

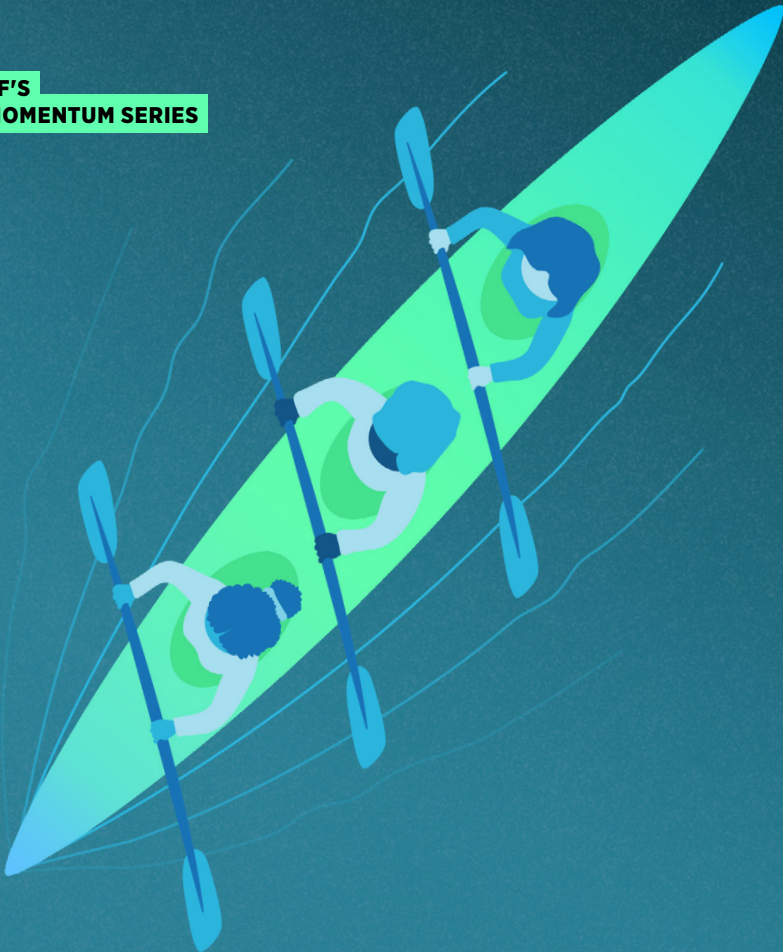


# The Belonging Advantage

How Quality of Life is Translating into  
Big Economic Gains for Atlantic Canada

BY MARK STEVENSON

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ATLANTIC MOMENTUM SERIES**





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**It struck the team from Thales Canada every time they landed in New Brunswick, and again on the day the multinational technology giant announced it would establish a National Digital Excellence Centre and move its cyber security operations to Fredericton.**

They'd been impressed by the economic vitality and the growing talent pool not just in New Brunswick but in Atlantic Canada overall, yet there was something else that made the region attractive. "There is a unique quality to the warmth, the community pride you feel there. Every time we visited, we could feel it. Even the security


personnel at the airport were just so welcoming,” says Cara Salci, vice-president, strategy & government relations for Thales Canada.

It may be a bit of an East Coast cliché that the region is more homey and hospitable than the rest of Canada, but it’s actually something that’s borne out in research. And it’s becoming increasingly important. For Thales, which will be hiring up to 100 people in New Brunswick over the next 10 years, and which hopes to move some from Ontario as well, that sense of the place fed into its decision.

“We’ve had interest from people in Ontario to move to New Brunswick,” says Salci. “It might be because they have family there, or some kind of connection that speaks to them. But it also offers a unique value proposition. You can have a great job with a large organization. You can have access to nature and recreational activities second to none. Housing is more affordable. It’s absolutely part of the decision to locate. Talent resourcing is just a tremendous priority for being able to have a successful business.”

The Public Policy Forum’s [Atlantic Momentum Index](#) released in March showed Atlantic Canadians report a greater satisfaction with their quality of life than Canadians as a whole, and a greater sense of belonging to the community.<sup>1</sup> Both indicators are based on Statistics Canada surveys, and the latter is particularly strong. [StatCan reports](#) that the percentage of Atlantic Canadians with a strong or very strong sense of belonging to the local community stood at 54.5 percent last year, almost nine percentage points higher than Canada as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Both factors showed increased momentum in the 2015-2021/22 period, compared to the previous seven years, with their average annual rate of growth improving. Canada as a whole had momentum in neither.

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Life satisfaction comes from a range of factors beginning with basics such as employment (which is growing more quickly in Atlantic Canada than in the country as a whole), employment income (which isn't) and housing affordability (in October, the [average home price](#) in all four Atlantic provinces was at least \$230,000 lower than the national average, and at least \$400,000 lower than in Ontario).<sup>3</sup>

Beyond economics are lifestyle factors like those Cara Salci noted. Commute times are shorter and recreational activities more accessible. “If you have a young family, you can finish your workday at 5, be home at 5:15 and take your kids to soccer, which is five minutes away,” says Traci Simmons, the CEO of Opportunities New Brunswick, the province's economic development agency. “That tends to resonate with people.” And, of course, the ocean is never far away.

Sense of belonging feeds into life satisfaction but is an important indicator on its own. It's thought to be stronger in the Atlantic provinces for a number of reasons — people tend to live closer to extended families and family connections often go back generations. With less time pressure, people are better able to stay connected to friends, family and neighbours.

Engage Nova Scotia, a non-profit organization dedicated to studying and improving the social fabric of the province, undertook a [massive survey](#)<sup>4</sup> of 12,000 Nova Scotians in 2019 that captured some of this:

- **Nova Scotians have an average of 5.84 relatives with whom they are close, and at least four neighbours of whom they could ask a favour;**
- **Nine of 10 Nova Scotians socialize with friends every month, typically at least twice a week; and**
- **Asked to rank their satisfaction with various aspects of well-being, they gave high marks to everything from personal relationships and access to parks to their neighbourhood as a good place to live.**

Call it Atlantic Canada's "Belonging Advantage." It was evident in the COVID pandemic, when the region famously saw a flood of ex-pats streaming back home and a flood of other Canadians looking to relocate. "The pandemic was a reset for a lot of people," says Danny Graham, chief engagement officer of Engage Nova Scotia. "A lot of people began to re-evaluate 'where do I want to live' and the answer came down to 'I want home to feel like home.' A place they feel connected to others and to the fabric of the community." The fact that the four provinces banded together in the Atlantic Bubble to co-ordinate rules and responses contributed to the sense of the region's social cohesion.

It's part of what's driving the population boom. All four provinces saw record levels of net migration from the rest of Canada during COVID. New Brunswick saw more than five times as many net interprovincial migrants in 2021-22 as two years earlier,<sup>5</sup> Nova Scotia nearly [three times](#)<sup>6</sup> and P.E.I. roughly [double](#).<sup>7</sup> Newfoundland and Labrador [reversed](#) a pre-pandemic

**“67% of immigrants in Atlantic Canada who had come a year earlier were still in their province of arrival”**



population drain.<sup>8</sup> How much of this is due to people chasing quality of life and how much is due to a resurgent economy in the region is difficult to know, but interprovincial migration together with a huge immigration uptick is driving a population boom after decades of relative decline.

The rise in population growth in Atlantic Canada from 2015 to 2022, as captured by the Momentum Index, was four times larger than the comparable national figure. Moncton and Halifax finished [first and second](#) among Canadian cities in population growth in 2021-2022, with Charlottetown second among smaller metropolitan centres.<sup>9</sup>

As important as the raw numbers are, the fact that so many are staying is just as critical. For decades, Atlantic Canada served as a launching pad, where immigrants landed on their way to another region. But the Momentum Index showed that has reversed as well. In 2010, the first year for which comprehensive data are available, 67 percent of immigrants in Atlantic Canada who had come a year earlier were still in their province of arrival. By 2019, the most recent year for which data are available, the retention rate jumped to 72 percent. (It's highest in Nova Scotia at 77 percent and lowest in P.E.I. at 58 percent.)

Again, it's difficult to know exactly how much of that's due simply to the region's economic vitality, but there is no question the Belonging Advantage matters. Ather Akbari, a labour economist at St. Mary's University, undertook a [huge study](#) in 2019, interviewing 2,815 immigrants who came to Nova Scotia between 2011 to 2018, 74 percent of whom were still in the province.<sup>10</sup> Asked the primary reason they moved to Nova Scotia, 29 percent said employment opportunities and 15 percent said quality of life, the second most popular choice. When asked to rank the importance of various factors in the decision, “safe community” received the highest average



**“For policy-makers, that means treating quality-of-life issues with the same urgency as economic concerns.”**



score, followed by quality of life and then employment opportunities.

Akbari also asked a simple, open-ended question: Why do you continue to stay in Nova Scotia? The number of mentions of quality-of-life factors (love it/happy here, it's a nice/safe/beautiful place, friendly people/place) far outstripped economic factors (employment opportunities, affordable housing). For those who left the province, finding a job or a better job was the number one reason. “I interviewed ex-Nova Scotia immigrants in Alberta and Ontario and many said that if they could find appropriate employment in the province they would like to move back,” Akbari told the Public Policy Forum in an interview.

The Belonging Advantage is a clear drawing card at a time of labour shortages. “In the past, the focus was on finding jobs for people. We are now in a time of finding people for jobs,” says Wendy Luther, CEO of Halifax Partnership, the city’s economic development organization. “What companies are asking, top of their list on decision-making, is: ‘Where will I find the talent?’” Halifax last year added “increase residents’ well-being” to the topline goals of its new five-year [economic strategy](#), alongside more traditional population and GDP goals, in recognition of its importance.<sup>11</sup>

### Relative importance of each factor in decision to immigrate or move to Nova Scotia

Respondents were asked, “How important were the following factors in your decision to immigrate or move to Nova Scotia? Rate on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all important and 5 is extremely important.”

Reason	Score					Average Score
	1 Not at all important	2	3 Neutral	4	5 Extremely important	
	percent	percent	percent	percent	percent	
Safe community	4.5	2.0	9.6	24.7	59.2	<b>4.3</b>
Quality of life*	5.1	3.6	12.6	30.0	48.8	<b>4.1</b>
Employment opportunities for myself	8.1	5.3	12.7	18.5	55.5	<b>4.1</b>
Community without discrimination	9.0	5.5	14.2	23.9	47.4	<b>4.0</b>
Health care	7.4	6.6	17.2	23.4	45.4	<b>3.9</b>
Affordable cost of living	6.0	5.7	19.2	28.7	40.4	<b>3.9</b>
Access to good quality accommodation	7.6	5.7	19.6	32.0	35.2	<b>3.8</b>
To build a better life for my children	21.2	3.6	9.5	16.1	49.6	<b>3.7</b>
Employment opportunities for spouse	20.4	6.0	13.2	18.6	41.9	<b>3.6</b>

\*Example: Recreation, public transportation, natural beauty, uncrowded, wide-open spaces.

Continued

Reason	Score					Average Score
	<b>1</b> Not at all important	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b> Neutral	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b> Extremely important	
	percent	percent	percent	percent	percent	
Education opportunities for my children	23.0	4.3	11.8	17.3	43.5	<b>3.5</b>
Recognition of my credentials	16.7	7.5	18.6	22.5	34.8	<b>3.5</b>
Education opportunities for myself or/ spouse	18.9	10.2	18.6	21.0	31.4	<b>3.4</b>
Organizations that help with access to services or the, government, etc.	18.6	12.6	21.5	23.9	23.5	<b>3.2</b>
Availability of culturally related experiences, products and services**	18.0	12.4	27.0	23.1	19.5	<b>3.1</b>
Family / friends close by	27.0	11.2	18.5	17.5	25.8	<b>3.0</b>
Local community settlement services	23.9	13.1	22.9	20.3	19.9	<b>3.0</b>
Access to language training	41.0	11.5	16.8	14.3	16.5	<b>2.5</b>

SOURCE: "Immigration in Nova Scotia: Who Comes, Who Stays, Who Leaves and Why?" 2020.

\*\*Example: Language, religion, food, clothing, entertainment.

For policy-makers, that means treating quality-of-life issues with the same urgency as economic concerns. “This advantage we have is one of our most critical economic assets,” says Mike Davis, a consultant who advises governments on social policy. “We need to double down and triple down on it.”

Those who study these issues advocate investing in social capital — from public spaces to mental health services and programs to address social isolation — to ensure that people don’t fall through the cracks. Health care is a perennial concern across the country, and in Atlantic Canada in particular. As the economy grows and people flood in, assuring access is critical. (And among quality-of-life indicators in the Momentum Index, access to a family physician was the only one in which Atlantic Canada had no momentum.)

Economic growth needs to be inclusive and, on that front, Atlantic Canada does have some work to do. The Momentum Index looked at an indicator called NEET, a measure defined as those aged 15-29 who are not in employment, education or training. The larger the proportion of NEET, the less well the labour market is meeting youth needs and, from 2015-2021, the proportion increased at a rate of 0.3 percent per year (not a good thing). Compared to Canada as a whole, Atlantic Canada’s rate is higher (also not a good thing) though the gap is closing.

Housing will be a huge concern as the population continues to grow, as it is across the country. The COVID population influx did bring with it a kind of land rush in the form of rising house prices. (And even if prices are lower compared to big urban markets in the rest of Canada, so too are incomes.) The pace of housing starts will be crucial. The region has good momentum here, having rebounded from its poor performance

in 2008-2015, but in terms of housing starts per thousand people, it still trails the national average.

Social capital will be key to assuring Atlantic Canada maintains its Belonging Advantage. Those charged with building the region's prosperity recognize they are living in a place with an enviable quality of life, one that's experienced an economic resurgence just at the time when quality of life became more important than ever. The trick now is to make sure the one doesn't swamp the other.



# Endnotes

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