

Training Business Mentors for the Circular Economy

The recent [Climate Change Conference](#), COP26, in Glasgow spotlighted the increasing importance of the circular economy. More than [60 large companies](#) in Ireland signed up to reduce their climate emissions in 2021. Creating sustainable and circular economy SME businesses is not easy. This article provides a reflection on the experiences of the [Hincks Centre](#) who actively developed and tested training materials for green business mentors as part of an Erasmus+ Funded EC project called the [Green Mentor](#). These Green Mentor materials meet goal number 12 of the United Nations Sustainability and Development Goals (SDGs). [Goal 12](#) ensures sustainable production and consumption patterns.



What is Green Entrepreneurship?

Green entrepreneurship considers businesses that are seeking to be more sustainable as well as those that are starting up as a green business. Agreement on definitions is lacking. Many terms are associated with green entrepreneurship including eco-entrepreneurship; eco-preneurship; environmental or ecological entrepreneurship; sustainable entrepreneurship; enviro-preneurship; or sustainopreneurship.

Green business considers both linear (sustainability and resource efficiency) processes and [circular](#) processes. Critics of linear sustainability processes believe that they are insufficient and at best slow down depletion of the earth's resources. [Circular processes](#) take a long perspective and include the eventual re-adsorption and regeneration of materials, in effect, mimicking nature's processes. For a business to be considered part of the circular economy, three dimensions are required, economy, environment, and society. An eco-innovative business will impact positively on society and the environment as well as having an economic impact.

The Green Mentor Project

The Green Mentor Project (2015 -2017) raised awareness and encouraged existing business advisors to mentor with a green mindset. A further aim was to develop the abilities of green activists to mentor businesses using their existing knowledge of the circular economy. Business mentors play a vital role in supporting management teams in start-ups and in scaling existing businesses, with mentors typically drawn from a variety of backgrounds, based on their entrepreneurial, business management, technical or sectoral expertise.

A consortium of partners from 4 EU countries collaborated to develop training tools and resources, available at the project website [Green Mentor](#). In Ireland, a panel of 6 experts, with business/ecosystem/green expertise (including one expert from the [Clean Technology Centre](#)) oversaw the quality of the project outputs. The training materials included a training handbook and a book of 16 business mentoring tools. One tool adapted the [business model canvas](#) to include the environment, society and the circular economy and used this adapted tool to explore the implications for the business models with mentors, and indirectly with businesses.



Testing the Training Materials

Recruitment for Green Mentor training events in 2016 were advertised through contact with local environmental groups and through recommendations of the project oversight panel. Recruitment difficulties drove a change from a 2-day to a 1-day, four-hour training session to introduce the Green Mentor materials. Training took place within MTU and by invitation, at community, or other educational and research facilities. A total of 30 individuals were recruited to test the developed materials, including both experienced business mentors (15) and those who were active in the circular economy with no prior mentoring experience. The trainees were then asked to implement the tools with a business mentee to receive a certificate of completion. Further exploration of the training tools was conducted with entrepreneurship students in 3rd level classrooms and in business incubator settings ([Student Inc](#)).

Outcomes from the Green Mentor

A total of 30 individuals attended the Green Mentor training sessions. Six MTU Green Mentor certificates were issued to existing business mentors who provided proof of using the circular economy tools to provide training to a green or greening business. One mentor completed a full cycle of mentoring with a green business, others implemented specific circular economy tools targeting a single green business goal. Feedback was positive from both the business mentors and entrepreneurs who engaged in the green mentoring. Even in the case where the business was an existing green business, one experienced business mentor commented:

“Susan has been very positive about our meeting and the structure that the Green Mentoring Framework provides. Her business is very green, by definition, so I was interested to see, to what extent the green perspective of the tools would be relevant/stimulating - given that its already embedded in the mentee’s mindset. It turned out that the addition of the “Environmental foresight” and “societal foresight” elements to the traditional business model canvas stimulated some new perspectives for the business, which we were both happy to discover”



What we Learned about Training Green Mentors

The Green Mentor training materials were evaluated as accessible and useful by the experienced mentors who evaluated the materials in practice, with further validation from the project panel of experts. The training tools and materials were welcomed by the [Rubicon Centre](#) incubator as providing a useful means for training new business mentors.

The recruits with a circular economy focus and no prior mentoring experience struggled with the 4-hours of training and volume of new materials. One trainee attended twice to embed the new information. Those who had not mentored businesses before did not gain enough confidence to mentor a business from the 4-hour session. Except for one trainee, an offer to apply the Green Mentor tools in a classroom-setting to build confidence was not compatible with holding down a job.

Experienced business mentors expressed reservations about green mentoring. They were uncomfortable recommending circular economy tools where the business models had not been proven, and particularly to start-ups and novice entrepreneurs. A further barrier to adoption of circular practices was that sustainability more easily shows results in terms of energy/cost/waste savings compared to the circular economy’s longer-term waste elimination approach.



The codesigned Green Mentor training materials and tools have provided much needed direction for business mentors in understanding the circular economy. Novice business mentors, despite having extensive knowledge of the circular economy did not have the confidence to directly mentor businesses following the training and provision of the tools. Those with prior business mentoring experience were seeking proofs that circular economy models make for economically successful businesses. This shows that further work is needed to enable business mentors to promote green business models to

businesses. Further case studies of what works for green businesses in terms of circular economy business models are required.