

Success is in the BAG

Advisory group helps entrepreneurs get and stay on track

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Nothing seemed to be working.

He was sending out hundreds of letters, making cold calls all day and none of it was producing business.

Des Brown was trying to find the right way to market his new general contracting company to the right people.

For 17 years in his native South Africa, he'd built up a solid business using those methods, but in Canada they were falling flat.

For Dianne Beveridge, the issue was learning the "common-sense" tricks of being self-employed after two decades of working for others.

While 80 per cent of such efforts fail in their first five years, Brown, Beveridge and several hundred other risk-takers in the Hamilton-Burlington area are hoping their chances of success are in the BAG -- the Business Advisory Group.

Formerly called Halton Business Advisory Group, BAG was formed in 1984 by a small group of retired corporate executives.

"They invented the organization because they wondered what they were going to do in retirement besides make doctor's appointments and play golf," said Mike Hoshoooley, one of the group's 16 advisers.

All of BAG's advisers work as volunteers.

Clients are charged \$150 for a three-hour consultation with three advisers.

The current corps includes people with backgrounds in human resources, finance, accounting, logistics and most other functions.

Bill Vickers, BAG's current president, says where it used to be clients were generally established small-business operators looking for advice to get them to the next level, the largest group now is displaced workers putting their severance packages into new ventures.

Most of the problems BAG is asked to solve involve money, marketing and strategy.

"An entrepreneur can be so hands-on, he can't find 15 minutes in the day to think strategically ..." Vickers said. "Not enough strategic thinking early on is one of the biggest things we're asked to help with."

For Brown and Beveridge, BAG has increased their confidence.

"Here, everything is about networking," Brown said.

"In South Africa, I built up a network over 30 or 40 years, but here I was an unknown entity and had to start from scratch again. BAG helped to reaffirm a lot of what I'd come to realize on my own. They showed I wasn't completely off track."

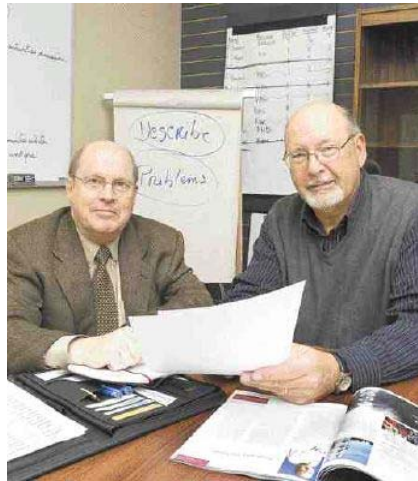
Beveridge has started her own distribution company, handling educational products for California-based PASCO Scientific.






It's the same business she's been in for the past 20 years, except now she's self-employed.

"BAG helped me with simple questions like, 'Should I take on a partner? Do I need to rent an office or can I operate from home?' and gave me a lot of financial advice."

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