

Storytelling through uncertainty: How a Yukon entrepreneur podcast helped chronicle the COVID-19 experience

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to entrepreneurs and businesses during its early phases, forcing them to rapidly adapt their means of product and service delivery. This involved coping with the closures of brick-and-mortar stores, constantly changing public health and safety measures, decision-making to support and retain employees, and managing customer and employee expectations in response to these changes. In the unique context of the Yukon Territory in the Western Canadian Arctic, entrepreneurs were faced with additional challenges due to the territory's small size and population, relative isolation, and strict territorial border controls. This makes the Yukon a compelling case study to examine how entrepreneurs adapted to the pandemic both in the short and longer term.

This article focuses on Kari Johnston, a local entrepreneur and business leader who also served as a Municipal Councilor during the early stages of the pandemic. Johnston initiated a podcast that highlighted the experiences of business owners and leaders as they grappled with the new and shifting pandemic context. The podcast also highlighted the importance of community-oriented supports like Yukon University's PIVOT Program (April-September 2020), the Tourism Industry Association forum and Yukon Government programs, all of which helped Yukon businesses reboot and grow during the pandemic. The podcast chronicled how, together, these initiatives created a collaborative knowledge-sharing network that provided support during the critical period of initial pandemic response when entrepreneurs were facing high levels of uncertainty. This exploration provides

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insights into the resilience of the entrepreneurial sector, and highlights the importance of tailored, community-based supports in responding to pandemic-like crises.

Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly across North America, leading to the abrupt cancellation of two major Yukon-hosted events – the Arctic Winter Games and the Yukon First Nations Hockey Tournament. For entrepreneurs, especially those in the hospitality industry, these cancellations signaled that the playing field was rapidly and unpredictably shifting. Amid these challenges and the ensuing lockdown, Kari Johnston, Municipal Councilor for the rural town of Haines Junction, former caterer, community development consultant, and member of Yukon University’s Innovation and Entrepreneurship Advisory Council (IEAC), recognized the difficulties that business leaders were encountering in connecting with each other and sharing information across communities in the absence of in-person meetings. She remembers receiving a message from Yukon University colleague Lauren Manekin Beille, who asked whether social media could be used as a platform to support community-building among small and rural business operators during this time of transition. Recognizing the need for a mechanism that enabled connection and an exchange of experiences, Kari decided to begin interviewing entrepreneurs and business leaders to document their stories. She reached out to her network with a focus on small and rural business operators; she knew that they would benefit from a platform that amplified their voices within the broader community and where they could learn from each other about how to work through uncertainty to adapt their businesses and continue servicing Yukon communities.

Yukon Entrepreneur Podcast

After posting initial interviews on YouTube and receiving positive feedback from listeners, Kari recounts “a bit of a daisy chain. At the end of each interview, I would say ‘Who should I interview next?’ and I would cold call those folks.” It quickly became clear how important this sharing of experiences was for the business community. “Nobody said no, really, because I think it was a way of us building and creating that sense of community and support, which is what we do for each other.” Realizing the important role that the interviews were playing in connecting members of the business community, Kari created a podcast feed to improve listener access.

The experience of entrepreneurs during the initial months of the pandemic was captured through the early interviews, which initially reflect a collective state of shell shock. “I think there was a real sense of ‘What do I do? I don’t know how to manage this in the business community.’” At the same time, interviewees reflected on the notion that it was important to take time, pause and take stock before acting. The first interviewee, Joanne Thomas, who has spent much of her career in the Yukon and Alberta, reinforced this message (as paraphrased by Kari): “Meditate. Don’t take in too much information. There’s not much you can do right now; the situation’s moving quickly. In all of the emotion and all of the hardness that’s about to unfold, you can’t take this on by yourself.” From those initial interviews, business owners clearly had the sense of being part of a collective of people who were in this together. Kari reflected that that this sense of mutual support is common in the territory: “We’re so accustomed to that as Yukoners. When we have fire, when we have flood, when we have sickness or a death in our community, we rally together”.

After the initial brief period of bewilderment, discussions shifted toward adaptation and questions about the types of opportunities that the pandemic disruption might bring for the Yukon and for businesses. “Really early in the interview series, it brings a very hopeful and inspiring message: there’s certainly a challenge that’s being reflected and a sense of grief, but it very quickly pivots to ‘Okay, here’s how the cards are falling; where’s our opportunity to transition and move forward?’” While the actions of Yukon-based retail outlets of larger companies were being dictated from corporate headquarters, the many small, Yukon-based businesses were navigating these challenges without the benefit of corporate human resources departments. This required managers to continually adapt as the context evolved.

As the podcast progressed, interviewees reflected on the importance of several community-oriented initiatives that collectively created a web of support for business owners. At the time, many Yukon businesses had a limited online presence and relied on pop-up models or brick-and-mortar infrastructure. Yukon University’s Innovation & Entrepreneurship (I&E) group responded by bringing together a diverse group of business and economic development professionals to share their perspectives on the challenges faced by local businesses during the pandemic, and to initiate action. Very quickly, the I&E launched the PIVOT Program, which ran from April to September 2020. The program had two main components: matching coaches with Yukon business owners and providing funding to support pandemic-related transitions (e.g., development of an online presence). According to Kari, “having money doesn’t necessarily equate to being able to figure out what you need; the PIVOT program played a critical role in helping businesses move forward and achieve system sustainability.”

Podcast interviewees also highlighted the important role of industry associations in building and supporting the tourism community during the pandemic. A prime example was the monthly online forum hosted by the Tourism Industry Association (TIA) that served as a conduit between tourism operators from across the territory and relevant government, non-government, and industry partners. With the closure of Yukon territorial borders, tourism operators struggled to reach their client base during the first year of the pandemic. The TIA’s initiative to host a regular Zoom forum provided an innovative way to hold the space and connect the tourism community during the pandemic. At the same time, the Yukon Government (YG) promptly established a Business Advisory Council to provide guidance on the types of support programs and policies needed to help the territory manage through the pandemic. This led YG to launch a paid sick leave program and business support programs during the first week of the pandemic.

A further dynamic raised by interviewees was the recognition that protecting rural First Nation communities from COVID-19 was a top priority. However, there were varying opinions about how to effectively achieve a balance between safeguarding community health and supporting businesses. To address this, in the early days of the pandemic efforts were made to ensure that the rural perspective was represented in discussions and decision-making processes (see *Indigenous approaches to public health: Lessons learned from Yukon First Nation responses to the COVID-19 pandemic*, this volume). By doing so, rural concerns were given consideration and incorporated into broader strategies for pandemic response and recovery.

Lessons learned

The Yukon Entrepreneur Podcast played a critical role in helping entrepreneurs and business leaders connect with each other, share experiences, and support each other during the uncertain and isolating time of the pandemic. The podcast highlighted the success of the Yukon's community-oriented approach in supporting its businesses and entrepreneurs during the initial stages of the pandemic. More specifically, it highlighted the key role of the PIVOT program, which helped business owners identify the gaps in their operations and develop sustainable solutions for the long term. The Yukon's small size, relative isolation, and early engagement of actors at different scales enabled the rapid initiation of a range of complementary initiatives that provided a web of support for Yukon entrepreneurs, helping them to weather the initial phase of the pandemic and adapt their business models to thrive in the 'new normal.' For example, new opportunities arose to enable the decentralization of consulting businesses; they can now be run primarily out of rural areas rather than being concentrated in Whitehorse. Consequently, the Yukon's entrepreneurial landscape now features a broader range of business models, and some businesses are no longer as reliant on brick-and-mortar establishments.

By examining perspectives from the Yukon business community during the early days of the pandemic, we identified lessons learned, including the importance of multi-level engagement in dealing with rapid change in the business environment. Our exploration also offers insights into the resilience of the entrepreneurial sector and can inform pandemic preparedness for the future. We hope that our reflections inspire and offer hope to other entities that face similar challenges, showcasing the importance of community-oriented approaches and the power of collaboration in times of crisis. Find out more at www.yukonentrepreneur.com.