

Publication: Telegraph-Journal; Date: Jun 10, 2014; Section: Opinion; Page: A7

Partner with the West, New Brunswick

TIM RYAN COMMENTARY

ew Brunswick boasts a multitude of vibrant small to medium-sized professional services companies.

Daily, those firms provide accounting, information technology, advertising, public relations, legal, surveying, environmental, project management, and engineering services, to name but a few. People employed in those fields often have post-secondary training and hold professional certificates, designations, and licenses that are recognized nationally or are easily transferrable between provinces.

They see themselves as the connectors that enable government, private companies, industry, and communities to generate economic development thorough the advancement of projects from concept to execution. A distinctive feature shared by many of our New Brunswick-based small to medium sized companies is their qualified, experienced, and stable workforce.

Unfortunately, the professional services sector is vulnerable to periods of economic booms and busts. The economic downturn New Brunswick has experienced over the past few years has also considerably affected professionals. Demand for professional services firms fell under our stalled regional economy and we are only now beginning to once again see growth. The shrinking pie of meaningful work created a highly cost-conscious and fiercely competitive market. In response, employees of these organizations often witnessed a reduction in professional growth opportunities and incurred stress associated with job insecurity. Corporate leadership has also been faced with balancing costs while maintaining a team that allows the organization to remain sustainable.

During this challenging economic period, Fundy Engineering, and a number of other professional service firms in our Province discovered options and innovative opportunities to retain employees, remain sustainable, and help rebuild our economy. It required some unconventional thinking and a desire to look beyond our borders, but it's been worth it.

Part of the solution for our professional services firms is looking to other regions in Canada that are currently experiencing tremendous growth and prosperity. Based on a quick scan of recent job ads, the exodus of workers is to Canada's "have" Provinces. The natural resource-based economies of those regions, which is centred on upstream oil and gas, typically offer workers high pay. But, those economies are not without their problems. The supply shortage of qualified and stable personnel there is the other key to success for our small to medium sized professional services companies.

New Brunswick professional services firms need to seize the opportunities available to them and build business to business relationships with like-minded companies in the "have" regions. Under this model, our New Brunswick based companies can serve as back office support to their partner by providing remote support right from here through the modern advances in technology. This allows New Brunswickers to stay here with their families.

Using Alberta as an example, professional services firms located here offer companies there several unique opportunities. Our three hour time zone advantage provides an extended workday. New Brunswickers can be working on files while their counterparts are still sleeping and making their way into the office. Likewise, Albertans can continue working on the file after professionals here have gone home for the night. The greatest asset of New Brunswick small to medium sized professional services firms is their highly qualified, stable, and loyal work force. Many of the companies in the "have" provinces operate in a very fluid and competitive economy where skilled resources are becoming increasingly difficult to locate and much more expensive to attract. New Brunswick firms offer an attractive solution to their challenge.

We have the ability to provide immediate support at reasonable rates. New Brunswick's brand is strong in the "have" regions of Canada and is due to the strong work ethic that is recognized in those that have already made the trek to those areas.

I challenge the leadership of all New Brunswick small to medium sized professional services firms to move outside of their comfort zone by undertaking a simple step-by-step business development strategy.

Better yet, take a visit to Calgary, Edmonton, Fort MacMurray or Saskatoon and see for yourself where you can help out. I bet you won't be sorry! Those initial conversations may quickly turn into in-person visits where bonds are strengthened and relationships are forged.

We have made the investment in building partnerships in Alberta and are proof this strategy works. We now have a strong relationships with an environmental services firm in Calgary and support each other's operations. Professional services can easily be exported from bases here.

Doing so will clearly help bolster and strengthen our domestic economy and maintain the sustainability of professional services firms here. And as market conditions improve here in New Brunswick, your company will be even stronger now that you have an export partner.

On June 19th industry, government, Enterprise Saint John and the Atlantica Centre for Energy, as part of True Growth 2.0, will build on the partnerships created to date, and discuss ways of strengthening economic ties between New Brunswick and Alberta. With the potential of the Energy East Pipeline coming to Saint John, we want to leverage the opportunities this project presents. We can build Alberta's supply chain to include more New Brunswick businesses; at the same time we create opportunities for Alberta companies to expand their operations by opening new markets for their crude.

To grow our businesses, and the New Brunswick economy, we need to look beyond our borders, and move beyond our comfort zones. By being bold, and seizing the opportunities in front of us, we will bring more prosperity to New Brunswick.

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TransCanada CEO Russ Girling, right, and TransCanada president of energy and oil pipelines Alex Pourbaix discuss the Energy East Pipeline project in 2013. Writer Tim Ryan argues that besides Energy East, there are lots of other opportunities for New Brunswick firms to find opportunity and contracts in western Canada. PhoTo: JEFF McINTOSH/ THE CANADIAN PRESS