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## Santa Fe Innovates seeks to teach tech entrepreneurs tools to win over investors

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Tech startups typically rely on family members and investors to get started and for years thereafter.

Investors need to have confidence in the startup's leader and team.

Often enough, however, techies aren't exactly fluent in business planning, financial planning or team building.

They have a great idea but no money, no product, no likely revenue for years. Traditional banks won't touch them.

That's where business accelerators come in. They are basically business boot camps tailored for the startup crowd.

Accelerators and business incubators have become part and parcel to modern local economies, especially in cities aspiring toward a tech sector or even those firmly established in technology.

The Santa Fe Business Incubator has been around for 20-plus years. Incubators provide startup businesses office space and shared facilities along with mentoring and guidance.

Jon Mertz is on the verge of launching a business accelerator program called Santa Fe Innovates. It will revolve around eight-week courses or modules designed to get a startup entrepreneur armed with all the tools to win over investors.

"We provide a disciplined approach to take the entrepreneur from point A to point B," Mertz said. "That is coming in with an idea and having to figure out how to go to market. They have no business model, no financial model. There is the people side, building your organizational culture, hiring a

team. At the end of eight weeks, when you meet with a potential investor, you can do so confidently and answer questions in an intelligent way.”

Mertz acknowledges Santa Fe Innovates will launch in a “bootstraps” manner. The accelerator itself is a startup, with Mertz working out of the Co-Fe co-workspace. The eight-week accelerator courses will be staged Saturdays at Falling Colors, a downtown Santa Fe tech startup at 125 Lincoln Ave.

The first eight-week session starts May 2.

Mertz will have a pair of information sessions Tuesday, March 3, at noon at the Santa Fe Business Incubator, 3900 Paseo del Sol, and at 6 p.m. at Cafe Sonder, 326 S. Guadalupe St. He will accept applications for three weeks for the first eight-week session.

The accelerator course fee is \$500, but Mertz hopes to have scholarships available. That is “still unfolding” as he seeks to build sponsorships from local companies willing “to give back” to the next generation of techies.

This approach falls within Mertz seeking B Corp certification as a “socially responsible” business.

Mertz wants social responsibility to be part of Santa Fe Innovates, part of the accelerator curriculum and among the sponsors and course instructors.

“Don’t stand on the sidelines,” Mertz said. “We have a playing field. You can get involved in social responsibility. It’s as much a call to action for entrepreneurs. I really believe Santa Fe can be the place for socially responsible technology enterprises to come and thrive.”

Mertz, 57, arrived in Santa Fe three years ago after a dozen years in Dallas and 25 years overall in Texas, where his latest venture was a health care technology startup that he eventually sold.

“I had a lot of ideas for chapter three of my life,” Mertz said. “How can I give back to the startup community? I was not planning on starting an accelerator.”

Within his first two weeks in town, he hooked up with the Santa Fe Business Incubator and became a board member. Incubator CEO Marie Longserre said she is “absolutely” supportive of the accelerator.

“Accelerators are focusing on time-constrained training for a cohort of companies going through the process at the same time,” Longserre said. “Most companies in accelerators are getting funded.”

Mertz has lined up three faculty members at the University of New Mexico Anderson School of Management to assist with modules dealing with business planning, strategic planning and leadership. Mertz’s focus on social responsibility matches with Anderson School’s own research in impact investing and social entrepreneurship, which will be incorporated in the accelerator course work, Anderson faculty member Wellington Spetic said.

Spetic said business accelerators “move businesses from plan to implementation in a faster way,” but Mertz’s accelerator is unique in New Mexico with its focus on socially responsible entrepreneurship.

Mertz hopes Santa Fe Innovates can answer the question he says numerous techies ask when they are thinking of moving to Santa Fe.

“Is there a tech accelerator I can get involved with?”

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**Teya Vitu**

Business Editor