

How can entrepreneurs creatively use their networks to overcome resource challenges?

Turning connections into resources: How entrepreneurs innovate through network bricolage

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Entrepreneurial ventures often operate in resource-constrained environments where creativity is key to survival and success. While traditional approaches to networking focus on resource-seeking, an emerging concept, network bricolage, highlights a more innovative approach. Network bricolage involves creatively repurposing and recombining existing social ties to generate new opportunities, solve problems, and achieve business growth. This concept is particularly relevant as entrepreneurs increasingly rely on their networks not just to sustain their ventures but to innovate and compete in challenging markets.

WHAT WE STUDIED

This study examines how entrepreneurs engage in network bricolage and identifies the factors that enable this behavior. Researchers analyzed 55 dyadic relationships across four entrepreneurial networks using a combination of qualitative methods, including interviews, site visits, direct observations, and archival research. Social network analysis provided a detailed understanding of how network structures—such as size, density, and tie strength—and the heterogeneity of relationship types influence bricolage behavior.

Key questions included:

- How do entrepreneurs utilize existing relationships to address resource constraints?
- What role do diverse relationship types play in fostering innovative outcomes?
- How do structural characteristics of networks shape bricolage opportunities?

KEY INSIGHTS

1. From Resource-Seeking to Resource Creation

Entrepreneurs traditionally view their networks as avenues to access existing resources—such as information, advice, and financial support. However, network bricolage shifts this perspective. Instead of merely seeking resources, entrepreneurs leverage their networks to create entirely new opportunities. This might involve repurposing a supplier relationship to co-develop a product or collaborating with distributors to enter uncharted markets.

2. The Power of Diverse Networks

The study emphasizes the importance of relationship heterogeneity. Entrepreneurs with networks comprising suppliers, distributors, business partners, and other connections—rather than a single relationship type—have a greater capacity for bricolage. This diversity provides access to varied skills, knowledge, and perspectives that fuel innovation.

3. Balancing Strong and Weak Ties

Strong ties, characterized by trust and frequent interaction, offer stability and depth of collaboration. Weak ties, on the other hand, provide access to new information and external opportunities. Successful entrepreneurs manage to balance both, strategically engaging with different ties based on the needs of their projects.

4. Bricolage in Action: Real-World Examples

- **Supplier Collaboration:** One entrepreneur transformed a packaging supplier into a co-designer, enabling the development of new, innovative product lines.

- **Distributor Partnerships:** Another leveraged a long-standing distributor relationship to establish a foothold in a previously inaccessible market.
- **Repurposed Roles:** A tech consultant transitioned into a distribution partner, showcasing how entrepreneurs can redefine existing roles to meet new business goals.

TAKEAWAYS

1. Recognize the Potential of Existing Ties

Entrepreneurs often overlook the untapped potential within their networks. Viewing existing relationships through the lens of bricolage allows for the discovery of innovative solutions without needing to establish entirely new connections.

2. Diversify Relationship Types

Networks comprising varied relationships, including suppliers, consultants, and distributors, are more conducive to bricolage. Entrepreneurs should actively seek and nurture such diversity within their professional circles.

3. Embrace Collaboration for Mutual Benefit

Successful bricolage often involves reciprocity. Entrepreneurs who approach relationships with a mutual value-creation mindset are more likely to foster productive collaborations.

4. Develop Curiosity and Opportunism

Bricolage requires entrepreneurs to remain curious and proactive. Asking questions, exploring the capabilities of network partners, and identifying alignment in goals can unlock unexpected opportunities.

IMPACT

Network bricolage is not merely a tool for addressing resource constraints; it is a strategy for unlocking innovation and enhancing competitiveness. Entrepreneurs who actively reconfigure their networks can access new markets, develop novel products, and improve operational efficiencies. This ability to creatively repurpose relationships is increasingly becoming a hallmark of successful entrepreneurial ventures.

1. A Supplier-Turned-Partner

An entrepreneur collaborated with an ingredient supplier to co-develop a new line of organic skincare products. Initially limited to sourcing raw materials,

the relationship evolved into a strategic partnership where the supplier contributed expertise in formulation and development. This approach not only saved R&D costs but also accelerated the product's market entry.

2. Bridging Markets with Distributors

Another entrepreneur leveraged a longstanding distributor relationship to access the Hong Kong market. The distributor, with established connections in the region, facilitated introductions to key stakeholders, enabling a smooth market entry.

3. From IT Consultant to Market Innovator

A U.S.-based IT consultant, initially engaged for technical support, transitioned into a distribution partner. This shift was driven by the consultant's deep understanding of the American market and willingness to explore a broader role.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Conduct Regular Network Audits

Entrepreneurs should periodically review their networks to identify underutilized relationships. Asking questions like "What unique capabilities does this connection offer?" can reveal opportunities for bricolage.

2. Invest in Relationship Building

Developing trust and rapport within the network lays the groundwork for effective bricolage. Entrepreneurs should prioritize consistent communication and demonstrate a willingness to collaborate.

3. Encourage Adaptive Thinking

Entrepreneurs must cultivate a mindset that sees networks not just as static resources but as dynamic platforms for innovation. Adaptive thinking helps in identifying and leveraging unconventional opportunities.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As the entrepreneurial landscape becomes increasingly complex, the ability to innovate within existing networks is crucial. Network bricolage represents a paradigm shift from merely seeking resources to actively creating them. Entrepreneurs who master this approach can unlock new possibilities, turning their networks into engines of growth and innovation.

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