

Wondering where to grow your business? Tony Hughes of City Curator can help

If you're travelling abroad, you can compare the cheapest flights online, you can find the best hotels online, and you can even read reviews of restaurants online before you've even set foot off the plane. But during his career in the startup world, Tony Hughes realised new businesses didn't have this convenience. His company City Curator thinks they can help with that.

Tony Hughes is no newcomer to the startup game. Having spent over a decade working in startups, accelerators, he reflects back on some of the more unfortunate timings of his business ventures.

"I started an accelerator during the first dotcom crash, I started my innovation agency when the economic crash happened," Tony remembers. Even now, in the fledgling stages of his business City Curator, he's facing global economic uncertainty. He sympathises with new startups facing up against the rapidly spreading Coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the economy.

“There’s never a great time to start a business.”

Launching a startup requires a lot of hard work and a healthy dose of luck. But more than that, it’s about preparation, about finding the right location and knowing the right people there. This is what City Curator is all about: setting up startups with the tools, knowledge, and best data available to make the leap into new markets abroad.

What does City Curator do?

Tony draws heavily on his own experience of working with startups in accelerators. When startups are expanding or moving abroad, he believes, there’s two important challenges they have to solve first.

Talent and money.

“It’s about, ‘How do I hire people, and how do I find my first client?’” Tony says.

City Curator was designed around bringing this information to startups in the media, technology, or software sectors. The online membership service provides users with up-to-date data on six criteria—market size, workforce, tax and regulation, universities and research, salaries, and access to investment.

Businesses indicate what they are looking for strategically—whether this is raising investment or finding clients and partners—as well as what they can financially afford in terms of office and talent. Within a matter of minutes, and with this limited information, startups have access to data comparison on dozens of cities across Europe.

“The idea was to harness the power of the consumer web and apply it to the startup world.”

Their help doesn’t end at data comparison: the next step is equally important. City Curator makes the all-important introductions to the right people and companies. This includes lawyers, marketing agencies, accountants, office locations, and, most importantly, potential investors.

Tony was also keen to help cities attract companies and talent, to help them grow and develop their ecosystem.

This is a gap he spotted. “Cities struggle at identifying which companies want to come to there, unless they are connected to them directly.”

This manifests as a type of lead generation—connecting agencies with companies who already have a stated preference for locating to that city, through matching their requirements with the strengths of that location.

Why do most startups fail?

It's often said, perhaps apocryphally, that nine out of ten startups fail. The numbers might be unrealistic, but it speaks volumes about the challenges that new ventures face, and their alarmingly low chance of survival.

Tony is quick to acknowledge that it isn't City Curator's job to stop startups from failing. It is their aim, however, to provide them with the right data and contacts to improve their chances of survival.

Identifying the right location is a big part of this. They can easily point to areas where other startups in the same industry have thrived.

"That's a good starting point. If someone succeeds, you know there's a market there," Tony adds. On the flip side, a lack of competition isn't always a good thing. "You have to worry that there isn't a market for a reason—no one wants it."

The network of businesses that City Curator builds in its different cities, in theory, means that the decision making process which they advise on is constantly improving and refining, building on the successes of other businesses.

This is the next step of the business, Tony predicts. This would involve building out City Curator as a membership organisation, where the companies themselves are as important as the data they provide. They're already on 50 members, having only launched this month.

Building more startup hubs

Much has changed during Tony's time in the startup world. There was once a time when every company would flock to America's west coast to set up shop in the most famous tech ecosystem in the world.

"There were a few generations of people who had to go to Silicon Valley, because that was the only place you could go to get startup money," Tony remembers.

Silicon Valley remains a startup oasis, but companies can now access finance anywhere around the world. As a result, choice of location is far greater than it was five to ten years ago.

"Good entrepreneurs will start their companies from anywhere. They go where the door is most open"

City Curator is playing a big role in increasing the number of startup hubs. Currently, this extends to 27 different cities across 12 European countries.

London and the UK remain a focal point for many businesses looking to expand into Europe. In spite of post-Brexit uncertainty, Tony insists, the UK is one of the best environments to start a business in.

The UK offers dozens of tax incentives to entrepreneurs. This includes research and development tax credits, reduced national insurance contributions for employees, and the Seed Enterprise Investment Schemes (SEIS), which gives tax breaks to investors.

It's also London's openness that has made it such a popular place for relocating or starting a business.

Tony points to an impressive statistic—nine of the UK's ten biggest startup unicorns (companies worth over \$1B) have at least one international founder. The opportunities for international entrepreneurs are vast.

"We like innovators here, we like people who take chances and go out on a limb, and we reward them as such."

Tony Hughes has 20 years experience in product innovation as an entrepreneur, mentor and consultant. He established the UK's first digital content incubator, spinning out over 60 startups and set up an international Digital Media research lab working with companies such as Unilever, Channel 4, BT and Nokia. He has advised Hewlett Packard and the BBC on new product innovation and was a founding member of the Tech City Investment Organisation in London and Tech North for the 7 cities in the north of England.

He is currently co-founder of Curator Technologies, which provides internationally mobile companies with the data and insights to help them access global markets. Curator Technologies produces insights into industry tech international clusters and nascent technologies and have recently contributed to research reports for the UK's Digital Catapult on the Immersive Sector.