

TECH Fort Worth Creates Innovative Incubation Programs based on *So what? who cares? why you?*® Platform

Located in one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, TECH Fort Worth is a leader in business incubation programs focused on the commercialization of science and technology. Since 2006, Executive Director Darlene Ryan has grown the incubator's scope and impact through innovative new entrepreneurship programs, outreach, and collaboration.

Previously a CEO at a pharmaceuticals start-up company and a current board member on the National Business Incubation Association (NBIA), Ryan has established TECH Fort Worth as a destination for new science- and technology-based businesses in Texas, in the United States, and abroad – including new program creation for German-based businesses.

“Our goal is to help entrepreneurs in our community to commercialize their ideas,” Ryan confirms, “and also to attract outside companies to Fort Worth as a place to grow their technology businesses.”

TECH Fort Worth works closely with each of its companies, guiding them through a prescribed program to ensure their success as they progress from concept to customer, including:

1. **Incubation** – the Incubation Program helps inventors and entrepreneurs transform their science and technology innovations into commercial value propositions.
2. **Acceleration** – the Acceleration Program helps start-ups to put in place the strategies, the team, the funds, and the infrastructure to enhance the company's chances for success.
3. **Launch** – the Launch Program helps start-up companies transition to become self-sustaining in the community.

“We look for companies with unique and/or proprietary technology that have a high potential for growth and success

in the marketplace,” explains Brent Sorrells, Operations Manager. “The founders of these companies have excellent technology or research knowledge, but often lack business experience. Our job is to help them determine whether they can create a viable business model, and *So what? who cares? why you?*® is ideal for this purpose.”

In fact, the Incubation Program at TECH Fort Worth is designed around Wendy Kennedy's *So what? who cares? why you?*® incubation system, which provides a structured approach for entrepreneurs to discover and articulate the business value of their ideas.

*“I quickly realized that *So what? who cares? why you?*® would provide TECH Fort Worth with everything we needed to offer the Incubation Program. It was the first resource we found that truly matched the way we think about commercialization and entrepreneurship. Using it, we are able to focus our time on the high-value, hands-on coaching with our companies.”*

– Darlene Ryan, Executive Director at TECH Fort Worth

*“So what? who cares? why you?” has been instrumental in TECH Fort Worth's ability to roll out programs to its clients. That is shown in the number of people directly employed by our clients, which more than doubled in the first two years of using *So what? who cares? why you?*®. In that same time period, the total economic impact of those new jobs was shown to have tripled.”*

The innovative programs and successes at TECH Fort Worth are gaining industry recognition as well. TECH Fort Worth will be featured in the NBIA's forthcoming book on best practices for incubators, and Ryan and Kennedy will present about the Incubation program and *So what? who cares? why you?*® at the NBIA annual meeting in 2010.

A Program Platform for Incubator Managers

TECH Fort Worth has used *So what? who cares? why you?*® to foster incubation since 2007. As Ryan recalls, “When I first came to TECH Fort Worth I was very actively looking for information and tools to use in the Incubation Program, but I couldn't find a resource dedicated to helping early-stage technology entrepreneurs.”

“When our companies prepare slides and concepts from the workbook and the online resources in their presentations to investors, they tell us that business people relate to what they are saying. That makes it very real for them – to be able to capture the interest of investors and to have real conversations with them.”

– Brent Sorrells, Operations Manager, TECH Fort Worth

Just as Ryan and Sorrells began to think they would have to create their own methodology and supporting materials, they became aware of Wendy Kennedy’s *So what? who cares? why you?*® and recognized an immediate fit with TECH Fort Worth’s own philosophy. “*So what? who cares? why you?*® is based on Wendy’s own experiences working in startup companies, so the tools are very relevant and resonate strongly with entrepreneurs,” Ryan explains.

She adds, “I quickly realized that *So what? who cares? why you?*® would provide us with everything we needed to offer the Incubation Program, because it truly matched the way we think about commercialization and entrepreneurship. Using it, we are able to provide a structured, real-world approach to developing start-up business models and we leverage that to provide high-value, hands-on coaching to our company founders.”

Sorrells remembers noticing an almost immediate impact after incorporating *So what? who cares? why you?*® into the Incubation program. “The companies took quickly to the concepts and activities found in the workbook. They tell us that it helps business people relate to what they are saying. That makes it very powerful for them – to be able to capture the interest of investors and to have real conversations.”

Incubating Ideas

Company founders who are in the Incubation phase at TECH Fort Worth are teamed in small groups of about six to work through the *So what? who cares? why you?*® workbook and methodology. For three months, they meet for a half day every week in the ThinkLab – physical space where they participate with fellow Incubation entrepreneurs in a *So what? who cares? why you?*® coaching clinic that provides intensive discussion, brainstorming and mentoring by Ryan and Sorrells.

Each entrepreneur completes assigned topics and work-sheets prior to attending each ThinkLab session. Through this process, the entrepreneurs gain experience articulating and presenting the business value of their ideas, while also serving as sounding boards to other entrepreneurs in the room.

Progressing through the workbook, the founders move from opportunity identification to customer definition, paths to market, defining their competitive advantage and more. “The process is really smartly organized,” Ryan notes. “By working through the book chapter by chapter we get the best results in terms of people really engaging at each stage as well as understanding what is needed next.”

Often, the ThinkLab discussions are focused around the wall-sized dry erase versions of tools from the methodology, where the group can visualize the concepts and explore different scenarios through group brainstorming and discussion. “By challenging and debating their ideas in groups, the entrepreneurs become very clear about the innovations they have and the commercial potential for them,” Ryan adds.



Two Incubation clients profile a market segment using the *So what? who cares? why you?*® Segment Strawman™ tool in the TECH Fort Worth ThinkLab. Pictured: Ashleigh Schwab of Organizational Wellness and Learning Systems, Inc., and Don Stewart of OMM Scientific

Prairie Designs (www.prairiedesignsllc.com) is one early-stage company that has successfully completed the Incubation program and embraced the *So what? who cares? why you?*® methodology. In fact, the toolsets the company completed

during Incubation are now used by Wendy Kennedy as a best-practice example in her workshops and speaking engagements, providing inspiration and concrete examples to other incubator managers and young technology companies.

David Williams, Co-Founder of Prairie Designs, explains: “So what? who cares? why you?” has helped us to develop the vocabulary necessary to communicate both the critical numbers and the ideas that are important to investors. Not only have we broadened our business vocabulary, we have also learned how to streamline our analysis of potential markets and customers. We are better able to adequately explain how our product works, what our next steps in commercialization are, and where we want to be in several years.”

Prairie Designs has now graduated to the Acceleration Program at TECH Fort Worth, where Ryan has also discovered an increasing demand for the So what? who cares? why you?” approach. Acceleration companies are more mature than Incubation companies, with operations up and running.

“I meet with the Acceleration CEOs on a quarterly basis,” Ryan explains. “Not all of our Acceleration companies go through the Incubation Program, but they often use the ThinkLab for meetings. They started asking questions about the So what? who cares? why you?” posters they saw on the walls in the lab. Now, at their request, I gear each quarterly Acceleration retreat around one concept from the book. It’s always a good practice to constantly challenge your own business model and assumptions and this approach helps them to gain clarity on their growth strategies and key decisions impacting their business.”

“It takes time to develop a business around intellectual property, and it requires attention to numerous problems on a number of fronts at any given time. So what? who cares? why you?” gave us a means of stepping back and putting the entire process into perspective. This was extremely helpful, and the same approach has guided us through additional steps in our journey.”

– Jon Kinder, Co-Founder, Prairie Designs LLC



Dr. Stephen Grant brainstorms potential market segments for his innovation using the So what? who cares? why you?” Market Fishbone™ tool in the TECH Fort Worth ThinkLab.

Fostering University Research Commercialization

Initiatives by the state of Texas focused on turning research licensing activity in Texas into local businesses and job growth has put new pressures on TTOs. TECH Fort Worth’s Breakthrough Program was created to assist faculty researchers at Texas universities to better communicate with business people and their Technology Transfer Offices. “Breakthrough participants are chosen by the Technology Transfer Officers at any of four universities in Texas,” Ryan explains. “TTOs engage with many faculty members but only those they believe have the most potential are chosen for Breakthrough.”

So what? who cares? why you?” provides the ideal foundation for these engagements, as it has been proven with researchers, scientists and engineers globally. “In this context, So what? who cares? why you?” adds a new dimension for us to connect with and engage scientific and research communities,” Ryan adds.

Researchers in the Breakthrough program use TECH Fort Worth’s ThinkLab to work through the So what? who cares? why you?” methodology. The ultimate goal is to develop the commercial value proposition for each participant’s science or technology idea, and to weave this into a slide presentation which can be used to present scientific or technology ideas to business people.

Ryan hopes that the Breakthrough program will lead to even greater collaboration. “We are working to involve the MBA program at the Neeley School of Business at Texas Christian University and the new Center for Law and Intellectual Property at Texas Wesleyan University. We intend to partner each research scientist with an MBA student and an IP Law student and together they will create a business around the technology idea.”

A Common Language for Commercialization

“We’re very proud of *So what? who cares? why you?*® here, and we use the workbook all the time when we talk about TECH Fort Worth,” Ryan says. “We co-branded the workbook with the TECH Fort Worth logo, and on the back cover we have a list of our programs. Inside the covers there are quotations from Brent and me. When we are talking to new potential sponsors or companies, we bring the book to show them the kind of things we do here. It establishes credibility for the caliber of programs we are delivering.”

She adds, “*So what? who cares? why you?*® plays a big role in the community-building aspect of an incubator. The companies can better help each other because they have a common framework for company building and a common language regardless of their idea. It’s a normal thing here for one company to ask another to see its Category Map as a means of understanding where the opportunity for their technology idea fits in the marketplace.”

In fact, the workbook has become something of a badge of accomplishment. “When people ask for a copy of the book, we say that only people who join the program can have one.”

Another valuable aspect of the Incubation and Breakthrough programs is the ToolShed, an online community resource to which only workbook owners are granted access. It provides



TECH Fort Worth's Brent Sorrells works with Incubation client, Ashleigh Schwab, to develop her company's Competitive Radar™.

the entrepreneurs with additional real-world case studies, complementary tool sets, templates for use in their own business presentations, presentations and audio file from Wendy, and much more.

“Our groups always visit the ToolShed,” Ryan says. “Wendy’s audio file about Category Maps is one of my favorites – it helps to explain the Category Map in a concise and consistent way to all of our clients. The ToolShed ties us to how Wendy thinks about things, it creates a real sense of community and reinforces the common language that *So what? who cares? why you?*® teaches.”

TECH Fort Worth has also realized the value of having a common language for technology-based business. “As time moves on and more of our Acceleration clients have been through the Incubation program, we find that as a community we now speak a common language – not just among ourselves but also with the world of business.”

“*So what? who cares? why you?*® enabled us to put our concept into terms that any business person can understand,” summarizes Jon Kinder, Co-Founder of Prairie Designs. “It takes time to develop a business around intellectual property, and it requires attention to numerous problems on a number of fronts at any given time. *So what? who cares? why you?*® also gave us a means of stepping back and putting the entire process into perspective. This was extremely helpful, and the same approach has guided us through additional steps in our journey.”

About TECH Fort Worth

TECH Fort Worth is a non-profit business incubator located in Fort Worth, Texas. The incubator identifies technologies with high potential for success in the marketplace, matches community resources with entrepreneurs, then mentors and coaches them toward success.

Learn more at www.techfortworth.org.