

Attracting and Retaining Innovative Talent in Region

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Abstract: Entrepreneurial success depends on several ecosystem-related factors, including social capital, the presence of support structures, and the ability to leverage the unique characteristics of a given territory. While innovative entrepreneurship can emerge across an entire territory, entrepreneurs operating in regional areas face challenges that differ significantly from those encountered in metropolitan environments. This paper explores regional entrepreneurship as a lens through which to better understand the opportunities, challenges, and barriers associated with starting and growing innovative ventures outside major urban centers. Labor shortages are particularly acute in more remote regions, which often contend with limited infrastructure and greater distance from markets, suppliers, and specialized resources. In this context, attracting and retaining innovative entrepreneurs can be especially challenging. The objective of this research is to identify ways to strengthen regional entrepreneurial ecosystems and enhance their capacity to attract, support, and retain innovative entrepreneurs. To address this issue, the study adopts an action research approach based on focus groups conducted with innovative entrepreneurs established in 10 remote regions. Five sectors with strong potential for innovation were targeted: technology, culture, agriculture, the social economy, and green technologies. The project seeks to foster the exchange of best practices while recognizing the distinctive characteristics and development needs of each region. Consistent with the principles of action research, the study aims not only to generate knowledge but also to produce practical outcomes that can be readily implemented by regional stakeholders. Preliminary findings identify four key attractiveness factors, three major regional strengths, and six significant challenges, along with potential solutions to address them.

Keywords: Entrepreneur, innovation, attraction, ecosystem, talent

1. Introduction

This research focuses on attracting and retaining talent in remote régions to promote innovative entrepreneurship. In a context where regions on the outskirts of urban centers are seeking to strengthen their economic vitality, innovative entrepreneurship appears as a promising avenue for both practical and academic circles, particularly because it represents an engine of economic development and contributes to the well-being of society (Bradley et al, 2021). Although innovation is polysemous, several authors agree on certain key notions. These include the creation of new products, services, production methods or business models that can foster organizational growth, generate value-added jobs and create wealth for individuals, organizations and society. Innovative entrepreneurship can therefore be found in various types of organizations, of different sizes and from different sectors. Innovative entrepreneurship needs a supportive environment to develop and encourage action from individuals and organizations. Bäumle and Bizer (2023) studied the importance of government incentives to create this environment. However, there is no "miracle recipe" in terms of public policy to attract and retain talent in remote régions and thus stimulate the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Cisneros et al., 2022), and several questions remain. Specifically, is it preferable to rely on subsidies, invest in business incubators, or develop the infrastructure of a territory? Regardless of how the aid is declined, the environment and context remain important factors in individuals' interest in innovative entrepreneurship (Autio et al, 2014).

2. Project Description

Organizations in Quebec, Canada, as well as in other countries, have faced several challenges in recent years, notably inflation, which has seen a cumulative increase of approximately 14% since 2021 (IST Quebec, 2025). The trade war with the United States puts significant economic pressure on organizations, as well as the labor shortage, with approximately 500,000 jobs in Quebec dependent on exports to the United States (Carbasset and Caillou, 2025). This last challenge is particularly important for several regions, where at the end of 2022, 65% of available jobs were located in regions outside urban centers (Lesage, 2023). This situation highlights an imbalance, with the majority of job vacancies concentrated in remote regions. These regions also face more limited infrastructure and distance from markets and suppliers (Polèse and Shearmur, 2002). This hinders the development of innovative regional entrepreneurship, despite the dynamism previously observed in this area.

It therefore appears that regions more distant from urban centres face particular challenges while also presenting significant innovative potential. Given this situation, our research question is, "How can we attract

and retain innovative talent in remote regions to stimulate the economy through entrepreneurship?". The ultimate goal is to identify the advantages, factors, and challenges of establishing an innovative project in a regional area rather than in major urban centers. Ten regions were selected in Quebec, Canada. The aim of this project is to conduct a regional diagnosis through knowledge sharing with support organizations, incubators, accelerators, and innovative entrepreneurs across regional ecosystems. Based on this diagnosis, the project seeks to develop recommendations for a comprehensive attraction and retention strategy that leverages the unique strengths of each region.

3. Literature Review

This literature review aims to highlight the theme of entrepreneurship, more specifically the innovative regional entrepreneurs, as a basis for reflection, in order to discover the strengths and weaknesses, the factors of attraction and barriers of remote regions compared to urban centers.

3.1 Innovative Entrepreneurs

The epistemological field of entrepreneurship aims to be fruitful, even if it remains somewhat fragmented (Omrane et al., 2011). For many authors, it is not possible to separate entrepreneurship from innovation. Indeed, according to Schumpeter (1928; 1965), one of the first scholars to take an interest in entrepreneurship, it is about changing the existing order to seize opportunities by innovating. He considers that the innovation brought by entrepreneurs constitutes the driving force of economic growth. Also, the OECD (2024) supports that entrepreneurship appears as a process expressed in terms of innovation, oriented towards economic creation.

This economic value creation is particularly evident in entrepreneurship's intrinsic ability to identify market asymmetries and transform latent commercial opportunities into action (Shane, 2000). Indeed, the entrepreneurial cognitive process regarding innovation is intrinsically aligned with the individual's idiosyncratic goals and value systems (Walder et al., 2019). Trott and Simm (2017), demonstrate the effects in practice of activities such as learning by doing, on the job problem solving and the use of external firm sources, as knowledge sharing, for the process of innovation in low and medium technology industries (LMT). Entrepreneurship thus becomes systemic, which can be explained in part by the wide range of factors influencing entrepreneurial intentions and actions. These are particularly economic (Wennekers et al., 2005), political (Cisneros et al., 2022), socio-cultural (Degeorge et al., 2018; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), and psychological (St-Jean and Duhamel, 2023).

Both theoretically and empirically, there is no doubt that the innovative entrepreneur is the result of intrinsic values and a set of structural and operational means through which economic and social value is created.

3.2 Régional Entrepreneurship: Between Agility and Resilience in the Face of Disruption

Entrepreneurship in remote regions is a complex system of value creation, dependent on specific local roots and regulation mechanisms that are both internal and external. Jean (2012) notes that rural life is no longer just about agriculture; it is becoming a rural life of residence, where development is driven by the efforts of local actors trying to maintain their living environment in the face of globalization pressures.

Urban entrepreneurship benefits from agglomeration forces, whereas more rural regions must contend with geographical disadvantages and a dependence on natural resources (Arthur et al., 2023). Mura et al. (2025) emphasize that remote regions benefit from localized innovation systems, but peripheral areas suffer from a lack of resources and even technological transfer infrastructure. However, regions are not just spaces or environments with constraints. According to Dent et al. (2023), the remote regions offer fertile ground for what is called soft innovation and ecological leadership models. Where urban areas seem to prioritize density, the region focuses more on social and cultural closeness, a community development spirit, to reduce transaction costs and encourage stronger and therefore more lasting strategic alliances (Natário and Oliveira, 2025) which may give rise to innovations.

At the micro level, Nnanna et al. (2024) point out that Quebec's regional entrepreneurship, in particular, stands out for its increased psychological resilience, often shown through the concept of entrepreneurial tinkering. This concept refers to adapting to external shocks, for which regional entrepreneurs demonstrate adaptability by reconfiguring available relational and material resources to cope with current constraints.

Thus, entrepreneurship in the remote regions is inseparable from its cultural roots. The sustainable development of the regions also depends on their ability to attract creative human capital (Dent et al., 2024).

3.3 Ecosystems and Innovation put to the Test by Regional Entrepreneurship

The ecosystem of remote regions isn't identified just by its geographical isolation or by the difficulty of accessing markets; it's a setup characterized by the network, community institutions, and resource endowment (Aguilar, 2021). Julien (2015) developed a pyramid representing the entrepreneurial ecosystem. In the middle of the pyramid are the factors that encourage the emergence of endogenous entrepreneurship and its development through: 1) information, which is at the heart of the knowledge economy and serves as the link to the vibrancy of the economy; 2) networking, for better access to and adaptation of this information; and finally 3) innovation, which is at the core of a company's competitiveness in the knowledge economy and relies on the information provided by networks (Julien, 2015: 17). It therefore appears that entrepreneurial innovation is fostered by networks and the sharing of information.

Moreover, Lachapelle and Cloutier (2020) highlight the importance of knowledge sharing in environments with feedback loops of information exchange to encourage the entrepreneur to come up with innovative ideas that provide a differentiating added value for adapting. Also, according to Arthur et al. (2023), the systemic perspective shows that innovation in the region works through feedback loops.

One way to foster information sharing is through closeness. Torrès (2007) explains that the management of small businesses is unique and can be expressed through various forms of proximity among entrepreneurs, whether hierarchical, functional, temporal, or spatial. This proximity, which translates into closeness that fosters the conditions for action and reflection in small firms, also relates to company functions, such as local marketing, local finance, and local information systems.

Forms of closeness can thus resonate with the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, and this proximity encourages the sharing of knowledge, especially in regional areas. Regional entrepreneurship can therefore be highlighted in a rational way, notably through the model of entrepreneurial ecosystems developed by Stam and Van de Ven (2021). According to the authors, the foundation of the entrepreneurial ecosystem is based on institutional arrangements (formal institutions, culture, network). These foundations create an environment of trust and rules that makes it easier for resource endowments such as infrastructure, talent, funding, and knowledge to emerge. A circular causal link is thus encouraged because entrepreneurial success doesn't just create wealth; it reinvests that wealth into the ecosystem, which strengthens networks and the entrepreneurial culture in the environment (Stam and Van de Ven, 2021) or the region.

Ultimately, the remote region appears as a reservoir of forces around which a dynamic can be structured, where the territory is no longer merely a site of entrepreneurial activity, but an innovative initiative that generates economic value (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Moreover, from Müller and Korsgaard's (2017) point of view, rurality is also seen as a kind of toolbox of finite and available resources, at the service of the regional entrepreneur, who can integrate them into their value creation process and better differentiate themselves in the market. The remote region therefore presents both strengths and significant challenges for innovative entrepreneurs, and in a context where innovative entrepreneurship is a central driving force of regional development, it becomes necessary to examine the factors that can attract them and support their retention within regions.

4. Methodology

The selected methodological approach aligns with the principles of action research (Fendt and Kaminska-Labbé, 2011) important for the co-creation of knowledge with practitioners. This research involves 10 support organizations for incubation and acceleration (OIA) who are partners in the project and helped to recruit innovative entrepreneurs from all sectors in their region.

This empirical qualitative research using focus groups highlights the current challenges facing by the remote regions, and the key concepts of attraction and retention. The 10 OIAs, through their expertise in the field, recruited (between May and July 2024) entrepreneurs for a total of 10 focus groups lasting approximately two (2) hours each. The groups série spread across the 10 regions of the OIA in Quebec located from two (2) to 18 hours from Montreal Metropolitan, Canada. The 10 groups were composed from three (3) to 10 innovative entrepreneurs for a total of 51 participants. In order to give an overall picture of each region, the innovative entrepreneurs who participated come from different sectors ranging from technology (8), agriculture (6), social economy (9), to green technology (13) and culture (15).

The discussion groups were recorded and transcribed to allow for the analysis of results (Miles et al, 2020) by region and subsequently to develop a regional diagnosis followed by general recommendations.

5. Analysis of Results

The analysis of the results across all focus groups (11) highlights four main strengths key factors that influence innovative entrepreneurs' decisions to establish their businesses in regional areas for their business projects, and these factors also represent competitive advantages for many regions are: Quality of life; Strategic business considerations; Financial advantages and Ecosystem from the community. The analyses also identify the major challenges entrepreneurs face, and the solutions proposed by participants.

5.1 Main Strengths of These Regions

5.1.1 *Quality of Life*

The main factor that has attracted innovative entrepreneurs to the region is the quality of life and peaceful environment it offers. This includes proximity to nature and recreational activities, opportunities to achieve a healthier work-life balance, and a less stressful lifestyle than that offered by large urban centers. Some entrepreneurs deliberately chose to return to their home region—particularly in very remote areas located more than five hours from a major urban center—to reconnect with their families, professional networks, and personal roots. This reflects both a strong attachment to the region and the family and social considerations cited by several participants.

5.1.2 *Strategic Business Considerations*

The second factor that was highlighted was Strategic business considerations which also played an important role in attracting entrepreneurs to certain regions, whether through commercial opportunities in underserved markets, lower levels of competition, or proximity to key suppliers.

5.1.3 *Financial Advantages*

In addition, many participants emphasized the financial advantages of operating in regional areas, including lower costs for purchasing land or buildings and more affordable commercial rents.

5.1.4 *Ecosystem from the Community*

Participants also highlighted the strong sense of community found in regional areas, close relationships with local stakeholders, a culture that emphasizes collaboration over competition, and the welcoming attitude toward new entrepreneurs.

"I would also point to the sense of proximity and the local business environment. There are many partnerships between companies, and a lot of relationships develop naturally that way. I think that was one of the region's strengths from the very beginning. For example, someone might say, "Oh, they do welding just down the road." There's a strong culture of businesses supporting one another. I believe that has been a real asset. It's also something the business owners have always valued—working with companies that are as close to them as possible, for both financial and relationship-building reasons." Participant -Chaudière Apalache, three hours from a urban center.

Some participants expressed a desire to contribute to the local community or promote cultural development, while others were attracted by specific features of the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as its dynamism, independence, or the presence of industry-specific business incubators.

5.2 Entrepreneurs' Challenges in Regional Areas

Regarding the challenges associated with operating in regional areas, participants identified several issues that are more pronounced than in urban centers. One of the most significant is the shortage of skilled labor and specialized resources resulting from a smaller talent pool. This challenge is compounded by difficulties in recruiting specialized employees and by business succession issues affecting many regions.

In addition, the shortage of housing and family support services, such as childcare, is closely linked to workforce attraction and retention, as larger urban centers generally offer a broader range of services.

“There are no daycare spaces because there aren’t enough early childhood educators. There aren’t enough educators because they can’t find housing. It’s the classic chicken-and-egg problem. So even if people want to move here and settle in the region, those in their fifties, for example, obviously aren’t the ones who need daycare services” Participant, Iles de la Madeleine, 10 hours from urban centers.

In some regions, the lack of commercial space and worker accommodations also limits business growth. Limited or inadequate public transportation further complicates the recruitment of both skilled and general workers. Participants also identified several financial challenges, including high transportation and supply costs—particularly in remote regions—limited access to financing tailored to innovative businesses, and the relatively small size of local markets.

In remote region some participants emphasize limited brand recognition and visibility also emerged as barriers to innovation, suggesting that businesses located in regional areas are often perceived as riskier than those based in major urban centers. Several entrepreneurs reported losing credibility with partners, investors, or clients simply because their businesses were located outside large cities.

Challenges related to innovation and the lack of specialized support services were mentioned in half of the regions studied. Participants also pointed to administrative barriers, such as the complexity of government programs, funding criteria that are not always well suited to innovative businesses, and insufficient personalized support.

To address these challenges, participants proposed several potential solutions. These include encouraging and facilitating immigration to regional areas, providing support to help newcomers access housing and childcare services, and fostering greater collaboration, resource sharing, and mutual support among businesses. Participants also recommended strengthening mentorship and business advisory services, investing in business succession planning and entrepreneurship transfer initiatives, supporting the development of housing and public infrastructure, and more effectively promoting the strengths of regional areas to enhance their attractiveness for innovative entrepreneurs.

6. Discussion

Regions are places where entrepreneurs are drawn to settle, both for their personal lives and their professional activities, because of the quality of life they offer. Also, to get closer to their established network, which helps them seize opportunities and innovate. Remote regions provide the chance to relax as soon as they leave the office and make it easier to balance work, family, and social life due to the closeness. Which empirically confirms Boone et al. research “The magnitude and qualities of livelihoods, lifestyles, connectivity, and place create the degree of urban-ness of intertwined human experiences and land configurations”(Boone et al., 2014:314.).

For some companies, region is also a strategic choice, given the lower costs associated with operating expenses (raw materials, business partners in the same field, etc.). However, it should be noted that this is not the case for other companies, particularly those in more remote regions, namely that the distance from major urban centers increases their shipping costs, etc. Aspects of innovative entrepreneurship have been well studied, and significant progress has been noted. Living in a rural area can now be an advantage in several aspects. Knowledge is sometimes centralized in large cities, but with urban development and the relocation of businesses to the regions, this knowledge is being shared outside of university towns (Fu et al, 2023). The driving forces behind innovation are change, a factor facilitated by urban development. The economy also drives change and opens new doors for entrepreneurs by developing, among other things, various local structures (Khodakivska et al, 2022).

Surprisingly, since the participants were invited by organizations for the incubation and acceleration (OIA) of the region and the discussion groups took place in the OIA offices, very few participants highlighted the help and support they received from the OIA itself. Nevertheless, Stam and Van de Ven (2021) point out that the foundation of the entrepreneurial ecosystem is based on institutional arrangements (formal institutions, culture, networks). These foundations create an environment of trust and rules that makes it easier for resource endowments like infrastructure, talent, funding, and know-how to emerge. The interaction between the institutional setup and the resource endowment shapes the quality of the ecosystem. So, when the conditions are right, these interactions feed what’s called “productive” entrepreneurship, which is the tangible outcome of the system. There’s kind of a circular cause-and-effect here because entrepreneurial success doesn’t just generate wealth, it reinvests that wealth back into the ecosystem, which strengthens networks and the entrepreneurial culture in the community.

The regions are at a disadvantage in terms of resources, public transportation, and networking (Fu et al, 2023). On the other hand, links created in the regions tend to be stronger, while those in the city are more common, and short-term. Furthermore, the solutions established to address the lack of resources and transportation require a certain degree of innovation and strong problem-solving skills, which are the foundation of innovative entrepreneurship (Deakins, 2018). This can also foster the opening of opportunities in the regions, as the market sometimes seems already saturated, and even closed to new developments, in more remote areas (Block et al, 2017). Deakins' study (2018) establishes a gradation for comparing the level of rurality. In particular, it appears easier for local rural businesses to develop than those that depend on city dwellers who commute daily. The opposite is actually more common, due to the centralization of resources. In particular, rural areas are affected by the following factors: the export of resources and workers to rural areas and the influence of urban areas. However, it is possible to classify rural areas by placing them in this gradation (rural with a strong urban influence, rural with a moderate urban influence, rural with a weak urban influence or very rural/remote) and better study their particular needs of innovative entrepreneurs.

Finally, the literature recognizes that entrepreneurship is a good way to encourage and stimulate an economy dependent on raw materials. Economic diversification is directly proportional to the wages of the inhabitants of the region studied (Asitik, 2023). Moreover, there is less competition in rural areas, so these businesses can take advantage of an emerging environment and encourage other companies to do the same (Bousmah, 2021).

7. Conclusion

This empirical study aims to identify how to attract and retain innovative talent in remote regions to boost the economy through entrepreneurship. Our research argues that quality of life and proximity to networks—personal, family, and business—are key. Regions have every advantage in highlighting their strengths in family well-being and business. To retain innovative companies, regions with university networks should train a skilled workforce and make sure they can provide housing and develop industrial parks. Innovative entrepreneurs are especially looking for financial support to develop or grow their business projects.

What wasn't surprising is the fact that it's hard to hire qualified staff. However, big centers also have this problem but more easily deal with other issues like public transportation.

In conclusion, this empirical research cannot identify the strengths or weaknesses of the ecosystem in the region, nor confirm or deny the lack of effectiveness of ecosystem players in order to better understand the issues in their region and promote knowledge sharing through geographic proximity. However, it does seem possible for remote regions to identify strategic levers for coordination among ecosystem players and the willingness to address their region's specific issues together.

There is one limitation of this research stems from the impossibility of analyzing the results according to the sector of activity of the innovative entrepreneurs, given that the groups were mixed and the sectoral sampling of each group is small and limited.

Ethics Declaration

This research project involving human beings has obtained an ethical approval certificate that attests to the compliance of the research project with the UQO Policy on Ethics in Research with Human Beings and is therefore issued on May 1, 2024, its number being 2024-3201.

AI Declaration

We declare no AI was used and no AI tools were used for the creation of this paper.

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