

# IEDC Faculty: Learning from the best



*A School with a View*

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Prof. Stewart Thornhill, Visiting Professor

## »BEING WILLING TO LEARN AND MODIFY THE ORIGINAL IDEA MAKES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SUCCESS AND FAILURE«

»We often talk about the combination of entrepreneurs, opportunities, and resources as the oxygen, spark, and fuel necessary to get a venture going,« stresses Prof. Stewart Thornhill, visiting professor at IEDC-Bled School of Management and the executive director of the Samuel Zell and Robert H. Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies. His research interests include strategic execution, leadership, competitive strategy, innovation and corporate entrepreneurship - at exactly this is the red thread of this interview.

Previously he served as the executive director of the Pierre L. Morrissette Institute for Entrepreneurship and at Ivey Business School at Western University in London where he championed a number of new initiatives and gained sizable experience helping entrepreneurs through his involvement in QuantumShift™, an Executive Development program for high-growth entrepreneurs. Thornhill's extensive background also includes global experience, having held the Karel Steur Chair in Entrepreneurship at the Universidad de San Andreas, Buenos Aires; and various professorial roles at Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany; the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris in France; and the Schulich School of Business at York University in Toronto.



By: Tonja Blatnik, Head of Corporate Communications, IEDC

**Recently, we have witnessed successes of the 20-something entrepreneurs of Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram. All of a sudden, 18-year-olds now think they can be billionaires at 25. However, in your podcast for the Washington Post you talk about interesting statistics: the percentage of new businesses started by 20-to-34-year-old entrepreneurs has actually been declining over the past decade. It slipped from 26 percent in 2003 to 22 percent in 2013. Why?**

If you graduated from high school, college or university in the past 8 years, you entered an economy that was struggling at best. For many, simply finding a job to pay a living wage has been a significant challenge. Living pay-check to pay-check makes it incredibly difficult to launch a company, especially if there is a significant technical component to the venture.

If you're twenty-something, financially secure, and in the idea- and talent-rich environment of a good university, the chances that you'll find the right opportunity and the right partners with whom to build a company go up dramatically. So I expect we'll continue to see very bright, very valuable start-ups coming from new graduates and current students. But for a large segment of the population, wage stagnation, slow economic growth, and the pressures of student debt make it harder to strike out on their own. In the specific case of the US, there's also the issue of health insurance, which makes full-time paid employment a more attractive option for many.

We often talk about the combination of entrepreneurs, opportunities, and resources as the oxygen,

spark, and fuel necessary to get a venture going. We're still seeing a lot of start-ups in terms of total businesses started. But macro conditions can be unforgiving and it may be a while before we see the start-up trend line move in an upward direction.

**'Being an entrepreneur is more than launching a start up -- it's a mindset.' What are three main steps of becoming a successful entrepreneur? And what are some most common mistakes?**

When I talk about the three steps, I'm referring to (1) Have an idea, (2) Do something about it and (3) Learn from your experience.

The "mindset" incorporates all of those elements. Entrepreneurs are on the lookout for problems to solve; things in their lives and surroundings that can be improved upon. Once they have an insight or an idea, they take action. If you stop at the first stage, you're just someone with an idea, and who knows whether it's a good one or a bad one? By trying it out, even on a very small scale, you can find out whether anyone else thinks there is value in your concept. And that's where learning becomes important. Some ideas aren't very good. Being willing to learn and modify the original idea if necessary can make the difference between success and failure. Listen to customers. Modify and try again. Listen some more. And so on.

**What would you advise to your children if they would be thinking about starting a company?**

If I had kids, I'd tell them to make sure they were solving something that really mattered to them. There are lots of trivial problems,

but if you're going to invest your time and energy into something, you might as well make sure it's meaningful.

**How and when did you decide to be part of IEDC story?**

Before joining the faculty at the University of Michigan, I was a professor at the Ivey Business School in Ontario, Canada. Several of my colleagues at Ivey had taught at IEDC and they always had wonderful things to say about the school, about Bled and about their students. So, when I had an opportunity to teach there, I jumped at the offer. And my colleagues were right; it was a wonderful experience.

**How do you define your success and the success of (your) clients, students?**

I encourage my students to define success for themselves. It's not for me to say whether they should build a company to a certain size or valuation. We each know what's important in our lives and if someone feels they've succeeded at achieving their goals, that's worth celebrating.

**In what ways is the role of business schools/educations changing? Can entrepreneurship be taught? How can we, for example, learn to take a risk in the classroom?**

Our disposition, our education, and our life experiences prepare each of us in different ways. Some students have no problem taking risks, but may lack people skills or technical abilities. Others may have great creative talents, but struggle with the financial aspects of building a company. A big part of entrepreneurship education is helping people discover what they want/need to do with their

lives and then figuring out how to get there. Some can achieve their dreams within an existing organization. They may become entrepreneurs. Others will need to build something from the ground up. Whatever their purpose, all entrepreneurs will need to build a team that collectively can turn ideas into reality. So, we absolutely can teach entrepreneurship - though we may be teaching different things to each student.

## MEET STEWART

**Finish the sentence:**

**My friends would describe me as ...**

.... positive.

**There's nothing better in life than ...**

.... running barefoot along the surf line next to an ocean.

**The most powerful lesson I have learned ...**

.... the power of community.

**I am inspired by ...**

.... nature.

**My favourite colour is ...**

.... vibrant deep blue.