



# The 411 on Entrepreneurial Support Organizations



## Who are ESOs?

Entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) support, mentor, train, and sometimes fund entrepreneurs and early-stage businesses. ESOs help spur innovation and economic growth by providing business development services and resources to help founders develop, scale, and sustain viable businesses.

## Where to find support from ESOs?

ESOs can be based out of universities, government agencies, for-profit and nonprofit organizations and include [accelerators](#), [incubators](#), entrepreneurship centers, [small business development centers](#), and [women's business centers](#).

### TIP:

Enter any of these terms into your internet search browser to find ESOs near you!



## What do ESOs offer?

ESOs offer a range of support and can differ in a number of ways.

- **Programming:** ESOs structure their support program or services in different ways. For example, program lengths, scope, and intensity vary widely, as do the kind and level of business coaching, mentorship, and resources an ESO offers. Program goals may also differ, as some ESOs focus on helping entrepreneurs find funding sources or investors, while others may focus on helping companies scale or grow their customer base.
- **Resources:** ESOs may offer a range of resources, including training, business and advisory support (such as attorneys and accountants), administrative support, mentorship, coworking space, and educational and networking opportunities.
- **Company Stage and Industry:** ESOs focus on companies at different lifecycle stages. Some ESOs target founders who are still developing their business model, product or idea, while others help scale an existing viable business. ESOs may focus on particular industries or affinity groups (e.g., based on race, gender, veteran-status, or geography).
- **Funding:** Some ESOs provide funding (e.g., grants or investments), while others may provide opportunities to meet and connect with potential investors (e.g., demo days and pitch competitions). Founders should be aware that federal securities laws may [limit how they can pitch their businesses](#) or who can [connect them with potential investors](#), and failure to comply with those laws could have [consequences](#).
- **Community:** No matter the structure, ESOs seek to provide a network of entrepreneurs and advisors, although the breadth and experience of the advisors, mentors, coaches, investors, and founders within these communities vary greatly.

## When to seek support from an ESO?

You may wish to consider the following to determine if you and your business are ready to engage with an incubator, accelerator, or other ESO:

- Do you work on your business full time?
- Are you ready to dedicate the time required of an ESO's program?
- Is your business plan and product/service fully developed or still in development?
- Is the ESO program you're considering the right fit for your current business needs?

## How to choose an ESO?

- **Prioritize:** Consider the kind of program(s), funding, and networking opportunities the organization provides. Do the organization and its program(s) align with your goals? Be clear about what you're looking for (e.g., customers, funding, or mentorship).
- **Reflect:** Be realistic about where your business is in its life cycle (i.e., are you looking to ideate or scale?) and how much time you can devote to an ESO program, as the focus, intensity, and requirements vary.
- **Research:** Consider the ESO's reputation and success rates, check references, and interview alumni. Do your homework and ask questions!
- **Persevere:** ESOs are oversubscribed and highly selective, so expect to hear "no" but be prepared to work towards "yes." Time can be an entrepreneur's greatest resource, so be thoughtful and strategic about where you spend your time. While you may want an ESO to choose you, you also choose them!

Have suggestions on additional educational resources? Email [smallbusiness@sec.gov](mailto:smallbusiness@sec.gov).

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