

## Meaningful Job Experience Jumpstarts Entrepreneurship

Jason Macdonald always wanted to start a company and be his own boss. After gaining experience in the banking and auto industries, he came up with the idea for an IT company that customizes software for these sectors. He took the plunge and started the venture in 2004. Seven years later, his PEI-based firm MJL Enterprises is moving full-speed ahead and adding new industries to his roster of clients.

“Launching a company is like facing a complex problem and can appear daunting. Rather than being overwhelmed, I approach problem solving by breaking down the process into small, achievable chunks,” says Jason. “It’s much easier to get a project completed following that type of methodology. In addition to using that approach myself, I coach my staff to look at projects in separate steps so that they can have success along the way to reaching their final goal.”



When Jason was in high school, he had a co-op placement at a bank that gave him practical experience early on. The co-op led to his initial career in banking and helped build the knowledge foundation for his business. Wanting to give other youth the same opportunity to learn, he has partnered with a high-school enrichment program called Shad Valley to provide internships to high-school students.

Shad Valley is a four-week summer program that places high-achieving secondary-school students at one of 10 universities across Canada. Approximately 50 students stay together in each campus residence for the month of July, supervised by faculty leaders, and take part in advanced academic lectures and workshops on science, engineering, technology and entrepreneurship. A hallmark of the program is introducing students to innovative and entrepreneurial thinking, thereby increasing their ability to apply their knowledge to real-world issues.

After the academic portion of the program, participants have the opportunity to compete for month-long internships in August at companies in their local community. Organizations like MJL in each province offer positions where students see the operations of a business firsthand and contribute to an enterprise in a meaningful way.

“Entrepreneurship takes many forms. One is launching a company. Another is bringing an entrepreneurial mindset to an employer and advancing innovation from the inside,” says Jason. “Exposing high-school students to a business environment helps foster that spirit. At MJL, our interns learn people skills by interacting with staff and clients. They see the importance of adapting quickly to change in order to meet customer needs and keep ahead of technology. They experience the value of different perspectives and learn that there is always a way to tackle a problem.”

Jason has found PEI to be a great spot to start a business. Government agencies, such as Innovation PEI, help with funding and guidance, and the community rallies round. The province supports PEI students who attend the Shad Valley program through the Premier’s Innovation Scholarship, which reduces the fee for attending the program by \$1,000 per student. Shad Valley, a registered charity, also offers financial aid to students who need help to cover program costs.