

# Business Innovation Discovery with a Social Impact by Croatian Business Students through Appreciative Inquiry Methodology

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(Konferenčni zbornik)

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## **Business Innovation Discovery with a Social Impact by Croatian Business Students through Appreciative Inquiry Methodology**

JUDITA PETERLIN, VLADO DIMOVSKI & DANIELA GARBIN PRANIČEVIĆ

**Abstract** Our paper demonstrates Croatian business students' engagement in an international contest AIM2flourish where we research business innovations with a social impact. Three business innovations are highlighted in order to provide insight into main characteristics of a business innovation together with environmental and social value. Appreciative inquiry was used as a research methodology. Students were empowered together with local business in Croatia. AIM2flourish project was presented at several courses at the Faculty of Economics University of Split and students were invited to apply. We conducted first appreciative inquiry with the interested students in order to give them the overview of how appreciative inquiry is conducted. Business students performed appreciative inquiry within the local business community and in-depth researched 3 companies. AIM2flourish exercise enabled insight into productive business community of Split region, Croatia. Students gained pride of their local community and got to know personally some of the successful managers in the local community. Establishing a dialogue with the business owners and managers proved to be the critical component for a successfully conducted AIM2flourish of our students. We establish that it is necessary to prepare the students well so that they are self-confident and curious in researching a personal story of businessmen, business model, business innovation and managerial context.

**KEYWORDS:** appreciative inquiry • change management • sustainable leadership • management education keyword

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## 1 Theoretical overview

Our paper provides an overview, process and methodology insight of the AM2flourish project implementation for management (Daft, 2012) educational purposes. AIM2flourish (2016) is supported by UN Global Goals (2016) and seeks business innovations in the local community that are reported by business students. AIM2flourish is based on an online platform that is open to international business education community. Students under the mentorship of their professors publish business innovations around the globe build on the appreciative inquiry methodology. We offer preliminary results, implementation lessons learned and recommendations for professors who wish to incorporate this kind of developmental activity into their courses.

International collaboration offers a high level of specialization, gaining knowledge from different participants and faster business process (Pavlič & Gudelj, 2015, p. 135). Lyles and Salk (in Pavlič & Gudelj, 2015, p. 138) state several conditions for a successful knowledge transfer in an international collaboration: (1) flexibility of the organization; (2) organized trainings; (3) technological expertise; (4) setting formal goals; (5) specialization of the members; (6) support of the top management. In contemporary educational and business environment e-learning and e-collaboration platforms are becoming a vital part of international collaborations. Main goal of an e-learning platform is knowledge management in a digital society and a better quality, flexibility and adjustment to the global students' learning needs. Inkpen (in Pavlič & Gudelj, 2015, p. 147) states that strategic partnerships have an important role in the process of knowledge management and developing new knowledge and skills. Through new technological solutions new web platforms have developed for learning and collaboration (Pavlič & Gudelj, 2015, p. 147). Based on the higher informational literacy e-learning is becoming a standard that strengthens efficiency of the learning process. E-learning is becoming a sustainable solution that satisfies the need for a lifelong learning in a flexible and cheaper way (Garbin Praničević & Zovko, 2015, p. 154). Garbin Praničević and Zovko (2015, p. 168) specifically stress the need for tourism workers to recognize the usefulness of new technologies, e-learning and its educational impact. Moreover, technology has to be incorporated in the tourism and hospitality education program via one of the available e-learning platforms as early as possible in education process. In Garbin Praničević & Šerić (2014) study provided in tourism studies education process is verified the positive relationship between the use of *Moodle* as available e-learning platform and the final study outcome. The aim of the research is to present the methodology of appreciative inquiry within social innovation education. The research question is: What are the benefits of appreciative inquiry integration for the business community and students' education? The method we used is appreciative inquiry that was developed by professor Cooperrider. The instrument is well structured and can be downloaded from the AIM2flourish platform. The sample comprised of Croatian students at the Faculty of economics University of Split. Three teams of students volunteered and participated at the AIM2flourish contest.

## 2 Method

Case studies (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008) of AIM2flourish cases are implemented following AIM2flourish methodology implementation. Preparation was carried out in Spring 2016 by studying the materials, given on the AIM2flourish platform for the professors and the students. The materials are continuously improved upon professors' and students' feedback. Regularly, one of the authors participated in the videoconferences with AIM2flourish professors and organizing team where we reported on progress and identified challenges. Opportunity was given to express questions and receive guidelines for an efficient support of students' business innovation stories within their local community. Based on the first group of students who participated in the AIM2flourish project at the Faculty of Economics University of Split in the period from April-July 2016 we provide the findings of the implementation process. AIM2flourish project was presented at several courses at the Faculty of Economics University of Split and students were invited to apply. We conducted first appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008) with the interested students in order to give them the overview of how appreciative inquiry is conducted in business community through story telling (Colville, Brown & Pye, 2011). In the final selection, appreciative inquiry with Student A was conducted on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2016, appreciative inquiry with Student B was conducted on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2016, appreciative inquiry with Student C was conducted on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2016, appreciative inquiry with Student D was conducted on 26<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

Appreciative inquiry is a methodology that seeks a positive core within an individual an/or organization. It is well-structured instrument that wishes to build upon positive past as this gives energy and will to perform also in the future. It deals with the focus what do you want more of: bad or good. Appreciative inquiry can be adjusted to the situation of analysis.

## 3 Findings

Our findings present the benefits of appreciative inquiry for the students and for the local community. During the appreciative inquiry students got to know local business people and also designed a model of social innovation that is based on the appreciative inquiry consideration. Proof quotes of appreciative inquiry demonstrate the personality traits of the business students who participated in our AIM2flourish project (Table 1).

|  | <b>Student A</b>  | <b>Student B</b>   | <b>Student C</b>   | <b>Student D</b>  |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Enthusiastic situation in the past</b>                | Demonstrating creativity in designing jewelry and selling it  | “I am an IT demonstrator on the faculty and in one moment all the technical support fell down, microphones didn't work, it was very nice for me because I could show to people what actually I do on this faculty. So, everything stopped and I was there and checked everything and repaired it”. | Second semester at the faculty and Erasmus exchange  | “Studying beginnings, the first time working in a big environment, in different teams who have different opinions, and during three year experience I changed but nobody said to me you need to change. I changed by myself because my work gave me input and information how to be better” |
| <b>Vision of 2026</b>                                    | “I hope I will do something that will help the world, something that will be better for our environment and... Really, I don't think too much about that but I want to do something that will be good for all people around me. And not to make things just to earn money and make profit because I think it is better when our community is happy than making rich. I don't know but for now I want people around me to have a better life. That's all”. | “I would really like for people to start buying electric cars and I think this is the main goal for population, actually for global population. Stop using fossil fuels and start with electricity”.   | “I see the poverty lowered down. I see more focus on environment and sustainability, let say more electric cars. Especially, in Croatia, which we don't have, waste management because in Croatia no waste management exists. I think technology will go up. And maybe, it's hard to say but maybe we'll have small robots or something similar. But I think a lot of things will be based on solar energy”. | “I think that they will over use technology. I think we need to control technology because I don't want to face that technology controls us”.   |
| <b>Personal characteristics</b>                          | independent, curious, seeks experiences in different fields   | ambitious, determined  | hard working, searching for balance  | persistent, curious, well-organized, demanding towards herself and others   |
| <b>Interest in business innovation (UN Global Goals)</b> | creative industry   | car industry, electrical cars  | sustainable tourism, sustainable cities and communities (Global Goal 11)   | sustainable cities and communities (Global Goal 11)   |

*Table 1: [Our students/participants identification at AIM2flourish 2016]*

Selected business innovation themes were selected by the students and approved by professors according to the criteria provided at the AIM2flourish platform and UN Global Goals platform (<http://www.globalgoals.org/>). Our experiences with the support of the organizing theme are good.

One of the authors participated at several AIM2Flourish Professors "Faculty Fair"'s hosted by Isabel Rimanoczy. On 12<sup>th</sup> May Claire Summers joined together with the coauthor video conference from UN Global Compact PRME offices in New York City. At these video international conferences we met our AIM2Flourish colleagues, shared our ideas, stories, challenges and experiences and learned what's new and improved with AIM2Flourish in the classrooms, it was also a good opportunity to ask questions and give updates. Business students performed under the supervision of one of the coauthors appreciative inquiry within the local business community and in-depth researched 3 companies (Table 2).

|                           | <b>Information about the company</b>  | <b>Year of foundation</b> | <b>Number of employees</b> | <b>Business Location</b>  |
|---------------------------|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Hotel Split</b>        | Four-Star Hotel Split, one of the first A-category hotels of this type in Croatia, family-run Boutique-hotel  | 2012                      | 11-50 (seasonal)           | Podstrana, Croatia<br><a href="http://hotelsplit.com/">http://hotelsplit.com/</a> |
| <b>Eco-Village</b>        | well-known tourist destination, preserved the memory of the life of our ancestors, conjure up a picture of life in peace and unspoiled nature, show the beauty of tradition and cultural heritage, Dalmatian hinterland | /                         | Family members             | Škopljanci, Croatia   |
| <b>Steora Smart bench</b> | First Croatian and European company which is in trend with the latest technology of smart benches.  | 2014                      | 11-50 (students)           | Klis, Croatia   |

*Table 2: [Identification of participating businesses in Croatia]*

Source: Milat, A. (2016), Đurđević, H. & Zovko, L. (2016), Statovci, A. (2016). AIM2flourish international contest submission.

### **3.1 First green hotel in Croatia**

Dalmatia has a tourist industry highly flourishing, therefore one of the business students, Ana Milat (2016) identified a business innovation in sustainable tourism sector.

#### **3.1.1 Business Benefit**

The hotel is recognized as the first a green hotel in Croatia. As such it ought to remain trendy and keep innovating. Business benefit from the innovation is definitely strengthening the brand position and image through the identity of green hotel, reducing

the cost (using renewable materials such as aluminum and glass the innovation was also taking care of sustainability), attracting and motivating the local employees (stimulation, good reference) and potential investors (working long term and also profitable). One of the business benefits is sales increase and market share increase. For example, 3,61% (451 overnights) of total (12 494) overnights from the United States tourists has been made in Hotel Split which is a huge number as it has only 40 rooms. As Americans are the leaders in green tourism it is an important fact as well as the fact that the majority of the guests of Hotel Split come from Western Europe (Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and France) which are also known as eco-tourists.

### **3.1.2 Societal and Environmental Benefit**

They employ 18 people during whole year and 40 during summer season which is really great amount as they have only 40 rooms. They also cooperate with local businesses and providers, hospitals, local artists, schools and faculties, domestic associations, organizations and European projects such as Near Zero Energy Hotels. Croatian Ministry of tourism has supported their project as they clean the beach and the underwater in front of the hotel what resulted in gaining of White flag. The impact on the environment is definitely positive as it is designed by the principles of green and environmentally friendly construction.

### **3.1.3 Overall Impact**

It was primary the location, architecture, luxury, design and the green facet of the innovation and overall good management that has the positive impact in raising the attractiveness, competitiveness, number of tourists and consequently rising of the revenues and profits. The overall impact on profits is the best attested by the fact that the profit growth rate in 2015 is 90,94 %, according to the Poslovna Hrvatska's database. As the first project of that type in Croatia they had a great impact on local community and environment. Since then we have only one Near Zero Energy Hotel (Adriatica in Supetar) and 41 hotels certificated by Sustainable Hotel Certificate by UPUHH (Croatian Hotel Business Association), such as Palace and Esplanade in Zagreb, Astoria, Hotel Iadera Zadar, Punta Skala Resort or Hotel Sveti Križ in Trogir.

### **3.1.4 Innovation**

The business innovation of Hotel Split is the construction and managing a family-owned hotel with an extraordinary location as a Near Zero Energy Hotel (neZEH). It was a new business model based on cost reduction and sustainability through environmentally friendly materials during the construction, raising the awareness of employees, local community and tourists as well as the improved process of energy management.

Main information about this business innovation with a social impact is stated in Table 3.

| <b>Key Ideas</b>   |
|--|
| Sustainable and environmentally friendly guesthouse: the key idea of the innovation is reasonable exploitation of the environment on the existing unused lot. The main focus is on:<br>(1) sustainability; (2) competitiveness; (3) cost reduction; (4) practicality; (5) ecologically friendly; (6) social responsibility; (7) social and ecological awareness. |
| <b>UN Global Goals Solution</b>  |
| Goal 8; Goal 11; Goal 13   |

*Table 3: [Green hotel Split]*

Source: Milat, A., AIM2flourish international contest submission, based on appreciative inquiry with Mladen Tomić, director of Hotel Split, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

### **3.2 Eco-village as a sustainable way of living**

Helena Đurđević and Luka Zovko (2016) identified a business innovation in sustainable community and different lifestyle.

#### **3.2.1 Key Ideas**

Eco-ethno Village Škopljanci is family estate which has preserved the past for the future. In the center of the village are 20 years old, stone houses of which 12 of them are fully restored to the smallest details in order to preserve the original format, respecting tradition and architecture of the area. Members of the family Škopljanac represent the pioneers of rural tourism, and thanks to the rural Olympics, Bullfights, Mid- summer nights; beauty contest Dalmatian hinterland is the most famous tourist complex of its kind in Croatia.

#### **3.2.2 Innovation**

It covers an area of up to 300 000 square meters' village with 20 houses, entailing more than 1700 exhibits from the Dalmatian region. There is an increased growth in profit and number of tourists which shows great influence on the tourism market in the region. On a daily level there is always about 300 people arriving, some of them in groups and some of them individually. They organize many manifestations which connect people with their roots of the past. An example of that are bullfights, a traditional manifestation, where people are coming, not only to see bulls, but also to hang out together in the nature, eat traditional food and enjoy in the fresh air. In 2015 there were 15 000 visitors, mostly families with their kids.

The main competitive advantage of their business model is that they grow their own food. A farm with domestic animals and BIO garden makes possible to serve organic food in their tavern, so you can be sure you eat a healthy food. Food in Škopljanci is prepared

according to the original recipes of our ancestors who passed their knowledge and experience from generation to generation.

A village, which the Ministry of Culture has protected as a protected monument, currently has two apartments and three taverns where they can accommodate about 130 people, with a large hall for 250 people, and a myriad of small taverns. Except bullfights, this place is well-known by “Ojkanje” singing, a tradition of polyphonic folk singing, which was in 2010 signed in UNESCOs List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding as representative of Croatia. In this way they preserved culture of this area and introduce it to the people around the world.

Village Radošić, where ethno-eco village Škopljanci is places, is covered with centuries-old pubescent oak forest (Pubescent oaks), a protected natural monument of Croatia. Cultural Club ”Ognjiste” started a project ”preserve oak to our honor ” which tries to educate younger generations with the importance of preserving natural resources. Through educational workshops and school in nature they are trying to introduce to children the beauty of the flora and fauna of the Dalmatian hinterland.

### **3.2.3 Business Benefit**

Everyday concerns about a healthy living without stress brings visitors to eco-ethno village. This kind of business innovation opens the door to new concepts in sustainable tourism and the way in doing business. Most towns are highly polluted and quiet noisy. People are concerned only about their jobs and don't have time to relax. That kind of living is not giving opportunities for healthy diet and taking some time for their own families.

The power of this concept could be seen through constant growth, not only in aspect of guests, but also in profit. This concept has been approved by numerous business people and it can be said that this concept is of great importance. Numerous celebrations like weddings, birthdays and anniversaries are celebrated in this area. Also, you cannot bypass the business aspect that these areas offer: Business meetings, team building and conferences are indispensable events.

### **3.2.4 Societal and Environmental Benefit**

This village is doing its business in a small local community. Today we still have many areas that suffer from the consequences of war that happened during the end 20 of century in this region. As a result of that, in the area of Lečevica there is less than 200 people, so anything what can start progress of the community is welcome.

In such an economic situation, the eco-ethno village has enabled economic development of the region. Before they started their own business, there was emphasized emigration and the withering away of the area. From the moment when this project started, it allowed

the people who live there to be also involved in the project. Eco-ethno village makes this possible in a way that they enable everything they need for the business, if they do not have in sufficient quantities, purchased from the local community.

Other thing that shows social benefit from their innovation is hiring local people. As the village is far from the big cities, need for extra workers is satisfied by people in the community. Most of the work is done by family Škopljanci, but because of increasingly growth there is need for extra workers. On daily levels there are 10 to 20 workers. On the other hand, for some manifestations like bullfights there are around 200 people who work on that kind of events.

It is interesting that the visitors, in the rural complex in Škopljanci, are not served by waiters. The family Škopljanac developed a specific relationship with guests who are not more guests when they come there. Everything is open, everything is available, to serve themselves, eat and drink what they want, when they want and where they want. Former stables, barns and rural farm buildings were converted into favorable facilities for staying overnight and for holidays.

Main information about this business innovation with a social impact is are stated in Table 4.

|   |
|---|
| <b>Overall Impact</b>   |
| Focusing on tradition, environment and local community gives them opportunity to improve community in many ways. This way of doing business is environmental friendly and does not harm the nature, even promotes the awareness about the importance and dependence upon nature and its fruits. By buying different natural products from neighbors around them and hiring them, they also effect the development of the local community. Eco-ethno village has enormous impact on society and environment around it. |
| <b>UN Global Goals Solution</b>   |
| Goal 8; Goal 11; Goal 13  |

Table 4: [Eco village]

Source: Đurđević & Zovko, AIM2flourish international contest submission, based on appreciative inquiry, May, 2016.

### 3.3 Smartbench

Arta Statovci (2016) identified a business innovation in sustainable technological sector.



### **3.3.1 Key Ideas**

First Croatian and European company which is in trend with the latest technology of smart benches. Steora™: (1) the most awarded Croatian Start-up with the best innovation in 2015; (2) solar powered smart bench; (3) basic and exclusive features.

### **3.3.2 Business Benefit**

By implementing smart bench Steora, each business will have opportunity to be part of the global trend, smart cities. Furthermore by installing advertising options in Steora's display and internet connection can be used to deliver advertising in order to generate revenue. Another benefit for business comes with built-in sensors of movement which enable counting passing pedestrians. This data can be very useful both for statistical and commercial purposes.

High Definition Display: Steora has the option of a 19" weather and vandalism resistant screen that can be used to display any desired information, picture or video. The Screen is built in to fit design perfectly and positioned sideways for optimal visibility.

Advertising: Advertising with Steora is backed by newest software that combines best characteristics of internet advertising and street advertising. By installing one of Steora's three advertising options, Steora's display and internet connection can be used to deliver advertising in order to generate revenue.

Reach Analytics: Steora comes with built-in sensors of movement which enable counting passing pedestrians. This data can be very useful both for statistical and commercial purposes.

### **3.3.3 Societal and Environmental Benefit**

The innovation faces environmental problems that bustling and very populated cities have today. Steora is the latest in smart bench technology, creatively harnessing green solar energy to provide practical solutions to increasingly pressing problems. From providing smart USB charging, mobile Internet, local information, to data gathering and revenue generation from advertisements. Steora is more than a bench. Steora is the future. Steora is suited to any environment, whether bustling town or national park.

### **3.3.4 Innovation**

Smartbench has the following innovative characteristics: 1) Solar power; 2) Mobile device charging; 3) Mobile internet; 4) resistant to vandalism; 5) high quality build materials.

**Solar Power:** The solar panels generate around 110W of electricity per hour. Steora's solar panels are situated under the seat, cover the whole upper surface and enable maximum solar power absorption.

**Mobile Device Charging:** Steora is equipped with an independently developed wireless device charger, allowing newer generations of smart phones and watches to charge without a cable. It also provides two smart USB connectors with an output power of 10 W, providing fast charging for mobile devices whilst ensuring battery protection.

**Mobile Internet:** Internet access is constantly available within a four-meter diameter of the bench, delivered by a superfast 4G mobile router. It is also possible to limit each users access to enable equal access to everyone. It is able to provide Internet packages in association with the best network agencies available in each country.

**Resistant to Vandalism:** Steora is bolted down and locked to prevent any unauthorized opening. There is also a sophisticated tracking system, enabling us to pinpoint its exact location at all times. If Steora is ever shut down, an alert is sent through to our internal tracking system to ensure immediate notification of the clients.

**High Quality Build Materials:** Steora is made from high quality materials to ensure protection against weather and rusting. 3mm thick steel plate with a bearing capacity of 1000kg which is sand blasted and laminated to achieve a high gloss finish. Panels and screen are covered with homogenous polycarbonate, which is often used in things like police shields.

Main information about this business innovation with a social impact are stated in Table 5.

|  |
|--|
| <b>Overall Impact</b>  |
| employing young local students, developing entrepreneurship in the local community, "role model" |
| <b>UN Global Goals Solution</b>  |
| Goal 11; Goal 12; Goal 13  |

*Table 5: [Smartbench]*

Source: Arta Statovci, 2016. AIM2flourish international contest submission, based on the appreciative inquiry with Ivan Mrvoš, director of Hotel Split, May 16th, 2016.

#### **4 Conclusion**

AIM2flourish exercise enabled insight into productive business community of Split region, Croatia. Students gained pride of their local community and got to know personally some of the successful managers that could potentially also offer them an

employment. Establishing a dialogue with the business owners and managers proved to be the critical component for a successfully conducted AIM2flourish of our students. We establish that it is necessary to prepare the students well so that they are self-confident and curious in researching a personal story of businessmen, business model, business innovation and managerial context.

International collaboration of developing Croatian students' business knowledge and skills through an online platform of AIM2flourish demonstrated to be a valuable experience for all the participants. The process itself provided a lot of learning material and collaboration was flexible, trainings were provided for students, technological support developed, formal goals were set by the AIM2flourish and collaboration partners, each of the participants had its own speciality and the support of the faculty's management was given. We therefore conclude that AIM2flourish meets the main goal of an e-learning platform, that is knowledge management in a digital society and a better quality, flexibility and adjustment to the global students' learning needs. Based on the higher informational literacy e-learning of business students through AIM2flourish platform about business innovations strengthens efficiency of the learning process.

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