Building a Community for Black Entrepreneurs in PEI

Tobi Oriade on the new Black Entrepreneurship Program, mentorship, and building bridges between talent and employers.

Tobi Oriade

Founder Success Coordinator, WorkSource Alliance

Adapted from an interview with Tobi Oriade, Founder Success Coordinator at WorkSource Alliance, by Bianca McGregor, CEO of the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce, at Speakers Corner at Confederation Court Mall on October 21, 2026.

What is the Black Entrepreneurship Program, who is it for, and what does a participant get?

The Black Entrepreneurship Program, or BEP, is a new program that launched in September. Our aim is to support Black entrepreneurs, and businesses where a Black person owns about 25% or more, by giving them access to resources, mentors, experts and a community, so they can start, grow, scale, buy or sell a business.

What does support look like at each stage?

We have programs for every stage of the journey, from having an idea, to running an established business that wants to scale. We also have a program for people who do not want to start from scratch but want to buy an existing business, and one for owners who want to sell. The point is that at whatever stage you are at, there is support for you here on the Island, and a community that is interested in your success.

If you have an idea but do not know the next step or who to turn to, you get connected to mentors who have already done it in your industry, and you can ask them specialized questions. We are also bringing in experts from across Canada to speak on topics that matter at each stage: how to write a business plan, how to evaluate your business, what risks come with different kinds of businesses, how to register a business, and how to buy or sell one. On the financial side, we have partners, including BDC and Innovation PEI, so participants have more streamlined access to financial supports. Our goal is to prepare them and then connect them.

How is the program going so far?

We are still ramping up. We are onboarding entrepreneurs, learning about their journeys so far and how we can help. It is a lot like starting a business, so in a way we are our own first participant. We are validating where the program is headed so we can serve the entrepreneurs in it better.

Where do founders get stuck, and how do mentorship and networking help?

Networking and mentorship are key in business, and we want to give people access to the conversations they would otherwise have to pay for. Some of the people in the program do not have the financial capacity to pay for those resources, or do not know where to look. Our job is to go out and find the networks, mentors, partnerships and funding, and make them accessible.

What do you wish you had when you started your own business?

I wish I had access to the programming on what it takes to start a business. When I started, I did not know there was such a thing as customer discovery. I thought you just had an idea and went with it. You have to understand the problems your customers are facing, address them, and test in small ways so that you can fail small and fail fast instead of taking a big risk and having a big failure. I did not have those frameworks.

That shapes our programming. I want to give people that information up front so they do not face the hardships I did and do not have to backtrack. If you pull the trigger on an idea with no customer validation, you eventually have to go back and do it all again. Providing the right resources, connections and programming helps founders make good decisions early.

How can the Chamber and the business community help founders stay on the Island?

Community is a big part of what we are trying to build. Being in a room with people who share your ambition and drive fosters a sense of belonging, and that is good for retention. What we need from the Chamber and from Islanders is people who are willing to help us build a network of experts and mentors: people willing to have conversations and open up connections. Connections matter enormously in business, and being connected to people who will lend their experience to budding startups would be really helpful.

What can employers do to make work and life here more inclusive?

From the employment side, businesses need to map out what skills a job actually requires and give people the chance to show they have them. I feel there is a disconnect between the job posting, the interview process and the actual job. Employers need to map that out carefully so they find people who have the skills they need.

We also need ways for talented people, including international talent, to build local relationships with employers. Many talented people never get noticed because they do not have those local relationships. That is what WorkSource Alliance is trying to do: be the bridge between employers and people looking for work. One program we launched recently, in partnership with Mitacs, uses Mitacs funding to place students with employers. An employer gives us a short, scoped description of the work, and we cover 50% of the cost of placing a student in that role.

Is there anything you would like people to know?

Come talk to us if you have industry experience or expertise. We are looking to build our network of experts and mentors to help our founders, and that is the most practical way to help us foster these relationships here.

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