

Mike Volker profile

Angel wing: The executive director of SFU's university industry liaison office is a leading B.C. cultivator of budding entrepreneurs and early-stage enterprise investment

Mission: Create a community of entrepreneurs and investors that can develop through the close-knit work and communication of its members

Assets: Experience in founding, investing or mentoring more than 100 early-stage companies in B.C.

Yield: A cluster of early-stage companies that are nearing commercialization

By Curt Cherewayko

Mike Volker calls it "founderitis". It describes an ailment suffered by startup founders who are so headstrong that they're impossible to advise or mentor.

The Western Universities Technology Innovation Fund (WUTIF), a six-year-old angel fund founded and managed by Volker, has had no official failures, although a handful of its investee companies have been written off the balance sheet because of founders that suffered "founderitis". "Usually it comes down to a personal failing of an individual," said Volker of the fund's writeoffs. "These people are better off running their own businesses where they don't have investors."

Junior entrepreneurs who are attempting to get their idea off the ground should pay heed: as the recently anointed Canadian angel investor of the year, Volker knows how to pluck an idea from the ether and develop it into a commercial enterprise.

Days after receiving the lofty title last October from the National Angel Capital Organization (NACO), which is a national umbrella organization that brings together Canada's many provincial, regional and local angel investor groups, Volker was named B.C. angel investor of the year by the Vancouver-based Angel Forum.

Considering the fund has invested in more than 50 early-stage companies since it was launched in 2003, WUTIF's number of writeoffs is relatively few.

From his small and cluttered office in Simon Fraser University's downtown campus, Volker typically juggles a handful of roles and tasks simultaneously. Those roles often overlap or flow into one another and have a common thread: they involve mentoring and or investing in very early-stage entrepreneurs and ideas.

He has been the executive director of SFU's university industry liaison office (UILO) since 1996.

Unlike the industry liaison offices at most universities, entrepreneurs who have no affiliation with SFU can approach Volker and SFU for help developing a company. "It just gets the university off the mountain, so to speak, and down to a closer level with other stakeholders," said Volker.

The novel approach is part of Volker's larger objective of creating a community of entrepreneurs and investors that can build on itself through the close-knit work and communication of its members.

If a student or faculty member at SFU approaches the UILO for help commercializing an idea, Volker might lease them space at SFU's TIME Ventures startup hub within the UILO and guide them through their infancy in exchange for a company stake.

If a startup is tight on capital, as is often the case, Volker will run a tab for them. And if a startup grows and the idea's founder doesn't get a case of "founderitis", Volker might invest in the idea through WUTIF. From there, he'll continue to mentor and support the idea-cum-enterprise until it's ready to take commercial flight or approach venture capitalists.

This year he launched the GreenAngel Energy Corp. (TSX-V: GAE). The publicly listed angel fund has invested in six early-stage B.C. companies that are developing clean and renewable energy technologies. "The biggest challenge when you get started," said Volker, "is getting that early help you need – getting the mentoring, getting a good board of directors, getting a little bit of money to get you going."

Outside of the office, he often co-ordinates and runs events for the Vancouver Angel Technology Network, an organization he co-founded in 1999 to connect investors, technology industry insiders and university startups.

Ali Tehrani, president and CEO of Zymeworks Inc., was introduced to Volker by other angel investors in Vancouver in 2005, and Volker ultimately invested two rounds in the company worth a total of roughly \$150,000. Zymeworks is developing complex software that could one day computerize laborious and physical lab research. "On the angel route, you will very quickly find that there are those who talk the talk and those who walk the walk," said Tehrani, who added that Volker's style reflects the fundamental principles of angel investing. "It's not necessarily about the technology at that stage," said Tehrani. "It's all about the people and about how driven they are to making something out of an opportunity."

When Tehrani first met Volker, he was not someone Tehrani would describe as a mover and shaker in Vancouver. But Volker has since found his footing. "Mike has made his own luck," said Tehrani. "He has really dug a space for himself [investing] in various clean-tech and IT companies that are not going to be billion-dollar companies, but they're certainly going to generate multiple exits for him."

WUTIF's only exit to date has been Brightside Technologies Inc., which Dolby Laboratories acquired in May 2007 for US\$28 million. Even though the fund is still early in its development, it has already played a large role in developing B.C.'s technology sector.

Bionic Power Inc., Clearvision Technologies Inc. and Energy Aware Technology Inc. are among the promising startups that Volker has either helped spin off from SFU or has invested in through WUTIF.

And while venture capitalists and other investors require a company to be more developed or have market traction, Volker helps build enterprises that are at the earliest and most challenging part of the development cycle. "The fallout rate is still pretty high," said Volker. "That's why a lot of institutional investors don't get involved in the early stage."

WUTIF's next milestones will likely be tied to investment exits. "We had deals ready to close and then the economy changed all that," said Volker. "Once we see a few of these exits coming back, people will get a little more excited again, and things will pick up." •