Top Tips for a Tech Ecosystem

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INTRO

Early this month I talked to URBACT expert Ceri Batchelder about what she thinks cities can do to support the development of a tech ecosystem. This article sets out her top ten tips, starting with the need for a shared understanding amongst ecosystem stakeholders of what you're trying to achieve together.

Ceri was Barnsley's ULG coordinator for the TechTown Action Planning Network, a role which tested her ability to bring together tech ecosystem stakeholders from the council, education, research, civil society and business around a common goal. Much of her advice comes from her time in this role in a medium sized city with a nascent tech scene, which required quite a simple and pragmatic approach. Clearly a more sophisticated approach would be more appropriate in a more developed tech landscape.

Here are the top tips Ceri shared:

TIP 1

Have an open approach

Innovation stems from creativity which is often derived from a diverse group of people coming together around a common theme. So, it's important to create a friendly and collaborative working environment which is open to new and different people and offers a safe space for connections and networking.

Many people find networking hard and the COVID pandemic means we are out of the habit of meeting in person. So, if you're bringing together tech ecosystem stakeholders you need to consider how to offer a warm welcome and engage some of the more 'unusual' suspects. This might mean using different venues, different times, allowing participants to be playful, maybe encouraging them to try out simple tech or coding activities and generally being quite hands-on.

TIP 2

Embrace messiness

Life in tech is never ordered or organised. A tech ecosystem is a complex and messy place with lots of different people, organisations, cultures and styles. Whilst it's important to have a long-term strategy and possible to plan to some extent, it's also useful to be prepared to expect the unexpected.

Remember that simply enabling new people to come together is often enough to lead to new dynamics and ideas. Try not to force the pace, but rather accept the somewhat chaotic and fuzzy front end of innovation and allow the time to explore new possibilities/opportunities.

TIP 3

Create right conditions

As with so many things in municipalities, buy-in from senior staff and politicians is important. You may not need much funding to start with, but you will need a venue, ideally some refreshments and, crucially, some help getting the right people engaged. It can be hard to define quantitative outcomes at the beginning of the process so a large amount of permission and trust from senior management is needed. So, don't be afraid to set out these parameters at the outset.

Be clear that impact will take time; manage expectations and be explicit that there is an element of risk. Share examples of what success looks like from other similar cities, such as URBACT's Good Practices.

TIP 4

Give people a voice & listen

As the convenor of a group of stakeholders, it can be tempting to take over and/or to lead the discussion, but often people disengage if they're not given the opportunity to speak. So, a fundamental success factor is to do your best to allow people to share and you will find that things start to happen organically.

This helps to connect people to each other and shows them it's worthwhile contributing. Importantly, you need to demonstrate that you're listening and acting on what people say to show that it has an impact. This might mean sharing how connections have led to X or that the collective group has made Y happen. Remember, you can't always do it all yourself. Try and empower others to take the lead. Identify network champions who can act as advocates or ambassadors within the wider tech scene.

TIP 5

Try things out

Anyone who's been involved in URBACT networks knows that small projects can lead to big things and this is also the case when convening a tech ecosystem.

In Barnsley's case, it tested out some pilot activities, bringing together the digital community with more traditional business sectors. This laid the groundwork for the activity of the ULG group and its development of a shared purpose with senior managers in the municipality. Having a common/integrated goal, stimulated a huge amount of progress and, over the course of 5-10 years, led to the town being able to attract millions of euros of additional projects.

Remember that some ideas will fly; others will not. Maybe think about placing a few small bets in anticipation of a win rather than focusing on one big project too early on.

TIP 6

Choose some themes

You'll also need to get an understanding of what the specific local challenges and strengths are and importantly what local businesses think is needed – and then to respond to them and / or support them to address these needs. Above all, avoid the temptation to preach about what is needed and try not to jump to solutions mode too quickly. Think about what makes your tech ecosystem unique and how it fits with other local and regional strategies – maybe it's about building on cultural heritage or linking to a local industry specialism. For Barnsley, it was connecting the work to the local retail, health and manufacturing sectors.

TIP 7

Have a startup mindset

When it comes to working with tech ecosystem stakeholders, it's important to walk the talk and essential to adopt an agile approach. Be ready to take risks, embrace and learn from failure, to be driven, determined and energetic to make a difference.

TIP 8

Communicate

As a central connector in the ecosystem, you are well placed to sign-post/direct people and share information, especially as the business support landscape is often quite complex.

Let people know about regional news and events and any funding and help available. To demonstrate the benefits of sharing, it's important to highlight successes both with stakeholders directly involved in the collective effort and with people outside to show them something's happening. Capture activity via photos or video and celebrate successes and good news. Use the channels where your audiences hang out – both physically and virtually.

TIP 9
Maintain activity

Convening ecosystem activity is demanding and things may fizzle out at quite an early stage without regular activity. As set out above (Tip 4), it's worth identifying network champions or guest hosts to help share the load. Encourage them to take the reins for different activities or events. This will support ecosystem development and help you to maintain momentum.

Try and have some fun and use lots of different tools and methods to keep things lively. Maybe see if you can create a 'fear of missing out' (FOMO) to drive future engagement and activity. When you can between meetings, keep in touch with people and try and help them through your ecosystem connections and support. As things develop it may also be appropriate to consider a more dedicated resource to support collective activity.

TIP 10
Keep things fresh

Linked to the above it will be vital to keep things fresh. People will stay with you if they keep learning, see impact and get something out of the work either personally or professionally. Continue to seek out and share best practice – maybe inviting people from other cities to inject new energy and ideas. Continue to look out for new and different opportunities to connect and collaborate. And of course use the URBACT tools and methods to support exchange, learning and fun.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, growing and supporting an ecosystem approach, whilst challenging at times, has much to offer. The URBACT framework and method can provide useful tools and tricks to support this. Taken together with Ceri's top tips set out here, gives what we hope is a starting point for cities considering investing in tech ecosystem development.

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Tip 2 - Embrace messiness

Tip 3 - Create right conditions

Tip 4 - Give people a voice & listen

Tip 5 - Try things out

Tip 6 - Choose some themes

Tip 7 - Have a startup mindset

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