



**Indsights**

A Window into the Indigenous Economy

**Case Study**

**Imagination Group Inc.**

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# Imagination Group Inc.



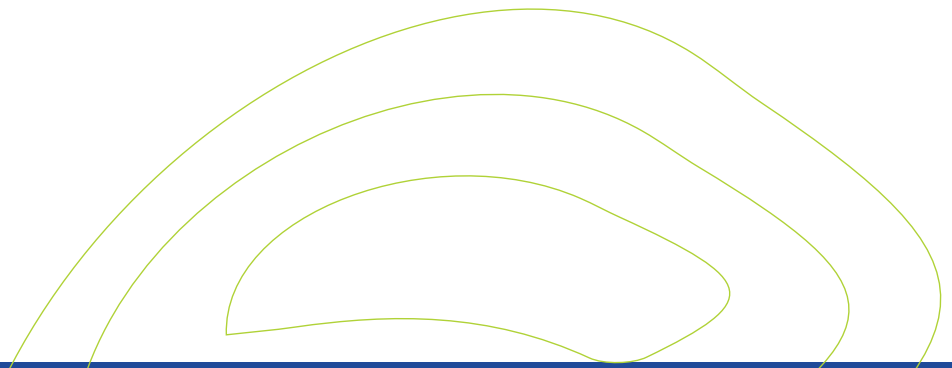
## Meet Colby

Colby Delorme is an owner of Imagination Group Inc., located in Calgary Alberta. This Indigenous-owned business has three divisions: consulting, Indigenous gifts, and ceremonial tobacco products.

He runs the company with his mother, Dr. Marie Delorme. Colby has been an entrepreneur since he was 18 years old and joined the company in 2002, bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience from his endeavours. He was instrumental in launching Imagination Group's ceremonial tobacco line in 2016.

Outside his work with Imagination Group, Colby co-founded a not-for-profit organization, Influence Mentoring Society, that provides mentoring relationships for post-secondary Indigenous students, helping them build their social capital. He is an active volunteer and has served on numerous boards within the community.

Colby holds an Institute of Corporate Directors Designation from the Rotman School of Management and is passionate about creating new and sustainable opportunities in business and making a positive impact on Indigenous communities in Canada.



# History of Imagination Group



## History of Imagination Group

Imagination Group was started in the early 2000s by Dr. Marie Delorme. Her idea was to start an Indigenous greeting card company as she was finishing her Executive MBA at Queen's University while simultaneously transitioning away from an executive position at TELUS. Colby was initially involved as a mentor, using his entrepreneurial skills and knowledge to help his mother launch the company, eventually joining the company two years later in a full-time role.

## Entering the Ceremonial Tobacco Market

While looking for ways to expand the business into new markets and offer new products, Colby began to investigate the idea of selling ceremonial tobacco as a complementary piece to the products that Imagination Group was selling. Many clients who were purchasing gifts for ceremonies were also procuring tobacco from other suppliers (mainly commercial tobacco) to accompany those gifts, and Colby had the idea of entering the ceremonial tobacco space.



After researching the various ways to sell ceremonial tobacco commercially, Imagination Group ultimately settled on becoming a manufacturer and wholesaler of ceremonial tobacco. They have partnered with a farmer to purchase organic raw leaf tobacco and package it for use in traditional Indigenous ceremonies.

*"We buy the raw leaf from a farmer and everything else we do. Our excise license is specifically designed for that purpose to buy raw leaf, to cut it and package it."*

Canada Revenue Agency requires any person or organization producing or packaging wine, beer, spirits, cannabis, or tobacco to obtain an excise license. It grants the person or organization "a license to perform certain restricted activities or to benefit from certain privileges related to alcohol and tobacco" (Canada Revenue Agency, 2018).

# Significance of Tobacco within Indigenous Cultures



## Products and Services

Tobacco plays a significant role within Indigenous cultures and is viewed as one of the most powerful medicines by Indigenous Peoples (other examples being sage, cedar, and sweetgrass). Specifically, tobacco is used in ceremonies to connect the present and the past — as a gateway between the Elder, the Creator, and ancestors.

*“If you were in a ceremony and specifically in a sweat lodge ceremony, that whole ceremony is designed to connect the Elder, and the individuals within that ceremony to the Creator and our ancestors.*

*Everything that we’re doing within that large ceremony ends up filtering through the Elder pushed into the grandfathers, which are [represented by] the heated rocks in the ceremony.”*

Tobacco is a gift that one can present to someone else who can, in turn, use it to gift to an Elder in a ceremony in exchange for help or guidance. For those seeking assistance from an Elder, giving tobacco acts as a symbol of intent, or in layperson’s terms, it is the intent to start the conversation or interaction in a good way — like shaking hands.

# Significance of Tobacco within Indigenous Cultures

*“The individual to whom you are gifting the tobacco can then take that tobacco you offered them. Go to an Elder or go to a ceremony and make an offering. And they use that offering typically to seek help for themselves or to seek help for others.*

*So, the tobacco is utilized for that purpose. And what happens with the tobacco is in the intentionality. It’s about the intentions in which you’re approaching the Elder. If you’re seeking knowledge or seeking their guidance or seeking their interest in what you’re doing and for them to offer a blessing. That’s the intention in which you’re offering that tobacco. And you state your intention at the same time, and they can either accept it or say, I’m not the right person for this, but here is the right person who could do that for you.”*

For Colby and Imagination Group Inc., it was important to seek permission from the community and Elders to sell ceremonial tobacco commercially. Acknowledging the vital role of respecting the views of Elders and ancestors, Colby understands the importance of obtaining this support in selling a product as culturally significant as tobacco within the Indigenous community.

*“One of the things I did know from being in ceremony and being a part of our traditional practices is that you shouldn’t be getting into that kind of business without permission. So, I approached Elders in our community, and other community members, and explained to them what it was I wanted to do. And whether a Métis person could be allowed to do that because it is a First Nation traditional practice.*

*I went through ceremony with my Elder, Patrick Daigneault, and spoke with the ancestors and he came back and said, yeah, this is what you’re supposed to be doing.”*



# Product Background

## Ceremonial Tobacco

For centuries, various Indigenous cultures and Peoples, including First Nations and Métis communities, have engaged in the traditional use of tobacco. In their practices, tobacco holds significance in ceremonies, healing rituals, and expressions of gratitude. Conversely, commercial cigarettes serve a distinct function. Traditional (ceremonial) tobacco is derived exclusively from the plant and is free from any additional chemical additives. It diverges from non-traditional or commercial tobacco mainly in its consumption method.

Unlike the routine inhalation associated with commercial cigarettes, ceremonial tobacco is typically not smoked. Instead, it is ceremonially burned in a pipe during special events without inhaling, except for certain special occasions. Moreover, tobacco plants are frequently used independently or in conjunction with other medicinal herbs like sage, cedar, and sweetgrass. Among these commonly employed medicinal plants, tobacco holds a special sacred status among most Indigenous communities as it is believed to establish a connection with the spirit world. According to First Nations cultures, it is crucial to treat these medicinal plants with the utmost respect, taking only a few branches or leaves to ensure the plant's survival, accompanied by a prayer of gratitude for sharing its healing properties (The Canadian Lung Association, n.d.).

Ceremonial tobacco also finds application in smudging, where dried tobacco leaves are burned, often alongside the other three plants. The resulting smoke is thought to open the soul, allowing spirits to bring healing energies and dispel negativity. Smudging practices can be undertaken individually or as part of a group ceremony. In various rituals and ceremonies, the tobacco leaves are not set in flames; instead, they are placed on the ground or in the water while offering prayers of thanks

and seeking the spirits' assistance in alleviating fears, stresses, or pain (The Canadian Lung Association, n.d.).

One of the plants utilized in traditional tobacco practices is scientifically known as *Nicotiana rustica* (Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Epidemiology Center, 2013). Originally from various regions worldwide, including the Great Lakes region, the herb typically grows up to three feet. Its flowers resemble those of commercial tobacco but are yellow, and its leaves are wider than those of commercial tobacco (Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Epidemiology Center, 2013). The plant also contains four to 15 times the nicotine content of commercial tobacco, potentially explaining why traditional tobacco is generally not inhaled when smoked in a pipe (Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Epidemiology Center, 2013).

While specific varieties of natural tobacco may contain nicotine, the traditional use of tobacco does not carry the same likelihood of addiction and dependence as commercial tobacco. The additives in commercial tobacco that enhance nicotine absorption pose a heightened risk of addiction compared to the use of ceremonial tobacco (The New Brunswick Lung Association, 2023).

Ceremonial tobacco is predominantly commercialized as a gift through retail stores and online platforms. With the retail sector representing 29.3% (Global Affairs Canada, 2019) of the 17,417 Indigenous businesses (Statistics Canada, 2023), there are approximately 5,000 Indigenous retail businesses in Canada ready to engage in the trade of traditional tobacco within the country.

The rich heritage of various Indigenous cultures and communities, embedded in the traditional use of tobacco, underscores authentic ceremonial tobacco's cultural and spiritual importance. The careful and respectful cultivation of these medicinal plants, including tobacco, sage, cedar, and sweetgrass, is a testament to cultural reverence and



# Product Background

a vital aspect of maintaining the plants' healing properties. In contrast to commercial tobacco with its additives and heightened risk of addiction, genuine traditional tobacco plays a crucial role in preserving cultural practices, promoting holistic well-being, and fostering a deeper understanding of the sacred bond between nature and spirituality. Supporting businesses that prioritize these traditional tobacco uses contributes to preserving cultural heritage and promoting healthier alternatives rooted in centuries-old wisdom.

## Commercial Tobacco

Commercial tobacco products are crafted using tobacco plant leaves along with chemical additives, and they are marketed for profit by various companies. These products can be either smoked or chewed. Examples of smoked commercial tobacco include cigarettes, cigars, cigarillos, and water pipes (hookah). Chewed commercial tobacco products include chewing tobacco or “wet snuff,” typically held inside the lip or cheek. Among these, cigarettes stand out as the most prevalent, utilizing finely cut tobacco leaves rolled in thin paper (Ottawa Public Health, 2023). The smoke emitted from commercial tobacco contains a substantial number of chemicals, ranging from 4000 to 7000, with 70 of them identified as known carcinogens (Ottawa Public Health, 2023). These chemicals originate from three primary sources: the tobacco plant and soil, the combustion process during smoking, and additives introduced by the tobacco industry. These additives make the product less harsh, reducing throat irritation, and, unfortunately, increasing the risk of nicotine addiction. Despite the high risk associated with nicotine addiction, tobacco companies actively promote these products to individuals of all ages (Ottawa Public Health, 2023). Smoking has various short-term and long-term effects on both physical

appearance and overall health. Short-term consequences include the lingering smell of smoke on hair and clothing, unpleasant taste and breath, and yellowing of teeth and fingers. The immediate health issues from smoking include coughing; difficulty breathing; dry and irritated throat; dizziness; increased heart rate and blood pressure; susceptibility to frequent colds, flu, and ear infections; reduced energy and strength; and the development of nicotine dependence (Ottawa Public Health, 2023).

Over the long term, smoking emerges as the primary cause of lung cancer and heightens the risk of other cancers affecting the mouth, throat, colon, bladder, and pancreas. It is also a significant contributor to lung diseases such as emphysema, a major factor in heart disease and stroke, and adversely affects the immune system, making smokers more susceptible to illnesses like colds, flu, and pneumonia. The cumulative impact of smoking extends beyond immediate discomfort, significantly compromising long-term health outcomes (Ottawa Public Health, 2023). Although there has been a decline in tobacco use, a considerable portion of the Canadian population still engages in it, with cigarette smoking alone killing 45,000 Canadians annually. The economic impact of tobacco use surpasses CAD \$16 billion every year (Government of Canada, 2022). In 2022, approximately 11% of Canadians aged 12 and above self-identified as occasional or regular tobacco users (IBIS World, 2023). In response, the Government of Canada has set a goal of achieving less than 5% tobacco use by 2035, aiming to alleviate the substantial health and financial burdens associated with tobacco-related deaths and diseases (Government of Canada, 2022). Successfully reaching this target holds the potential to save millions of lives and billions of dollars in the long run.

# What Makes Imagination Group's Tobacco Unique

## Caring for the Tobacco

All Imagination Group's tobacco is blessed by an Elder, and the team takes great care of their tobacco during the storage and packaging process. When the team is working with the tobacco, they are cognizant of the things that they say and how they speak. They limit their conversation to positive experiences and ensure that those working with tobacco are in a positive state of mind. This is extremely important as it helps ensure that the tobacco reflects this frame of mind and remains in a sacred, respectful state for future ceremonial use.

*"We care for the tobacco like a child. So, we bring no negativity around tobacco. We don't handle tobacco if we're in a negative state of mind. We smudge the tobacco once a week, anytime we touch the tobacco to work with it, we smudge. We're particular about the care that we put into the tobacco."*

## Automation

Part of what separates Imagination Group from other tobacco wholesalers is that they have automated their packaging process. This has ensured that their products have minimal interaction with humans and that the tobacco remain in its purest form.

*"We have reduced the amount of hand touching or manipulating of the tobacco by a human drastically. The reason why we do this is because of that intentionality. We can't control everyone's ability to be in a positive state of mind or to understand the importance of protocol with tobacco, especially caring for the tobacco. What we've done is we've used automation equipment that takes the tobacco from cut to a final product. So, that's one of the things that make our tobacco very different."*



# What Makes Imagination Group's Tobacco Unique

*"We've automated so that anybody who orders from us, it doesn't matter how much they order, we ship same day or next day. Our competitors can't do that. They haven't automated [their process]."*

## Packaging

In creating Imagination Group's Ceremonial Tobacco bundles, Colby wanted to ensure their products were ready for gifting. Customers receive their tobacco in ready-made tins, similar to old snuff tins.

This is an important distinction for Colby as customers would previously buy conventional tobacco, filled with chemicals and additives, and then need to separate the tobacco into tobacco ties or some sort of package themselves. Having a ready-to-gift product that is clean, well taken care of, and with minimal human interaction is crucial to keeping the intentionality and purpose in place.

In Canada, 93.8% of the population utilizes the internet (We Are Social, 2023) with over 25% of Canadians dedicating 20 hours or more to internet usage each week (Statistics Canada, 2020). The share of social media users between the ages of 16 and 64 who visit social platforms specifically to gather information about brands and explore their content is around 40% (We Are Social, 2023). For brands and businesses, these numbers represent a vast and highly engaged audience. Utilizing smart digital marketing approaches to connect with, and capture the attention of, this tech-savvy consumer is crucial for seizing the opportunities offered by the online marketplace.



In 2022, digital advertising revenue in Canada surged to nearly CAD \$14.2 billion, showcasing a resilient industry on the rebound post-pandemic. The sector experienced a 15% growth in 2022 compared to the impressive 28.1% recorded in 2021, signifying a steady recovery. Revenue is predominantly concentrated in performance channels, such as search and social media — over 70% of the total revenue — reflecting the strategic choices of marketers navigating through an uncertain economic perspective. The current landscape highlights the industry's adaptability and the diverse opportunities contributing to its strong performance (Interactive Advertising Bureau of Canada, 2023).

# Challenges

## Regulations

Running a business that operates in a heavily regulated industry comes with its own set of challenges. Learning how to work with the various parties involved in the regulatory process was difficult at first. Imagination Group needed to be approved by the federal government to sell their products, but that did not include the ability to sell within Canada's provinces — with each province having their own set of regulations that needed to be followed.

*“We had to navigate all the rules, how to do it properly, working with Health Canada, working with CRA, work with the ministries of finance for each province, and you know, jump through all the hoops.”*

Furthermore, Imagination Group recognized that it needed to be set up as a wholesaler and as a manufacturer of tobacco products. To be a manufacturer of tobacco products in Canada comes with a special license called an excise license, which allows companies to manufacture tobacco products. It is a lot more difficult to obtain this type of license. Thus, determining their business structure was important as it saved Imagination Group time and resources while allowing them to enter the marketplace effectively and quickly by managing all aspects of the manufacturing of their tobacco.

## Cost

Tobacco is an expensive industry to enter. Colby estimates that it was close to a million dollars to start his tobacco business. Without relying on his successful and well-known Indigenous gifts business, it would be extremely difficult to start a business in this space with no name recognition or prior market experience. The return on investment is not guaranteed as various regulations limit businesses trying to market their products. In Canada, tobacco companies are restricted from advertising and promoting their products, making it difficult for companies like Imagination Group to socialize their products, build their brand, and build trust with their customers.

*“There’s no mechanism to market tobacco in Canada. Even with all my experience, and I’m in my 29th year being self-employed, I don’t think I fully understood how different of a buildup for this business it would be — not being able to market your product or your brand. It is very difficult. This is an organic growth initiative that is difficult. We’re lucky that we have a brand that’s known in a lot of other different areas and across different sectors.”*

# Challenges

## Automation

While there are clear benefits to automating their packaging process, it comes with its own set of challenges. Particularly, there are no established automation processes for ceremonial tobacco products. This was something that Colby had to work through and develop on his own.

*“I had to go and figure out the automation. And this is something that I have realistically, I probably spent 10,000 hours working on the automation. So, there are no machines designed for small-scale tobacco manufacturing. We utilized equipment designed for other product manufacturing, but I found smaller-scale equipment that could produce tobacco the way I needed it.”*

## Contraband Tobacco

Lastly, there are others in the marketplace that Imagination Group competes with that do not follow the rules and regulations of the industry. There is a lot of contraband tobacco that can be found in their product stream, which can make it difficult to compete against because those companies are evading the rules and not paying their fair share in taxes.

*“We want to follow all the laws. One, we’re just honest people, but two, we believe it destroys the nature of the tobacco and the positive intentionality.”*



# Opportunities and Growth

## Opportunities and Growth

Colby has ambitious plans to grow Imagination Group's ceremonial tobacco product line. To do so, Colby envisions that the automation process will need to be completed and perfected to maximize output and quality. Their goal is to finish this process in 2024.

*"We want to automate the whole line. We'll still have some human components to it. But every action within the production line will have a machine or robotic component to it."*

Finishing the automation process will help them enter and compete in new, larger markets. Colby has his sights set on entering the crowded U.S. market soon.

There are potential opportunities to enter the Canadian tobacco retail market as well. While this opportunity would provide potential marketing opportunities that do not currently exist, it does come with challenges. For example, Imagination Group will need to work with a distributor that has a license to sell across Canada and each province. This comes with its own set of taxation protocols to follow.

Having their tobacco in retail stores would act as a marketing arm for the company as potential customers would know it is readily available. For now, their ceremonial tobacco products can be elusive to those who do not know they exist. Colby's goal is to provoke some change in how ceremonial tobacco is regulated at the federal and provincial levels.

*"This would be our next move forward in getting a better foothold [in the retail market] and trying to convert the individuals who buy conventional tobacco for ceremonial purposes and gifting to buying ceremonial tobacco. That's our overall goal. We would also like to evoke some change within federal regulations around ceremonial tobacco."*



## Branding

For Imagination Group, using the Petroglyph icon as branding was important because of what it symbolizes — it brings people together and helps to demonstrate that the world is built on Indigenous teachings. It is an opportunity to show that Indigenous Peoples are part of the broader global community and have been since time immemorial.

“That Petroglyph icon, that’s been our branding and logo from day one. So, it wasn’t tobacco-related.

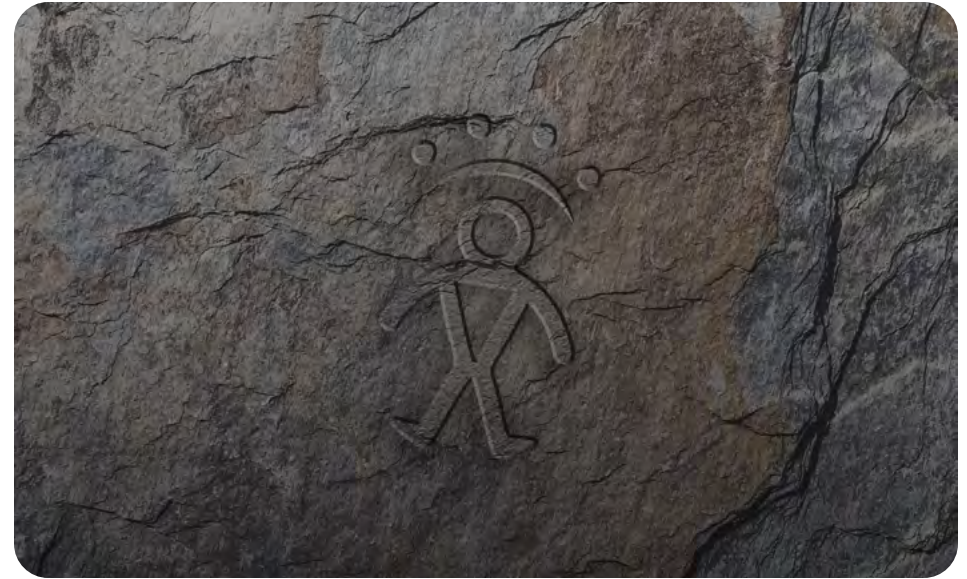
It was Indigenous-related. It’s the one thing that you see all around the world that ties Indigenous Peoples together, it doesn’t matter what part of the world they’re from.”

## The Role of Arts and Culture in Reconciliation

Colby sees a central role for arts and culture in the broader theme of reconciliation. Arts and culture can help promote reconciliation by fostering understanding, promoting dialogue, and celebrating the rich diversity of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

Recognizing the importance and value of Indigenous arts and culture can help take significant steps towards understanding while promoting a more inclusive and equitable future.

Colby looks to the role Indigenous culture plays in New Zealand as an example that Canada can strive to replicate.



*“I think if we were to look at other countries that are further ahead than Canada, not only in reconciliation but maybe more in that adoption of Indigenous culture. The greatest one, I believe, is New Zealand. If we were to look at Māori people, the work that that country has done, adopting Māori culture as the national culture is so powerful.”*

Canada has the potential to do the same. Colby believes it will happen through cultural experiences that can be accessed by all. We may have our differences, but cultural experiences allow us to learn, grow, and gain respect for things we may not be familiar with.

*“Look at the statement that Louis Riel made, it’ll be our artists, our people will sleep for 100 years, and it will be our artists who bring back culture and our spirit.”*



## Indigenous Heritage

Colby looks at his Métis heritage as a cultural bridge builder. By definition, Métis people are both European and First Nations, and Colby believes that this gives him a unique opportunity to be a connecting force for both groups of people.

*“We were cultural bridge builders. We were working with European settlers, and we were working with First Nations. We were this unique group that was built by both. We were created by both. It has informed our business, my business practices, and the ingenuity we utilize.”*

He credits his heritage and belief in his ability to solve problems through a touch of ingenuity as the reason for the success of Imagination Group and the successful launch of its tobacco line.

*“We find unique ways to solve problems. My ability to create a tobacco company probably is completely based on my ingenuity and my ability to sort of think like an engineer without being one and trying to solve problems.”*

He is proud of his Métis heritage, which has translated to other endeavours as well, most notably with the work that he has done with his charity, Influence Mentoring Society.

*“When you look at the charity that I co-founded, we’re ensuring that Indigenous post-secondary students feel supported along their journey and creating an opportunity for them to be engaged in Canada’s economy as early as possible and to build that needed business acumen. So yeah, I’m very proud to be an Indigenous person, to be Métis and really to be living probably not much differently than my grandfather did. Finding new and unique opportunities to create a sustainable future for yourself and your community.”*



# Indigenous Heritage



## Significance of Gift Giving

Gift-giving is a form of exchange that has been employed by Indigenous Peoples since time immemorial. For many Indigenous communities in Canada, the act of giving a gift is oftentimes associated with learning, value, or feeling being transferred from one person to another. In this regard, gifting is less about the material aspect of the gift, but rather the responsibility embedded in the gifting process — to enact commitment to sacred laws, kin, and community (Hobenshield, 2022). It is intended to balance relationships and demonstrate mutual respect between two parties.

Gift giving is an embodiment of showing respect to the receiver, as well as appreciation of the knowledge that is shared. It is especially important to consider gift-giving when you are seeking advice, insights, knowledge, or other forms of guidance from Elders

and Knowledge Keepers. It is always good to do research or check with the Elder you are engaging with as to which form of gift is most appropriate. For many, a small bundle of tobacco is accepted as a token of appreciation and good intentions. Other gifts that are commonly used include but are not limited to copper, other sacred medicines, or authentic Indigenous artwork. In any gift-giving scenario, it is important to keep in mind that it is not so much about the gift, but rather the act of recognizing the other party and respecting them in a relationship.

The tradition of gifting was deeply rooted in Indigenous cultures long before contact with settlers. For many Indigenous Peoples, it means sharing one's resources to benefit and support others. Sharing, reciprocity, and community are some of the key factors that have allowed Indigenous Peoples to thrive on this continent for millennia.

# Advice for Future Entrepreneurs



## Advice for Future Entrepreneurs

Colby offers great advice for those looking to explore their entrepreneurial journey. Find a mentor. During his journey, Colby sought the advice of experts, surrounded himself with mentors in different areas of business, and built his own personal board of directors.

*“The people that I see who are doing this the most successfully are gaining multiple mentors in different areas. If you need someone who’s going to give you a general sense of business, find that individual. You probably need an individual who knows your sector well. So, if you’re starting a tobacco business, go find someone in tobacco.”*

Mentors will often provide real-world experiences that one cannot gain from the theoretical approaches taught in school. Learning from someone engaged in the market day in and day out is invaluable.

*“Everyone has a specific skill set, and they bring that to you because they care, they want to help, they want to share their information, and you utilize that information to propel you forward. And I just think it’s a more powerful tool than only possessing the theoretical things you’re learning in business school.”*

Lastly, Colby suggests that it is reasonable to start a business while working for someone else. It is easier to make decisions and grow your business when you are mentally grounded and financially stable. Everyone has a unique entrepreneurial journey, and it is important to make decisions that are best for your business based on its circumstances and ignore what others are doing.

*“Keep that in mind when you’re formulating what [your business] is. Don’t look at the organization you’re reading about in magazines or on social media. Most of us are in the trenches just making stuff happen.”*

# Advice for Future Entrepreneurs



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# Acknowledgements

## Land Acknowledgement

Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning and the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business is on the treaty lands and traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit and homeland of Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit.

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The research team would like to thank Colby Delorme of Imagination Group Inc. who generously shared his time, experiences, and knowledge throughout the development of this case study.

## Suggested Citation

Wubbenhorst, A., Henebry, J., & Silva, A. (2023). *Indsights - A Window into the Indigenous Economy: A Case Study on Imagination Group Inc.* (pp. 1–20). Toronto, Ontario: Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. Retrieved from [www.indsights.ca](http://www.indsights.ca).





**Insights**





# Indsights

A Window into the Indigenous Economy