

Istraživanje potencijala za razvoj i aktivaciju zajednica u pozicioniranju startapa

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REZIME: *Startapi su novi način poslovanja koji se javlja u savremenom društvu. Jedna od najvažnijih karakteristika ovih kompanija jeste gotovo obavezno formiranje sopstvene zajednice. Na osnovu vrste zajednica koje će se proučavati, na konkretnom primeru će biti prikazano na koji način su određeni primeri startapa poslovali, privlačili potencijalno okruženje i tržište. Svrha ovog rada jeste da doprinese razumevanju i prikazu poslovanja samih zajednica, ali i posledicama i prednostima koje zahvaljujući njima postoje.*

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UVOD

U savremenom poslovanju, proizvodi i usluge kompanija se zasnivaju na što većoj inovativnosti, kako bi se razlikovali od drugih na tržištu. Međutim, kako se savremeno društvo menjalo, tako su se i načini poslovanja promenili. Kompanije koje se tek pojavljuju na tržištu žele da u što kraćem roku posluju i teže rastu. Opšta definicija startapa glasi: „Startap je privremena organizacija u potrazi za skalabilnim, ponovljivim, profitabilnim poslovnim modelom“ (3). Startap kompanije su zasnovane na brojnim komunikacijskim odnosima, kako međusobnim, tako i sa stejkholderima i okruženjem koje kreiraju. Kako bi što pre napredovale, ove kompanije su počele sa izgradnjom zajednica, pomoću kojih mogu lakše da komuniciraju, dođu do neophodnih informacija o poslovanju, ali i angažuju učesnike organizacija da se uključe u samu organizaciju. Iskustvo, saveti i informacije koje mogu dobiti o kompanijama u zajednici koje posluju ili su poslovale na sličan način, za startape je značajan, jer su se ove male kompanije tek pojavile na tržištu, obično bez iskustva, sa težnjom što bržeg rasta u što kraćem vremenskom periodu.

Formiranje zajednica startapa je složeni proces, kome prethodi definisanje poslovanja startap kompanije, tipa startapa, faze u kojoj se nalazi i kroz koje će proći, načinima poslovanja za svaku od njih, ispitivanju tržišta, potreba kupaca za određenim proizvodom, utvrđivanje ciljeva, misije i vizije, ciljne grupe, stejkholdera sa kojima će se poslovati, umrežavanja, kanala komunikacije i vrste zajednica koje koristi određena grupa kupaca kojoj startapi proizvod žele da predstavljaju i sa kojima žele da kreiraju zajednice. To mogu biti, pre svega, zajednice koje su zasnovane na fizičkom prostoru, ali i onlajn zajednice koje sve više dobijaju na značaju i primeni. Različiti su uticaji na startape prilikom odabira ključnih kupaca, ciljnih grupa i sl. Pored demografskih i geografskih, ima i psiholoških efekata. Tek nakon uspostavljanja potencijalnih članova, startapi definišu ciljeve. Vrlo je nezahvalno definisati zajedničke ciljeve koji će biti važni svim članovima, stoga startapi ili pokušavaju da privuku širi auditorijum i prilagođavaju se potrebama tržišta ili prihvataju postojeću i formiranu zajednicu i ulažu dodatne napore u nju. Svakako da nakon ispitivanja i uspostavljanja tržišnih šansi, startap pokreće svoju ideju i razvija poslovanje. Zbog nedostatka iskustva kada su startap poslovni modeli u pitanju, angažovanje zajednica i učestvovanje među njima su jako važni za tek formiranu kompaniju. Način same komunikacije, poslovanja, prednosti i mogućnosti koje ima su neverovatno velike, međutim, potrebno je u svakoj fazi uskladiti komunikaciju startapa. Startapi se na samom početku nalaze u fazi izbora načina na koji će se predstaviti, a jedna od najvažnijih brojnih odluka koju moraju doneti je njihova geografska prisutnost. Da li će se kreirati uživo ili onlajn i kako privući pažnju? – o ovome mogu razmišljati tek nakon što se utvrde članovi i ciljevi. Inovativnost je ključna i pre same pojave na tržištu. Još u fazi ideje startapi moraju voditi računa o činjenici da je mnogo kompanija koje su iz iste industrije. Počev od ekosistema startapa, okruženja, uticaja koji na njega kao zajednicu vrše spoljašnji faktori. Osećaj zajedništva je jako teško izgraditi. Startapi na samom početku i kreiraju ove zajednice kako bi se čulo za njih još u fazi ideje i kako bi kupci imali već izazvanu emociju prema određenom brendu.

TEORIJSKO ODREĐENJE STARTAP ZAJEDNICE

U današnjem vremenu, organizatori, ali i čitav tim ljudi iz organizacije smatraju zajednicu obaveznom u razvoju startapa kako bi osigurali lidersku poziciju od ostalih učesnika (19). Ono što na samom početku nedostaje startapima jeste kako da znanje i ono što imaju, tj. ideju, pretvore u novac; upravo u tome im zajednice pomažu (17). Već u početnoj fazi razvoja startapi angažuju mentore, što je postalo pravilo. U fazi razvoja startapa još uvek se formira tim, nakon toga tek dolazi do prototipa, preduzimanja akcija i ulaska u zajednicu (16). Startap zajednicu najbolje je posmatrati objektivno, ali biti u njoj (7). Pre samog formiranja i odlučivanja o startap zajednici, potrebno je postaviti cilj za koji će ciljna grupa biti zainteresovana, odnosno koji je zajednički za sve članove. Nakon toga se postavlja osoba koja će biti glavna za ovu mrežu, ali tako da se svaki član oseća podjednako važnim (18). Na osnovu brojnih istraživanja, zaključuje se da većina članova zajednica smatra zajednicu vrlo korisnom za edukaciju i rešavanje brojnih problema u samom poslovanju. Ovde se pre svega misli na nedostatak preduzetničkog znanja i edukacije na samom početku razvoja, u fazi pokretanja ideje (23). Bez obzira na pojedine razlike, svako ko želi da se učlani u zajednicu i da se bavi tim poslom, mora biti dobrodošao i pozdravljen od strane lidera. Sam pristup zajednici bez kapitala je moguć (18). Sporazum o prednostima zajednice (CBA) je strateško sredstvo koje se koristi u procesu izgradnje bogatstva zajednice (8). Zajednice startapa se najbolje mogu razumeti ako se posmatraju u okviru ekosistema. Ekosistem predstavlja klaster startapa i saradnika koji koriste zajedničke resurse i nalaze se u regionu. Startap ekosistem je u porastu u Srbiji. Broj startapa koji se pridružuju ekosistemu je svake godine u porastu – u proseku oko 20-30% novih startapa svake godine, kako navode autori (20).

U zavisnosti od toga koja vrsta zajednice se izgrađuje, startapi potencijalne članove pronalaze na internetu ili uživo na nekom događaju. Nakon okupljanja članova osnivač formira organizaciju ili klub u kome će biti svi članovi organizacije. Ako je u pitanju internet zajednica, može biti npr. grupa na Mitingu ili Fejsbuku (22). Izgradnja i angažovanje zajednice su niz donetih odluka na osnovu uticaja koji može imati na samo poslovanje, ali i na članove koji su deo nje. Neke od platformi i alati koji se koriste su: Facebook zajednice, Podkast, Circle.co (platforma), Revue, Tviter, Discord, Typeform tj. VideoAsk (kreator obrazaca i anketi) itd. (19). Autori (9) navode i to da je Instagram postao način komunikacije i marketinga na samom početku razvoja startapa. Međutim, postoje i negativne strane ove vrste zajednice, a to su nedostatak fizičkog kontakta, odnosno govor „licem u lice“ (24). Navodi se da se „onlajn zajednice više odnose na interese, a manje na društvene značaje“ (4). Prvi organizovani sastanak može mnogo pomoći u samom formiranju zajednice, ali kako bi se održala, neophodni su redovni sastanci i događaji (22). Tehnološki parkovi povremeno organizuju događaje gde se predstavljaju programi investicija (inkubatori, akceleratori i drugi investitori) i povezuju sa preduzetnicima koji žele da osnuju startap, imaju ideju. Ove institucije pružaju pomoć startapima i povezuju ih sa ostalim startap kompanijama, zajednicama i mentorima; važno je da imaju isti cilj poslovanja i slične

aktivnosti (17). Na samom početku razvoja, pre samo nekoliko godina, nije bilo saradnje među startap akterima, međutim, u poslednje vreme se situacija promenila. Sve više je inicijativa i pružanja pomoći startapima unutar zajednice. Ovo su neformalna okupljanja, koja počinju među prijateljima, rodbinom i sličnim poznanstvima. Nešto formalnija je komunikacija startapa sa akceleratorima i inkubatorima, odnosno investitorima (9). Glavni problem koji mnogi navode jeste što su ove zajednice usmerene na pružanju pomoći startapima, ali na samom početku njihovog razvoja, ne i u kasnijim, rizičnim fazama poslovanja. Ovde se navodi i nedostatak onlajn rada od strane investitora i mentora sa startapima, kao i nedostatak na događajima koje organizuju zajednice mentora, jer ovde nemaju mogućnost individualnog savetovanja. Kada je u pitanju ono što im je neophodno, mnogi navode da je to upravo edukacija u različitim oblastima koje su potrebne, nezavisno od toga kojim se delatnostima bave startapi, kao što je na primer knjigovodstvo, pomoć u izvozu i uvozu robe, traženju drugih sredstava iz različitih programa podrške, ali i savetovanje iz oblasti finansija (23). Važno je napomenuti i da zajednice između inkubatora i startapa, kao i period pružanja pomoći ovim kompanijama, traju znatno duže nego što je to zajednica sa akceleratorima koji obično startapima pružaju pomoć prvih tri do šest meseci poslovanja. Najmanje je poznata zajednica sa tzv. „biznis anđelima“. Ovo je najnoviji način investiranja u regionu, jer su oni jedini koji ulažu u visoko rizične projekte. Obično ih startapi iz regiona nalaze u inostranstvu i tako ostvaruju povezanost sa njima i zajednicu (17). Pored saveta, iskustva, poznanstava, mogućeg spajanja, na ovim događajima dolazi do motivisanja. Ovde se može čak i formirati tim (25). Kako se nazivaju „preduzetnici znanja“, važno je istaći da se ove kompanije više fokusiraju na umrežavanje nego što to čine tradicionalne kompanije (5). Ovde se ne sme zanemariti komunikacija sa kupcima, koja je neophodna kada su startapi u pitanju, jer kupci cene kada se njihove potrebe i želje ispituju (17). Zapravo, zajednica je ta koja pruža podršku za organizovanje događaja, radionica, programa i obuke (10). Kada je u pitanju samo organizovanje događaja, kako su ove zajednice neprofitne, važno je naglasiti da pored sponzorstava na ovim događajima, organizatori istih imaju i dodatne prihode, kao što su nadoknada usluge, zatim paketi koje dobijaju od dobavljača i mesta održavanja. Pored finansijske koristi, najvažnija korist na ovim događajima je što dolazi do saradnje i partnerstva (13). Svakako da je prisustvo na događajima koje organizuje izabrana zajednica najbolji pokazatelj startapima da li se uklapaju tu, ali i kakva je kultura zajednice, osećaj koji kao tim članovi međusobno imaju i sami članovi (22). U poslednje vreme se pojavio novi oblik zajednice i pružanja pomoći startapima, tzv. *coworking*, koji ima za cilj da umreži i poveže startape koji su već u poslovanju i one koji tek ulaze u svet startapa i pokreću isti (23).

Pogodnosti za startape su: finansijska pomoć koju im obezbeđuje zajednica, ne moraju tražiti investitore (posebno privlače startape na samom početku poslovanja), kompanije koje su članice mogu videti startape kao poslovne saradnike na duže staze, skalabilna baza podataka o kupcima, već izgrađeni kanali prodaje koji su prihvaćeni na tržištu. Ovakva infrastruktura će pre privući kupce nego kanali koje sam startap kreira (12). Svaka kompanija koja duže posluje na tržištu zna da se izgradnjom jake zajednice povećava

marketinški budžet, pruža veća vrednost kupcima, ali i uspostavlja dobra pozicija na tržištu (11). Ono što startapi u zajednicama izdvajaju kao pogodnosti jeste i pristupačnost cene, zajednički ambijent, zajednica članova, programi i predavanja, pristup globalnoj mreži i upoznavanje, *coworking* prostorije i lokacije. Ovde se navodi i nedostatak takmičarskih programa za startape, ali i tematski programi i edukacije, na osnovu kojih bi ove kompanije znale na koju fazu razvoja se odnosi predavanje, ali i edukacija o različitim načinima finansiranja (23).

Uključivanje i angažovanje startap tima unutar zajednice

Formiranje zajednice obuhvata i formiranje tima i njegovo angažovanje u zajednici. Uključivanje u lokalnu zajednicu je veoma važno za poslovanje i razvoj startapa. Bilo da je reč o fizičkim ili onlajn zajednicama i umrežavanju u iste, one doprinose vidljivosti i prepoznatljivosti novoformiranih organizacija da se za njih čuje i pre početka njihovog poslovanja (2). Startap zajednice u svom poslovanju za umrežene startape koriste termin „ekosistem“; on se odnosi na mrežu ljudi, institucija, resursa koji su neophodni kako bi se formirao startap sistem. U ovaj ekosistem se uključuju različiti tipovi preduzetnika, drugi startapi, institucije koje otvaraju finansijske fondove za startape, privatne institucije, ali i već poznate javnosti, velike kompanije koje stvaraju startapima infrastrukturu i univerzitete (21). Najvažnije je da se odluče za zajednicu i ideju koja odgovara njihovim željama i planovima. Potrebno je da startapi razmišljaju o finansijama, ali i skupu svih odlika zajednice koje utiču na njenu produktivnost i poslovanje (17). Na samom početku, kada su zajednice sa mentorima u pitanju, važno je naglasiti da su ovi programi podrške (najčešće zajednice startapa i inkubatora) namenjeni početnom periodu razvoja startapa i pružanju pomoći u tom periodu. Ova pomoć se u početku obično ogleda u pružanju poslovnog prostora. U okviru ove zajednice, na startape koji su u zajednici sa inkubatorima gleda se kao na snalažljive, one koji mogu da reše probleme, komuniciraju i obrate se stručnjacima sa iskustvom za pomoć (23). Učesnici i investitori koji u okviru zajednica pružaju pomoć startapima su: akceleratori, investicioni fondovi, inkubatori, finansijske organizacije, drugi startapi, stejkholderi i potrošači (14). Ovde se navodi značaj društvenih mreža kada je uključivanje startapa u pitanju, na ovaj način se one promovišu, predstavljaju drugima, međusobno komuniciraju i jedni drugima pomažu u dobijanju publike (20). Na ovaj način se stvaraju i dublje veze sa kupcima, odnosno bazom potencijalnih kupaca, samim tim i privlače se kupci ostalih članova zajednice, kojima se na samom početku stvara osećaj pripadnosti i povezanosti sa tek osnovanom organizacijom (6). Uključivanjem se stvara osećaj jedinstvenosti kod članova, ali i timskog rada; samim tim tek formirane kompanije dobijaju priliku da budu deo zajednice i pomognu u izgradnji osećaja pripadnosti (2). Važno je napomenuti i umrežavanje i saradnju sa jačim brendovima na tržištu, zahvaljujući kojoj dolazi do prepoznatljivosti tek formiranih kompanija široj javnosti. Brend im pomaže da se stvori osećaj poverenja kod kupaca, koji je kompanija sa kojom startap posluje već izgradila (20). Kako se na samom početku uključivanjem u zajednicu

stvara osećaj ličnosti, diferenciranja u odnosu na konkurenciju, kod kupaca se javlja osećaj većeg poverenja u ovakve kompanije. Ovo utiče i na moral koji se stvara kod zaposlenih, njihovo raspoloženje i atmosferu prilikom rada, koja je mnogo privlačnija saradnicima i kupcima (2). Važno je napomenuti i sve veći broj programa podrške sa kojima saraduju startapi; kako se ovi programi otvaraju u poslednjih nekoliko godina sve češće, sve više startapa se odlučuje za angažovanje u okviru istih (20). Takođe, jedna od odličnih metoda prilikom pružanja „pomoći” zajednici (materijalna, novčana, podrška) jeste ispitivanje stavova ostalih učesnika tj. članova zajednice. Zapravo se ta ispitivanja odnose na istraživanje šta bi bilo dobro ili očekivano uraditi, pogotovo za organizaciju koja se tek priključuje već postojećoj zajednici. Takođe, ispitivanje stavova kupaca, tj. potencijalnih kupaca je odlična metoda privlačenja istih i stvaranja osećaja pripadnosti (15). Međutim, kao problem se navodi i pružanje savetodavne pomoći startapima od strane inkubatora i investitora, ali ne i finansijske podrške. Ovi autori navode i to da, zahvaljujući promociji i pisanju u medijima o inkubatorima i programima sufinansiranja, sve veći broj mladih se odlučuje da osnuje svoju startap kompaniju, te konkuriše za dobijanje sredstava u okviru ovih programa (23).

Doniranje, odnosno ulaganje na neki način u zajednicu je takođe oblik poslovanja koji stvara lepšu sliku o startapu. Ova preduzeća „vode svojim primerom”. Dobar primer iz prakse za to ima kompanija „Dell” koja donacijama pomaže pogođenima u nesrećnim okolnostima (2). Benefiti prilikom izgradnje i učestvovanja u zajednicama svakako da jesu povećanje marketinškog budžeta, ojačavanje istraživanja tržišta i pružanje veće vrednosti klijentima, tj. potencijalnim kupcima. Važno je spojiti se, odnosno priključiti se zajednici koja ima iste ciljeve kao i kompanija čiji članovi tragaju za istim vrednostima kao i novoformirane organizacije. U tom slučaju nastaju timovi koji su međusobno povezani, zavisni i veoma uspešni (11). Takođe, ono što se navodi kao glavni problem za sve startape na samom početku njihovog razvoja, a koje sa iskusnim, drugim zajednicama startapa rešavaju i saznavaju, jesu: administrativni problemi, finansijski problemi, početni kapital za ulaganje u izgradnju startapa, zatim nalaženje radnog prostora, stručnog kadra, mentora i savetnika, pravna nepismenost i nepoznavanje regulativa, ali i nedostatak znanja kako poslovati i pronaći investitore (23).

ISTRAŽIVANJE ULOGE I ZNAČAJA ZAJEDNICA U RAZVOJU STARTAPA

Istraživanje je sprovedeno u obliku intervjua sa startapima na teritoriji Srbije. U istraživanju je učestvovalo 11 startapa. Reč je o kvalitativnom istraživanju i primarnim izvorima podataka dobijenih putem sprovođenja uživo/onlajn intervjua sa vlasnicima kompanija ili zaposlenima u zajednici. Reč je o poluotvorenom obliku intervjua. Intervjuisani su i startapi koji imaju sopstvenu zajednicu, ali i oni koji su deo neke druge, već formirane zajednice. Primarni cilj ovog istraživanja jeste zaključiti na osnovu kojih kriterijuma se intervjuisani startapi mogu podeliti. Intervjuisanima je postavljeno jedanaest pitanja, koja se mogu

podeliti u tri grupe. Prva grupa se odnosila na razumevanje šta su startap zajednice, kako se formiraju i iz kog razloga. Druga grupa pitanja bila je u vezi sa prikupljanjem informacija o tome koje zajednice se javljaju u samom startapu a koje u ekosistemu i koja je njihova razlika, dok je treća grupa pitanja bila u vezi sa saznanjem koje pogodnosti startap ima od njih.

Opis uzorka

Istraživanje je sprovedeno u periodu od januara do marta 2023. godine. U ovom istraživanju uzorak je 11 startap kompanija, sa kojima su sprovedeni intervjui – deset onlajn intervjua i jedan je sproveden uživo. Intervjuisani su pretežno osnivači kompanija, ali u pojedinim, redim situacijama, i predstavnici zajednica u okviru ovih kompanija.

Većina intervjuisanih startapa pripadaju nekom sektoru IT industrije, od kojih su dve kompanije za računarsko programiranje, tri za softversko programiranje i po jedna za: *networking*, „blok čein“, *call centar*, unapređenje procesa istraživanja na vebu i kolaboracije koja se odvija oko njega, prodaja i proizvodnja proizvoda (naočara za vid), onlajn šahovski turniri. U daljem radu, u sledećem poglavlju koje opisuje zapažanja iz intervjua, ove kompanije i prikaz dobijenih odgovora biće predstavljen na sledeći način: Startap 1, 2, 3...11. Objašnjenje na koji se startap odnose ove oznake je sledeće:

Startap 1: bavi se *networking*-om,

Startap 2: „blok čein“ zajednica,

Startap 3: *call centar*,

Startap 4: računarsko programiranje,

Startap 5: računarsko programiranje,

Startap 6: softverska kompanija,

Startap 7: softverska kompanija,

Startap 8: bave se unapređivanjem procesa na vebu i kolaboracije koja se odvija oko njega,

Startap 9: softverska kompanija u oblasti hotelijerstva,

Startap 10: proizvodnja i prodaja naočara za vid,

Startap 11: organizovanje onlajn šahovskih turnira i igri.

Rezultati istraživanja

U zavisnosti od vremenskog perioda kada su ušle u zajednicu, sektora industrije u kojima posluju, tržišta na kome plasiraju proizvod, ove kompanije su podeljene u mišljenju o zajednici. Zbog toga je, radi lakšeg razumevanja razloga za iznete stavove predstavnika kompanija, lakše objasniti kriterijume koji su direktno uticali na razlike u njihovom mišljenju. Iz njihovih odgovora zaključeno je da su kriterijumi sledeći:

1. Industrija kojom se startapi bave – Više od polovine ispitanika se izjasnilo da posluje u IT industriji (uglavnom softverske kompanije); tačnije, 70% ispitanih startapa se bave IT industrijom.

2. Skoro polovina ispitanih je deo neke druge zajednice (72,7%), dok druga polovina ima i/ili svoju zajednicu (45,5%). Takođe 50% onih koji imaju svoju zajednicu, učestvovali su, deo su/bili su i deo druge zajednice.
3. Tržište na kome posluju – Gotovo većina posluje ili ima namere i tendencije da svoje poslovanje proširi i na inostrano tržište (72,7% ispitanih).
4. Startap ekosistem Srbije – Više od 80% intervjuisanih je deo ovog ekosistema, dok predstavnici dva startapa nisu znali da u Srbiji ovo postoji.
5. Zadovoljstvo poslovanjem ekosistema na teritoriji naše države (R. Srbije) – Više od polovine ispitanih je konstatovalo da su u okviru ekosistema startapi sada dobro povezani (72,7%), iako je do pre par godina (5–10) ovaj pojam bio stran na domaćem tržištu (pojam zajednice, ali i startapa).
6. Sve manji regionalni jaz na teritoriji naše zemlje u pogledu razvoja startap kompanija i njihovih zajednica, sve bolja povezanost, dostupnost, mogućnost i ekonomski razvoj južnog dela Srbije.

Većina intervjuisanih od samog početka (mnogi i pre osnivanja, 18% ispitanih) imaju svoju zajednicu/deo su nje, tačnije 63,6% ispitanika (na početku poslovanja većina ulazi u zajednicu akcelatora). Oni koji su kasnije postali deo zajednice ističu da je ovo mana, te navode kako bi im sa pravne i administrativne strane značilo da su bili deo iste i pre osnivanja startapa. Većina učesnika u uzorku navodi da su usmereni na korist koju imaju od zajednice i dodaju da su prisustvovali događajima u trenucima traganja za rešavanjem problema, najčešće administrativnih, a kasnije i poslovnih – tačno 90% ispitanika ovo navodi. Mnogi ističu da su iznenađeni nesebičnim informacijama i deljenjem iskustava prisutnih (pretežno misle na okupljene u okviru programa akcelatora gde učestvuje većina mladih startapa Srbije). Većina intervjuisanih smatra da je više programa usmereno na mlade startape, a manji deo učesnika u uzorku ovo navodi kao razlog zašto više ne posećuje tako često ove događaje (27% ispitanika). Zapaženo je i da su u toku obrazloženja i opisa intervjuja intervjuisani koji imaju sopstvene zajednice bili iznenađeni šta sve obuhvata ovaj termin, odnosno na koje vrste zajednice se odnosi. Većina njih mentore nije smatrala zajednicom (90% učesnika). Dok se svi startapi okupljaju sa mentorima, mali broj intervjuisanih stejkholdere svrstava u zajednicu, odnosno priča o načinu na koji dolaze do povratne reakcije od njih (18%). Definitivno je mišljenje kupaca i mentora (od svih navedenih podgrupa zajednica) presudno za startape (100% ispitanih je dalo ovaj odgovor).

Komparativni prikaz analiziranih startapa

Komparativni prikaz analiziranih startapa obuhvata najkarakterističnija pitanja i odgovore koji su značajni za razumevanja razlika među ispitanim startapima, na osnovu kojih su i postavljeni kriterijumi u tabeli.

Posmatrajući podatke prikazane u tabeli dolazi se do osnovne razlike između startapa, a to je da li imaju sopstvenu zajednicu (45,5% ispitanih startapa) ili su deo druge zajednice

(73%). Pretežno su odmah osnovale zajednicu one kompanije koje imaju sopstvenu i one čiji su osnivači već imali iskustva u startapu (63,5%), pa su odmah postali deo druge zajednice. Kompanije koje su delimično zadovoljne su one koje su u prethodno prikazanim odgovorima iznele mišljenje da ove zajednice nekada nadmaše očekivanja, a nekad razočaraju (27% ispitanih startapa je ovako odgovorilo). Delimično zajednica utiče na poslovanje za one koji su delimično i zadovoljni njenim funkcionisanjem (27% takođe). Kada je reč o učestvovanju tima ili jedne osobe u organizovanju ili prisustvovanju događajima koje organizuje zajednica, one kompanije koje imaju svoje zajednice uključuju čitav tim (54,5%), osim manjih koje su na početku razvoja i to su još uvek osnivači. Ostali intervjuisani iskazuju da je to obično jedna osoba (45,5%), osim kada zbog teme postoji potreba da prisustvuje i stručnjak iz startapa koji radi u oblasti na koju se tema odnosi. Razlika je i kada su pitanju onlajn i uživo događaji, te su se zbog načina poslovanja (onlajn) i lokacija kompanije odlučile za onlajn formu (18%), dok su ostali deo drugih zajednica radi komunikacije sa učesnicima, gde je uživo događaj u prednosti (63,6%), a 18% ispitanih je zbog prostorne prednosti onlajn komunikacije i prednosti komuniciranja uživo izabrao oba.

Tabela 1 Kategorije zasnovane na razlikama između startap zajednica.

Intervjuisani startapi	Sopstvena/ deo druge zajednice	Odmah formirali / kasnije ušli u zajednicu	Zadovoljni zajednicom / delimično zadovoljni zajednicom	Zajednica ima uticaja na poslovanje	Prisustvuje događajima / organizuje ih jedna osoba ili tim	Uživo / onlajn događaj
Startap 1	deo	kasnije	da	da	tim	onlajn
Startap 2	sopstvena	odmah	da	ne	tim	oba
Startap 3	deo	kasnije	da	delimično	1 osoba	uživo
Startap 4	deo	odmah	da	da	1- 2 osobe	uživo
Startap 5	deo	kasnije	da	da	tim	uživo
Startap 6	sopstvena	before	da	da	tim	uživo
Startap 7	deo	Immediately	delimično	delimično	1-2 osobe	oba
Startap 8	deo	immediately	da	da	tim	uživo
Startap 9	deo	I pre	delimično	delimično	1-2 osobe	uživo
Startap 10	deo	odmah	delimično	da	tim	uživo
Startap 11	sopstvena	I pre	da	da	1-2 osobe	Onlajn
Ukupno u %	45.5% sopstvena	63.5% odmah i pre	72% zadovoljnih	63.6% ima uticaja	54.5% tim	73% uživo

ZAKLJUČAK

Analizom i sprovođenjem intervjua izvodi se zaključak da su autori, navedeni u radu, značaj zajednice opisali na način na koji su ih predstavnici startapa formirali. Značaj zajednice je postao vidljiv u kratkom roku na našem tržištu, te je ona postala neizostavan segment i grupa u poslovanju startapa. Rezultati istraživanja su zasnovani na malom uzorku, te ih je potrebno tumačiti uz značajan oprez.

Kada je reč o odgovorima na pitanja, bili su podeljeni između onih koji imaju svoje zajednice ili/i pripadaju mnogim zajednicama (među kojima je većina sa akceleratorima u zajednici). Iznenaduje mišljenje intervjuisanih da su u Srbiji zajednice dobro povezane i formirane. Zahvaljujući poređenju severnog i južnog regiona zemlje, dobijene su informacije da je razlika u razvijenosti ova dva regiona minimalna, gde su se intervjuisani složili da je jedino istočni deo zemlje onaj koji zaostaje. Analizom odgovora, može se zaključiti da su ove zajednice ključni faktor za razvoj poslovanja, povezivanja i funkcionisanja startap kompanija. Izvodi se mišljenje da, iako su ove zajednice neprofitne, većina ih smatra značajnim i okuplja se sa njima radi povezivanja sa drugima, sticanja novih kontakata, te ne čudi činjenica da je intervjuisanim uživo okupljanje u prednosti u odnosu na onlajn sastanke. Formiranje zajednice je mnogima, zahvaljujući prethodnom iskustvu i radu, bilo lakše, dok su drugi teško dolazili do podataka, čak i do ulaska u postojeće zajednice. Oni koji nisu na samom početku bili deo nje, to bi sada promenili, jer je u fazi razvoja njen značaj najveći. U intervjuu je takođe bilo reči o inostranim tržištima i zajednicama, te se tendencija za izlazak na međunarodno tržište uočava kod startapa, a intervjuisani se slažu u tome da je prisustvo u inostranim zajednicama dragoceno iskustvo, te će se u budućim istraživanjima ova tema sigurno ispitivati. Mišljenje intervjuisanih je da bi ovakve događaje trebalo da organizuje startap ekosistem Srbije. Učesnici u uzorku smatraju da je ekosistem u poslednjih pet godina poboljšao poslovanje, ali da bi trebalo bolje utvrditi teme događaja, tj. tačno definisati koja faza razvoja startapa će biti predstavljena na događaju. Kako navode, zbog nerazumevanja koja je faza u pitanju, nekad na događajima shvate da su određenu temu već prošli. Takođe, pored činjenice da su pojedini intervjuisani navodili LinkedIn kao društvenu platformu ne samo za pretragu potencijalnih zaposlenih i saradnika, već i za pretragu zajednica, komunikaciju sa kupcima i mentorima, ova društvena mreža je bila glavno sredstvo komuniciranja i nalaženja startapa u Srbiji koji su navedeni u radu i intervjuisani.

Iako su obostrane koristi neminovne, startapi pomažu jedni drugima i kad nemaju sopstvenu korist. Nakon dobijanja pomoći dugo osećaju zahvalnost prema zajednici. Kod ispitanih je uočen i osećaj pripadanja, odnosno da su deo neke zajednice, te se kasnije pored racionalnih odluka donošenih na samom ulasku u zajednicu, vremenom javlja i emocionalna povezanost sa članovima. Oni koji na samom početku nisu osnivači i deo iste, kasnije ostaju u njoj kako bi u znaku zahvalnosti pomogli mladim startapima da nauče na njihovim greškama. Ovo su zajednice u kojima se prisutni ne gledaju međusobno kao konkurencija. Značaj pravilnog komuniciranja dolazi do izražaja i u odnosima sa startapima, mentorima, saradnicima, kupcima i drugim startapima, te je učestvovanje u zajednici još jedan način vežbanja pravilne komunikacije i učenja kako je najbolje sprovoditi.

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Researching the Potential for the Development and Activation of Communities in the Positioning of Startups

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

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Summary: *Startups are a new way of doing business emerging in modern society. One of the most important characteristics of these companies is the almost mandatory formation of their own communities. Based on the types of communities that will be studied, concrete examples will illustrate how certain startup cases operated, attracted potential environments, and markets. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the understanding and presentation of community operations and the consequences and advantages that exist thanks to them.*

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INTRODUCTION

In modern business, companies' products and services are based on increasing levels of innovation to differentiate themselves from others in the market. However, as modern society has evolved, so have business practices. Companies newly entering the market aim to operate as quickly as possible and strive for growth. The general definition of a startup is: "A startup is a temporary organization in search of a scalable, repeatable, profitable business model" (3). Startup companies are built on numerous communication relationships, both internal and external, with stakeholders and the environment they create. To accelerate their progress, these companies have started building communities that enable easier communication, access to necessary business information, and engagement of organization participants to contribute directly to the organization itself. The experience, advice, and information they can gather about companies within the community that operate or have operated similarly are crucial for startups, as these small companies are new to the market, typically without prior experience, and aim for rapid growth within the shortest possible time.

The formation of startup communities is a complex process preceded by defining the startup company's business, the type of startup, the stage it is in and will go through, business methods for each stage, market research, customer needs for a specific product, and determining goals, mission, vision, target groups, stakeholders, networking, communication channels, and the types of communities to engage with specific customer groups to which the startup wishes to present its product and with whom it seeks to build communities. These can primarily be communities based on physical space but also online communities, which are gaining increasing importance and application. Various factors influence startups when selecting key customers, target groups, etc. In addition to demographic and geographic factors, there are psychological effects as well. Only after identifying potential members do startups define their goals. It is challenging to define common goals that are important to all members; therefore, startups either strive to attract a broader audience and adapt to market needs or focus on additional efforts to nurture their existing, established community. Certainly, after exploring and establishing market opportunities, a startup launches its idea and develops its business. Due to the lack of experience with startup business models, engaging with and participating in communities is extremely important for newly established companies. The communication methods, business strategies, advantages, and opportunities startups possess are immensely significant; however, it is necessary to align communication strategies at every stage. Startups are initially in the phase of deciding how they will present themselves. Among numerous decisions, one of the most critical is geographic or spatial. Will the community be created in person or online, and how will attention be attracted? Naturally, these considerations come only after members and goals are defined. Innovation is crucial even before entering the market; startups must consider during the idea stage that many companies operate within the same industry. From the startup ecosystem, the

surrounding environment, and the external factors influencing it as a community, the sense of belonging is exceptionally difficult to build. Startups create these communities at the very beginning to raise awareness about themselves during the idea stage and to evoke an emotional connection with their brand among potential customers.

THEORETICAL DEFINITION OF STARTUP COMMUNITIES

In today's world, organizers and entire teams within organizations consider communities essential for the development of startups to secure a leading position over other participants (19). One of the main challenges startups face at the beginning is how to transform their knowledge and ideas into financial success; communities play a crucial role in this process (17). From the initial phase of development, startups often engage mentors, which has become a standard practice. During this phase, teams are still being formed, followed by the creation of prototypes, taking actions, and joining a community (16). It is best to view a startup community objectively while being an active participant in it (7). Before forming and deciding on the startup community, it is necessary to define a goal that will engage the target group and resonate with all members. After this, a leader is appointed for the network, ensuring every member feels equally valued (18). Research shows that most community members find the community highly beneficial for education and solving numerous business-related problems, particularly the lack of entrepreneurial knowledge and education during the early stages of development (23). Despite individual differences, anyone interested in joining the community and engaging in the business must be welcomed and supported by its leaders. Access to a community is possible even without capital (18). The Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) is a strategic tool used in building community wealth (8). Startup communities are best understood when observed within the context of ecosystems. An ecosystem represents a cluster of startups and collaborators that utilize shared resources and operate within a region. The startup ecosystem in Serbia is growing, with the number of startups joining the ecosystem increasing by 20–30% annually on average (20).

Depending on the type of community being developed, startups find potential members either online or in person at events. Once members are gathered, the founder establishes an organization or club that includes all members. For online communities, this might involve creating groups on platforms like Meetup or Facebook. (22). Community building and engagement require a series of decisions based on their impact on both the business and its members. Common platforms and tools include Facebook groups, podcasts, Circle.co, Revue, Twitter, Discord, Typeform, and VideoAsk (19). Authors (9) note that Instagram has become a communication and marketing tool during the early stages of startup development. However, there are downsides to this type of community, such as the lack of physical contact and face-to-face communication (24). It is stated that "online communities" are more interest-driven and less socially significant (4). An initial

organized meeting can greatly aid in forming a community, but regular meetings and events are necessary for its sustainability (22). Technology parks occasionally organize events showcasing investment programs (incubators, accelerators, and other investors) and connect entrepreneurs with startup ideas. These institutions support startups by linking them with other startup companies, communities, and mentors, emphasizing shared business goals and similar activities (17). In the early stages of startup development, just a few years ago, there was little collaboration among startup actors. However, the situation has recently improved, with more initiatives and community support for startups. These gatherings are often informal, beginning among friends, family, and acquaintances. More formal communication occurs between startups, accelerators, incubators, and investors (9). A significant issue noted by many is that these communities focus on helping startups in their early stages but not in later, riskier phases of business. Additionally, there is a lack of online engagement by investors and mentors with startups, as well as a shortage of opportunities for individual mentoring at events organized by mentor communities. Regarding their needs, startups often emphasize the importance of education in various areas, regardless of their specific industries. This includes bookkeeping, export and import assistance, finding additional funding from various support programs, and financial consulting (23). It is also worth noting that the relationship between incubators and startups, as well as the support period for these companies, tends to last much longer compared to accelerators, which typically provide assistance for the first three to six months of a startup's operations. The least familiar community type involves so-called "business angels." This is the newest investment approach in the region, as they are the only ones investing in high-risk projects. Startups in the region usually connect with these investors internationally, building relationships and communities (17). In addition to advice, experience, networking, and potential collaborations, these events serve as sources of motivation and even team formation (25). As "knowledge entrepreneurs," startups focus more on networking than traditional companies do (5). Communication with customers must not be neglected, as it is crucial for startups. Customers value when their needs and desires are explored (17). Communities play a role in supporting the organization of events, workshops, programs, and training (10). When it comes to organizing events, since these communities are nonprofit, it is important to highlight that besides sponsorships, organizers also generate additional income from service fees, supplier packages, and venue contributions. Beyond financial benefits, the most important outcome of these events is collaboration and partnership (13). Attending events organized by a chosen community is the best way for startups to determine if they fit in, assess the community's culture, and understand team dynamics among members (22). Recently, a new form of community support for startups has emerged, known as coworking, aimed at connecting established startups with those just entering the startup ecosystem (23).

The benefits for startups include financial support provided by the community, eliminating the need to seek out investors. Communities are particularly attractive to startups in the early stages of business. Member companies can see startups as long-term business

partners, while providing access to a scalable customer database and established sales channels already accepted in the market. This infrastructure is more likely to attract customers than channels created independently by the startup (12). Companies with longer market presence understand that building a strong community enhances marketing budgets, provides greater value to customers, and secures a favorable market position (11). Startups within communities highlight advantages such as affordability, a collaborative environment, member networks, programs and lectures, access to global networks, and coworking spaces and locations. It also highlights the lack of competitive programs for startups, as well as thematic programs and training that would help these companies identify which stage of development the lecture addresses, along with education on various funding methods (23).

Inclusion and Engagement of Startup Teams Within the Community

The formation of a community involves building a team and engaging it within the community. Integrating into the local community is crucial for the operations and development of a startup. Whether physical or online, such communities and networking efforts enhance the visibility and recognition of newly established organizations, often even before they officially begin operations (2). Startup communities often use the term "ecosystem" to describe the network of people, institutions, and resources essential for forming a startup system. This ecosystem includes various types of entrepreneurs, other startups, institutions providing financial funds for startups, private organizations, well-known companies that offer infrastructure, and universities (21). Choosing a community and an idea aligned with their goals and plans is essential for startups. They must consider financial aspects and the collective attributes of the community that influence its productivity and operations (17). At the early stages, particularly with mentor-based communities, it's important to note that these support programs (commonly startup and incubator communities) focus on the initial stages of startup development, providing assistance during this period. This support often begins with offering office space. Startups within incubator communities are seen as resourceful entities capable of solving problems, communicating effectively, and seeking help from experienced professionals (23). Participants and investors who provide assistance to startups within communities include accelerators, venture capital funds, incubators, financial organizations, other startups, stakeholders, and consumers (14). Social networks play a significant role in integrating startups, enabling them to promote themselves, connect with others, and help one another gain an audience (20). This process also fosters deeper relationships with customers and builds a base of potential customers. As a result, startups attract the clients of other community members, creating a sense of belonging and connection to the newly established organization from the outset (6). Inclusion fosters a sense of uniqueness and teamwork among members, offering newly formed companies the opportunity to contribute to building a sense of belonging (2). Networking and collaborating with

established brands in the market are also significant. Such partnerships enhance the visibility of newly formed companies to a broader audience. Collaborating with a trusted brand helps create a sense of trust among customers, leveraging the reputation the brand has already built (20). By joining a community, startups establish a sense of identity and differentiation from competitors, which builds greater trust among customers. This also positively impacts employee morale, creating an appealing work atmosphere for collaborators and customers alike (2). The increasing number of support programs collaborating with startups is noteworthy. As these programs have become more frequent in recent years, a growing number of startups are engaging with them (20). One effective way for startups to "give back" to the community—whether through material, financial, or other support—is by surveying the opinions of community members. These surveys explore what actions would be beneficial or expected, particularly for organizations newly joining an existing community. Similarly, gathering feedback from customers or potential customers is an excellent method for attracting them and fostering a sense of belonging (15). However, a challenge remains the lack of financial support from incubators and investors, which often only provide advisory assistance to startups. It is also noted that media coverage and promotion of incubators and co-funding programs have encouraged a growing number of young people to start their own startup companies and apply for funding through these programs (23).

Donating or contributing to the community is another form of business that positively reflects on the startup. Such companies "lead by example." A notable example is Dell, which supports those affected by adverse circumstances through donations (2). The benefits of building and participating in communities include increasing marketing budgets, strengthening market research, and delivering greater value to clients or potential customers. It is essential to connect with and join a community that shares the same goals as the company, where members seek values aligned with those of newly established organizations. In such cases, teams are formed that are interconnected, interdependent, and highly successful (11). Additionally, the main challenges cited for all startups at the beginning of their development—which they address and learn to overcome through collaboration with experienced startup communities—include administrative issues, financial difficulties, initial capital for building the startup, finding workspace, skilled personnel, mentors and advisors, legal illiteracy and lack of knowledge about regulations, as well as insufficient understanding of how to operate a business and attract investors (23).

RESEARCH ON THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITIES IN STARTUP DEVELOPMENT

The research was conducted through interviews with startups operating in Serbia. A total of 11 startups participated. This was a qualitative study using primary data collected through live/online interviews with company owners or community employees.

The interviews were semi-structured, including both startups with their own communities and those that are part of other, pre-established communities. The primary aim of this research was to identify the criteria by which the interviewed startups can be categorized. Participants were asked 11 questions divided into three groups. The first group focused on understanding what startup communities are, how they are formed, and for what purpose. The second group of questions aimed to gather information on the communities that emerge within the startup itself versus those within the ecosystem and their differences. The third group explored the benefits that startups gain from these communities.

Sample Description

The research was conducted from January to March 2023. The sample included 11 startup companies, with interviews conducted as part of the study. Ten interviews were held online, while one was conducted in person. Most interviewees were company founders, although in some less common cases, representatives of the communities within these companies were interviewed. The majority of the interviewed startups belong to the IT industry. These include two companies focused on computer programming, three on software development, and one each in the following areas: networking, blockchain, call center operations, web research process improvement and collaboration, the production and sale of vision correction glasses, and organizing online chess tournaments. In the following sections, which describe the observations from the interviews, these companies and their responses will be referred to as Startup 1, 2, 3...11. The designation of each startup corresponds to the following descriptions:

Startup 1: Networking

Startup 2: Blockchain community

Startup 3: Call center operations

Startup 4: Computer programming

Startup 5: Computer programming

Startup 6: Software development

Startup 7: Software development

Startup 8: Web process improvement and collaboration

Startup 9: Software for the hospitality industry

Startup 10: Production and sale of vision correction glasses

Startup 11: Organizing online chess tournaments and games

Research Results

Depending on the time they joined a community, the industry sector in which they operate, and the market where they offer their products, these companies were somewhat divided in their opinions about communities. To better understand the reasons for the

perspectives expressed by company representatives, it is helpful to explain the criteria that directly influenced these differences in opinion. Based on their responses, the criteria were as follows:

1. Industry in which startups operate: More than half of the respondents stated that they work in the IT industry (primarily software companies). Specifically, 70% of the startups surveyed are involved in the IT industry.
2. Community involvement: Almost half of the respondents are part of an existing community (72.7%), while the other half either have their own community (45.5%) or participate in both their own and another community (50% of those with their own community).
3. Market focus: A significant majority operate or intend to expand their business to international markets (72.7% of respondents).
4. Serbia's startup ecosystem: Over 80% of those interviewed are part of this ecosystem, although representatives of two startups were unaware of its existence in Serbia.
5. Satisfaction with the startup ecosystem in Serbia: More than half of the respondents observed that startups are now well-connected within the ecosystem (72.7%), even though, 5–10 years ago, this concept (of communities and startups) was unfamiliar in the domestic market.
6. Decreasing regional disparities: There is noticeable progress in reducing the regional gap within Serbia regarding the development of startup companies and their communities. Improved connectivity, accessibility, opportunities, and economic development, particularly in southern Serbia, have been highlighted.

The majority of interviewees have been part of a community (or had their own) from the very beginning, with many joining even before establishing their startups (18% of respondents). Specifically, 63.6% of respondents reported being part of a community. Most startups initially join an accelerator community at the beginning of their operations. Those who joined a community later viewed this as a disadvantage, noting that being part of a community earlier would have been beneficial for addressing legal and administrative issues. Most participants in the sample emphasized the benefits they gained from being part of a community. They also mentioned attending events during periods when they were seeking solutions to problems, which were primarily administrative at first and later business-related (90% of respondents reported this). Many respondents were pleasantly surprised by the generosity and willingness of others to share information and experiences, particularly those involved in accelerator programs that host a significant number of young Serbian startups. Most interviewees felt that these programs are predominantly aimed at young startups. A smaller portion of participants (27%) cited this focus as the reason they no longer attend such events frequently. It was also observed during the interviews that participants who had their own communities were often surprised by the broad scope of the term "community" and the various types it includes. A majority (90%) did not

initially consider mentors as part of a community. While all startups engage with mentors, only a small number of respondents classified stakeholders as part of their community or discussed how they gather feedback from them (18%). Ultimately, the feedback from customers and mentors (among all community subgroups mentioned) was identified as critical for startups, with 100% of respondents highlighting its importance.

Comparative Overview of Analyzed Startups

The comparative overview of analyzed startups includes the most characteristic questions and answers that are essential for understanding the differences among the surveyed startups. These differences serve as the basis for establishing the criteria presented in the table.

Table 1: Categories Based on Differences Between Startup Communities

Surveyed startups	Own / a part of another community	Immediately formed or joined existing one later	Satisfied / partially satisfied	Community impact on operation	Events / organized by one person or a team	In person / on line attendance
Startup 1	part	later	yes	yes	team	online
Startup 2	own	immediately	yes	no	team	both
Startup 3	Part	later	yes	partially	1 person	in person
Startup 4	part	immediately	yes	yes	1-2 persons	in person
Startup 5	part	later	yes	yes	team	in person
Startup 6	own	before	yes	yes	team	in person
Startup 7	Part	Immediately	partilly	partially	1-2 persons	both
Startup 8	Part	immediately	yes	yes	team	in person
Startup 9	Part	later	partially	partially	1-2 persons	in person
Startup 10	part	immediately	partially	yes	team	in person
Startup 11	own	before	yes	yes	1-2 persons	Online
Total in %	45.5% own	63.5% before or immediate	72% satisfied	63.6% with impact	54.5% teams	73% in person

Examining the data presented in the table highlights a key difference among startups: whether they have their own community (45.5% of surveyed startups) or are part of another community (73%). Companies with their own community were primarily those whose founders had prior startup experience (63.5%), enabling them to either immediately form a community or join an existing one. Startups partially satisfied with their community expressed mixed feelings, noting that while communities sometimes exceed expectations, they can also disappoint (27% of respondents shared this view). Similarly, 27% of respondents indicated that the community only partially impacts their operations and satisfaction with its functioning. Regarding team participation in organizing or attending community events, startups with their own communities often involve the entire team (54.5%), except for smaller companies still in the early stages of development, where founders handle these roles. For others, it is typically one individual (45.5%), unless the event topic necessitates the

attendance of a specialist from the startup. Differences were also observed in preferences for online versus in-person events. Due to their operational models (online) and company locations, 18% of startups opted for online formats. Others favored in-person events (63.6%) for better communication opportunities, while 18% selected both formats to combine the spatial advantages of online interaction with the benefits of in-person networking.

CONCLUSION

The analysis and conducted interviews conclude that the authors referenced in the study described the significance of communities in a way that reflects how startup representatives have formed them. The importance of communities became evident in a short period within the local market, making them an indispensable segment and group in the operation of startups. However, as the research is based on a small sample, its results should be interpreted with caution. Regarding the survey responses, they were divided between those startups that have their own communities and those belonging to multiple communities (most often including accelerators). It is surprising that respondents consider communities in Serbia to be well-connected and well-structured. A comparison between the northern and southern regions of the country revealed minimal developmental differences, with respondents agreeing that only the eastern region lags behind. Analyzing the responses, it can be concluded that these communities are a key factor for business development, networking, and the operation of startup companies. Despite being non-profit, most respondents regard these communities as highly significant and participate in them to connect with others and establish new contacts. Unsurprisingly, respondents prefer in-person gatherings over online meetings. For some, forming a community was easier due to prior experience and work, while others struggled to obtain even basic information to join existing communities. Those who were not part of a community initially expressed that they would change this in hindsight, as the community's importance is greatest during the development phase. The interviews also addressed international markets and communities, revealing a tendency among startups to expand to international markets. Respondents agreed that participation in foreign communities is a valuable experience, which should be explored in future research. They suggested that such events should be organized by the Serbian startup ecosystem. While respondents noted improvements in the ecosystem over the past five years, they recommended better defining event topics and specifying which development stages of startups would be addressed. They mentioned that misunderstandings about the intended stage of development occasionally led them to attend events that covered topics they had already moved past. Additionally, several respondents identified LinkedIn as a social platform not only for searching for potential employees and collaborators but also for discovering communities, communicating with customers, and finding mentors. This platform was a primary means of communication and locating startups in Serbia, which were then interviewed and featured in the study.

Although mutual benefits are inevitable, startups often help each other without expecting direct personal gain. After receiving help, many respondents expressed a lasting sense of gratitude toward their community. A sense of belonging was also observed, as joining a community initially stemmed from rational decisions but often evolved into emotional connections with its members. Those who were not founders or part of a community from the start often remained involved later to help young startups learn from their mistakes, as a gesture of gratitude. These communities foster an environment where members do not view one another as competitors. The importance of proper communication is evident in relationships with startups, mentors, collaborators, customers, and other startups, making community participation another avenue for practicing effective communication and learning how to implement it optimally.

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