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ENTREPRENEURSHIP, STARTUPS, COMPETITIONS

### MassChallenge Launches \$1 Million Global Business Competition to Fuel State's Innovation Economy

By Erin Kutz 4/15/10

MassChallenge, a Boston-area nonprofit focused on encouraging innovation, is "convinced that entrepreneurship is the answer" for everything to unemployment to the housing crisis to pollution, in the words of CEO and co-founder John Harthorne.

To put its money where its mouth is, the organization is unleashing a global startup competition with \$1 million available in award money. MassChallenge officially launched the contest Wednesday to a standing room-only crowd at the new Fan Pier building on Boston's waterfront, which will also be the organization's future home.


From now until June 11, early stage startups from around the world can register for the contest online. Immediately they'll get access to online training, discounts on services, and access to a network of companies in similar positions. The organization will select 300 semi-finalists for in-person pitches in July.

Up to 100 finalist businesses will actually have the opportunity to move into MassChallenge's new office space in Boston's seaport area, which has been designated an "innovation district" by Mayor Thomas Menino's office. There, they'll pair up with mentors, get strategic advice from industry experts, and link with members of the Massachusetts support system for entrepreneurs, including investors. At the inaugural competition's conclusion in October, as many as 20 winning companies will receive \$50,000—no strings attached (meaning that MassChallenge won't require an equity stake in the companies, as many venture incubators do).

"MassChallenge is a celebration of these risk-takers," Harthorne says.

The competition is drawing some pretty fresh entrepreneurs, including three senior students from Worcester, MA-based Clark University whom I chatted with at the launch event. They're taking advantage of MassChallenge to turn their class project—a company called Delish Nutrish that makes allergen-free food products—into a business reality.

"We really want this to get somewhere. We don't want it to just be a year-long project," says co-founder Eva Fang. Another co-founder noted that MassChallenge will be particularly helpful in getting the students the contacts they lack as young entrepreneurs.




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State and local officials lauded the MassChallenge organizers' goals of promoting job creation and economic recovery in Massachusetts. "Our economy here in the Commonwealth has always been about what's next," said Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick.

Mayor Menino, who also spoke at the launch, repeatedly exuded pride over MassChallenge's impending relocation to Boston. (The organization previously had office space in Kendall Square's Cambridge Innovation Center, but will move in July to the Fan Pier space—which oddly enough currently resembles the C/C's unfinished expanded space). "Where else can you find such intellectual firepower and such a strong network of supportive services?" Menino asked.

The competition's reach will go beyond the companies directly involved in it, says Brian Burke, the northeast director for state government affairs at Microsoft, a top-level sponsor for the competition. In increasing its presence in Massachusetts, Microsoft also sought to invest in other startup efforts and further fuel the innovation economy, Burke says. "The Challenge is a core part of our DNA," he says of the startup competition.

I caught up with one attendee who says his business will benefit from the influx of startups that MassChallenge will encourage. "MassChallenge is doing a great job promoting entrepreneurship from a business standpoint; we're trying to do it from a legal standpoint," says Benjamin Hron, a co-founder of two-person firm [VC Ready Law Group](#), which seeks to provide cost-effective legal services to startups.

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