

Opinion

Canada needs its youth to show swagger to be global leaders in the entrepreneurship and innovation game

By [Cathy Han](#) Jun. 11, 2018

Let youth not be wasted on the young. Give them a platform; empower them to think big—because this is the generation that will define Canada’s future place in the world.



This is a crucial time for us to have this discussion about the future of Canadian entrepreneurship and to examine if we are setting up our youth to succeed, writes Cathy Han. *The Hill Times file photograph*

Our global reputation for being nice means we sometimes take a back seat on the world stage when it comes to creating the next big ideas, organizations, or initiatives.

This puts Canadians at a disadvantage in business, economic, and political development.

My co-founder and I are both Canadian. We started 42 Technologies, a big data platform to help the retail industry, in Toronto and subsequently moved to Silicon Valley to raise financing and grow the company. I’ve seen first-hand the incredible raw talent and ideas that Canadians

have to offer. However, we need to devote more resources to even the playing field and give our entrepreneurs a fair chance.

For one, our “polite” mindset means entrepreneurs don’t always get the tough, honest feedback they need to improve. Don’t be afraid to discourage entrepreneurs. If they’re in it for the right reasons, they’ll know how to filter valid feedback. Being nice deprives young founders of the opportunity to grow. Rather than avoiding difficult conversations, we should work on more mentorship and support networks to help startups tackle these problems.

On the investment side, venture capitalists seeking stringent revenue numbers and tough financing terms could send Canadian startups looking elsewhere. Many early stage startups find more favourable terms and move to the U.S. More private funding and strategic, long-term views around equity ownership can help keep the economic potential of our startups at home.

Our conservative approach to entrepreneurship starts with youth. I’m happy to see that the Government of Canada recently asked the enrichment and entrepreneurship program, SHAD, to survey its network about entrepreneurship so they could consider some of the recommendations for its new National Youth Policy based on our first-hand experiences.

https://www.shad.ca/userContent/documents//SHAD_Youth_Action.pdf

I attended SHAD at its University of Waterloo campus when I was in high school. It was transformational because for the first time, I had the chance to hear career perspectives outside of classes. SHADs are driven youth from across the country with immensely different interests. We had four weeks to solve a complex global problem and simulated starting a business from scratch.

Spoiler alert: our business didn’t turn into Facebook. However, the short summer was enough to show me that I, too, could start a company. This was a springboard for myself and many others at SHAD to be the entrepreneurs we are today.

We need more programs at the elementary and high school levels for Canadian youth to gain exposure to entrepreneurship. Failure is the ultimate teacher, and the less you know, the less you’re afraid to fail. If we can instill a sense of courage at an early age, we can build risk tolerance through real experience and prepare the next generation of founders.

So we have to start early.

Governments can help by creating easily accessible entrepreneurship programs for youth. From weekend hackathons, to lunch and learns, we can create opportunities to teach students how to turn ideas into mini products. From there, we could build programs to help them learn market testing, strategy, product roadmaps, and financial skills to run businesses. Students would revise and improve the idea and see that failure and learning from that failure is an important part of the process.

This is a crucial time for us to have this discussion about the future of Canadian entrepreneurship and to examine if we are setting up our youth to succeed. The advancement of artificial intelligence and automation means many of today’s jobs will not exist in 20 years.

Being able to pass a quiz won't determine your success in the real world. Our education curriculum should be amended to require high schools to bring mentors into the classroom to share real stories, so youth can see there is a world of opportunities they could explore outside of traditional paths.

We can start by teaching our youth to be bold and show them they'll be supported as they carve their own path to become world leading entrepreneurs.

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Cathy Han is an entrepreneur, and the founder and CEO of 42 Technologies, a big data platform focused on the retail industry. She was recently voted one of Forbes 30 Under 30 and is a SHAD Fellow 2006.

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