

I/O Spaces: Going Global With Diversity in Tech

Teaching Notes

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Organization: [I/O Spaces](#) | **Organization size:** Micro| Small

Region: [Middle Africa](#), [Western Africa](#), [Northern America](#) | **State:** District of Columbia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio

Industry: Office administrative, office support and other business support activities| Rental and leasing activities

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PREVIEW

Teaching Notes Case Summary

As an immigrant to the United States from Cameroon in 2010, Leslie Tita needed to figure out how he fitted into his new country. He turned to entrepreneurship as a means to do so, first in Columbus, Ohio, and then in Silver Spring, Maryland, a diversely populated city located metro stops away from Washington, DC's embassies and not far from Virginia's tech corridor where Amazon later chose to build its HQ. Joining with his Forbes-recognized mentor Rebecca Enonchong in 2015, he co-founded I/O Spaces, which became a multinational community where entrepreneurs could input their idea and, with the community support, would produce output. The case teaches students to identify entrepreneurial strategies for marketing and adding value to product offerings so they might apply these strategies to other entrepreneurial companies. It additionally discusses other factors contributing to success and failure such as urban environments and immigrant experience. Finally, it highlights the challenges of being of African descent while fundraising.

Teaching Objectives

The teaching objectives are to help students to:

- identify entrepreneurial strategies in marketing and for adding value to product offerings; have them apply these strategies to other entrepreneurial companies;
- explain I/O Space branding and describe elements of office design and culture meant to support productivity;
- recognize how the environment in Montgomery County contributed to I/O Spaces' development;
- analyze the role of failure and learning from failure in a successful entrepreneurial venture;
- provide insights on the motivations of some entrepreneurs, including family influence.

Target Audience

Business (entrepreneurship, marketing, technology or hospitality concentrations), African or African American Studies-focused undergraduates, and global business executive masters students.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

1. Before class, assign the case to the students and ask them to come to the lesson with answers to the discussion questions. Instructors can also recommend students try a co-working space (co-working spaces allow for free trial periods) for a minimum of two hours and compare their experience to the library or their individual study space.
2. In class, instructors should provide a brief summary of the case before presiding over a free-range discussion of the questions at the end of the case.
3. Once all students in the class have had an opportunity to contribute, assign students or student teams to design a hypothetical co-working space with additional services that the student or student group could run. An option could be an in-person or virtual class on one of the following topics I/O Spaces found relevant to its membership:
 - a. Technology (Software, AI, ML, Robotics, VR/AR)
 - b. Healthcare, Health Tech, Wellness
 - c. Lifestyle (Food & Drink, Gaming, Travel, Fashion, Beauty, Sports)
 - d. Education/ EdTech, Consumer Tech

- e.
Government & Public Policy
- f.
Social Impact, PR, Journalism
- g.
Community (Investors, Ecosystem builders, Nonprofits)
- h.
Design, Development, Events, Marketing
- 4.
Have students create a form of advertising for I/O Spaces and think about the best channel for reaching the target audience. Students may evaluate the choice against what they perceive I/O Spaces has done so far.

Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

1. What does the I/O brand stand for? How did I/O's inclusive offerings help international businesspeople, particularly from Africa, surmount barriers to market entry?

I/O brand stands for input and output of various kinds. Entrepreneurs could input their idea and, with community support, would produce output. The co-founders designed the brand to reflect this two-way interaction. The community could also provide input in the form of time, service, and introductions, thereby enabling and better equipping the entrepreneur to produce output.

In the video, Tita explained:

That's exactly what I/O spaces is. Yeah, it's input output. As simple as that. Come with input. People give you output. It could be financial, it could be time, it could be service, it could be introductions to other people that could help you. So that's kind of the basis of the whole thing.

Because he wants to build community and know his customers, Tita mentioned he doesn't personally have an office at I/O spaces, instead he sits at the table with his members. Advanced students may note that, according to a 2011 study by the Society for Knowledge Economics, this leadership behavior does correlate with high team performance—at least in an employee context—and bodes well for I/O Spaces.

Known as designer-in-residence, Tita also takes pride in the holistically supportive, Afro-celebratory culture. This design plan, including an Ethiopian coffeeshop at the entrance, probably makes visiting African customers feel welcome.

I/O Spaces' partnerships with Active Spaces, an incubator in Cameroon, and AfriLabs, a pan African network of innovation centers co-chaired by Enonchong and operating in about 80 African locations in 45 countries, must help Americans do business with Africans and vice versa.

I/O Spaces aims to support previously under supported entrepreneurs by connecting them to African hubs. This is possible with the AfriLab partnership.

These partnerships along with "superfast and reliable Wifi" make I/O Spaces attractive to entrepreneurs from outside the United States, who may not have grown up with this web access at home.

2. How did Leslie Tita adapt from the failure of his first venture to ensure that I/O Spaces would be more successful? What lessons can be drawn from UsePulse's failure?

Tita recognized that UsePulse had not succeeded, in part because he did not have access to his customers on another continent. In developing, iterating and growing I/O Spaces, Tita seems keenly aware of his local

environment. I/O Spaces offers many community touchpoints and earns money from many of them—hosting social, professional and political events. Students may again point out that Tita sat amongst his members so he would feel what they did about the working atmosphere and know them better. Students can also note that UsePulse also lacked funding. With its accelerators and other educational events, plus Enonchong's continuing leadership presence in African business circles, I/O Spaces could build pipelines to important sources of funding.

3. What strategies did Tita and Enonchong employ to add value to their co-working space and increase membership? How can these strategies be applied to other kinds of entrepreneurial ventures?

Besides the aforementioned African connections, Tita and Enonchong offered classes and event rentals that could support their members holistically. To add value to the otherwise urban co-working experience, Designer-in-Residence Tita included natural design elements in I/O spaces (shown in the video) such as the big windows offering natural light, plant trellis and wooden partitions, plus ceiling decorations to promote a feeling of well-being at I/O spaces. Research proves these elements promote productivity, too. In part inspired by the WELL certification movement, well-being design is sprouting up in corporate offices and co-working spaces in major cities (Margolies, 2018).

Tita and Enonchong recognized that if they built community and nicely designed co-working space, members might be more interested in having their professional and social events there. Social cohesion is important for entrepreneurship because teams work long hours together and investors often are betting on the team as much as the product. When entrepreneurs offer free trials and opportunities to be part of product testing, and this goes well, they can develop brand affinity.

4. Using the data provided throughout the case, explain how Silver Spring, Maryland, enabled I/O Spaces to grow. How did the environment in Montgomery County outside Washington, DC attract and shape I/O Spaces?

Students may point out that Tita does not think I/O Spaces would have worked in many other cities. He chose Silver Spring because it was one of the most diverse cities in the United States. As it happened, in the year that he opened Montgomery County chose to recognize African Heritage. The co-founders knew Silver Spring offered public transportation and Capital Beltway access, making the co-working space accessible to workers and trainers from nearby Amazon (which will have a greater presence in Crystal City, Virginia), TEDCO (which funds entrepreneurs), Google and Cisco. Tita believes that having these people work with I/O Spaces, shows students that a career in tech is possible for them.

As well as offering opportunities to collaborate with tech companies, the demographics of Silver Spring ensured that there would be a need for I/O Spaces product offerings. Students could use Data 4 to point out that in 2017, 37% of Silver Spring's population was foreign born. The area offered a significant population of highly educated people of color as well. Whether or not the co-founders looked at demographics showing immigrants were one of the largest demographics of the local area, they had the good market sense to make I/O Spaces as welcoming as possible to immigrant entrepreneurs. Additionally, students may point to the high percentage of ethnic minorities in Silver Spring and Washington, DC, 59% and 60% respectively, as evidence that I/O Spaces needed to support ethnic minority and immigrant entrepreneurship to remain in business.

Advanced students' responses will note that real estate in Silver Spring is less costly than nearby Washington, DC. Finally, since they aspired to help women beat barriers, situating in an area with a preponderance of educated professional women who might mentor, invest or join the community made sense.

5. Why might an immigrant choose entrepreneurship as a career choice? How do family attitudes factor into anyone's choice to become an entrepreneur?

Students can draw from the interview and references to answer this question. Tita comments that in 2010

his parents recommended he move to the United States to study and start a business. He seemed to take pride in beating the entrepreneurship team his father had mentored as a Northeastern professor of entrepreneurship and innovation. Research by Bunting (2015), Lindquist et al. (2012), and Rider et al. (2019) are also helpful sources on the influence parents and market opportunities have on career choices that lead to entrepreneurship.

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