THESIS MANUSCRIPT

Democratizing Entrepreneurship Through Shared Commercial Infrastructure

A conceptual model of experiential learning, shared opportunity, and participant value capture

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Main text: approximately 8,000 words, excluding headings, abstract, references, and declarations.

Conceptual propositions and a proposed evaluation design; no original participant outcomes or causal estimates are reported.

Abstract

I have spent 23 years in the rubber and plastics industry. I started in sales in January 2003, learned the business from the ground up, and today I own and run COi Rubber Products, a US-owned manufacturer of custom molded rubber and plastic parts. This thesis grows out of that experience. Entrepreneurship education can build knowledge without supplying the resources a person needs to actually take part in commerce. Access to an established business can close that gap, but access alone can also create dependence and unequal chances to keep the value a person helps create. I develop a framework I call shared commercial infrastructure (SCI): an arrangement that links structured learning, governed access to a company's commercial resources, and real market-facing practice. Drawing on research on human capital, learning transfer, relational resources, effectuation, and power dependence, I separate outcomes that are often blurred together: capability, commercial activity, sponsor performance, participant net income, and durable economic options. My central argument is simple. Lowering the barrier to entry does not by itself close the gap between creating value and keeping a fair share of it. Eight propositions specify the roles of instructional complementarity, calibrated feedback, network

access, compensation governance, payment timing, portability, capacity, and incentives. My own company's developing representative program, the Purple Team, serves as a motivating illustration, not as evidence of effectiveness. I propose comparative research designs, participant-level accounting, distributional measures, and independent governance that could identify benefits, null results, and harms. The contribution is a conditional model of inclusive commercial participation, not a claim that shared infrastructure automatically democratizes entrepreneurship.

Keywords: entrepreneurship education; experiential learning; shared commercial infrastructure; power dependence; participant welfare; business-to-business selling

1. Introduction

1.1 Where I come from, and why I wrote this

My journey in this industry started on January 13, 2003, in an entry-level sales job. I worked long hours, went to college, and learned the trade one customer conversation at a time. My path was not a straight line. As a young man I faced life-changing challenges, and I rebuilt my life through work, education, and industrial sales. Where we begin does not have to determine where we finish. In 2011 I began building my own company, including its own overseas factory, built from the ground up. In 2013 I formed COi Rubber Products, Inc. and became its President and CEO. Today COi is a US-owned company with offices and warehouses in California and its own manufacturing facility overseas, serving customers who need custom molded rubber and plastic parts.

I tell you this at the start of a thesis because it is the reason the thesis exists. Everything I know about business I learned by doing it, inside someone else's company first and then inside my own. I did not start with a product, a supplier, a quotation process, or a customer list. Someone's established business gave me access to those things, and that access let me learn, earn, and eventually build something of my own. Twenty-three years later, I am in a position to offer that same kind of access to other people through COi's Purple Team program. That raises the question at the heart of this document: when can an operating company open its commercial resources to learners as a genuine opportunity, and when does that same arrangement quietly shift costs and risks onto the very people it claims to help?

1.2 The problem

Entrepreneurship education and access to entrepreneurship are not the same intervention. A learner may understand customer discovery, margins, and cash flow yet lack a product, a credible supplier, a quotation process, or a route to fulfilling an order. Conversely, access to an established company's products may permit commercial activity without providing meaningful learning, bargaining power, or durable economic benefit. This thesis examines the relationship between those two problems. It asks when an operating enterprise can make its commercial

resources available as an educational opportunity without merely transferring customer-acquisition costs and risks to inexperienced participants.

The question matters because the outcomes commonly associated with entrepreneurship programs occupy different analytical levels. Knowledge is an individual capability; confidence is a belief; a sales inquiry is an activity; revenue belongs to an identified economic entity; compensation is a participant's receipt; and financial independence is a sustained condition. Treating these outcomes as interchangeable can make an intervention appear successful before its central economic claim has been tested. A sponsor may report growing sales while participants experience disappointing earnings. A participant may leave without generating sales but acquire useful skills. Neither pattern can be understood through enrollment, certification, or revenue totals alone.

Existing evidence supports neither the universal promise nor the blanket dismissal of entrepreneurship education. Meta-analytic research associates education with entrepreneurship-related human capital and outcomes, while identifying substantial heterogeneity and methodological limitations (Martin et al., 2013). Bae et al. (2014) show why preexisting entrepreneurial intentions complicate interpretation of education-intention relationships. Reviewing business training, McKenzie and Woodruff (2014) emphasize small samples, short follow-up, attrition, and measurement difficulties. McKenzie's (2021) reassessment argues against interpreting earlier statistically insignificant findings as proof that training has no effect. The relevant question is consequently not whether education works in the abstract, but which mechanisms operate, for whom, under what organizational conditions, and against which alternative.

1.3 The argument

I develop shared commercial infrastructure (SCI) as an analytical configuration linking education to an operating enterprise. SCI combines structured learning, supervised market participation, and access to transaction-enabling resources that participants do not independently own. Examples include product expertise, supplier relationships, technical quotation support, customer-management systems, quality processes, and fulfillment. The concept does not designate a new legal category or imply that all commission-based activity constitutes entrepreneurship. Its purpose is to isolate how resource access, learning arrangements, and participant rights interact within otherwise familiar organizational forms.

My central argument concerns an access-to-value-capture gap. Infrastructure can make commercial activity feasible while leaving participants unable to obtain or retain a reasonable share of its value. The gap appears when capability development and transaction generation advance more quickly than compensation, discretion, or portable assets. It can narrow when participants receive usable support, reliable attribution of their contributions, predictable payment, and transferable capabilities. It can widen when sponsor dependence, delayed compensation, opaque allocation, or recruitment pressures increase. I frame these as proposed relationships to be tested, not established findings about any particular program. I also write as

a sponsor who wants the gap closed: the propositions are stated so that evidence can prove my own program wrong, because a program that only works on paper is not worth running.

Three contributions follow. First, the framework connects the educational problem of transferring learning into practice with the organizational problem of accessing complementary resources. Second, it incorporates power and dependence into the explanation of participant outcomes, rather than treating governance as a peripheral implementation concern. Third, it proposes an evaluation architecture that distinguishes sponsor performance from participant welfare and short-term activation from durable opportunity. The contribution is a theoretically specified integration, not a claim that shared resources, independent representatives, or experiential education were previously unknown.

COi Rubber Products' developing Purple Team initiative motivates the inquiry. It supplies an illustrative setting in which a business-to-business supplier proposes to combine business literacy, mentoring, and access to commercial operations. My experience identifies the practical design questions, but neither that experience nor the company's existence validates the intervention. This thesis reports no participant experiment, interviews, verified earnings, or causal estimates. Its propositions and research design are intended to permit findings that contradict the sponsor's expectations as readily as findings that support them.

2. Conceptual approach and construct boundaries

2.1 A theory-building thesis rather than an effectiveness report

This thesis follows a model-building approach to conceptual scholarship: relevant theories are selected for the mechanisms they explain, and their integration yields propositions and boundary conditions. Jaakkola (2020) emphasizes the importance of an explicit research design in conceptual articles. Accordingly, my synthesis is organized around three unresolved transitions: from instruction to competent action, from organizational access to transactions, and from transactions to participant benefit. Human-capital and learning research illuminate the first; relational-resource and effectuation perspectives inform the second; dependence and governance explain why the third may fail.

The literature selection is purposive and critical, not a systematic review or meta-analysis. It draws on foundational conceptual studies, reviews, and selected experimental evidence relevant to those transitions. No exhaustive database search, screening count, or comprehensive estimate of the literature is claimed. Evidence from students, existing microenterprise owners, digital platforms, and interorganizational relationships is used to identify plausible mechanisms, not to establish an effect size for novice American industrial representatives. The resulting propositions require direct testing in their proposed setting.

2.2 Defining shared commercial infrastructure

I define SCI as an arrangement through which a sponsoring enterprise provides non-owner participants with governed access to transaction-enabling resources, structured learning, and market-facing practice, alongside a specified route to compensation. Four features identify the configuration: resources remain substantially under sponsor control; learning includes assessment or feedback rather than information distribution alone; participants encounter genuine customer needs; and their economic rights can be distinguished from the sponsor's commercial returns. The definition excludes a classroom simulation, a product catalog without a learning process, and a motivational community without an operational pathway.

The unit of analysis is the participant-sponsor relationship over time, embedded in a customer market. This choice prevents a firm-level success measure from silently replacing an individual-level outcome. It also recognizes that infrastructure is not simply available or absent. Access can be nominal, delayed, selective, or practically unusable. A representative may possess a software login but lack authority to obtain a quotation. Consequently, the relevant treatment is usable access: resources that can be mobilized for specified tasks within reliable response and decision procedures. I have seen this distinction firsthand. A new salesperson with a catalog and a phone still cannot move until someone with technical authority answers their question.

Infrastructure is a bundle, not a single interchangeable input. A catalog cannot substitute for fulfillment; a mentor cannot compensate indefinitely for uncompetitive products; and a certificate cannot resolve unclear payment rights. Researchers should document the bundle's components and their implementation rather than infer a uniform intervention from the SCI label. Component-level measurement also permits identification of bottlenecks. A program might deliver instruction as designed while failing to provide timely technical responses, producing an implementation failure rather than evidence against every mechanism in the framework.

2.3 Adjacent organizational forms

The arrangement overlaps established forms. Conventional sales agency already allows representatives to use a principal's products and operations. SCI adds an explicit educational architecture and participant-centered evaluation; the addition is analytically meaningful only when learning is substantively delivered. Franchising similarly combines established resources with local initiative. Kaufmann and Dant (1999) show why franchising belongs within entrepreneurship research, but this does not make every sponsor-participant relationship a franchise or every franchise educational. Ownership, fees, contractual controls, and applicable legal definitions require separate examination.

Accelerators also combine resources, mentoring, and market exposure, but they generally support ventures whose founders are developing their own businesses. Cohen et al. (2019) demonstrate variation in accelerator design, cautioning against treating all support bundles as equivalent. The focal SCI relationship may instead place the customer contract and operating assets with the sponsor. Digital marketplaces provide another comparison: technology can

reorganize entrepreneurial processes (Nambisan, 2017), while platform dependence introduces asymmetric control (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021). A physical supplier need not operate a digital marketplace for resource dependence to become relevant.

Employment-based training offers an especially important counterfactual. An employee can acquire substantial commercial skill without being described as an entrepreneur, and paid learning may be preferable to uncertain commission income. SCI should therefore not receive a favorable evaluation merely because it uses entrepreneurial language. The appropriate comparison depends on participants' realistic alternatives: employment, another training program, independent selling, education, or nonparticipation. The framework evaluates what the arrangement provides, not the prestige of its label.

2.4 Participation, autonomy, and ownership

I use entrepreneurial participation to describe bounded opportunity-seeking and market-facing problem solving, not to certify independent business ownership. The opportunity perspective associated with Shane and Venkataraman (2000) supports examining how opportunities are acted upon, but it does not eliminate questions about control. Researchers must separately document discretion over customers, schedules, methods, negotiation, and business development; enforceable economic rights; and ownership of any assets created. A person may exercise initiative while remaining economically dependent.

For this reason, durable opportunity means an improved set of feasible future choices, supported by retained capabilities, resources, or rights. It may include further selling, employment, education, or independent enterprise. It does not require permanent attachment to the sponsor. Nor does a completion certificate itself demonstrate portability: employers or customers must recognize the underlying competence, and participants must be able to substantiate what they learned. This definition makes successful exit a possible program benefit rather than automatically a failure of retention. I want to be direct about this point, because it runs against the instinct of most business owners, including me: if a participant learns in my program and then leaves for a better opportunity, the framework treats that as a success to be explained, not a defection to be prevented.

3. Theoretical foundations and empirical tensions

3.1 Human capital and transfer into practice

Human-capital research distinguishes accumulated experience or schooling from task-relevant knowledge and skill. Unger et al. (2011) find that the relationship between human capital and entrepreneurial success depends partly on how human capital is conceptualized and measured. For SCI, this directs attention toward observable commercial tasks: interpreting an inquiry, identifying missing specifications, distinguishing revenue from margin, documenting a customer conversation, and deciding when technical escalation is necessary. Time spent studying is an input, not evidence of mastery.

Transfer research provides a complementary explanation. Baldwin and Ford (1988) organize transfer around trainee characteristics, training design, and the work environment, including whether learning generalizes and is maintained. In the proposed model, sponsor infrastructure supplies an environment in which concepts can be used, but transfer remains conditional on task design and support. Assigning hundreds of contacts without feedback may create exposure without learning. Carefully bounded assignments followed by specific correction may build competence even before an order occurs. This matches my own experience training salespeople: the correction, not the contact count, is where the learning happens.

Politis (2005) conceptualizes entrepreneurial learning as a process through which experience becomes entrepreneurial knowledge. Applying that distinction, the framework treats reflection and revision as essential links between activity and capability. A rejected inquiry becomes educational when participants can distinguish poor targeting, incomplete specifications, weak communication, and an unsuitable product. Without such interpretation, repetition may reproduce mistakes. Thus, the learning mechanism is not commercial activity alone, but structured opportunities to act, receive intelligible feedback, and change subsequent decisions.

3.2 Confidence, intentions, and actual behavior

Entrepreneurial self-efficacy concerns beliefs about performing entrepreneurial tasks (Chen et al., 1998). Newman et al. (2019) review its foundations, measurement, antecedents, and outcomes, illustrating its importance while also identifying unresolved research questions. In SCI, confidence may facilitate the first customer conversation, but confidence cannot establish technical competence or economic viability. A program that increases willingness to prospect without improving judgment may intensify unproductive effort. The desirable outcome is calibrated confidence: beliefs that become better aligned with demonstrated performance and task difficulty.

The education literature reinforces the need to distinguish endpoints. Bae et al. (2014) find that accounting for prior intentions changes conclusions about the education-intention relationship. Rauch and Hulsink (2015), using a quasi-experimental design, examine links from education to intentions and subsequent entrepreneurial behavior. Neither result licenses treating enrollment, enthusiasm, or intention as earned income. Nabi et al. (2017) further identify the prominence of short-term and subjective outcomes in higher-education research. The proposed framework therefore places confidence between instructional experience and action, not at the end of an effectiveness chain.

A competing mechanism is selection rather than development. Individuals with more time, confidence, contacts, or financial reserves may enroll, persist, and earn more even when the program contributes little. Mentors may then direct additional attention toward those participants, strengthening observed associations between engagement and outcomes. Analyses restricted to completers would confuse this sorting process with educational impact. Selection is therefore incorporated into the theory and research design, rather than mentioned only after favorable results appear.

3.3 Relational resources and access to an operating business

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) distinguish structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital. Their framework suggests that access to people is insufficient when participants lack shared language, trust, or an understanding of how work is coordinated. An industrial supplier may make a technical specialist nominally available, yet a novice may not know which questions justify escalation. Training can increase the value of an existing relationship by enabling appropriate use, while mentoring can explain otherwise tacit organizational conventions.

Dyer and Singh's (1998) relational view locates value creation partly in relationships, complementary resources, knowledge sharing, and governance between organizations. Applied cautiously to SCI, it suggests that participants and sponsors can create value that neither would create as efficiently alone. Participants may contribute customer access or local knowledge; the sponsor supplies operational capabilities. However, the original interorganizational argument does not establish fair distribution to individual learners. Joint value creation and participant value capture remain separate questions, requiring separate measures.

Network access can also reproduce inequality. A participant with existing industry contacts may rapidly mobilize sponsor resources, while someone without those ties faces a much longer search. Program averages could conceal this difference. The framework therefore asks whether the sponsor supplies genuinely additional access, such as transparently allocated practice opportunities and technical introductions, or merely rewards networks participants already possess. Inclusion concerns both who can enter and who can use the offered resources productively. This question is personal for me. I started with no network in this industry, so a program that only works for people who already have one is not the program I set out to build.

3.4 Effectuation, affordable experiments, and dependence

Sarasvathy (2001) describes effectual reasoning as beginning with available means and developing opportunities through interaction, rather than relying exclusively on prediction. SCI may support this process by allowing bounded experiments without requiring participants to establish manufacturing or fulfillment systems. Yet means that are available are not necessarily means under the participant's control. An experiment dependent on sponsor approval, changing commission rules, or inaccessible customer records may be inexpensive to start but costly to sustain or leave.

Emerson's (1962) power-dependence account explains why valuable access and unequal bargaining power can increase together: dependence is shaped by the importance of resources and the availability of alternatives. Cutolo and Kenney (2021) extend related concerns to entrepreneurs whose businesses depend on platforms. The proposed SCI mechanism is comparable at the level of resource control, not necessarily technology. A sponsor may become more essential as a participant develops specialized knowledge or pending accounts. Progress inside the system can therefore increase vulnerability unless rights and outside options develop alongside it. I treat this as a design requirement rather than an accusation: a sponsor who

understands the dependence mechanism can build the safeguards, such as transparent records and portable credentials, that keep opportunity ahead of dependence.

3.5 What training evidence does and does not establish

Experimental findings demonstrate why context and intervention content matter. Fairlie et al. (2015) evaluate subsidized entrepreneurship training in the United States and find that some early business-ownership effects did not translate into broad improvements in business performance. In Togo, Campos et al. (2017) report positive profit effects from personal-initiative training among existing microenterprise owners. Their setting, participant population, and intervention differ substantially from novice industrial selling. The studies support neither universal pessimism nor transplantation of a reported effect size into a new program.

Longer follow-up can also change interpretation. Campos et al. (2025) report lasting average benefits of personal-initiative training alongside differing trajectories for men and women. This strengthens the case for examining persistence and heterogeneity, not merely initial activation. More broadly, Sutter et al. (2019) identify different ways entrepreneurship is framed in relation to extreme poverty. Their review cautions against assuming that individual business skills alone resolve structural disadvantage. SCI is accordingly proposed as a bounded organizational intervention, not a comprehensive explanation or remedy for poverty.

4. An integrated model of access and value capture

4.1 The mechanism sequence

The proposed sequence begins with usable infrastructure and instructional support, proceeds through calibrated capability and qualified market activity, and reaches transactions, compensation, and potentially durable opportunity. These stages need not move together. Technical competence can improve when market demand is weak; transactions can occur without participant payment; and participants can earn while acquiring little transferable capability. The model therefore contains multiple possible stopping points rather than a single success ladder. Each transition has an identifiable mechanism and a distinct failure condition.

Three dimensions organize the model. Learning quality concerns whether practice develops transferable judgment. Commercial usability concerns whether resources permit credible action and reliable delivery. Value-capture governance concerns attribution, compensation, decision rights, and exit. The dimensions are analytically separable but potentially complementary. Strong governance cannot manufacture demand, and good demand cannot establish educational value. A favorable arrangement requires enough alignment to generate participant benefit without assuming that excellence on one dimension compensates for failure on another.

This produces four useful interpretive possibilities. Strong learning with weak capture may resemble an educational placement whose costs require justification. Strong capture with weak learning may be a worthwhile selling arrangement but not a successful educational intervention.

Weak learning and weak capture indicate little participant value even if the sponsor acquires leads. Strong learning and strong capture provide the clearest basis for a developmental claim. These categories are proposed evaluation distinctions, not empirically validated types or legal classifications.

The sequence also contains feedback. Early success may increase confidence, attract mentor attention, and improve access to accounts; early rejection may produce either correction or withdrawal. These responses can strengthen the intervention while making observational comparisons harder to interpret. Researchers should distinguish resources allocated before performance becomes visible from resources allocated because performance has already improved. Otherwise, an association between extensive support and success could be read backward. The framework therefore requires temporal ordering of access, decisions, feedback, transactions, and settlement, rather than a single retrospective satisfaction survey.

4.2 Capability complementarity

Instruction may make infrastructure intelligible, while infrastructure makes instruction applicable. A learner who understands buyer qualification can use technical support more effectively; a real quotation process reveals why qualification matters. Complementarity should be greatest when the relevant resources are available at the moment of practice and assignments match developing competence. It should weaken when participants encounter inaccessible specialists, inconsistent procedures, or tasks beyond their preparation. Additional activity under those conditions may amplify errors rather than learning.

Proposition 1. Structured instruction and usable commercial infrastructure will have a positive interaction on applied commercial competence when practice opportunities and support are aligned with participants' developmental stage.

The interaction is a stronger claim than saying that a combined package outperforms instruction alone. It requires comparing the additional benefit of instruction with and without infrastructure, or an equivalent design. A positive package effect could instead arise entirely from infrastructure access. The proposition would be weakened if instruction adds no competence benefit when usable resources are supplied, or if the combination merely increases activity without improving assessed performance.

4.3 Feedback and calibrated action

Mentorship should affect the quality of decisions, not simply persistence. Feedback that explains why an inquiry is unsuitable may reduce contact volume while improving opportunity selection. Feedback focused only on effort or morale may increase confidence without changing performance. The mediating construct is calibration: participants learn when to act independently, when to request help, and when to stop pursuing a poor opportunity. Such calibration can make declining an unproductive task a positive learning outcome.

Proposition 2. Timely, task-specific feedback will strengthen the relationship between infrastructure access and qualified commercial activity through improved alignment between confidence and demonstrated competence.

An empirical test should measure feedback content and timing independently of participant satisfaction. Reverse causality is plausible because mentors may give better feedback to already successful representatives. Randomized mentoring intensity or an operationally credible assignment rule would strengthen inference. A rise in confidence unaccompanied by better task performance would contradict the proposed calibration mechanism, even when participants report enjoying the program.

4.4 Network access and uneven starting positions

Shared infrastructure can substitute for missing relationships only when access is genuinely additional. Giving all participants the same catalog does not equalize buyer networks or familiarity with technical language. Conversely, allocating all promising inquiries to experienced representatives may maximize immediate sponsor revenue while limiting novice learning. The theoretical trade-off concerns the distribution of learning opportunities as well as operational efficiency. Transparent allocation makes that trade-off observable; it does not automatically resolve it.

Proposition 3. The capability benefits of SCI for participants with limited prior commercial networks will be greater when the program supplies additional, supported relationship access rather than relying predominantly on participants' existing contacts.

The appropriate outcome is change from baseline, not simply the performance gap at follow-up. Participants with stronger starting networks may still achieve higher earnings while novices experience larger capability gains. Both patterns can coexist. The proposition fails if nominally additional access is unusable or if its allocation consistently excludes the intended population, underscoring the difference between open enrollment and substantive inclusion.

4.5 Governance and the conversion of transactions into benefit

The sponsor typically controls several conversion points: whether an inquiry is accepted, how credit is assigned, which costs affect compensation, and when payment becomes due. Ambiguity at these points can allow transactions to increase without corresponding participant returns. Predictable attribution and enforceable payment procedures reduce this gap, while comprehensible records permit participants to assess their own performance. Governance is thus a causal element of the model, not merely documentation surrounding it. In my own company, this is the argument for writing compensation rules down before the first participant asks about them.

Proposition 4. For comparable participant contributions and customer transactions, transparent attribution, stable compensation rules, and reliable settlement will be associated with greater realized participant net returns and lower payment-related disputes.

The comparison must account for legitimate differences in contribution and contract terms. Higher payout alone need not imply fairer governance if it accompanies greater unpaid effort or expenses. Conversely, predictable but modest compensation may remain economically unattractive for some participants while suiting others who value flexibility or learning. Tests should therefore connect account-level records to participant-level costs, rather than infer participant benefit from either gross customer revenue or the nominal commission percentage.

4.6 Liquidity and commercial time horizons

Removing initial infrastructure costs does not remove the need to finance time. In an arrangement where compensation follows customer qualification and payment, participants may incur effort and expenses well before receiving cash. Those with limited reserves may exit despite learning effectively, while better-resourced participants remain long enough to realize returns. The resulting selection could make the program appear more meritocratic than it is. This mechanism is conditional on the actual payment cycle, which must be measured rather than assumed.

Proposition 5. Longer intervals between participant effort and compensation will weaken the relationship between capability gains and sustained participation more strongly among participants with fewer financial reserves, unless the arrangement reduces interim costs or supplies lawful, transparent support.

Support may change both inclusion and sponsor economics. Reimbursements, paid training, or other assistance should therefore be recorded as intervention costs and participant receipts under clearly stated rules. The proposition predicts a specific interaction between lag and liquidity, not that all participants need identical support or that persistence is desirable when the underlying opportunity has poor expected returns.

4.7 Portability and developmental independence

A program develops options when participants retain competence, credible evidence of performance, or contractual rights that remain useful beyond the sponsor. It develops dependence when progress consists primarily of sponsor-specific access that can be withdrawn. Customer confidentiality can be legitimate without preventing participants from documenting general skills or verified achievements. Portability therefore requires careful distinctions between protected commercial information, participant-owned knowledge, and permitted evidence of experience.

Proposition 6. Conditional on initial learning and earnings, greater portability of capabilities and documented achievements, together with credible exit options, will be associated with stronger subsequent economic opportunities outside the original sponsor relationship.

Successful movement into employment or another enterprise would support this proposition even if sponsor retention declined. Conversely, high retention would not establish durable opportunity when leaving would destroy pending compensation or access to the participant's

own performance record. This distinction gives the framework a developmental criterion that cannot be satisfied solely by keeping representatives active.

4.8 Capacity, incentives, and scale

More participants can create additional market coverage, but they can also compete for limited buyers and technical support. As enrollment grows, feedback delays, duplicate outreach, and quotation congestion may undermine the mechanisms responsible for early results. Scaling is therefore not simply replication of a favorable average. It requires preserving support quality and measuring whether new activity expands the market served or reallocates existing opportunities among participants.

Proposition 7. The marginal participant benefit of SCI will decline when enrollment growth outpaces qualified demand or sponsor support capacity, with congestion effects mediated by response delays and competition for usable opportunities.

A separate concern is what the program rewards. Compensation or recognition directed toward recruitment can divert effort from customer problem solving and demonstrated competence. Multi-level arrangements require scrutiny of their actual incentives, not endorsement or rejection based on terminology alone. Here the theoretical issue is allocation of scarce participant attention: the behaviors rewarded by advancement rules may differ from those required for learning and genuine customer value.

Proposition 8. As rewards become more strongly tied to recruitment or status attainment relative to verified customer contribution and instructional quality, participant effort will shift away from the activities through which the SCI model predicts learning and economic benefit.

These propositions are related but not interchangeable. The first three explain capability formation and access; the next three address economic conversion and durable options; the final two specify conditions under which expansion or incentives can undermine both. Together they make the model contestable: favorable enrollment and sponsor revenue would not rescue it if the predicted participant mechanisms consistently failed.

4.9 Rival mechanisms and discriminating observations

The model also permits a cooperative-investment interpretation. Sponsors may retain control because they bear technical, quality, delivery, and credit risks that novices cannot efficiently manage. Centralization can protect customers and participants rather than simply enable appropriation. Under that interpretation, greater sponsor control should coexist with clearer explanations, competent support, predictable compensation, and increasing participant judgment. Under a dependence-centered interpretation, control would instead persist without corresponding developmental benefits, and participants would face difficulty verifying contributions or exercising credible alternatives. Observable practices, not the presence of control alone, distinguish these accounts. I recognize my own company in both descriptions, which is exactly why the distinction has to be made observable rather than asserted.

Likewise, a participant's share of revenue is not a sufficient measure of value capture. The sponsor supplies resources and may incur substantial costs before or after the participant's contribution. A small revenue share could yield attractive returns for limited work, while a larger share could be inadequate after extensive unpaid effort. The relevant comparison is therefore between realized participant outcomes and credible alternatives, alongside an account of sponsor costs. Neither a uniform payout percentage nor a presumption that all residual sponsor income is extracted from participants follows from the framework.

A further rival is that practice, rather than formal instruction, produces the entire capability gain. This would favor a simpler supported-work arrangement over a curriculum-intensive model. Comparing components and measuring changes in specific decisions can distinguish that explanation. The research should remain willing to conclude that one component is redundant, that a different organizational form performs better, or that the arrangement is beneficial without being distinctively entrepreneurial.

5. The motivating application: COi's Purple Team program

5.1 The setting and its evidentiary limits

The Purple Team is COi Rubber Products' developing program for independent sales representatives, and it is the reason I wrote this thesis. The program proposes to teach business-to-business selling through a structured curriculum, weekly training sessions, and mentoring, and then to give participants governed access to what a new seller cannot easily build alone: product knowledge, technical quotation support, quality processes, and fulfillment through an established US-owned manufacturer with its own overseas factory. An internal design document dated October 22, 2026 outlines a learning sequence covering products and customers, buyer identification, requests for quotation, sampling and qualification, first orders, repeat business, and mentoring (COi Rubber Products, Inc., 2026).

I want to be precise about what that document is. It is an historical planning source. Its descriptions do not establish which elements were subsequently implemented, whether participants received them, or whether they produced benefits. The program is young, and no participant earnings data, outcome study, or independent evaluation exists. Nothing in this thesis should be read as evidence that the Purple Team works. The program illustrates the questions; it does not answer them.

The proposed division of activity is analytically useful. Participants identify suitable buyers, develop conversations, and help assemble commercial inquiries; the established enterprise supplies technical assessment and operational execution. This could reduce the resources a novice needs to test a commercial opportunity. It could also concentrate control with the sponsor, because a participant's work depends on quotation decisions, product suitability, fulfillment, and customer payment. The setting therefore exposes both sides of the access-to-value-capture gap without requiring an assumption that either side dominates.

5.2 Design commitments informed by the framework

I did not encounter the risks in this thesis as abstract theory. They are the problems I had to design around. The framework's concerns translate into specific commitments the program is asked to meet: compensation rules written down before participation rather than negotiated after; attribution and payment procedures a participant can inspect; feedback tied to specific tasks rather than general encouragement; and skills and documented achievements a participant can carry elsewhere. Whether the program meets those commitments in practice is an empirical question, and Section 6 proposes how to ask it honestly.

A plausible instructional unit would begin with identifying an application and explaining why a particular buyer might need assistance. The participant would then assemble the information required for technical review, observe how that information affects a quotation, and receive feedback on omissions or inaccurate claims. Later tasks could address account follow-up, commercial documentation, and interpretation of a lost opportunity. These are proposed design elements, not observations of existing lessons. Their educational value would depend on how instruction, practice, and feedback were actually delivered.

Assessment should separate technical recognition from unauthorized technical commitment. A novice need not be qualified to guarantee material performance in order to recognize that specialist review is required. Correct escalation can itself demonstrate competence. Likewise, a well-qualified inquiry that does not become an order can evidence learning without being counted as a financial success. This separation protects the analysis from two opposing errors: dismissing every unsuccessful transaction as failed education, and presenting every educational activity as evidence of earnings potential.

A certificate would be meaningful only to the extent that it identifies assessed competencies and a defensible standard. Completion of reading or attendance would support a narrower statement. The research should document assessment tasks, scoring criteria, reassessment procedures, and whether an independent evaluator can reproduce scores. A company-issued certificate should not be described as an academic degree, external accreditation, or widely recognized occupational qualification without evidence establishing that status.

5.3 Rights and terms that require documentation

Before testing the program, researchers would need the operative agreements rather than marketing summaries or superseded proposals. Relevant information includes all mandatory and optional costs; the conditions for earning and receiving compensation; treatment of repeat orders, refunds, and termination; attribution of customer contributions; and access to records. Any mentoring, referral, or multi-level compensation would need separate documentation. No particular rate, fee, account right, or recruitment arrangement is assumed to be in force here.

The sponsor's economic objectives must also be explicit. A program designed primarily to obtain qualified inquiries may be commercially coherent while offering limited educational development. A program intended to develop novices may require resources that reduce short-

term profitability. Neither objective should be concealed behind the other. Recording both permits evaluation of whether learning and commercial performance are mutually supportive, in tension, or sustainable only through ongoing subsidy. My stated objective is that both hold together; the research design exists because a stated objective is not evidence.

6. A research agenda

6.1 Begin with implementation and a defined estimand

A future evaluation should begin by documenting the intervention, not by selecting a convenient sample size. A feasibility phase would establish eligibility rules, curriculum content, support capacity, compensation procedures, participant burdens, and plausible commercial time lags. It would also test whether records can distinguish assignment, access, participation, activity, transactions, and settlement. This phase is for improving measurement and implementation; descriptive pilot outcomes should not be presented as causal effects or representative earnings forecasts.

The primary estimand should be specified before recruitment. For an inclusion claim, an appropriate candidate is the intention-to-treat effect of an offer of SCI on cumulative net earned income across program and nonprogram activities over a defined period. Program-specific net receipts remain an essential operational outcome, but they cannot alone establish economic improvement: a participant may replace better-paid work with program activity. Where collecting total income is infeasible, the study should narrow its welfare claim rather than imply that program receipts measure incremental benefit.

Researchers should distinguish assignment effects from effects among those who take up the offer. The intention-to-treat comparison preserves the initial allocation and includes people who decline, never begin, or leave. Analyses of engaged participants can describe implementation but generally do not identify causal participation effects because engagement follows treatment. Instrumental-variable approaches would require defensible assumptions, including an exclusion restriction and a clearly defined treatment; they should not be added mechanically to convert a disappointing assignment effect into a favorable claim.

6.2 Comparison groups and the complementarity test

A three-arm design could compare structured education, education plus SCI, and delayed access or an ethically appropriate alternative. This would estimate the incremental effect of adding infrastructure to the educational package and the package's effect relative to the comparator. It would not, by itself, identify the positive interaction asserted in Proposition 1. That distinction matters because access to operational resources could drive the entire improvement even if the instruction supplied no additional benefit.

A factorial design would be more informative for complementarity: baseline support, additional structured instruction, additional usable infrastructure, and their combination. All arms would

receive any required safety, legal, and customer-protection preparation. On a specified additive outcome scale, complementarity is the combined-arm mean minus the instruction-only mean minus the infrastructure-only mean plus the baseline-arm mean. A positive contrast would support the proposed interaction. Its interpretation would still depend on adherence, intervention consistency, and the absence of unaddressed spillovers.

Random allocation should occur only where access can ethically and practically be varied. A delayed-access comparison becomes problematic when the study withholds an entitlement or when promised delays are not honored. Where randomization is unavailable, prospective comparison cohorts, repeated baseline observations, and transparent adjustment can improve inference. Matching does not remove unobserved motivation or access to networks. A difference-in-differences analysis would require a credible parallel-trends argument and attention to changing selection, rather than relying solely on the availability of before-and-after data.

6.3 Sampling, power, and commercial interference

The enrollment target should follow the primary endpoint, expected variability, minimum meaningful effect, anticipated attrition, allocation ratios, and any clustering. A fixed target chosen for convenience cannot establish adequate power. Earnings may contain many zeros and a small number of large values, making estimates unstable in small samples. Multiple measurement periods can improve precision for noisy business outcomes, although the appropriate frequency depends on burden and the underlying process (McKenzie, 2012). Pilot information should guide design without becoming a substitute for a prespecified power analysis.

Participants may compete for the same customers or share training materials. Such interference can dilute individual-level treatment contrasts or make one participant's success another's loss. Researchers should record overlap in accounts, territories, mentoring groups, and lead pools. Cluster assignment may reduce some contamination, but it increases sample-size requirements and does not eliminate market-wide displacement. Where feasible, the study should distinguish newly served demand from reassigned existing accounts and compare aggregate customer activity alongside participant outcomes.

The target population must be described through actual recruitment and eligibility, not a broad label such as underserved. Baseline measures could include prior selling experience, available time, industry contacts, financial reserves, and relevant barriers to participation. Sensitive information should be collected only when necessary and justified. Recruitment through a workforce organization does not establish that all enrollees face the same disadvantages, nor that results generalize to everyone the program hopes eventually to reach.

6.4 Measuring learning, activity, and implementation

Applied capability should be measured using tasks that resemble the intended work but are not identical to rehearsed examples. Possible assessments include qualifying an unfamiliar buyer,

identifying missing quotation information, evaluating a basic margin scenario, and deciding when to escalate a technical question. Scorers should use explicit rubrics and, where practicable, remain unaware of treatment assignment. Reliability checks and alternative task versions would help distinguish learning from memorization or familiarity with a specific assessment.

Self-efficacy should be measured separately and compared with performance. Researchers could examine whether confidence becomes more accurate rather than merely higher. Activity measures should distinguish attempted contacts, substantive buyer conversations, qualified inquiries, accepted quotations, orders, and settled transactions. Definitions must be fixed before analysis. Otherwise, apparent improvement may result from changing what counts as a lead or recording activity more diligently in the treatment arm.

Implementation measures include access failures, mentor response times, technical turnaround, training completion, feedback quality, and reasons for rejected inquiries. These measures illuminate mechanisms but should not be treated as randomized exposures unless their assignment justifies that interpretation. A participant receiving extensive support may have needed more help, produced more promising opportunities, or been favored by staff. Process data should therefore explain patterns without automatically establishing which component caused them.

6.5 Financial accounting at the participant level

For each participant and observation period, program-related net cash income should equal compensation actually received, including applicable wages or stipends, minus unreimbursed participation expenses. Expense categories should cover required fees, purchased materials, paid software, travel, advertising, and other direct costs, with rules preventing double counting of reimbursed items. Research participation payments should be recorded separately. Pre-tax income and any tax treatment should be explicitly distinguished; a convenient assumption about taxes should not silently determine the reported benefit.

Booked commissions, approved amounts, paid amounts, reversals, and pending settlements must remain separate fields. An account can generate revenue before a participant has a payment right or receives cash. Recording the full sequence permits analysis of delay and disputes. A prespecified settlement follow-up can capture payments attributable to activity during the study without indefinitely extending the outcome window until results become favorable. Pending amounts should be reported transparently, not combined with cash as though collection were certain.

Time records should include instruction, preparation, prospecting, customer follow-up, mentoring, recruiting, administration, and travel. Hours should be reported alongside net income, with sensitivity analyses valuing time at plausible alternative rates. Those analyses are not observed cash losses. Researchers must also avoid double counting opportunity costs by subtracting displaced earnings and a monetized value for the same hours. Net income per hour should be undefined when recorded hours are zero, not forced to zero or treated as infinite.

Distributional reporting is essential. Means, medians, selected quantiles, the share receiving no compensation, and the share with negative net income answer different questions. The concentration of positive payouts can be reported when the denominator is meaningful. All measures should identify whether their population is assigned individuals, enrollees, starters, or completers. Averages restricted to paid participants are insufficient for evaluating an offer made to prospective entrants. Account-level reconciliation should also prevent counting the same customer revenue repeatedly across representative and mentoring layers.

6.6 Attrition, analysis, and adverse outcomes

Zero earnings and missing earnings are different observations. A participant who leaves may have earned nothing, incurred losses, received a delayed payment, or moved to a better opportunity. Independent follow-up should therefore continue after program exit without making response a condition of compensation. Attrition rates and reasons should be reported by assigned group. Differential missingness requires sensitivity analysis; selection bounds such as those developed by Lee (2009) are useful only when their assumptions, including the relevant monotonicity condition, are defensible.

A preregistered analysis plan should define endpoints, follow-up windows, exclusions, covariates, subgroup tests, and the handling of multiple comparisons. Estimates should include uncertainty and economic magnitude, not only statistical significance. Exploratory mechanisms or subgroups can be informative if labeled accordingly. The primary analysis should not exclude inconvenient zero earners, move the endpoint after seeing payout delays, or redefine activity to favor the sponsor. Negative and null findings must remain reportable.

Adverse outcomes deserve explicit measurement: unreimbursed losses, debt incurred to participate, misleading expectations, excessive unpaid hours, customer complaints, pressure to recruit, and disputes over compensation or records. These are proposed monitoring categories, not allegations about the illustrative organization. A credible study would specify escalation and pause procedures before such problems arise. Their inclusion allows the evaluation to determine whether positive averages conceal serious harms for a smaller group.

6.7 Qualitative inquiry and longer follow-up

Interviews should purposefully include successful participants, zero earners, people who declined or left, mentors, operational staff, and customers. Independent interviewers should explore how participants understood terms, interpreted feedback, managed financial pressure, and evaluated alternatives. Negative cases can challenge the proposed mechanism: someone may learn without remaining, remain without learning, or earn despite inadequate instruction. Qualitative explanations should emerge from actual material and documented analysis, not from hypothetical narratives presented as participant testimony.

An initial follow-up period should match observed commercial cycles, with later measurement used to examine persistence and outside opportunities. Twelve months is a possible planning interval, not a universal sufficient duration. Durable gains would require evidence that

capabilities, earnings, or feasible alternatives persist beyond initial support. Claims about wealth accumulation or intergenerational mobility require substantially different measures and horizons. A conceptual promise cannot substitute for those observations.

6.8 A multilevel decision framework

Participant, sponsor, and customer outcomes should be connected without being combined into a single success index. Participant records establish learning, costs, receipts, and subsequent choices. Sponsor records establish incremental operating costs, support capacity, and attributable commercial results. Customer records establish whether inquiries and delivered orders met genuine needs. Agreement across these levels would strengthen a sustainability claim. Disagreement would reveal who benefits and who bears costs, rather than automatically invalidate every aspect of the intervention.

Decision rules for continuation should be set prospectively. Persistent payment failures, unsafe technical claims, or coercive recruitment may justify stopping or redesigning an intervention even when average income is positive. Conversely, an initially weak sales outcome might justify a limited revision when independently assessed learning is strong and the financial burden is modest. Such judgments require explicit thresholds and independent oversight; they should not be rationalized after the sponsor has invested in expansion.

Replication should vary settings in theoretically informative ways. Comparing programs with different settlement lags, support capacity, or portability rights would test the proposed boundary conditions more effectively than reproducing a single attractive case. Cross-sponsor research could also distinguish the general SCI configuration from the unusual skill, reputation, or resources of one founder. The aim would be a cumulative explanation of conditions, not a ranking of success stories.

7. Ethical governance and research independence

An educational label does not remove the responsibilities created by a commercial arrangement. Applicable employment, contracting, business-opportunity, franchise, consumer-protection, and privacy questions require qualified review of actual practices and terms. This thesis does not classify the Purple Team under any of those regimes. In particular, calling a person independent does not settle their legal status, and stating that a program sells to businesses does not by itself resolve questions about recruitment incentives or income representations.

Where multi-level compensation is contemplated, the Federal Trade Commission's (2024) guidance emphasizes examining the operation and incentives of the arrangement and substantiating earnings representations. The relevant research lesson is methodological as well as legal: exceptional success stories and gross receipts cannot establish typical participant net outcomes. No finding about the illustrative program's legality is made here. Any future marketing use of study results would need to preserve the studied population, conditions, costs,

uncertainty, and limitations rather than convert an average into an individual promise. My own rule for the program follows directly: no earnings promises, ever, in any recruiting material, whatever this research later finds.

My ownership interest creates a material conflict because favorable conclusions could benefit my company. Independence requires more than naming a collaborator. Any research agreement should give investigators access to relevant records, protect participants from retaliation, and preserve the ability to publish unfavorable results. The sponsor may correct factual errors and protect legitimate confidential information, but should not hold a veto over findings. Financial relationships, funding, analytical roles, and publication rights should be disclosed before interpretation. I state this conflict openly here rather than leaving it for a reviewer to discover.

Human-participant review should occur prospectively through the appropriate institutional process. Researchers should obtain a determination about review requirements rather than assuming that a business program is exempt because it operates outside a university. Research consent must be distinguishable from program enrollment, and declining research should not remove benefits otherwise available under the program's terms. Sensitive interviews and surveys should not be visible to supervisors or mentors in identifiable form merely because the sponsor hosts the activity.

Data governance should minimize unnecessary personal information, restrict access, define retention periods, and separate customer confidentiality from participant reporting rights. Particular care is warranted where financial pressure or institutional referrals could make participation feel obligatory. Compensation for research should reflect participation burdens without becoming an undisclosed program incentive. The ethical objective is an evaluation that participants can understand and question, not merely an agreement that secures their signatures.

8. Discussion: what would count as democratization?

The framework relocates the central question from whether individuals can enter a commercial system to what they can do and retain once inside it. Entry can be inexpensive while sustained participation remains costly. Learning can be authentic while compensation is modest. Sponsor performance can improve while participant opportunities narrow. These possibilities make democratization a proposition requiring evidence about distribution and control, not a descriptive synonym for accessibility or enrollment growth.

For entrepreneurship education, the main implication is that the learning environment includes the terms of commercial participation. Pedagogy does not end with a lesson plan when quotation access, customer allocation, and payment records determine whether practice is possible and intelligible. This does not mean that every educator must operate a business. It means that programs using real enterprises as learning settings must specify how organizational arrangements enable or obstruct the intended educational mechanism.

For organizational theory, the contribution lies in connecting complementarity with dependence at the participant level. The same resource bundle can make action possible and strengthen the sponsor's control. Neither an entirely enabling nor an entirely exploitative account follows automatically. The balance depends on what participants learn, the compensation they actually receive, and the alternatives they develop. The access-to-value-capture gap offers a way to investigate that balance without treating sponsor and participant outcomes as inherently aligned or inherently opposed.

For sponsoring firms, participant value and commercial sustainability should be assessed together but not collapsed into one ratio. Providing extensive support without sufficient margin may be unsustainable; generating profitable leads through uncompensated novice effort may be unattractive or harmful to participants. A credible operating model must make those costs visible. Expansion should follow evidence that support quality, customer value, and participant outcomes remain viable, rather than assuming that additional recruits necessarily produce proportionate economic opportunity.

Workforce organizations and educators should compare SCI with realistic alternatives. A modest commission opportunity may be worthwhile as supplementary experience but inferior to paid training for someone needing immediate income. Equally, a participant's movement into another job can represent a successful outcome rather than lost program loyalty. Spigel and Harrison's (2018) process perspective on entrepreneurial ecosystems highlights resource flows and their wider circulation. Extending that insight, capabilities that leave the sponsor may create public value even when they no longer contribute directly to sponsor revenue.

The strongest inclusion claim would therefore require three kinds of evidence: that people facing relevant barriers can participate effectively; that participation improves outcomes relative to credible alternatives; and that benefits are not concentrated solely among those who were already advantaged. None requires identical results for everyone. Each requires transparent denominators, attention to costs, and the possibility that the intervention is useful only for a narrower population than its initial aspirations suggest.

A practical implication is to make developmental promises auditable before making them expansive. A program could specify the tasks it teaches, the support participants can expect, the evidence they may retain, and how disagreements will be resolved. Those commitments would permit educators and prospective participants to judge the opportunity on its stated terms. They would also allow researchers to distinguish a weak theory from a program that never supplied its promised inputs.

A second implication is that inclusion should be evaluated at successive transitions. Researchers should examine who is invited, who enrolls, who gains usable access, who develops competence, who receives compensation, and who acquires further options. Unequal outcomes can originate at different stages, demanding different remedies. Providing more introductory

instruction will not necessarily repair delayed payment or biased access to qualified opportunities.

9. Limitations and competing explanations

The framework is conceptual and has not been validated. Its proposed integration may omit relevant mechanisms, and the boundaries between SCI and existing agency, training, and support arrangements require further scrutiny. No exhaustive novelty claim is made. The founder-identified illustration creates a risk of selecting a setting that appears to fit the argument. Independent examination of contrasting programs, including unsuccessful ones, would provide a stronger basis for construct refinement.

The underlying literature spans different countries, populations, sectors, and organizational levels. Findings among established microenterprise owners or university students cannot establish expected effects for novice industrial representatives. Transferring an interorganizational theory to individual participants also requires care. The proposed relationships should be treated as arguments to test, not as consequences already demonstrated by the cited sources.

Several rival explanations remain plausible. Better products, unusually capable mentors, preexisting networks, temporary subsidies, or favorable demand could explain strong participant outcomes without the proposed educational mechanisms. Poor outcomes could reflect an inadequate implementation rather than a failure of resource access in principle. Independent measurement of component delivery, comparison across sponsors, and designs that vary components would help distinguish these explanations. No single descriptive success story could do so.

Finally, income and competence do not exhaust participant welfare. Predictability, dignity, stress, scheduling flexibility, and household responsibilities may influence whether an opportunity is beneficial. Some of these dimensions are difficult to monetize without imposing contentious assumptions. A rigorous evaluation should present them transparently alongside financial results rather than force all experiences into a single success score. I would add one more limitation from experience: my 23 years in this industry are a source of insight and a source of bias at the same time. The research design in this thesis exists to keep both honest.

10. Conclusion

I started in this industry with no product, no supplier, and no customer list. Access to an established company's infrastructure is what let me learn the trade and eventually build a company of my own. Shared commercial infrastructure offers a plausible way to give other people that same starting point: a way to connect business education with the resources real market participation requires. Its promise is conditional. Making an established enterprise accessible can facilitate learning and transactions while simultaneously creating dependence,

delayed returns, and unequal opportunities. The framework therefore distinguishes the ability to act from the ability to capture and retain value.

The appropriate test is not how many people enroll, receive certificates, or contribute to sponsor revenue. It is whether usable infrastructure and structured learning improve capabilities, net outcomes, and future options relative to credible alternatives. The eight propositions and evaluation design make that claim open to evidence, including evidence of failure. SCI should be understood as an organizational possibility requiring independent scrutiny, not as proof that entrepreneurship has been democratized. If the research someday shows that my own program fails its participants, I would rather learn that from the data than from the people it let down.

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Declarations

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