

Self-sufficiency and the creative economy

David Hawkins
THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Published Thursday December 18th, 2008

(Part 2 of a three-part series)

You just never know where creative talent and wealth generation will spring from but it is best to encourage them both wherever and whenever they seem to be trying to blossom.

One of the world's newest billionaires is a single mother who authored, from her own imagination, the best-selling suite of books and collateral intellectual property in history. Working by herself in a relatively out of the way place, she did this without a factory, without a workforce, without a research lab, and without the backing of investors or financial capitalization. Her name of course is J.K. Rowling and her story is compelling evidence of the power of creativity.

It all boils down to a simple realization. Creativity is not a product -- it's a process. It's the measure of what we do with what we have to work with. In creative hands, a simple HB pencil can write a great novel, sketch a great picture, or draft a world-changing philosophy, a life-changing strategy, a new manifesto for humanity and society. Or it can be used for kindling and consumed in the fire in just a few seconds.

The choice is up to each of us.

In the first article of this series I summarized the core proposition of social theorist and economist Dr. Richard Florida. He argues that traditional commodity-based economic models are giving way to a new creative economy. A clear sign of this trend, he maintains, is the growing number of innovative entrepreneurs, artists and professionals earning premium incomes in fields such as research, technology, education, and culture.

Perhaps surprisingly to some, Dr. Florida has identified New Brunswick as an area of significant potential for success in this new economy. He has visited the province twice in the past 10 months and has indicated that one of our cities will be on his soon-to-be released list of top places in Canada.

In this second article I want to look at what has attracted his attention to New Brunswick and how our creative potential can help us achieve the sustainable self-sufficiency that we desire so much.

To some, the proposition of a self-sufficient New Brunswick may seem far-fetched and fanciful. For generations, two sectors, forestry and fisheries, have formed the core of our economy. Thousands have been employed in harvesting the bounty of land and sea. Thousands more have worked to process, package, market and distribute these raw resources. These activities have built and sustained communities all across the province.

Self-sufficiency and the creative economy

David Hawkins
THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Still, even in the best of times, our modest geographic area and small population have been limiting factors, especially in comparison to provinces like Quebec or Ontario with populations of 10 and 17-plus times ours. Furthermore, over the past two decades changing markets, aging infrastructure, currency fluctuations, and a host of other complex factors have had devastating impacts on these traditional industries.

That is not to say that our forests and coastal waters will no longer contribute significantly to our economy. On the contrary, determined investment and innovation have helped them keep up with the best practices in these highly competitive global sectors. Still, the cost of downsizing and rationalization that accompanies this process has resulted in the permanent loss of thousands of jobs.

How then has New Brunswick managed to achieve unprecedented diversification of its economy and a steady increase in employment in recent years? Much of that achievement is directly linked to the growth of an entirely new economic base.

As it became increasingly evident, over the past 20 years, that our traditional economic mainstays were no longer proof against changes in global markets, many New Brunswickers turned their attention to finding alternatives. In our four chartered universities, specialists in science, engineering, economics, commerce, and the arts turned their attention to the understanding and promotion of innovation. Our community colleges, ever mindful of the need to prepare their students for opportunities in a future world, introduced programs in leading edge fields like environmental technology, graphic design and computer animation.

The global village, foreseen as early as the 1960s by Canadian cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan, had become a reality and New Brunswick entrepreneurs and economic developers sought and found partners who could ease our integration into these new neighbourhoods. For instance, the New Brunswick Innovation Foundation launched initiatives to encourage innovative research, training and investment at all levels.

In his recent book, *Who's Your City*, Richard Florida states boldly that today's economic transformation:

"Is bigger in scale than the shift from farms to factories a century or two ago. As a consequence (advanced economies) are shedding manufacturing jobs and generating jobs in two other economic sectors -- low-paid service work in everything from retail sales to personal service, and high-paid professional, innovative and design work in what I call the creative sector of the economy."

Let's look briefly at just a few examples of enterprises that are sustaining that transition.

Self-sufficiency and the creative economy

David Hawkins

THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

In just 10 years, the Atlantic Cancer Research Institute has become a globally recognized centre of excellence in the exploration of the genetic origins of cancer.

The Moncton Flight College attracts students from around the world and recently teamed up with Mount Allison University to offer a Bachelor of Science in Aviation program.

From a New Brunswick base, Whitehill Technologies Inc. developed document automation software in use by over 1,000 customers in 45 countries, including many of the largest law firms in the world.

Recently, Moncton and Fredericton were ranked first and second among the most competitive cities in northeastern North America. A month ago in New York, they were listed among the top 21 smartest cities in the world, selected from a pool of over 400 candidates. Among the reasons for the inclusion of Moncton, according to Ben Champoux, senior economic development officer for the city, is the fact that it is the first city in North America to have established its entire downtown area as a Wi-Fi zone for free wireless Internet access.

And the list of examples could go on for pages. The point is that we are not only facing a period of challenge for our older industries. We are also engaged in a period of exciting opportunities for new ones.

When he visited Saint John in October, Richard Florida spoke optimistically about New Brunswick's economic prospects. He spoke of the attractiveness of the province to creative people as a place in which to live. He mentioned its proximity to the Boston-Washington DC region, which he identifies as one of the world's most important concentrations of creative energy.

And he noted that the proportion of creative workers in our three major cities is hovering at about 30 per cent of the workforce, a figure he has identified as the critical threshold for communities that wish for to be players in the creative economy.

The third and final article in this series, which will appear early in January, will look at the significance of his analysis in terms of the opportunities for innovation that lie before us and how we can attract and retain the creative population that will foster continued growth of a sustainable, self-sufficient economy.

David Hawkins is the President of CouleurNB a strategic communications firm located in Moncton and an operating division of Halifax-based communications agency Colour. He has worked with clients in the field of economic development since the 1970s.