

Community-based innovation: 'local' matters

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The pace of change in the global economy is punctuating the importance of strengthened innovation performance and competitiveness. Most leading nations have recognized that optimizing national innovative capacity also means optimizing innovative capacity at the local and regional levels.

Innovation is a local phenomenon. The local innovation environment . . . think of Porter's four elements (innovation infrastructure, cluster-specific conditions, quality of linkages, company innovation orientation) . . . in any community or region is vital to sustainable economic development.

There are many excellent examples in Canada of communities, large and small, that have successfully implemented technology-based economic growth strategies. And many of them have also established brand recognition based on that success. For several years now, Moncton has been gaining a reputation as a great city in which to live and do business. The city rebounded dramatically from several economic shocks in the 1980s, and is now one of the two fastest growing urban economies in eastern Canada.

The first officially bilingual city in Canada, Moncton capitalized on the province's investment in digitization to attract significant investments in the customer contact industry. The city has recorded five consecutive years of record growth in construction, and has been successful in attracting new investment in the manufacturing sector. In fact, manufacturing employment in Moncton grew by over 67 per cent between 1991 and 2001, while nationally it declined. Despite these and other encouraging indicators, the city faces a number of key challenges.

These include significant demographic pressures, gaps in post-secondary education offerings, and a lack of challenging employment opportunities in knowledge-based industries. A group of leaders from the ICT sector, post-secondary and research institutions, and local government came together in 2004 to initiate a dialogue aimed at accelerating technology-based enterprise in the Moncton area. The Moncton Technology Planning Group (MTPG), convinced that most of the key success factors were present, entered into a partnership with the IC2 Institute at the University of Texas at Austin to undertake a detailed assessment and develop a strategy.

A central consideration for Moncton, as it should be for any community, is developing a strategy that reflects who we are as a community and what competitive advantage our region can mobilize for success in the global economy. Cities and regions that are succeeding are those that have been effective in spurring technological innovation, entrepreneurship, education and advanced skills.

Focus and specialization to gain critical mass in key sectors, building on existing areas of strength, are also key for communities to gain competitive advantage. Moncton's partners from Texas bring a shared belief in the value of bringing global knowledge to local solutions. They also bring extensive experience working with communities in all parts of the world in addressing their unique innovation challenges.

The partnership has been a revelation for all involved. It is remarkable when you go through an exercise like this just how much you can learn about your own community.

And how much it can open your eyes to the possibilities . . . and the limitations. It is very much about relationship building, and the development and extension of not just local networks, but international ones as well.

The MTPG's objective is to "up our game" with a made in Moncton strategy. In the end, the MTPG-IC2 partnership will provide the community with a report and action plan that will guide Moncton's innovation and knowledge-based economic development.

The MTPG is both determined and confident that the Moncton area's technology-based economy can contribute more fully to the social and economic well-being of the community and its residents.

Optimizing the environment for robust growth of technology-based industry . . . putting in place the conditions where smart, innovative young people have the education and the working environment in which to thrive . . . those are the keys to long-term prosperity and competitiveness locally, regionally and nationally. If regions and communities succeed in this way, then nations have a chance to make their innovative capacity as great as the sum of their parts, as opposed to just some of their parts.