



Social Workers as Entrepreneurs

By Lindsay Charlie Brink

Background

Veronica Khosa, a 54 year old nurse in South Africa, saw an unaddressed problem in her community: a high rate of HIV positive patients with no care for them at home. At that time, South Africa had the highest rate of HIV infections in the world at 35%. Living in a shanty township serving as a containment area for blacks working in the city under apartheid, over 70% of residents were unemployed. The lack of economic opportunities led many young girls to prostitution. These young girls came to Veronica hoping to protect themselves from the HIV/AIDS epidemic and as Veronica counseled them to leave prostitution, they asked her “how much money can you give me?” because prostitution was their only way of survival.

Without the guarantee of a job afterwards for Veronica or the girls, Veronica spent her life savings on training the women to become caregivers for HIV/AIDS patients and eventually, those trainings turned into a thriving business that had great social AND economic value! Veronica Khosa is one of many great social entrepreneurs (Borstien, 2007).

Business and technology are constantly changing our world for the better and sometimes, for worse. This shift is dominated by high income and often highly educated non-minority individuals, typically with their own interest in mind. The implication is not that business entrepreneurs are only looking out for themselves. It is that like all individuals, they have a network of contacts that is often limited to people similar to themselves limiting their understanding of the lives of those outside their network. Social workers who have social justice written on their heart have a place in the world of innovators and entrepreneurs as they intentionally attempt to understand the lives of marginalized people.

Entrepreneurship through the lens of a social worker focuses on power, privilege, oppression and social justice which business does not explicitly address. Most social workers have been conditioned to believe they will work for a non-profit or the government, which although not bad, is not the whole picture. Part of the entrepreneurial and design process is to connect with your customers/clients in order to find out their needs, pains, and ideal solutions. Many in the business world start with the product and ask customers if they are interested in buying it instead of

starting with the customer and creating a product with their input. Social workers have the unique skill of connecting with clients, collaborating to identify the problem.

An entrepreneur is an enterprising individual who builds capital through risk and initiative while a social entrepreneur integrates the benefit for the society. It is time for social workers to bring their unique lens and skills of truly connecting with, understanding, and working with community members to create appropriate solutions for societal ills.

Like business entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs’ top priority is defining their target customers or clients — those who stand to benefit most from the specific offering of the enterprise. This close focus on the client excites the social entrepreneur (and social worker) as much as it does the business entrepreneur. Both gets out of bed every day to serve a specific clientele, to change the equilibrium for a specific group. Social entrepreneurs take a step further, aiming to make a difference for someone in particular.

The new field of social entrepreneurship is solving societal ills by using a combination of business and social work principles. Social entrepreneurs are creating innovative business models to address the long term issues, instead of short term band aids. This emerging new field pops up against the backdrop of global inequality.

Many people believe for-profit enterprises cannot possibly make a positive contribution to society. However, this assumption is short sighted. The blend of purpose and profit allows an enterprise to be beholden not only to its financial stakeholders but also to society. Profit and purpose need not be in conflict with each other. Currently for-profit companies donate funds, at their discretion, to social benefit organizations. In contrast, social entrepreneurship provides freedom to conduct a business that provides societal benefit while also having authority over finances to chose their own priorities.

U of M Students as Social Entrepreneurs

At U-M, Innovation in Action, a social entrepreneurial program, trains students from all academic backgrounds to solve social problems using business and design processes. Consider these few examples of past U-M IIA teams that are making a difference.

- **LivPoz** “is an interdisciplinary team that created a potentially life saving app for HIV patients that are managing strict medication and lifestyle regimens.”





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- **Fresh Fare** “presents an innovative solution to a debilitating barrier to food access—lack of reliable transportation—by partnering established grocery retailers and a rideshare program to get more food insecure individuals shopping for healthy foods in well-stocked grocery stores. Our product provides a membership for customers to utilize rideshare vehicles at a subsidized low price to and from grocery stores, with an incentive for grocery stores and rideshare companies to gain a larger customer base and sell grocery store gas to the rideshare drivers.”
- **Mindful** is “composed from students across five schools, this team’s disciplines will give a fresh perspective and interdisciplinary approach to the innovation of manageability of symptoms present in mental illness through the use of technology.”
- **Ditto** “aims to connect individuals living with chronic illness to mitigate feelings of depression and loneliness.”
- **Sweet Dreams** “aims to reduce the racial disparity of sleep related infant death in African American families in Detroit by creating a bed that serves their specific needs.”
- **Benbo** is a “non-profit social enterprise that employs homeless individuals to create, cook, and vend affordable, healthy and quick to-go meals.”

Several of these teams are on their way to becoming viable social enterprises. The last two listed teams included social workers among their team mates and above all else held social justice at the center of their business model.

If you are seeing a social problem that your field organization is struggling to address, consider joining Innovation in Action, a U-M School of Public Health and Education collaboration where interdisciplinary teams are formed to address public health and education challenges using business models and design processes. Your field placement site is the perfect place to discover the issues that concern your

clients by talking directly to them and involving them in the solution design process. Find information at this link:

<http://innovationinaction.umich.edu/>

For further reading about women like Veronica Khosa, read David Borstiens (2007) book *How to Change the World* or check out Ashoka online at <https://www.ashoka.org/changemakers>

Also consider taking this course, SW799 Advanced Topics in Macro; Social Entrepreneurship

