



Starting a Local Inventors' Group

First Steps

You will be surprised at the interest in inventing and how many “closet inventors” there are. Talk to a lot of people about starting a local inventors’ group. There are many individuals out there with the knowledge, ability and willingness to help. Find them. Here are some places where you may look:

- Contact the United Inventors Association (UIA) at www.uiausa.org. There may already be a group near you that can assist with your start-up by sharing their lessons learned, procedures and policies.
- Visit your local Chamber of Commerce
- See if your area has Business Incubators
- Go to your Area SCORE chapter - Counselors to Small Business; associated with the US Small Business Association.
- Search the United States Patent & Trademark Office (USPTO) website (www.uspto.gov); you can search for patents, inventors, assignees, etc. in your area
- Contact your local Intellectual Property attorneys
- Check with your local colleges and universities (especially the law school and technology transfer office)
- Let your creative juices flow – think outside the box!

Once you find a handful of people (3 - 7) who are willing to help start a group, schedule a meeting. Find a place to meet, a restaurant, a coffee shop, someone’s home, etc. This steering committee is the core that actually gives your group momentum. These key individuals will probably form your original board of directors.

The initial goal for this group is to define its inner workings – the ‘how we do this and that’, prior to the first formal meeting. For your official member meetings you

want to spend as much time as possible on inventors, ideas, and helping people. Minimize meeting time spent on administrative issues; potential members are coming to the meeting to be educated and to find guidance.

It is important that the group not be a “for profit” entity – making money off of inventors. Plan to migrate from an informal entity legally to being a recognized non-profit entity. Being a non-profit can be useful in getting a place to meet, as well as donations from businesses and individuals. This can either be a state non-profit, which involves minimal paper work, or a federal non-profit, which is more involved. It may be handy to have an attorney be part of the group early on so that his/her firm can do the 501(c)(3) filing paperwork as a donation.

Bylaws are needed to apply for not-for-profit status. Find an attorney willing to file this for the group; it is not as difficult as you would think. Save on time by using another group’s bylaws as a guide in documenting your group’s bylaws. The board can change bylaws as needed in the future.

It is critical early on to find a physical location to hold meetings that is offered without charge. Inquire with larger non-profits who have facilities that are often unused: area chambers of commerce, local colleges, business incubators that have start-up space available, maybe a large law firm who is also a group sponsor. Be creative, but find a place to meet that does not cost the group money early on.

Enlist the help of people who can assist immediately in forming the organization but who are also in a position later to provide value to the group’s main goal of helping its members. Candidates for a start-up steering committee and/or board members are: a successful inventor who has actually commercialized his/her idea, an IP attorney, an engineer/prototype expert, a packaging expert, a marketing guru, a product development specialist, a successful entrepreneur, etc. Ensure they bring a specific skill to the table. It is strongly recommended that people be chosen for their desire to help and ability to bring something to the group as opposed to picking people with a great resume who may not attend meetings or bring any tangible value to the group long term.

Pick as the group’s leader someone who is comfortable and skilled speaking and leading a group; someone with energy and enthusiasm. As Ron Reardon, the current President of the UIA says, “a healthy club has a leader who is a spark plug”.

Spend a lot of time thinking about the group. Much of this endeavor can be kept from being overwhelming by just thinking. Leverage the skills and energy of others to move the group to its ideal state.

It is recommended that a list of responsibilities or committee descriptions be documented – written down, shared and emphasized. Board members are assigned these jobs or are committee heads responsible for getting the job done. Duties and jobs should be divided up fairly amongst board members and/or advisors. People should be willing to dedicate a few hours each month in order

to complete their duties. Suggested job descriptions, committees and/or advisors:

- President
- Vice President
- Secretary
- Treasurer
- Legal Affairs
- Marketing & Promotion
- Newsletter
- Facilities & Refreshments
- Guest Speakers/Programming
- Librarian
- Web Site

Know that the more members are involved, and the more help is given to the board, the more the group will thrive.

Day to Day or Monthly Operations

Have two board members (ideally the Treasurer) open a bank account with the Treasurer and another member having signing authority. The entire board should accept responsibility of the group's financial matters. Missing money is a common problem with non-profits but if everyone on the board accepts this responsibility and keep the Treasurer on his/her toes, everyone should know the financial status and history.

The following operational items have worked in many inventor group start-up's:

1. Pick a meeting duration and stick to it; 2 - 2.5 hours works well.
2. Pick a convenient time to meet, e.g. evenings between 6:00 & 9:00 PM or Saturday mornings at 10:00 AM
3. Pick the same day to meet each month (i.e. the third Tuesday of each month)
4. Avoid picking the same time as another group so you can avoid scheduling conflicts with members, advisors, and/or guest speakers.
5. Decide on a place that is easy to find, with adequate free parking.
6. As the group grows, ensure that the audio-visual equipment is adequate for everyone to hear and see the presentations, even in the back of the room.
7. Decide on a name for the group. Strive to use words "invention" or "inventor" or "innovation" and your city or area. (Example: Muskegon Inventors Network)
8. Pick a date for your first meeting and put in on the calendar!
9. Be prepared and arrive early so all meetings start on time.
10. Respect others time, keep the meeting moving and end on time.
11. Well in advance, have the board member in charge of promotion getting the word out about the club and the meeting, using every available form of

- communication (flyers, mailers, emails, web, personal contacts, etc.). This is a critical and key area to focus efforts in the start-up phase.
12. Consider advertising that a prospective member's first meeting will be at no charge so people see if there is a 'fit' between what the club offers and what the attendee needs.
 13. Line up a really good speaker for the first meeting; get help from other groups or the UIA.
 14. Work to keep expenditures low early on since there won't be any revenue coming in; investigate pro bono or donation arrangements.
 15. Actual startup costs for the first meeting could be as simple as name tags and markers.
 16. Remember that networking is the key – sharing knowledge between members.
 17. One of the reasons for existence of the group is saving members time, energy, and money as they commercialize their inventions, and helping them make smart decisions.
 18. Collect dues from all board members in advance, everybody pays.
 19. Start as lean as possible, you can always add or adjust.
 20. You do not need a physical newsletter at the beginning; email is free and eliminates postage costs
 21. Discuss a website; perhaps someone involved could start a basic site.
 22. Consider a flyer to advertise the group; look into what other groups have done.

The First Meeting

Board members should be there early to greet people as they enter. The Secretary should have table set up ready to check people in and take names/emails. Everyone should have a name tag. The first half hour is check in, meet and greet/networking. Do not allow people to discuss their unprotected ideas with the whole group; explain why. The President opens meeting with his/her bio, introduces the board members and gives their backgrounds. Read the group's mission statement. Explain in non-formal language what the group strives to do and maybe, how its members can benefit. Ask attendees to briefly introduce themselves and state why they are there. Then the President can review the group's FIVE W's:

What – A nonprofit group to assist people developing ideas.

Who – It is for anybody, anywhere who wants to join the group.

Why – It is very difficult to do yourself but benefits the community

When – We meet the _____ of each month; consider taking a month or two off or having a social event in place for a monthly meeting.

Where – We meet at _____.

Introduce the UIA with short slideshow, highlighting the UIA mini-series and UIA Certified Professional Members. Recommend membership in the UIA. Go over UIA suggested group standards and state that the group subscribes to these.

Introduce Inventor's Digest, have a copy of a recent issue and recommend that members all get a subscription. Inventor's Digest and the UIA both offer subscription discounts to inventor group members.

Invention promotion and patent search/application scams should be discussed early and often. Here are the basic steps to inventing:

1. Does it already exist? Can you find it in stores?
2. Research your market and find out where it fits
3. Informal patent search at www.google.com/patents
4. Professional patent search
5. Design/Prototype/Engineer
6. Evaluation – Go/No-go
7. So far, so good? Talk to an IP attorney or Patent Agent
8. Manufacturing
9. Marketing

Onward

Get feedback from your first meeting. Adjust based on what worked and what did not work. Continue with strong promotion until the group builds to critical mass. The marketing gets easier as momentum builds, the group grows via word-of-mouth and the more meetings and events are announced.

Develop a meeting format that works and stick with it. It may seem repetitive at times, but you are hopefully helping members move along and the basics are not old at all, since it is new to your new members. Always use the Five W's to ensure you are staying on message.

On occasion, ask members/attendees to fill out a questionnaire. Read the responses and learn from them. The initial meeting should always be at no cost to allow prospective members a chance to see if there is a 'fit', but if they come back, they pay the membership fee (as determined by the Board). An annual fee has been successful in many clubs.

Other ways to obtain revenue are donations from area businesses who are interested in the group's mission. Consider having a class of membership for vendors who provide services to inventors, and charge these vendors a higher membership fee. Always begin and end on time.

Allow people to hang out after meetings to encourage dialogue and networking. Members who come early and stay late generally maximize their value of attending a meeting.

Steering Committee Follow Up

Have a follow-up meeting with the steering committee soon after the group's first meeting. This is critical to ensure the group is off to the good start that you've

envisioned and that expectations have been met. Learn from your mistakes and have a list of items that may not have gone as planned. Document an action list to remedy them and keep the group onto the success track.

Suggested things to do:

1. Review the first meeting “how do you think it went?”
2. What can we do to improve, to help our members?
3. Review questionnaires,
4. Look for any details left out from setup/start....what did we miss?
5. Work on finding great speakers and a rainbow of topics
6. Get help from those groups who have gone before.
7. Consider an informational flier
8. Further discussion of website and newsletters

Together we are better, together we are stronger. The combination of the UIA and inventor groups focused on the needs of local inventors keeps inventing safe, rewarding, and fun.