

# How a Small-town Enterprise Delivers “Worldwide” Services: A Case from the Music Production Industry

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**Abstract:** In Rena, a small town (approx. 2,500 inhabitants) in a small municipality (approx. 5,000 inhabitants), there is a rather small enterprise that has not only had a national impact, but also attracts international attention. The company has specialized in music production and developing singer/songwriters and are running a substantial number of “music camps” that are sessions lasting either a weekend or a week with different themes. With increasingly better equipment accessible to “everyone” and digital platforms with short access to the public, the competition regarding being spotted on the different music apps is high and increasing rapidly. In our paper, we have investigated how this company has made a living out of facilitating for the development of music. We have used qualitative methods, and primarily focussed on in-depth interviews with the employees and participants, as well as observations during sessions. Our results show that not only their business model, but also the structure and facilitation, is vital for developing products that may be published. The structure and facilitation have been developed over some time. During this time, the founder and colleagues have shown exceptional learning abilities, and not only developed as music producers, but also as facilitators. We have found some explanations for this success, not only from theory on innovation and entrepreneurship, but also in theory on Positive Deviance, which we will present in the paper. The combination of these directions has provided a richer understanding of how this small-town company has a worldwide customer database. The innovation capacity of the company has supported the development of the organization as they have been able to utilize their dynamic skills, hired staff with complimentary skills and through a leadership and management style managed to engage the staff by involving and including them in the strategic development of the organization and what they offer their customers. Their ability to attract and develop competency and their professionalism have contributed towards turning potential disadvantages to a part of what they offer the customers as a support and positive means to finish or enhance their products.

**Keywords:** innovation, entrepreneurial behaviour, music production camps

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## 1. Introduction

Establishing a company generally requires a good idea and a lot of guts. Establishing it at a place where it is not necessarily “natural” to place a company and may even be a daunting task. One would assume that a larger city, or even the capital of Norway, would be a more natural place to set up a company that will be dealing with established artists, as well as “up and coming” stars. Yet, two hours north of the capital, in a tiny town called Rena, which has approximately 2,500 inhabitants, The Woods is thriving and steadily growing.

The company offers music production services, and over the years has specialized on offering so-called “music camps”. These are singer-songwriter seminars ranging from a few days up to a week. Most of the camps are held at their offices/studios at Rena.

What would make both famous and less famous people from Norway, the USA, Belgium, France, UK, etc. come to this remote place to work with the people working at The Woods? And, what made them think at all that they would attract these people to a place so far away from anything remotely actionlike? As there are no bars, only a few restaurants, one hotel, and a couple of food shops and very little else at this place, why would both celebrities and coming stars want to travel to this place to be creative and write, record and produce potential hits?

These are among the questions we had, and that we seek to answer. For this paper, we have focussed on:

***How do they view their own success?***

***How this is perceived by experienced participants?***

***How does this align with the theory on innovation and entrepreneurship?***

**And lastly: How does this also fit with the theory on Positive Deviance?**

In the following, we will present the theory that has enlightened our study, and our methodological choices, before we present our results. Lastly, we will conclude, and suggest how to study this further.

**1.1 Case: The Woods**

The Woods is a music production company based in Rena, Norway, a two-hour drive north of Oslo, the capital of Norway. The company employs no less than 11 music producers who are not only capable music producers, but who also play instruments, are able text writers, melody writers, and can sing. They are based on the 2nd floor of an industry building, and specialize in planning, organizing, and conducting “songwriting camps”. In short, these are seminars where established artists (singers, singer-songwriters, etc.), and artists *in spe* from Norway and the rest of the world, participate in making music. They apply for taking part in the seminars, and must fill out an extensive form describing themselves, their skills and what they may contribute with. When being considered for an offer of participation, they are interviewed by representatives from The Woods. In this interview, they not only look for the skills and talents they have described in the form, but also investigate their personalities. Are they shy and withdrawn, or are they forward and «pushy»?

From the time they are invited to these seminars, they have observed, reflected, discussed and refined the way they organize the teams. Another thing they have learned “the hard way” is about establishing and presenting the rules of dialogue within the groups as an introduction to the seminars.

The employees have meetings every day of the seminars, where they discuss and reflect upon what has taken place during the day. In addition, they update each other on their plans for the upcoming day. For the employees who have been there from the beginning, facilitating seminars has become a part of their tacit knowledge, and a lot of what happens regarding facilitating, feedback, development, handling, producing, etc., which is something that they “just do”, and that they have “learned by experience”. They sometimes work in different projects, with one of these projects being to develop potential contributions to the national competition that will end up with a winner who will take part in the Eurovision Song Contest. These camps are called “MGP camp’s”, in which the acronym MGP is “Melodi Grand Prix” – the name of the Norwegian song contest.

The experiences they gain from all of these music camps are valuable knowledge, in addition to be a part of the knowledge base within their organization. Another asset is their ability to doubly and triply learn from their experiences, share tacit and explicit knowledge, as well as their professionalism; hence several of the artists keep returning to these camps.

Distribution of the products (the songs/melodies/videos) have also become easier with the digitalization and enhanced internet connections in basically the whole world. Markets that previously were less accessible have become highly accessible, and the cooperation and collaboration across borders enabled by the digital technology have been truly beneficial for the type of products, distribution and service provision The Woods are working within.

In the following, we will present the theory that has enlightened our study and the methodology used for the data collection, followed by the results and discussion. Lastly, we will present the conclusion and our future research.

**2. Theoretical foundation**

We have chosen innovation and entrepreneurship as the company has found a niche, and through hard work, market communication and opportunities from having a university close by and managed to develop a business that in a short time has put a significant stamp on the Norwegian music business. As they have managed to do this in an area remote from the “big cities” where you would expect them to be, and that they have made a business out of their passion and hobbies in a very competitive business area, resembles how it is possible to define Positive Deviance; being able to develop something that has become an international business in a place far from where one would expect “the action” to be.

**2.1 Innovation and entrepreneurship**

Innovation is strongly connected to growth (Bessant & Tidd, 2015, p. 5) and about “identifying or creating opportunities, new ways of serving existing markets, growing new markets, rethinking services, meeting social needs and improving operations (doing what we do but better)” (Bessant & Tidd, 2015, pp. 7-9).

Schumpeter claimed that entrepreneurship drives economic development, and that entrepreneurs thus utilize ideas and technical inventions, sees funding opportunities, and turn ideas into technological, commercial and

organizational innovations (Schumpeter, 1934, 2021), even if there are debates on whether business opportunities are unveiled or created, if they take to existing solutions or invent something new (Malerba & McKelvey, 2020).

According to Schumpeter (1934, 2021), entrepreneurs are risk takers, and may develop new ways of combining new and/or existing businesses. Entrepreneurs not only take risks but are able to organize capital for the development of innovations. According to Kurz (2012), any new combinations are: “the systematic production of new, economically useful knowledge out of existing knowledge” (Kurz, 2012, p. 883). Malerba and McKelvey (2020) claim that an entrepreneur takes risks, develops new combinations and secure resources in order to convert ideas into innovations. Also, the entrepreneur may introduce new products, processes, technology and constellations of the organization. It may also be on the use of technology, as this has enabled a worldwide distribution of digital material, which allows new markets to be reached from anywhere by exploiting technological solutions (Heggernes, 2020).

According to Malerba and McKelvey (2020), entrepreneurs are: “involved with others in the diffusion, use and creation of knowledge, engage in learning and problem-solving activities, use knowledge in new combinations for innovation” and “are affected by education, knowledge and experiences in their innovative activities” (Malerba & McKelvey, 2020, p. 506). Similarly, entrepreneurship is: “a process with emergent properties which involves actors searching for opportunities and generating new knowledge, is affected by the learning, technological and knowledge context” and “involves the co-evolution of knowledge, firms, industrial structure and institutions” (Malerba & McKelvey, 2020, p. 506).

They even present a theoretical definition of a knowledge-intensive entrepreneurship: “Knowledge-intensive innovative entrepreneurial firms are new learning organizations that use and transform existing knowledge, and generate new knowledge in order to innovate within innovation systems” (Malerba & McKelvey, 2020, p. 508).

Ridley (2020) claim that innovation is a *process* and one of the most important sources for growth. It is about finding new useful ways of reorganizing. Many innovations fail to be used due to costs, being too advanced or that they are unfinished at the point of release.

## **2.2 Innovation capacity**

Developing innovation capacity is about training the ability to innovate (Meyer *et al.*, 2022). Succeeding over and over again require skills regarding developing this innovation capacity. It will also draw on theory on dynamic skills. It is important that the co-workers have or gain the right competencies and that there is support regarding the development of innovations. Enthusiastic co-workers that persevere and don't give up is equally important.

The three components that make up innovation capacity are:

- Dynamic skills
- Complementary skills
- Engagement

The dynamic skills consists of identifying (technological) possibilities, needs of the customers and to recognize strategic challenges (Meyer *et al.*, 2022). This thus needs to seize the opportunities that lie in the identified possibilities and needs, and to transform the organization in order to utilize them. For this, complementary skills are needed, such as the ability and capability of producing, supporting customers, or other skills necessary to support and develop the production or the services. It is thus not just about inventing and having new ideas to services and products, but also about being able to act on them and having support and skills in the organization to be able to work systematically to provide the services or products to the public. The co-workers' engagement also represent an important factor and should be a result of leadership and be incorporated in the culture of the organization (Meyer *et al.*, 2022).

There are nine organizational elements identified as important for the innovation capacity: organizational structure, competence, work processes, incentives, culture, technological platforms, external relations, leadership and management, and ownership.

Regarding organization, it is about having a structure that allow people from different parts in the organization to work towards a common goal. Regarding competence, the most important skill is about learning to learn (Toner, 2011; World Economic Forum, 2020; Meyer *et al.*, 2022). Also, it is about developing the existing competence. The culture is also important as it expresses common values, norms and mental models. Innovative business culture may also be paradoxical; for example: to err is accepted, but incompetence is not, psychological safety is important, but honesty is highly valued, autonomy is supported but with a strong leadership.

Technological development and choice of technological platforms also play an important role regarding innovative capacity. Development of a national and an international technological infrastructure supporting exchange of for example knowledge, services and products will allow for example different ways of distributing services and/or products and open up for other markets.

### **2.2.1 Adult learning**

As learning is important for both entrepreneurial behaviours, being innovative and for innovative capacity, it is necessary to include adult learning theories.

In adult learning Malcolm Knowles has presented his six key principles on andragogy: self-direction, learning through experiences and with a basis in prior experience, readiness to learning, problem-centred (more than subject-centred), internal motivation (rather than external), and they need to understand why they need to know what they are learning (Knowles, 1978; Roe, 2023).

Reflection is also very important for learning (Raelin, 2002; Del Carlo, Hinkhouse and Isbell, 2010; Moon, 2013; Knowles, Holton III and Swanson, 2015). Reflection can be undertaken both prior to, during and after a learning experience (Schön, 1987). As innovations and the work on innovating may be a learning experience and thus require reflections in order to evaluate the innovations (Meyer *et al.*, 2022).

### **2.3 Positive Deviance**

Positive Deviance (hereafter called PD) has generally been used to find the positive exceptions when all parameters predict a negative outcome. One definition is about it being a “practical strategy to identify and promote exceptionally high performance in a problem domain of interest” (Herington and van de Fliert, 2018, p. 664). It has been a theoretical concept as well as a practical strategy. Regarding the theoretical viewpoint, it is about understanding how and why the positive deviance arises. Regarding a practical approach, the understanding may contribute to attend to social problems. An example that is much used, regarding teenage pregnancy, in which some girls did not get pregnant, despite all parameters, suggested they should. The difference (positive deviance) was due to the parents’ plea for them to wait with getting pregnant until finishing school, while the other parents lectured their daughters about contraception options.

Pascale (2010) present the basic premises: “(1) solutions to seemingly intractable problems already exist, (2) they have been discovered by members of the community itself, and (3) these innovators (individual positive deviants) have succeeded even though they share the same constraints and barriers as others” (Pascale, 2010, p. 3,4). It is therefore about finding the reasons to “why things work” when it *normally* should not. It may also be about detecting issues that should be visible but appears invisible in plain sight. It is often referred to a story of a smuggler that is repeatedly stopped with his donkeys carrying bags of straw. They never find anything and have to let him pass. Upon later encounter with the chief of customs he reveals that what he has been smuggling are the donkeys (Pascale, 2010).

Ochieng (2007) offers the following definition of PD: “intentional behaviour that significantly departs from the norms of a referent group (in honourable ways) to create social, technical, institutional, organizational, and policy innovations, whether embraced and amplified by the referent group or not” (Ochieng, 2007, pp. 456–457). Also, Sletli and Singhal (2016) claim that PD may aid the amplification of tacit knowledge. In their study, they claim that the positive deviants are aiding in the communication of change, and that it is important to facilitate for arenas for people-driven changes.

Herington and Van de Fliert (2018) claim that PD tends to “be applied as a tool or framework in practice” (p. 676). When a PD is unveiled it is possible to utilize the results for social change. It is suggested to encourage to describe a situation or episode where a situation was resolved well but where the circumstances were not optimal and it is claimed that it is important to define the intention, how the solutions departs from any norms and the actions are “of an Honorable Nature” (Spreitzer and Sonenshein, 2004, p. 842). An example of this is displayed by Vold and Kiørnig (2015) where they have interviewed two municipalities to investigate PD during a crisis situation and detected how situations were resolved, how it differed from normal practice and that the action was executed out of the respect and dedication of a profession. One of the cases were from the 1995 flood where there were clients of the health care sector that their nurses were unable to reach due to the flood. This was solved by the nurses that lived more accessible to the one in need of care, but that originally were occupied with other tasks, chose to take over the jobs for the nurses that were unable to attend to their clients. This was, however, due to local knowledge and a sense of duty to the community members (Vold and Kiørnig, 2015).

### 3. Method of inquiry

In this case study (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, 2014; Yin, 2014; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016), we have chosen a qualitative approach, where we have conducted an in-depth interview with two informants using a semi-structured interview guide (Creswell, 2007; Dalen, 2011; Jacobsen, 2015; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). We have chosen to do a case study, as this is a unique study (Remenyi, 2012). The data are particularly important when doing case studies (Remenyi, 2012). In this study, we have had a “gatekeeper” (Remenyi, 2012, p. 87), who had provided us access to the organization, and which is the main informant (informant 1). One of the informants is the founder, managing director and music producer. The other informant (informant 2) is one of the participants of one of the MGP camps. The latter, with more than 40 years of experiences from a long international career working with international stars and organizing singer-songwriter retreats. Hence, the informants are carefully chosen with the purpose of providing feedback both from a managerial point of view and a customer point of view.

To secure the data, we have used checkback as described in Guba and Lincoln (1989) where the informants are shown the text with the possibility of commenting and correcting any statements. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, in addition to the interviewers notes from the meetings.

### 4. Results and discussion

Regarding being an entrepreneurial organization, the main informant claims, “I followed my passion and started out with my mates to do what we liked to do: make music. However, we did have to make some money, and inspired by conventions we went to in Europe, we started offering singer-songwriting camps. We already had access to the technological tools, and we could reach our markets online” (informant 1). This concurs with Schumpeter’s claim about entrepreneurship driving economic development, and the utilization of technology, seeing financial opportunities, and that they were able to turn their ideas into commercial and organizational innovations (Schumpeter, 1934, 2021).

They were also willing to take the risks of failing when they started their singer-songwriting camps, but as Kurz (2012) explains about combining: They were able to utilize their own competencies as singer-songwriters and producers to develop “new economically useful knowledge out of existing knowledge” (Kurz, 2012, p. 883).

Informant 1 further claim: “We have developed from two, sometimes three to 11 employees, and we aim to utilize the individuals’ personal knowledge and skills in order to maximize the outcome for our clients. Also, we are very careful to reflect after each camp in order to learn from each other and from our experiences.” (informant 1). This resembles how Malerba and McKelvey (2020) describe entrepreneurs, namely regarding being: “involved with others in the diffusion, use and creation of knowledge, engage in learning and problem-solving activities, use knowledge into new combinations for innovation” (Malerba and McKelvey, 2020, p. 506).

This is confirmed by informant 2, claiming that: “The guys at The Woods know what they are doing. They are highly qualified music producers, and they run decent camps. I have taken part in a few, and I am impressed about how they develop between each time I am here. I am “old” in the game, as I have worked in the business for about 40 years and have been at many camps. I have even organized a few myself, and I still learn from them about organizing camps, and about how to organize the work in the groups. I have actually asked them to come to San Francisco to co-operate on a retreat/singer-songwriting camp” (informant 2). Here, the respondent is not only referring to their professionalism, but also to their ability to develop from their learning, and about expanding their business (Malerba and McKelvey, 2020).

What the informants present, also bear witness to innovation capacity. It has started with a passion and the company has expanded, attracting relevant competencies and been able to sustain an engagement of the employees. The company has the ability of working together, drawing upon each other’s experiences. What theory on innovation capacity is not focussing on but which The Woods is great at is to *reflect* and thereby supporting the development of *reflective practitioners* (Schön, 1987). The reflection processes are integrated in the way they work and is found to be a strong support for their development process. The reflections are organized in a way that also support inclusion and involvement of the co-workers and thus support engagement amongst the members of the organization. And *engagement* is one of the pivotal elements of the innovation capacity.

As they are able to *sense* the different trends in the music business due to their close connections to the business and are able to understand and recognize their customers needs as well as being able to solve the strategic challenges. Informant 2’s statement above, also confirms this. In addition, informant 1 explain that we always reflect after each and every music camp, in order to learn from their experiences and improve. One example has

been extremely important and is about being clear about rules for communication. The Woods have been agile regarding recruiting needed competences based on a recognized gap regarding lack of competencies and resources in general due to expanding their business.

The leadership style is very inclusive and the manager (informant 1) claim that it is extremely important that the employees are heard in the meetings. Their opinions are valued and form the base of any decisions made for the company and for the way they conduct their business.

Regarding Positive Deviance, informant 1 is clear about the intentionality of keeping it in a remote place: "We want the participants to focus on the music, collaboration and development, rather than being distracted by fancy shops, restaurants and pub-life. They pay good money to develop songs, and then they should be able to focus on this. Besides, the scenery here is wonderful and may even inspire to creativity" (informant 1). This fits with Ochieng's definition of PD, in which he claims that this is: "intentional behaviour that significantly departs from the norms of a referent group (in honourable ways) to create social, technical, institutional, organizational, and policy innovations, whether embraced and amplified by the referent group or not" (Ochieng, 2007, pp. 456–457).

Informant 2 confirms this when he reports: "I was surprised the first time I came here, as it was such a small place. I am used to a bit busier environment. But I understand their philosophy and their business intentions – we do focus more on the music when there is nothing else to do" (informant 2).

The remoteness may also support their opportunities of reflecting after each camp and share any learning, something which also may enable the discovery of any tacit knowledge. Respondent 1 claims that: "There are things that we have discovered little by little, as we have summed up after the camps. Things we took a bit for granted, and did not pay too much attention to, have become important features and a part of why we are successful and why our clients return to us. For example, the rules we have developed are a result of our reflections, and they have proven to be crucial regarding how clients work together in order to establish a positive and thriving environment in the groups" (informant 1). This example can be tied to Sletkli and Singhal's (2016) claim that PD may aid in the amplification of tacit knowledge. Also, The Woods and how they are able to grow and get national and international attention contribute to theory on PD by the fact that Norway is country with approximately 5,5 million inhabitants, mostly with a standard of living that is above the examples that generally are presented in the PD literature. Hence, theory on PD can be used to understand positive exceptions also in a high cost country, within an established business market, and to recognize how perceived disadvantages (small place, far from any major city), can be turned to an advantage when presented as one (far from "noise" and "disturbances", "areas for reflections"). It also shows how thorough business skills and knowledge, ability to be professional, and inhabiting innovation capacity, facilitates for success, even if it the business/organization to outsiders may have some clear disadvantages, such as perceived poor location, for example.

The technology has, however, been an enabler of reaching different markets and supported continued work between the participants at the camps. As informant 1 claim: "Sometimes we are not finished with the production when the camp is over. But this is not a problem as we only send the digital files to the artists when they are done. Also, we sometimes distribute them on the agreed platforms to the public." This show that the technology enables the innovation capacity (Meyer *et al.*, 2022). Informant 1 continues: "We are even able to distribute the products to markets in different parts of the world. We are for instance, serving the Asian market with a lot of songs and melodies developed for this market. This is distributed online via secure channels." The technology thus allows for reaching markets previously less accessible from countries outside Asia. Hence, the digitalization of the music business facilitates for remote working as the product transfer is no longer an obstacle for working away from any density of similar businesses.

## **5. Conclusion**

We can conclude that The Woods fits within the definitions of entrepreneurial organization. The organization has utilized technology, not only in their work to support the production of music, but also to be able to distribute to different markets. Also, they are learning from their experiences in order to improve and expand both in markets and in services. They take risks by venturing into new markets and new customer groups.

They have also been agile regarding exploiting their innovation capacity as they have been able to utilize their dynamic skills, hired complimentary skills and through the leadership and management style enabled involvement and thus engagement in the organization.

The Woods have been able to establish a company in growth in a remote part of Norway, although the business is within a business area mostly identified with having a network close by, such as in the larger cities. They have

utilized the remoteness to their advantage and communicated to the market about the enabling of focus and efficiency due to the remoteness of the location. The remoteness has also allowed the organization to evaluate and turn their tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge about how to run efficient and productive singer-songwriting camps, without the disturbance normally taking place in a busier place.

The digitalization and development of the technological platforms have supported a connectedness that has enabled working remotely as one is no longer dependent on physical delivery of the products.

### 5.1 Further research

The Woods are continuously developing their products, exploiting and exploring new customer markets. Their latest venue is about organizing singer-songwriting camps for children/youths from 9–13 years old. To investigate this, we will need the consent from the parents, but it will be interesting to see how this age group perceives these camps. Also, we are planning on doing research on camps they call “Bad Manors”, which takes place in the autumn outside London, UK. Here, the aim is to further investigate the international market and how they perceive the camps, and how any learning from this is taken back into the “ordinary” singer-songwriting camps.

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