

UNITING EAST BOSTON FOR POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY: STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

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Following a conversation with Mr. Alvaro Lima, the Director of Research for the Boston Planning and Development Agency at the City of Boston, Julia Ivy, a strategy professor and author of the concept of *boutique employability*, began to think about projects that might bring together three entities that lie close to her heart to deal with the challenges raised by market disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic: (a) the small businesses for whom she did research and strategy consulting; (b) educated Millennials with whom she regularly connected in her work as a professor; and (c) the government and leadership of East Boston, the neighborhood she called home.

Dr. Ivy's knew that these three groups needed each other. Local small businesses had been hit hardest by COVID-19; they desperately needed help to deal with their challenges to become the post-COVID market. Millennials, the most educated and proactive (but least employed) generation sought more ways to connect with their community, make their voices heard and, hopefully, invest in their employability. East Boston, with its long history and a strong Latino community, dealt with gentrification and needed to bridge the Latino community's 'old timers' and educated Millennials as newcomers, and to find ways for both new arrivals and established high-income earners to succeed in the post-pandemic.

Dr. Ivy had previously developed the **BE-EDGE** method that allowed the parties to synchronize at several levels, and she thought that BE-EDGE might help East Boston as well. Mr. Lima loved the idea. The question was about the ways to transform the idea into a product that would serve the purpose and satisfy the needs of stakeholders.

The pressure was on. Every day, more and more businesses were realizing that the “*good old times*” were gone. Severely hit by COVID-19, East Boston urgently needed an injection of positive change as more businesses went under water and more Millennials filed for unemployment.

The City of Boston’s Small Business Development department was looking for proposals that would have the most significant potential impact. Mr. Lima connected Dr. Ivy with the New Urban Mechanics Department of the City of Boston Mayor’s Office, and Laura Ballek Cole of New Urban Mechanics said that she was on board. Two volunteer master students, both Boston residents, joined the team, driven with a passion to make an impact (see Exhibit 1). Everybody was ready to start. Everybody waited for specifics of the project design. The momentum to make a difference was there, with no time for a wrong move.

Exhibit 1. The Team

	Dr. Julia Ivy , Executive Professor, Northeastern University. Founder, BE-EDGE Strategy, resident of East Boston		Laura Ballek Cole , Program Director, City of Boston Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, resident of East Boston
	Dana Bogatko , Student, MS in Project Management, Volunteer, resident of East Boston		Emily Murphy , Student, Master of Business Administration, Volunteer, resident of South Boston

Small Businesses and COVID-19

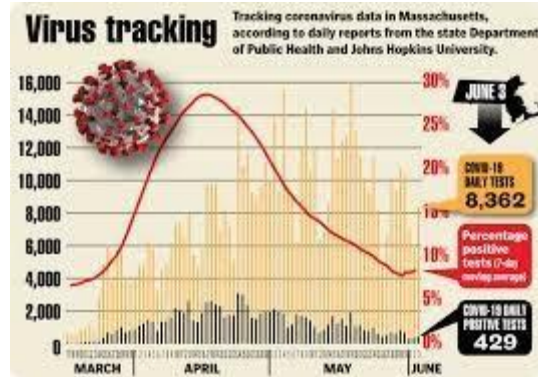
Besides being a deadly disease that by June 6, 2020 had infected 103,132 and caused the death of 7,289 people in Massachusetts (Mass.gov 2020), COVID-19 had incited the worst economic slump since the Great Depression (Georgieva 2020). In April 2020, retail sales declined by 8.7%, the most significant monthly drop since the government began tracking the data (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Manufacturing output experienced its worst decline since the 1940s (Board 2021).

Boston's business community came to a standstill when the state issued a shelter-in-place order in March 2020 (see Exhibit 2). On April 14, 2020, Boston Mayor Martin Walsh said, *"When we feel the surge is past us, we will start to continue to go forward... We are going to be working with businesses when that time comes"* (Fortier 2020). In response, The National Federation of Independent Businesses said, *"Time is running out quickly for small businesses."* To cite just one example, Wormtown Brewery lost 70% of its customer base, according to sales manager David Fields (Palumbo 2020).

Exhibit 2. COVID 19 in Numbers

COVID in MA: March 3-June 3 Dynamic

Source: (Cohan, 2020)



COVID by Boston's Neighborhoods

Source: Lynds, 2020



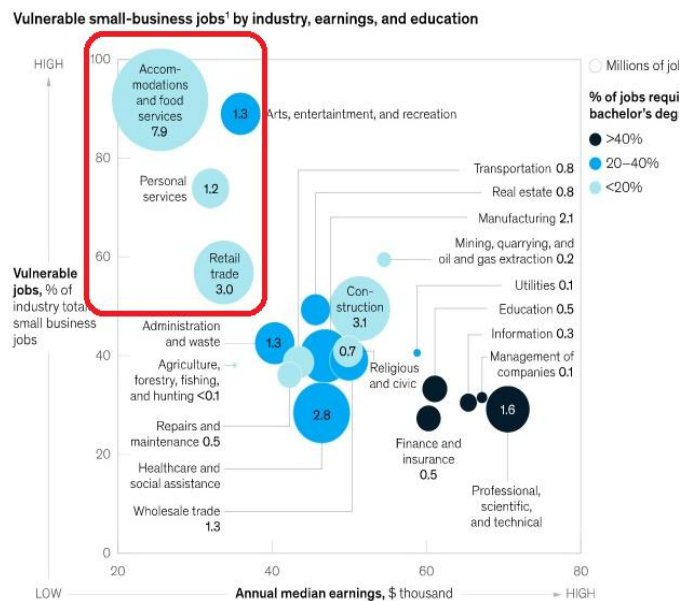
Impact on Boston's Small Businesses

Source: (Curran, 2020)



Vulnerability of Small Businesses, by Industry

Source: (Dua et al, 2020)



Jon Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts, anticipated that most of the group's 4,000 businesses would continue to struggle, considering the current rule capping grocery stores at 40% of their usual capacity. Boston.com summarized that point: "*Getting back to business may not mean business as usual in Mass*" (Borchers 2020).

Post-pandemic Recovery

Dr. Ivy was horrified with the news. On a more optimistic note, she found historical examples of how major market disruptions had initiated business innovations, ultimately demonstrating business resiliency and initiating business model changes to drive down costs and enable entirely new categories of businesses to emerge (Mudassir 2020). For instance, the SARS pandemic of 2002-2004 catalyzed the meteoric growth of the once-small Asian e-commerce company Ali Baba. The financial crisis of 2008 presented an opportunity for the business models of Airbnb and Uber, which enabled people to share assets and cover expenses. East Boston's small businesses needed a boost of ideas to help them rejuvenate after the COVID.

Sadly, crisis deepened inequality in American society and disproportionately affected communities of color. On April 10, 2020, Mayor Marty Walsh said, *"We do see disparities, and it does concern me."* The city released additional data that showed that more than 24% of residents that had contracted the disease were Black, 32% White, 31% Latino, and 5% Asian or Pacific Islander. Those numbers indicated that Latino residents, who made up 25 percent of Boston's population according to census data, were coming down with the disease at much higher rates (DeCosta-Klipa 2020). *"We need to focus more on the Latino community around Boston,"* Walsh said, adding that the city had observed *"clusters"* of cases and pointing to East Boston as an example (DeCosta-Klipa 2020). Geographical data supported Mayor Walsh's point, revealing that COVID-19 hit harder in some neighborhoods: in East Boston, 46.8% of residents tested positive (Gavin 2020).

East Boston: Ethnically Rich and Attractive for Millennials

East Boston was located near downtown Boston and the city's Financial District, as well as Logan International Airport, but was separated from other Boston neighborhoods by water (see Exhibits 3 and 4). The geography and history of East Boston had defined both its vibrancy and generated some controversy. Home to beautiful harbor access and breathtaking views of Boston, it had also served as the backyard for Boston's industrial needs, which had left a legacy

of oil tanks, scrap metal collections, the salt piles across Chelsea Creek, a push from Eversource for its substation, and pollution from Logan Airport-related traffic. Such geographical and historical context made East Boston a home for three distinct groups. The first, the current majority of East Boston, was composed of immigrants from Latin America.

Exhibit 3. East Boston

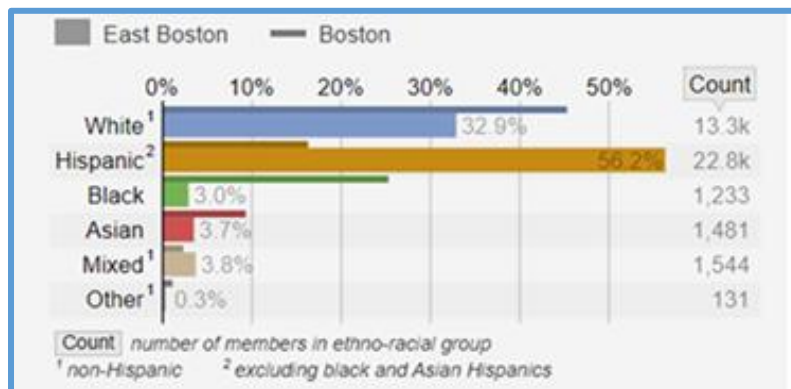
Source: LandVest (2018)



Exhibit 4. Bost and East Boston Ethnic Populations

Source: Statistic Atlas

Percentage of the total population of Boston and East Boston

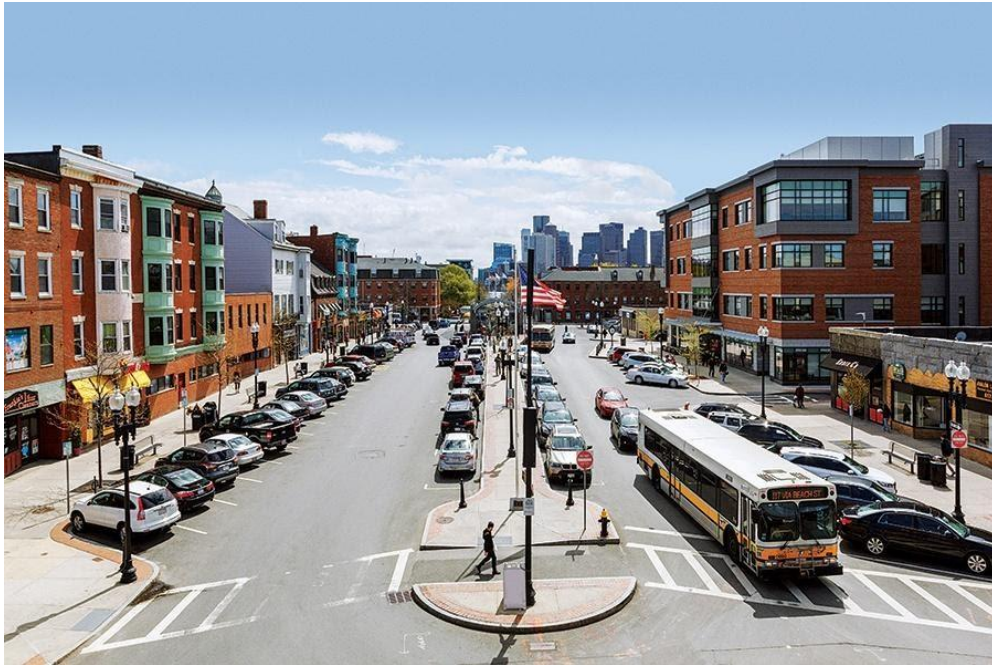


The second and most recent wave included many well-educated Millennials who worked in Boston's Financial District. As the Boston Planning & Development Agency has reported, the percentage of East Boston residents ages 25 and older with a bachelor's degree doubled between 2000 and 2015 (Boston Planning 2017). The situation initiated "*The Battle for Eastie's Soul*," where the question of "*Who will win in the fight for the city's last frontier?*" revealed East Boston's divide between the old-timers, represented by old-fashioned Bostonian political powers, Millennials and developers for luxury residences, and majority-minority immigrants from Latin America (Sweeney 2019).

Exhibit 5. Divided East Boston

Source: Photo by Bob O'Connor

A view of Maverick Square in East Boston shows the divide between old and new



Local businesses and the neighborhood life in East Boston reflected its demographics. While the scope of these enterprises was diverse, East Boston was mostly known for its ethnic cuisine and art. Places like *La Chiva*, *Pollos A La Brasa Beto's*, *El Palmar*, *El Peñol*, and *Rincon Limeño* were run and frequented by Latin American immigrants (Exhibit 6). At the same time, Millennials had their waterfront restaurants, such as Pier 6, Canary Tavern, or ReelHouse (Exhibit 7). These two

groups rarely interacted or visited each other's small businesses, making East Boston appear to be a tale of two disconnected realities.

Exhibit 6. Ethnic Restaurants in East Boston

Sources: Google search "Latino Restaurants East Boston" and author photos

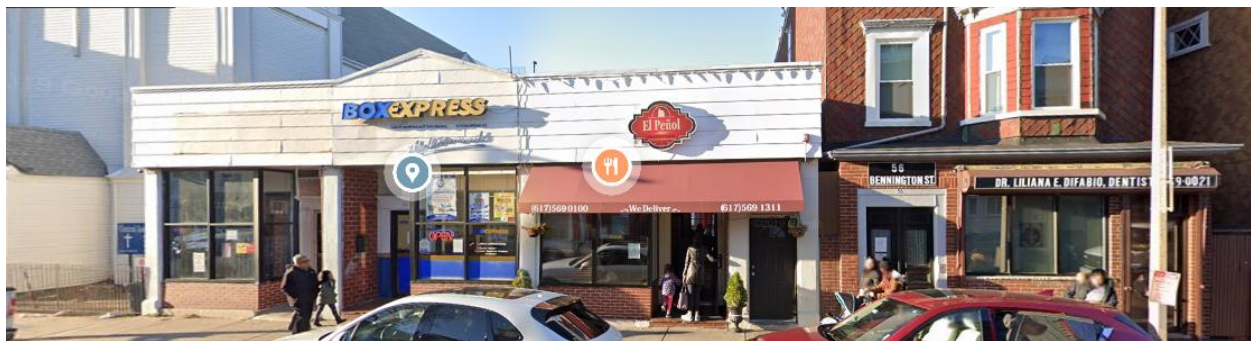
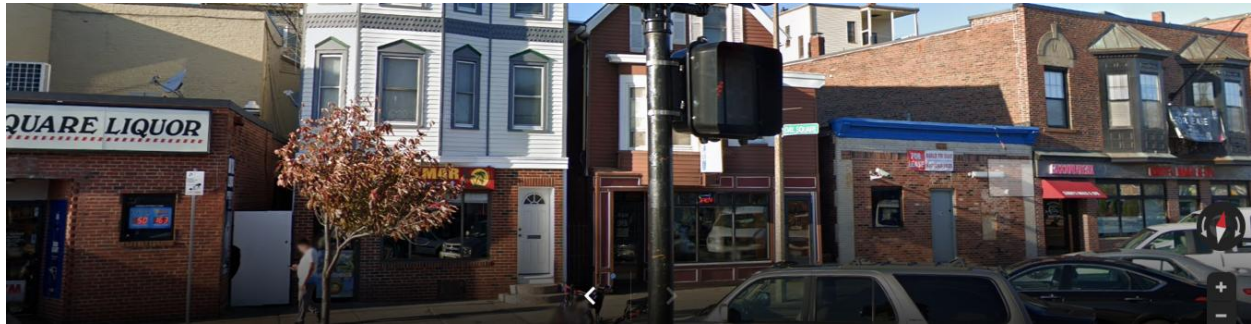
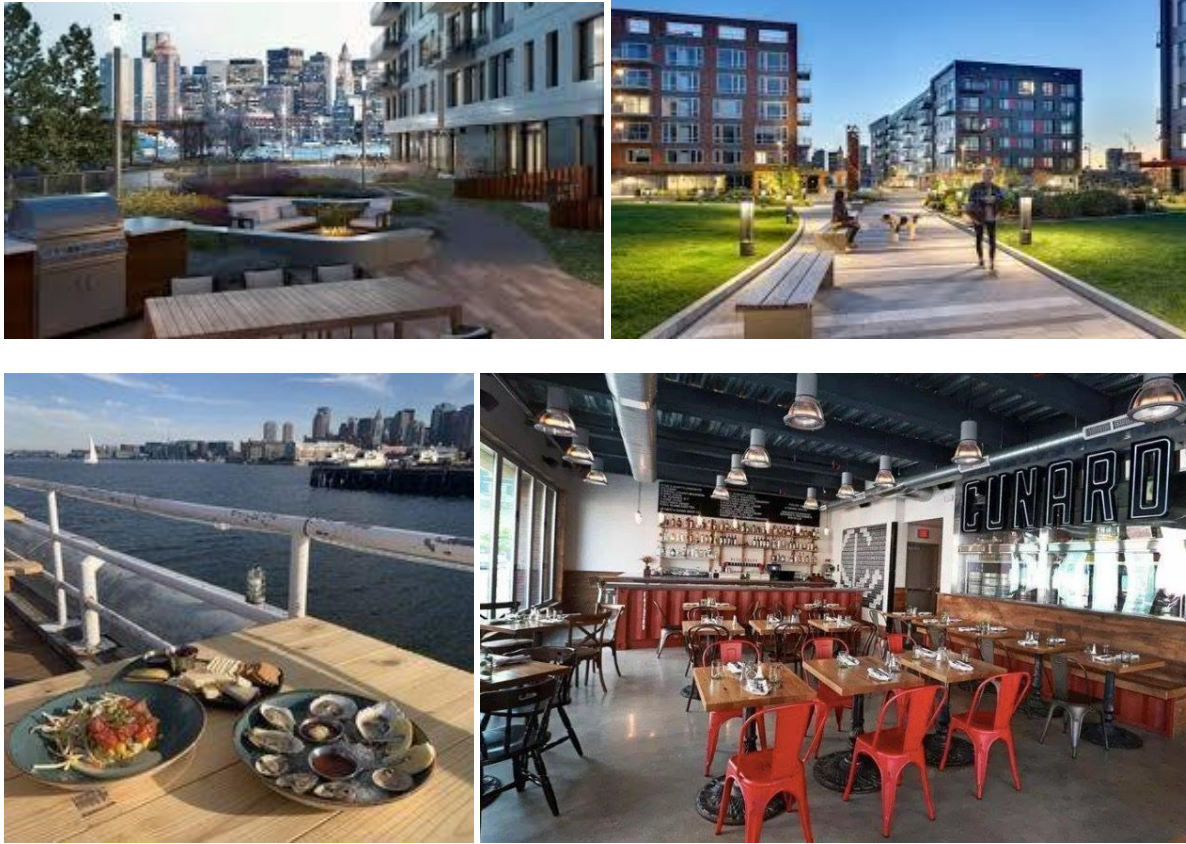


Exhibit 7. Millennials of East Boston: Trends

Sources: Source: (Elevated Residential, n.d.) and Google search--Waterfront restaurants East Boston for Millennials



Millennials in a Time of Market Disruption

Millennials, the generation born between about 1980 and 2000, represented a growing group not only in East Boston; by the time of COVID-19, they made up half of the American workforce and, by 2025, were projected to represent 75% of the global workforce (Economy 2019).

By April 16, 2020, four weeks into the COVID-19-induced economic crisis, more than 22 million Americans and 572,000 Massachusetts residents had filed new claims for unemployment aid, with Millennials being disproportionately affected. A staggering 52% of Millennials lost their

jobs, were put on leave, or had their hours reduced because of the pandemic, compared with 26% of people from older generations (Swasey 2020).

Millennials perceived psychological profile also distinguished them from other generations, which annoyed many. Cognovi Labs found that Millennials' perceived nonchalance angered previous generations more than COVID itself. Specifically, 22.7% of adults in the United States expressed anger toward COVID-19, and 66.7% of the same adults expressed anger toward Millennials' general nonchalance (Cognovi Labs 2020). *Time* magazine had labeled Millennials the “*Me, me, me*” generation—narcissistic, fame-obsessed, convinced of their greatness, critical of the establishment, and technologically addicted (Stein 2013). *Forbes* referred to Millennials' overconfidence, high expectations, inward focus, misplaced education, and low attention to building their credit scores (Alton 2016). In a highly routinized work environment lacking flexibility, impact, and opportunities for growth, Millennials were likely to feel disengaged and would eventually leave the job: 21% of Millennials changed jobs within the past year—more than three times the rate of non-Millennials (Adkins 2019).

While Millennials generally disagreed with the negative connotations attached to their generation by publications such as *Time* and *Forbes*, many agreed that their generation was different from the preceding ones. Millennials described themselves as connected and tech-savvy multitaskers and innovators (Holland 2016). As an example of their ability to view the world differently and being digital natives, Cisco found that 87% of Millennial executives believed video had had a significant and positive impact on their organization — a view they held long before the advent of the pandemic (Economy 2019). Millennials were also the most educated demographic in the workforce. Historical data on educational levels among people aged 25 to 29 showed that in 2016, 40% of Millennials held advanced degrees, compared to 32% of Generation Xers in 2000, 26% of Boomers in 1985, and 16% of Silents in 1964 (Graf 2017). Finally, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Millennials made up most of the new gig

economy by their self-reliance and ability to innovate; in 2020, self-employment in the United States had reached 42 million workers, and 42% of those were Millennials (Monahan 2018).

Millennials were also a generation that was not afraid to take a stand on social issues. They sought to make an impact on issues that mattered to them, refused to expend their energy on those who did not, and firmly believed in the power of activism (Case 2017). *Fast Company* reported that this generation wanted to help humanity and save the planet in ways that went beyond the efforts of previous generations, possibly with far greater outcomes (Paynter 2019). It was clear to Dr. Julia that Millennials would be the best chance for small businesses to find innovative solutions for rejuvenation, if she were able to find a way to connect them in a meaningful way.

The City of Boston for Small Businesses and Neighborhoods

The third stakeholder in Dr. Ivy's equation was the city government and its policies for both small businesses, Millennials, and neighborhoods.

The City of Boston had taken the lead in securing federal aid and other grant money where it was needed, rolling out \$6 million in grants for small businesses ready to reopen. Mayor Walsh said, *"We want our business owners and workers to have access to the appropriate resources to stay safe."* Walsh added, *"These additional grants will help level the playing field for Boston's small businesses and support both our public health and economic equity priorities."* The first wave of funding was aimed at assisting businesses with fewer than 15 employees, where most employees had to work nearby. Another \$7.5 million was intended to support similarly sized small businesses in paying their bills as COVID-19 continued to affect the economy (Cotter 2020).

When Dr. Ivy inquired which city department might be most appropriate to approach with a neighborhood-focused project, Mr. Lima immediately pointed to two departments that could be the best stakeholders. The first was the Director of Small Business Department, Natalia Urtubey, who previously served as Executive Director of Imagine Boston 2030 and was active in the Latino community (City of Boston 2018). Mrs. Urtubey's department worked with local residents and existing businesses to ensure the city support for growth without displacement, and coordinated with other departments to remove any barriers to doing business in Boston. She also oversaw the distribution of more than \$3 million in small business resources under the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program and over \$3 million in investments in small businesses within and outside the 20 Boston Main Streets Districts. Additionally, Mrs. Urtubey started the Mayor's Latinx Employee Resource Group (ERG) and served as the liaison to the Diversity Office for the ERG.

Mr. Lima also pointed out that Dr. Ivy should consult with the New Urban Mechanics group, the mayor's civic research and design team that worked across departments and communities to explore, experiment, and evaluate new approaches to government and civic life, and a first of its kind in the country.

"The New Urban Mechanics' team are all Millennials, and they are all interested in creative ideas to improve the city. They would be a great help for a pilot project, and if the project works, they will hand it to another City of Boston department," said Mr. Alvaro.

Weighing the Options

At the end of June 2020, when Julia Ivy shared her idea with Alvaro Lima, Natalia Urtubey, and two members of the *New Urban Mechanics* team, Nigel and Laura, to launch a project that would bridge local Millennials and local, ethnically rich, small businesses. All parties agreed on the project's needs, while also emphasizing the differing needs of various stakeholders. Alvaro said: *"I think focusing on the businesses and their urging needs should be the priority in such a harsh time."* Natalia said, *"Connection between the groups should be key."* Nigel mentioned

that if the project could develop the mechanics behind involving Millennials in local projects, it would be groundbreaking for many city governments.

By the end of the summer of 2020, the team was formed. It included Julia Ivy as the content leader and the author of the BE-EDGE method, Dana Bogatko, a master's student in project management to cover the operational aspects of the project, and Laura Cole from New Urban Mechanics to oversee local small business outreach and contact with city offices. Emily Murphy joined the team as an MBA student after learning about this project in Dr. Julia Ivy's class. She became a core team member and specialized in understanding the Millennial's point of view.

Fall 2020: Team members collected data on stakeholders' expectations and boundaries:

- Emily collected the data on Millennials' expectations;
- Laura stayed connected with small businesses;
- Julia stayed in contact with the government officials;
- Dana was deeply embedded into East Boston's fabric.

November-December 2020: The team arrived at the idea that the focus should be on how it could help local businesses reimagine their business models and operations to reach new target groups of clients, suppliers, or employees. The team had three the options of how to proceed with that focus (see Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8. An Overview of the Options under Consideration

Descriptors	Option 1: Solving the Case	Option 2: Making Your Consulting Case	Option 3: Hackathon-style event
In a nutshell	Solving a business case	Making a real-time consulting case	Exploratory programming
Why: The meaning for participants	Demonstration of problem-solving skills within the allocated time.	Synchronization on personal, social, and professional levels between talents and businesses.	Advancement in a targeted area. Demonstration of programmer skills within the allocated time.
What: The challenge the participants worked on	Professionally written “ <i>real world</i> ” case on a theme, defined by organizers.	Businesses define the challenges they needed to be solved. Talents select the challenges that fit their career or personal interests.	Could be for a cause or purpose, application type, programming language, demographic group, or corporate innovation.
Who: The participants	Students, job candidates, or employees.	Edge-crafters (multidimensional talents) interested in connecting with the industry of their choice, or interested in consulting.	Usually, programmers and project managers.
Needed coaching	In problem-solving.	In case method for consulting.	In coding.
How: The process	1: A team 2: Case. Hosting an organization (e.g., a business) provides a case on a relevant for the theme. 3: Teamwork: for solving the case 4: Delivering: PPT or case write-up 5: If contest: Judging by industry leaders and/or hosting organization.	1: Core: business defines a challenge; talents define the scope of their interest. They find a match. 2: Trust: the business provides company data. Talents put it to the industry context. They connect through making a case 3: Value: Talents solve the case they have made. 4: Delivering: Case Brief & Consulting Report 5. If contest: Judging.	1: Goal and terms 2: Qualification: Developers register and are qualified based on background 3: Programming work 4. Sharing: A log about results, share progress on social media 5: If contest: Demonstrations and judging
Formality	Usually formal.	Semi-formal. Defined by the business-talent pair.	Usually informal.
So what: The deliveries and impact	Case solution “ <i>you</i> ” – for business value.	Statements “ <i>Me</i> ” – for focus on a core; Company case, “ <i>Us</i> ” – for trust and connection; Consulting Report “ <i>You</i> ” – for business value; Case Brief “ <i>Me for you</i> ” – for portfolio.	Demonstration of results and work-in-progress “ <i>for me</i> ” Often, open-source “ <i>for us</i> ”

Option 1: The *“Solving the Case”* option would be run as a weekend-long event, like traditional case competitions. Dr. Ivy would write the case on East Boston and its challenge of gentrification and the need for connection. Participants would receive a case on Friday night and would have to submit their solutions within 24 hours. On Sunday morning, they would present their case solution to city officials, industry leaders, and investors who might support this or that idea. This option would require Dr. Ivy to write the case that participants would attempt to solve. Participants would have the freedom to provide any solution if it brought together the community and included small businesses. The City of Buston seemed to like this option.

Option 2: The *“Making Your Consulting Case”* option would refer to Dr. Ivy’s BE-EDGE method for synchronization between Millennials’ personal strategies for employability and competitive strategies of local businesses. If they followed this option, local businesses would share the challenges they faced in dealing with COVID-related issues. Millennials would select the challenge relevant to their career aspirations in industries of interest, forming teams around each small business. It would enable businesses and Millennials to align at the core level and share a common vision. Then, they would connect socially by learning specifics of the local business, industry, and market – and summarize them in a company case. Next, Millennials would generate value for the business they had connected with by applying their multidimensional competencies by formalizing it all in a consulting report. Finally, the case and the consulting report would be delivered to the client and evaluated by the City of Boston’s professionals and industry leaders. Small businesses would benefit most from that option.

Dr. Ivy’s experience of working with this method showed that the entire process realistically took from four to eight weeks for participants to complete the project.

Option 3: Finally, the *Hackathon* option that Emily suggested would be similar to the *“Solving the Case”* case competition in its weekend-long format and similar to the *“Making Your Post-pandemic Recovery*

Consulting Case” option on the focus of the business challenge that Millennials would choose to work on. The goal would be to replicate the value generated in the *“Making Your Consulting Case”* option and keep the fast-paced energy of the *“Solving the Case”* option. This was an idea that no team member had any experience with, but they were intrigued by it. The quality of deliverables and their value for the neighborhood or for the local businesses was unknown.

Time For a Decision

In January 2021, the team met after the Christmas break and decided that the event would start in late March if they were ready, or would be moved to early November if they were not. The team planned to launch the project in the Spring of 2021. As Laura said, *“Because it will be virtual, let us do it while it is cold and grey outside.”* Julia and Laura reported that the discussions with the city, local businesses, and possible judges confirmed their interest. Emily and Dana shared their data on Millennials and neighborhood. Their expectations stayed unchanged. Preliminary conversations with members of the media confirmed their interest as well. All they asked for was a one-page press release.

Julia, Laura, Emily, and Dana looked at the shared screen of their Zoom meeting. All were in place except for the design of the product they would offer. Each option was perfect for one stakeholder but less attractive for others: the city seemed to like Option 1, small businesses were excited by the relevance help their challenges of Option 2, while Millennials were excited with Option 3. Which proposition provided the highest value to stakeholders? While the November 2021 option was on the table, the team recognized that momentum to unite East Boston, which had suffered the most from COVID, was present, so the March 2021 option remained a goal.



JULIA IVY is an executive professor of strategy and international business at Northeastern University, Boston, USA. Julia Ivy's interests fall in the intersection of psychology, strategy, and entrepreneurship. She is the author of the concept of Boutique Employability and the book "*Crafting Your Edge for Today's Job Market: Using BE-EDGE Method for Consulting Cases and Capstone Projects*," which applies her BE-EDGE method for crafting and implementing a personal positioning strategy for a competitive edge in the reality of the future of work.



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