# Youth**Action**Net®

# CASE STUDY SERIES

**SwimAbility Canada:**

*Students Dive in to Volunteer with Special Needs Children*

## Introduction

*This is one of a series of case studies produced by students enrolled in the Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University through its partnership with the International Youth Foundation (IYF). Students enrolled in a course exploring the role of social enterprises and social entrepreneurs were paired with young leaders of social ventures identified through the IYF's YouthActionNet® program. The students were given the assignment of analyzing the venture's assets, successful methodologies, and opportunities for investment to increase impact. Through this experiential learning process, the student consultants gained hands-on experience and exposure to the needs of social enterprises. The ventures, too, benefited from student insights into their strengths, areas for growth, and recommendations for enhancing their impact and sustainability. The Georgetown practicum is part of YouthActionNet's larger efforts to partner with institutions of higher learning around the globe to integrate social change into the academic experience and career interests of students.*

## International Youth Foundation

*The International Youth Foundation (IYF) invests in the extraordinary potential of young people. Founded in 1990, IYF builds and maintains a worldwide community of businesses, governments, and civil society organizations committed to empowering youth to be healthy, productive, and engaged citizens. IYF programs are catalysts of change that help young people obtain a quality education, gain employability skills, make healthy choices, and improve their communities.*

www.iyfnet.org

## YouthActionNet®

*Since 2001, YouthActionNet, a program of the International Youth Foundation, has provided founders of social ventures, ages 18 to 29, with the training, networking, coaching, funding, and advocacy opportunities they need to strengthen and scale their impact. These young social entrepreneurs have pioneered innovative solutions to critical local and global challenges, resulting in increased civic engagement, improved health, education reform, economic opportunity, environmental protection, and more inclusive societies. Our work is carried out through a network of 23 national and regional youth leadership institutes that collectively support over 1,350 young social entrepreneurs globally.*

www.youthactionnet.org

## Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University

*The Global Human Development Program of Georgetown University is home to one of the world's premier master's degree programs in international development. An innovative, academically rigorous skills-based graduate program, the Master of Global Human Development degree prepares the next generation of development professionals to work with public sector agencies, private businesses, and non-profit organizations that advance development. Through coursework, extracurricular activity, and practical fieldwork experiences, our graduates develop the insights, skills, and experiences necessary to become leaders in development and make a difference in our global community.*

https://ghd.georgetown.edu

# INTRODUCTION

## *Meet Matthew Morantz: Founder and Director*

Some people learn about a social problem in their community and, after taking a moment to lament, go back to their everyday lives. Other people decide to commit their lives to solving the problem. Matthew Morantz and his classmates from universities across Canada are the second kind of people. In response to diverse issues around health, safety, and inequality toward children with disabilities, they developed a university-based student organization to alleviate some of the many misfortunes these children face. SwimAbility Canada, formerly known as Making Waves Canada, has been operating since 2009.[1]

**SwimAbility Canada breaks down barriers for children with special needs by connecting them to university students for one-on-one swimming lessons.**

## *The Problem*

Research shows some evidence that water-related exercise improves the health and development of mentally challenged kids while also being safer than many dry land sports.[2] In addition, many children with social and developmental delays are at a higher risk for obesity, making safe exercise imperative for them.[3] However, there are not many community centers or schools that provide swim instruction programs specifically designed for children with special needs. These kids can benefit greatly from such a service, but it has been historically unavailable to them. They receive extra help in public schools and at the doctor's office, but they often lack the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities or to learn a sport. SwimAbility's mission statement is "to improve the lives of children with disabilities through swimming." The social problem Matthew identified is a unique gap in social services for children with special needs.

## *The Solution*

SwimAbility fills this gap through one-on-one instruction in a safe, supportive environment with passionate volunteers who engage with kids' families, the community, and the national SwimAbility network. Students and their instructors work together closely to improve swimming ability, water safety knowledge, and other skill sets particular to the child. Parents and instructors communicate regularly about students' progress, creating a community of care around the child. SwimAbility's model represents an innovative yet intuitive solution to an often-overlooked problem for many families.
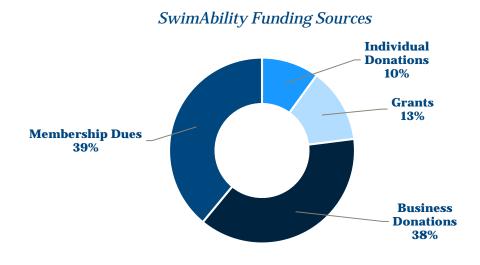
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1 "CGI U Stories: Matthew Morantz." May 13, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcV98KgDQe0
2 Al Rudis, "Swimming pool therapy helps children with physical and developmental challenges." *Los Angeles Daily News*, August 11, 2011.  http://www.dailynews.com/article/ZZ/20110811/NEWS/110819573
3 "Autism Speaks Canada 2011 Family Service Community Grants Application: Making Waves Canada." 2011.

## *Operational Model*

SwimAbility, a legally registered non-profit in Canada, uses a franchise operational model that allows the organization to grow quickly, remain financially viable, and create a national network all at the same time. Using this innovative model, SwimAbility generates revenue in a few different ways. As a franchise organization, it collects membership dues from franchised program sites in exchange for organizational, curricular, and fundraising support. Secondly, SwimAbility chapters charge a nominal fee to families for participation in its swim lessons. This cost is not prohibitive, though, so beneficiaries are not limited by their inability to pay: SwimAbility maintains a commitment to keep each lesson's cost under $5. In this way, the organization strikes a happy medium of generating some of its own revenue while also seeking grants and donations to fill its remaining financial needs. Using this operational model for the umbrella organization, SwimAbility has opened franchises, referred to as chapters, in 15 cities all over the country.

### *SwimAbility Funding Sources*



- Individual Donations 10%
- Grants 13%
- Membership Dues 39%
- Business Donations 38%
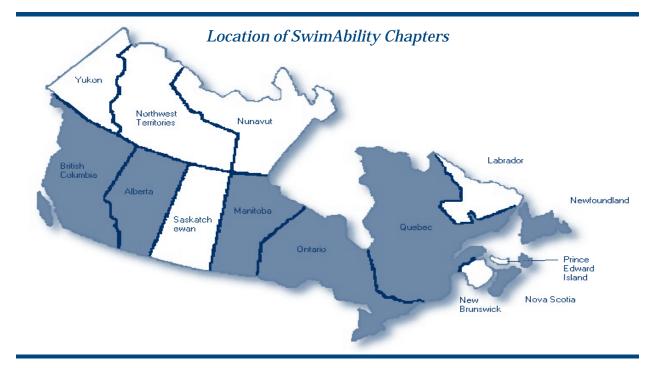
## KEY ASSETS AND SUCCESSFUL METHODOLOGIES

SwimAbility's strengths lie primarily in their organizational structure and practice. Many grassroots non-profits and social enterprises suffer from organizational mistakes that detract from their members' passion and talent. Luckily, SwimAbility has met this challenge head-on and created a strong, viable organization with direction and purpose.

### *Expansion Through a Franchise Model*

As explained earlier, SwimAbility operates on a franchise model that includes 15 chapters all over Canada (see map on next page for details on which provinces are home to chapters). This method of expansion is both strategic and prudent: it allows the larger organization to share costs and delegate responsibilities, but it also naturally creates an advocacy network in communities across the nation.

By disseminating certain controls, SwimAbility avoided the pitfall of becoming a top- heavy, overly-centralized organization. Its chapters fulfill nearly all of the day-to-day responsibilities, so the Board of Directors is freer to face high-level, long-term challenges that may come up. This division of labor

is extremely advantageous, though often difficult to balance well. SwimAbility has thus far done a fantastic job of delegating just the right amount of work to its chapters and reserving certain decisions and tasks for its Board.



*Location of SwimAbility Chapters*

In addition to the internal, organizational advantages of the franchise model, there are other more external ways in which the model is an asset as well. SwimAbility chapters from Quebec to British Columbia can engage in community building and advocacy on behalf of the larger organization. Not only is SwimAbility able to serve more children through its many chapters, but it also gains entry into larger cultural and political conversations about social services and special education due to its national reach. This widens the ripple effect of the organization and increases its overall impact.

## *Centralized Control Over Branding, Communications, and Policies*

Another asset to SwimAbility's structure and organization is essentially the flip side of the asset explained above. Though the organization delegates many responsibilities to its chapter sites through a franchise model, it does maintain central control of certain key aspects of the organization. This strategy allows for consistency across the chapters, a necessary advantage to an organization growing as quickly as SwimAbility. The graph here demonstrates this rapid growth over only a few months. Through a thoughtful balance of delegation and centralized control, SwimAbility is able to process this growth effectively and maintain its high service quality in each chapter.

Three examples that demonstrate the advantage of this system are ensured consistent branding, streamlined organizational communication strategies, and legal protection.

SwimAbility's Board of Directors is divided into several committees, one of which is dedicated specifically to external communications and branding. This Board committee ensures that messaging to the public is consistent across the country by managing social media, web design, and other aspects of external branding. Though the chapters operate fairly autonomously, they do still

represent a single, united entity. For this reason, it is critical that SwimAbility's governing body maintain control over public communication and branding. To the organization's credit, the Board of Directors currently does this quite well.

As with external communications, internal messages from one part of the organization to the next must be clear and consistent. SwimAbility's directors identified this need and addressed it through another Board committee on chapter relations and services. This central entity is responsible for providing uniform communication tools and regular top- down messages to the chapters. SwimAbility's Board fills the need for streamlined internal communication, rather than delegating such a singular task out to the individual franchise. This wise operational choice sets the organization up nicely to continue to expand without upsetting the balance of work between various chapters.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, SwimAbility's Board of Directors have unshared control over critical policies and procedural mandates. This protects the organization legally and makes certain that each chapter adheres to the high standard of practice set by the Board. If each franchise were allowed to use its own policies but operate under SwimAbility's name, the larger organization could be held responsible for negligent practices or unsatisfactory services of which the directors knew nothing about. By keeping the policies and standards of service uniform across chapters, SwimAbility protects its positive reputation and safeguards against potential legal trouble. While this organizational choice might seem like a no-brainer to many business professionals, some nonprofit leaders prioritize shared, democratic leadership over strategic operations, often to their detriment.

SwimAbility has found a way to harness the positive aspects of shared responsibility while also capitalizing on the benefits of central control. Many organizations, especially young nonprofits, are not able to strike such a chord. In this way, SwimAbility far exceeds expectations and is well poised to continue its rapid growth, potentially into international markets.

## *Unique Service Provision that Fills Gaps in Child Services*

Because SwimAbility is a nonprofit, mission-driven organization, the potential for impact simply must be assessed in this case study. Though the beneficial operational methods outlined above make smart business sense, the bottom line for SwimAbility's Board and volunteers is that, through a strong organizational structure, they are able to reach out to children who truly need them and positively impact their lives forever. SwimAbility bridges the gap between traditional classroom education and highly clinical physical therapy, offering developmentally challenged kids a safe, supportive environment to explore a fun activity to which they might never have access without this organization.

SwimAbility's directors and instructors ensure that the mission always remains front and center, and that commitment might be the organization's single strongest asset.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVESTMENT

Thus far, a strong case has been made for the immense promise of SwimAbility's innovative, passionate team to continue increasing its impact in the coming years. In order to maximize that potential, SwimAbility's directors would be wise to commit more fully to its monitoring and evaluation efforts, which will open up opportunities for more effectively communicating its impacts to participants, donors, and the wider public.

## *Develop Rigorous Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting Methods*

Right now, SwimAbility shows a commitment to monitoring and evaluation at a level that is uncommon for an organization of its age and size. The designation of "un-met need" should not be read as "an activity this organization should have undertaken long ago." Mission-driven groups must first define themselves, connect with beneficiaries, secure funding, and define operations before adding the administrative task of evaluation to their portfolios. In this way, SwimAbility is exactly where it should be when it comes to evaluating and reporting.

That being said, the Board's monitoring and evaluation committee has thus far implemented more light-touch surveys that gather output data, such as numbers of enrolled students, rather than impact data, such as increased swimming ability in students. Impact data is definitely more difficult to capture, but now might be the time for SwimAbility to invest its capacity in this challenging endeavor. After the initial push to get more rigorous methods put in place, the process will soon become a natural part of the regular operating procedures. Well-executed evaluations that get at the deep level of impacts often translate into more engaged donors and opportunities to monetize services in more innovative and lucrative ways.[4]

In order to assess its impact more fully and reap the benefits of that deeper knowledge, SwimAbility must plan its programming intentionally and with evaluation for impact always in mind. This can take shape through a simultaneous top-down and bottom-up approach. For instance, the Board of Directors, starting with the monitoring and evaluation committee, can undergo an evaluation planning process that connects the high level, organization-wide objectives to simple indicators to be assessed through everyday practices at the instructor level. Conversely, parents, children, and instructors can provide individual feedback on basic improvement indicators as well as higher-level impacts.

A key challenge must be highlighted here. One of SwimAbility's goals is to increase the capabilities of developmentally challenged children, and levels of achievement on that goal are almost impossible to fully measure. As one director explained, many of SwimAbility's students have trouble communicating in traditional ways, so oral or written surveys cannot be consistently administered. In addition, the ability to swim and stay safe in the water is a very subjective indicator to measure, which leads to unreliable data. Due to these challenges, SwimAbility can only evaluate certain aspects of its programming directly, while its evaluators can try to gather information on other, harder-to-reach impacts through more indirect channels. The table on the following page provides some suggested examples of more direct impact measurement:

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4 "Outline of Key Principles of Impact Evaluation," Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dcdndep/37671602.pdf

## Sample Evaluation Framework for SwimAbility Canada

| Objective | Output Indicator | Impact Indicator | Example of Impact | Data Collection Tools |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| To connect chapters and instructors across Canada. | Number of cross-chapter events attended by more than 20% of instructors | Number or percentage of instructors who experience sustained engagement with other chapters | Five instructors, all from different chapters, create and maintain service that connects SwimAbility families with area chapters if they move to another Canadian province | Regular chapter reporting, qualitative interviews |
| To provide resources, structure, and a framework for chapters. | Number of full-service orientation packets given to new chapters or new instructors | Families benefit from the consistency provided by the resources, structure, and framework given to chapters | Families who have been with SwimAbility for more than two years feel a deep sense of consistency in the services provided | Organizational records, qualitative interviews, pre- and post- season surveys |
| To develop and share best practices for teaching swimming and water safety to children with disabilities. | Number or percentage of directors who attend industry conferences or other educational events within a reporting period | Level of sector-wide recognition of SwimAbility's expertise in swimming instruction and water safety | SwimAbility instructors and/or directors are asked to consult with a school seeking to start a swim education program | Organizational records, informal interviews |
| To grow the SwimAbility volunteer movement through chapter expansion and development. | Percent increase in number of volunteers within a reporting period | Volunteers' level of engagement and commitment to SwimAbility's mission | After six months with SwimAbility, 78% of volunteers commit to working with the organization for another year | Regular chapter reporting |

SwimAbility is ready to take on this type of more rigorous evaluation methodology at this point in time, primarily because the organization is already committed to monitoring and evaluation. More intensive methods like those in Table 1 will require a heavier lift from the directors, but not to an overwhelming extent. As stated earlier, after the groundwork has been laid, the everyday work levels will most likely be similar to what they are now.

A greater sense of the organization's impacts will benefit directors, instructors, and families alike. Directors will have a clearer idea of organizational strengths and weaknesses that can be used to inform high-level visioning processes. Instructors will be able to make immediate and tangible

changes to their service provision in order to more effectively teach and encourage children. Lastly, families will be empowered to give constructive feedback early and often, ensuring that they receive the services they need and have a positive overall experience with SwimAbility.

### *Create an Integrated Communications and Evaluation Strategy*

SwimAbility finds itself up against a unique challenge with regard to its impact demonstration. This un-met need is related to the challenge described earlier because it is difficult to measure some of the most critical impacts SwimAbility is seeking: cognitive and physical improvement in children with developmental disabilities. And it can be even more difficult to create attention-grabbing messaging around those difficult to measure impacts than it is to actually measure them.

One simple solution to the problem of communicating impacts has to do with closer working groups. The monitoring and evaluation committee should work closely with the communications and chapter relations committees to ensure that all of SwimAbility's stakeholders have access to important evaluation findings. This could be implemented simply through scheduling dedicated impact meetings involving members of each committee.

A more robust solution to this challenge involves a stronger evaluation methodology that integrates SwimAbility's communications strategy into the planning process. For instance, the communications team can think strategically about its desired content and request certain types of information from the evaluators. With this insight in mind, evaluators can ask survey questions or make key observations that get at the information the communications team needs. This integrated process can also carry over to timelines, since well-planned communications and evaluation strategies both work on more long-term schedules. Below are some examples of how the system described above might be put into practice:

*Sample Integrated Communications Strategy for SwimAbility Canada*

| Communications Priorities | Evaluation Priorities | Strategy to Integrate |
|---|---|---|
| Publicize parent satisfaction at an after-school expo | Gather information on parent satisfaction and perceived child improvement | Evaluation team sets its data collection and analysis deadline well in advance of the after-school expo so that the communications team has time to package the information and brand it for public consumption |
| Streamline cross-chapter communication | Learn about instructor satisfaction with organizational support | Communications team uses the data from the instructor satisfaction evaluation to inform its new cross- chapter communication strategy |
| Continue to reach new families, donors, and instructors | Collect information on SwimAbility's outreach | Evaluation team sets indicators for best outreach practices and interviews communications team against those indicators; communications team then uses the findings to improve its outreach |

The two opportunities for improvement outlined here require more of an investment of human capital than of actual finances. SwimAbility could fundraise and hire evaluation consultants and public relations associates, but the Board of Directors already has the expertise and passion to make these improvements all on its own. Therefore, these highlighted opportunities seem to be two of the most realistic improvements the organization could make at this juncture.

## CONCLUSION

One previously undiscussed aspect of SwimAbility's strategy for impact and growth is the founder's ambition to open international chapters in the near future. Based on the findings in this case, a compelling argument can be made for SwimAbility continuing to grow, both domestically and internationally. The nonprofit's strong organizational foundation, coupled with its commitment to improvement and impact, make it a fantastic candidate for continued expansion.

## FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SWIMABILITY CANADA

- SwimAbility Canada's Website: http://www.canada.swimability.org/
- SwimAbility Canada on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/swimabilitycanada/
- SwimAbility Canada on Twitter: https://twitter.com/SwimAbility_Can
- CGI U Video Interview with Matthew Morantz: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcV98KgDQe0
- Matthew Morantz's YouthActionNet Profile: http://www.youthactionnet.org/fellows/1055/
- YouthActionNet Video – Scaling with the Help of Committed Volunteers: http://www.youthactionnet.org/videos/scaling-help-committed-volunteers

## AUTHOR

Meredith Medlin
M.A. in Conflict Resolution, Georgetown University
Mm3806@georgetown.edu