

CASE STUDY

Micro Coaches™: the development of a national peer support programme for social enterprises.

The history of the Micro Coaches™ programme

Seeking support from peers frequently occurs informally within the social enterprise movement and has shown itself to be a highly effective and valuable business support tool. However by this informal nature, it often lacks clear processes and boundaries - something which can prevent it from being as successful a process as it could be.

In 2007, to tackle this issue, Social Enterprise East of England (SEEE) designed and created Micro Coaches™; a structured programme of peer to peer skills transfer which standardises the peer support process, increasing the efficiency and impact. The programme works by training individuals as 'official' coaches and then matching these coaches with individuals who have registered their interest as a 'coachee' via a specially designed online network (www.microcoaches.co.uk).

The I-SEE project

Following the success in the East of England, SEEE submitted Micro Coaches™ for inclusion as a project in the Social Enterprise Coalition (SEC)'s Big Lottery funded [Investing in Social Enterprise Expansion \(I-SEE\) programme](#); a programme which aims to develop successful social enterprise business support tools and services for national reach. Micro Coaches™ was accepted: it had been successful in the East of England and its potential for national roll-out was clear.

The aim of the I-SEE Micro Coaches™ project is to further develop the programme in the East of England before licensing it to other social enterprise support bodies for delivery in their areas – creating a national programme with SEEE as the licensor, managing the overall brand, central curriculum, training system and national website.

Activity so far

One year into the project and key developments have been made. In the East of England, additional coaches were trained and successfully matched with 'coachees', and the Micro Coaches™ website was redeveloped. This having been completed, it was time to prepare for the expansion of the programme. A programme manager (license holder)'s manual and training course was produced, as well as a 'train the trainer' manual and training course. The plan behind the latter being for new license holders to initially train one coach, who can then go on to train other coaches.

In terms of making contact with potential new license holders, a product of the Capacitybuilders' National Knowledge Management programme was of key value: the Social Enterprise Knowledge Exchange (SEKE). This quarterly meeting of all nine social enterprise regional support networks had created strong relationships between the regional bodies. It therefore made perfect sense for this group to be the first license holders and deliverers of Micro Coaches™ outside of the East of England.

The opportunity to deliver Micro Coaches™ was presented to the eight regional bodies in January 2010 and since that point, all eight have been granted the license. Seven of these eight have now completed their initial training programme and are ready to begin training coaches in their regions and deliver the full programme.



The project is therefore moving very promisingly.

Key insight gained on peer support

Developing Micro Coaches™ has strengthened SEEE's belief in the value of peer support and by standardising the process they have shown how it can successfully sit alongside other mainstream support services – arguably filling a much sought after gap.

The project has provided them with greater insight into the more personal aspects of the process; why and how people become coaches; how knowledge is most effectively transferred between coaches and coachees; and how the relationships are managed. These lessons have enabled SEEE to develop Micro Coaches™ in a way which is sensitive to these issues and as a consequence, successful.

Terminology wise, the project has increased SEEE's understanding of the differences between 'coaching' and 'mentoring'. They discovered that the terms are often used interchangeably and that there is a need to raise awareness in the sector of the difference. Micro Coaches™ promotes and facilitates the exchange of specific packages of information in short-term, controlled environments. In this way, it differs from mentoring where large quantities of knowledge are exchanged via sustained relationships between two specific individuals..

Key insight gained on expansion through the licensing model

Adopting licensing as the route to expand Micro Coaches™, has enabled SEEE to gain an increased understanding of this model.

It is of key importance to first identify the correct licensee; someone who shares the commitment and vision for the programme. It is then crucial to set out clear terms and conditions in the licensing agreement, to ensure that the delivery and brand remain constant. It also ensures that relationships between licensors and licensees remain transparent and of trust – enabling the two parties to learn from each other, deliver a successful service to the sector and grow a respected brand.

The future of the Micro Coaches™

Micro Coaches™ has the potential to be a commercially viable and sustainable business support service for the social enterprise sector. From its origins in the East of England, the programme now has the potential to run in every English region and it is hoped that over the remaining two years of the project, more programmes will be established– supporting increasing numbers of social enterprises to exchange valuable knowledge.

The remainder of the project will see SEEE develop and maintain key relationships with its licensees and where necessary make further improvements to the programme.

On a longer term basis, SEEE's ambition for Micro Coaches™ is to see it adopted and run by private and public sector organisations; proving its worth by moving out of the social enterprise sector into a wider arena.

Michele Rigby, CEO of SEEE, has great hopes for Micro Coaches: "It has energised SEEE and we are proud to have developed such a product."



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