Methodology, Process, and Tips for Introducing a Business Edge Program: The Case of Burkina Faso

One way the International Finance Corporation (IFC) strengthens the overall business environment is by making excellent training programs available to small and medium businesses. Business Edge is a perfect example. Local partner firms use these interactive learning solutions to train and mentor small business owners and their staff, resulting in more efficient businesses, higher employment, and stronger local economies. This SmartLesson shows the process methodology, including tips on how IFC implemented Business Edge in Burkina Faso, offering key lessons learned in the process.

Background

Supporting the development of competitive small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is a strategic pillar of the Private Enterprise Partnership for Africa (PEP Africa). With its private sector partners, IFC-PEP Africa uses interactive training tools such as Business Edge (BE) and the Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Toolkit to help SMEs grow and prosper. These capacity-building solutions are managed by the SME Management Solutions (SMS) Program under IFC’s Sustainability Advisory Services (SBA) business line. They are tailored to the needs of small businesses in developing countries, providing them with market contacts, affordable access to finance, and localized, customized business management information.

In Burkina Faso, IFC worked with five partners—all qualified local firms and institutions—and led them through the entire life cycle of the Business Edge (BE) solution. Although the market has still not responded due to the life cycle of the project (9 months is still too soon to capture the results), today these partners are equipped with the necessary tools and know-how to provide services to SMEs such as organizing educational events, designing training programs, customizing learning content, managing training activities, coaching, and evaluating program impact. The process that IFC used to implement BE in Burkina Faso is outlined below:

Step 1: Selecting Business Development Service Providers (BDSPs) and Meeting Potential Clients

Applicants went through a thorough recruiting process which tested their abilities to absorb and apply new information about the Business Edge program and process which included the submission to IFC of proper application forms on time.

Step 2: Administrative Issues

Administrative matters, such as identifying costs, preparing agreements, and marketing tools, started during the recruitment process. Before the Training of Trainers/Assessors program began, all agreements were in place, fees paid, and marketing materials ready (see Figure 1).

Step 3: Training of Trainers/Assessors Program

Preparing the trainers and assessors is the key to the entire program. Besides knowing the material thoroughly, they must be able to conduct assessments, conduct training, measure results, and record relevant data in the BE database.

Step 4: Program Launch

The program was launched through a “teaser event” with 50 participants from government, the private sector, BE partners, and trainers (see Figure 2).
Following the teaser event, two clients signed cooperation agreements for ongoing training.

Next Steps:

- A full-time support staff is required for business development, technical and financial proposals writing, budgeting, Business Edge Database monitoring and development of complementary solutions such as the SME Toolkit.

- A transition plan is required to ensure that newly hired staff are properly trained in BE operations, with an emphasis on making the link between BE partners and clients and vice versa, acting as a “Broker”.

Although BE is a well-established IFC solution in some regions, such as Asia and the Middle East, rolling it out in Africa and in a new country is never a smooth and predictable process. Some common problems are:

- There is no clear vision of the process and rules of the program and solution implementations.

- Local small businesses often do not know how to gauge the value of business training; they have few selling and entrepreneurship skills.

- In some Africa countries, donors are subsidizing training, including paying for people to attend, which in some cases might make it difficult to establish a program where the end users have to pay a minimum (US$20 a day) to attend BE training.

- Potential clients, either SMEs or even corporations, are reluctant to pay for services.

- Often, IFC is not well known, so it cannot initially rely on its reputation to build confidence in the solution.

Teams sometimes have difficulty organizing a program in new countries where conditions, local suppliers, and other factors are unknown.

- The quality of potential local partners is initially unclear, which sometimes makes it difficult to select the most active, persistent and entrepreneurial consultants.

This SmartLesson provides guidance and a methodology to establish a BE program in a country. It provides information regarding the life cycle, process, and steps to establish a BE program and demonstrates how some of these issues can be addressed by describing the lessons learned when IFC introduced BE in Burkina Faso. The key lessons are summarized below.
Lesson 1: Justify the program: training is usually considered a cost instead of an investment by SME clients.

Additional effort is needed to explain who we are, what we do, and why we are bringing these solutions to the market. We found that providing examples and success stories were effective ways to convince SME clients and other stakeholders about the value of the program. For example, in Egypt, IFC worked with Mobinil, a telecom firm, which used Business Edge to strengthen the business skills of its distributor network. Additional examples from the Sub-Sahara Africa region (e.g., Democratic Republic of Congo – MIDEMA project; Mozambique – BCI Project; Cameroon – Advans Bank project; Uganda – ZAIN Project; etc) are most welcomed by the stakeholders. All this needs to be combined with heartfelt speeches and concrete examples of how the tool can be applied in the real world. By so doing, we were able to convince potential clients that using Business Edge was worth the investment.

Lesson 2: Believe in the Business Edge solution.

If you don’t know and believe in the solution you are marketing, you can’t sell it—especially when most potential clients have never heard of the BE solution. You need to be familiar with Business Edge’s six topic areas and course programs, which are covered in 55 trainer manuals and 38 workbooks. Going through this volume of material takes time and commitment, but it’s worth the effort. Your knowledge shines through when you discuss the Business Edge methodology, life cycle, process, procedures, rules, and materials with potential clients. They will have many questions, and you have to be quick to provide answers. This is a long process and requires at least 12-18 months of continual contact with clients, because the process of selling requires persistence, innovation, and sometimes aggressiveness.

Lesson 3: Up the supply and demand from the beginning, including donors.

You will need to create supply and demand for the BE product in parallel. Otherwise, there may not be sufficient demand for the solution. At the beginning of the program in Burkina Faso, it was clear that we needed to meet with potential clients and other stakeholders, such as donors, international organizations and programs, to have a better sense of their interest in participating in BE training. We met with firms and development organizations such as UBA, AIRTEL, Ecobank, Prodia, World Food Program, FCBC, Telecel, MEBF, to understand the market needs and also the constraints and challenges. We also met the donor community (AFD, AFDB, European Union, and others) to ensure that they understood the program and objectives. The result of these discussions was a much higher awareness of the BE program.

Lesson 4: Ensure that the administrative aspects of the project are well planned.

Timing and organization are important. We found that completing key tasks at least 3-6 months in advance made the BE program launch much smoother. Some examples from the Burkina Faso experience include:

- **The BE partner selection process:** By selecting in advance the trainers and consulting firms you will be working with, you can better define your implementation strategy. This affects business development, pricing, marketing, staffing, quality control, and more. You will also know the strengths and weaknesses of BE trainers and can prepare accordingly. In Burkina Faso, starting early gave us sufficient time to train our partners to the necessary level.

- **Logistics:** The training of trainers (ToT) program requires a master trainer and strong full-time commitment from trainers for four to nine days. Additionally, it requires printing course materials in the proper format, finding a good venue, arranging food, organizing travel support (some countries are difficult to travel to because of flight schedules and visa requirements), and finding accommodation for the master trainer. By organizing all of this in advance, you can reduce the risk of postponing the ToT, which would affect IFC’s credibility in the market.
(There have been cases in other countries where some of our potential partners complained about the ToT being postponed). The Burkina Faso launch took place on time because of well-planned logistics.

- **Contracts**: Signing agreements with BE partners and clients in advance enables BE to be launched immediately after the ToT program, or at least to pressure BE partners to do so. Agreements go through a lengthy clearance process at IFC. Sometimes partners and clients also have lengthy legal reviews and clearance procedures. Additionally, the agreement has several rules and procedures that often need clarification. In some markets/countries, it takes 3-6 months to sign agreements, which slows down the program and creates some challenges with BE partners because some of them had clients at their door but couldn’t deliver. We were able to kick off BE right after the completion of the ToT program, which kept the momentum of the launch going.

- **Collecting fees**: Partners sometimes take 3-6 months to pay ToT and/or license fees for the year, which slows down the signing of agreements. Additionally, the collection of fees helps IFC select the best players in the market; one of the rules used was “If you can’t commit on time, most probably you are not interested.” We were able to collect all fees early on, and thereby avoided unnecessary delays and all the necessary internal process related to it.

- **Training and input into the BE database**: To enable partners to register for courses, workshops, participant evaluations, and so forth, you will need to register their details in the database, grant access but most importantly to train them in how to do it. Our partners’ information was entered early on, so the registration process proceeded without any serious issues and the training was provided during the Training of Trainers program.

- **Creating the website**: Setting up the country site within the BE website helps BE partners, trainers, and clients market themselves immediately after the ToT program is over—or at least avoids their firing back and complaining to IFC. This includes posting partner contacts and logos, BE trainers’ photos, and profiles. In Burkina Faso, the country page was launched in the market at the same time the BE program began.

- **Project planning**: By preparing real BE training proposals (Technical and financial) to clients in advance, you and Business Edge partners better understand the market and its capacity to buy into and pay for the training program. Some clients are very conservative institutions; the approval process can take months. A detailed explanation of the cost structure (CVC and Open Course Models) and how BE is implemented can help develop their interest. By doing this in Burkina Faso, we were able to sign up clients before BE was launched (for example: Maison de l’Entreprise du Burkina Faso—MEBF).

- **Marketing materials**: In some markets, IFC only delivered marketing materials months after BE launch. This undermined the communications strategy. It is important to provide BE partner and trainers with the right communications tools so they can start promoting the solution immediately after the BE launch is completed. By obtaining all materials well before launch, we avoided communications problems and were able to promote the BE solution immediately after the training was completed.

### Lesson 5: Engage local staff in all phases of the process.

Local staff either from IFC or the World Bank should also be familiar with the BE and SME Toolkit solutions. By introducing them into BE at the very beginning of the project, staff felt a sense of ownership and empowerment, which contributed to its success. Providing all the necessary knowledge and tools available to empower local staff was one of the main objectives of the program. This is important, because they will carry on the work once the program is established (or at least until IFC staff is recruited). In Burkina Faso, the local staff played an important and critical role in dealing with all stakeholders when the SMS officer was not in the country.

### Conclusion

A clear vision of the supply and demand of the market in the region was essential for supporting the growth of SMEs in Burkina Faso. Launching a successful BE program required that all staff follow a series of specific operational steps.

It is important to capture the interest of a critical mass of country clients at the beginning of the process; otherwise the efforts of IFC will be for naught. By carefully following the implementation approach described above, one can expect the market to start to grow and prosper in two to three years. If people on both the supply and demand side of the equation understand the full workings and benefits of the BE solution, more businesses will prosper with less and less need for intervention from IFC. This is a win-win situation for all.