

Innovation push must start here

By Kevin Lynch And David Mitchell, The StarPhoenix March 23, 2012

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Remember the old saying, "Think globally, act locally." When it comes to innovation in Canada, we need to "Think locally and act globally."

Leading Innovation: Insights from Canadian Regions - a Public Policy Forum report authored in partnership with BMO Financial Group, Deloitte and Business Development Bank of Canada - reveals how much innovation originates locally and is pushed globally, often bypassing national trends.

Leading Innovation engaged entrepreneurs, small and medium enterprise leaders, funders and connectors across Canada to better understand the efforts being made to drive innovation. We visited innovation centres in five regions and spoke with hundreds of leaders at the local and regional levels.

We sought to learn how innovation gains are being made in communities, and how we can build on these successes.

Through this micro approach, we encountered the challenges and opportunities that individuals and companies face in spurring innovation. We saw how innovation is happening at the community level where enterprises, not-for-profit organizations and academic institutions are joining forces to build on the strengths of their region (i.e. mining and agri-food in Saskatoon, ocean technologies in St. John's, health technologies in the York region, mentorship initiatives in Montreal, innovation support in Calgary) and expand their reach globally.

Saskatoon provides an interesting example of how innovation can grow from a traditional resource base.

In the past, very active Crown corporation investment and regulation in Saskatchewan instilled a culture of greater reliance on government investment and leadership rather than a dependence on the regional entrepreneurial system to generate business ventures. However, this is fading and being replaced with greater encouragement of entrepreneurship through more collaboration across the education system, small businesses and established companies.

The entrepreneurial system in Saskatoon is working to utilize existing resources to advance the region's innovation agenda. There are highly innovative companies working in Saskatoon, but they often work outside formal collaborations.

Better collaboration among businesses, and between businesses and university researchers will spur this innovation even more.

Additionally, the private sector needs to benefit more from the city's cluster strength in mining and agri-food.

There is no single "secret sauce" in innovation, but there is a need for shared purpose and more active collaboration. We can learn from best practices in Canada's innovation ecosystem, such as changing the entrepreneurial culture and tapping local economic strength and talent, as is the focus in the Saskatoon area.

Leading Innovation did identify three areas in which we must systematically move to support and to tangibly advance innovation in Canada's regions: strong regional innovation systems; active accelerators and networks; and available early-stage risk capital.

What is clear from our pan-Canadian roundtables is that local leaders from business, government, not-for-profit and higher education advancing new ideas and new enterprises are driving innovation in this country. They are being supported by connectors and funders who are first engaged locally. For Canada to be a true "Innovation Nation," we must continue to support and build strong local ecosystems, including encouraging more active collaboration across and within sectors, and clear cluster strategies in every part of the country.

These actions range from the organization level (e.g. entrepreneurship mentoring), to the regional level (e.g. creating collaboration hubs) to the national level (e.g. expertise-based innovation support). Some are small steps, some are large. But, taken together, the Leading Innovation partners believe that these actions can lead to quickened pace, tangible advances in product and process development, and a more successful innovation system that will ensure Canada's long-term economic place in the world.

The Leading Innovation report is available at www.ppforum.ca.

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