

CREATING A CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Centre for Social Innovation is a nonprofit social enterprise, a global pioneer in coworking, and a community and catalyst for people and organizations that are changing the world. We host over 1,000 organizations that employ 2,500 people and generate over \$250 million per year in combined revenue.

Tonya Surman

At the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI), our goal is to build social innovation ecosystems. We know that social innovation is unpredictable. There are too many complex variables at play, and as those variables dance together they create an emergent process whose consequences confound quantitative analysis and detailed prescription. That's why we avoid attempts to engineer specific outcomes, and focus instead on using experience and theory to craft the conditions for success. We create social innovation ecosystems by providing a coworking space, community and launchpad for people who want to change the world.

Our theory of change is most succinctly communicated through the corresponding graphic.



CSI's theory of change

Let's talk about each level of the pyramid, starting with the foundation: space.

COWORKING SPACES AND CROWDFUNDED REAL ESTATE

CSI is a global pioneer in coworking. Today, coworking has been mainstreamed into a multi-billion-dollar business. Back in 2004, CSI created a coworking space that may have been the first of its kind in the world. When we started our goal was to address two issues at once. First, we wanted to address the fact that so many social mission organizations lacked good, affordable space. Second, we wanted to seize the opportunity of sharing space provided for promoting collaboration between organizations across sectors.

Coworking meets crucial organizational needs. By sharing the cost across many organizations, we could all enjoy the amenities that are possible for a certain scale of enterprise, like a full-size kitchen, advanced printers and meeting rooms. The coworking model also provides organizations with the flexibility to scale their physical space up or down to match their needs during different phases of their life cycle.

We knew that we needed to go beyond conventional office design. While many office spaces are austere and artificial, we designed our space to be warm and nourishing. We wanted the kind of people who choose to work on some of the hardest social and environmental challenges to feel comforted by their environment. More than that, we knew that with the right design we could help them feel great. When people feel great they are going to be helped in doing their best work, and they will be encouraged to look up from their desks and seek out connections with their peers.

The idea caught on and we were soon looking for more capital to expand and welcome more organizations. Our response: a new idea for a community bond that allows an organization to leverage financial contributions from its supporter base by providing a reasonable return, with

reduced bureaucratic barriers, to anyone who wants to support the organization's social mission.

We have since organized two more community bond campaigns to raise millions of dollars from hundreds of individuals and organizations to buy two buildings in Toronto. These buildings are islands of security for our community, now surrounded by a sea of sharply-rising property prices. The community bond has since been replicated and scaled up around the world, creating a lasting social innovation.

Since starting its first location in Toronto, CSI has grown to include 162,000 sq. ft. under management spread across five locations in Toronto and New York City. We are also testing out a new program to partner with the new generation of coworking spaces that have developed since we opened our doors a decade ago, with our first affiliate site in London, Canada.

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

While coworking meets a fundamental need for space, it is community animation that builds a community that can foster a social innovation ecosystem that collaborates, innovates and succeeds in unpredictable ways.

Community animation is the glue that holds a shared workspace together and the air that breathes vitality into the lives of everyone who moves through it. From social networking events to issue-based summits, and from a weekly "salad club" lunch potluck to our intranet platform, we bring our members together for work and pleasure.

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Social innovation occurs best in environments that are diverse. Innovation rarely occurs within uniform or static structures. It happens at the edges, where differing approaches bump up against each other and stimulate new ways of thinking. The diversity of our ecosystem leads to new opportunities and robust and flexible responses to common challenges. For us, this means doing away with the silos that keep sectors and structures apart. We often refer to the 'social mission sector' – an umbrella term that includes all the individuals and organizations whose primary mission is to produce some benefit for people or planet.

We don't create change by doing the same things we've always done. By introducing diversity, we provoke discovery.

The CSI community reflects this diversity, and we are always striving to be more inclusive. Our social mission members include nonprofits, charities, for-profits, entrepreneurs and activists working in areas from health and education to arts and environment. We don't create change by doing the same things we've always done. By introducing diversity, we provoke discovery.

If the community is the body of CSI's innovation ecosystem, then our culture is the DNA. Over the years, we've developed an intentional culture with nine values that bring us together and inspire our success. The culture mixes high-performance with fun, and celebrates our authentic individuality while emphasizing that our greatest success will come through our collaboration.

The secret to our culture is our commitment to acting on our values. CSI supports social innovation by others, and practices social innovation itself. We are a lab and we embrace this role wholeheartedly. For one example, while it's possible that we could have found other ways to raise the money we needed to buy buildings for our coworking space, the community bond was a way to live our purpose. It is collaborative, entrepreneurial, and system changing, and the more we act on our values the greater our ability to attract and animate our community.

In this way, our culture brings our vision into reality: a world where people and the planet come first. Where our systems – economy, government, culture and communities – serve to create a healthy, just, resilient and sustainable society full of meaning, equity and happiness. Where everyone can take meaningful action to be co-creators of their world.

Our unique culture and the quality of our community can be hard to quantify, but our members routinely describe it as being an essential part of their experience at CSI, and something that differentiates us from other coworking spaces.

LAUNCHPAD FOR SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

Potential social innovations emerge as our community connects in our spaces, and we provide a launchpad for their success. We act as an incubator and accelerator for social enterprises and other social mission organizations, both member and non-members. Our space and community

create rich soil for new projects to grow. Over the years we have supported and nurtured projects that have failed, and others that succeeded and gone on to spin off their own organizations.

Interventions and learning opportunities that help make connections and stimulate new thoughts and ways of doing. We are a platform that brings innovators together with capacity-building workshops, informal social mixers, our Intranet network, and more. We foster individual and collective growth and create an environment that produces original action. Historically, we have adopted a light touch. We do not program with an expectation of uniform engagement. We offer opportunities for individuals to ‘find their own level’; to dip in and dip out of the community in a way they find comfortable and natural. And when a new idea begins to surface, that same gentle touch helps it to grow.

Today, we are increasingly focused on acceleration programs and online platforms. Our acceleration programs bring together a cohort of social entrepreneurs working in a defined area, such as climate change and community health, and provide them with training and mentors to help them succeed. Our online platforms will create new connections between members outside of our home cities of Toronto and New York, and make it easier for social entrepreneurs to find the resources and knowledge they need to succeed.

As the community has grown and developed, so too has the breadth of the community’s reach and the depth of its social and economic impact. The ultimate goal is social impact, that can be difficult to measure, and even harder to aggregate across so many different areas of focus. For that reason, we offer the chart as a snapshot of the community’s economic impact and the growth in staff, volunteers and revenue that participants in our premier acceleration program enjoyed while working with us.

CONCLUSION

Social innovation refers to the whole cycle of creating, applying, spreading and evaluating new and renewed ideas to put people and planet first. At CSI our motto is that “It’s up to us!” because we are focused on the power of citizens to take initiative to create social innovations, and understand that this work must be supported with an ecosystem approach. For that reason, our work is biased toward local, emerging, citizen-led initiatives. We offer people a chance to share space and collaborate with other people who want to be part of the solution, and we support them by living our values and building a platform for their success. We’ve found this to be a reliable way of improving the chances for social innovation in an unpredictable world.

[Snapshot of the community’s economic impact and the growth in staff, volunteers and revenue](#)

BUILDING THE NEW ECONOMY

CSI members are turning social, environmental, economic and cultural challenges into opportunities to create jobs and make the world a better place.

MEMBER STUDY

PAID STAFF

Category	Start	End	% Change
PAID STAFF	~7	~20	214%

VOLUNTEERS

Category	Start	End	% Change
VOLUNTEERS	~180	~265	48%

REVENUE

Category	Start	End	% Change
REVENUE	~\$100,000	~\$560,000	461%

The results, on average, of eleven CSI Agents of Change whose impact was studied over a 12 month period.

JOBS & IMPACT

TOTAL JOBS

2,176

Number of jobs CSI supports

NEW JOBS

270

The top 20% of CSI members each create 1.7 new jobs per year

ECONOMIC IMPACT

\$250M

Annual revenue generated by CSI members

1. Education
2. Community Development
3. Health and Well-Being
4. Environment
5. Children & Youth
6. Arts & Culture
7. Equality & Human Rights
8. Social Justice