

WATERLOO REGION RECORD

TECHNOLOGY

SPOTLIGHT 2015

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Creative thinking

Innovation labs give big companies a window into new ideas

Flexible thinking

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Tech sector evolving in face of rapid change

Much attention has been paid to the growth of our tech community over the past few years, as local startup activity has increased and large companies from elsewhere have opened or expanded operations here.

Less discussed, but just as noteworthy, is the amount of change we've seen during the same period.

That's not to say the growth hasn't been impressive on its own. The startup explosion in Waterloo Region — part of a new era of entrepreneurship sweeping the globe, accelerated by technology and the way it has lowered barriers to entry — is as exciting as the early success of some of the companies taking part in it.

Still, growth is an incremental, linear process. Change, on the other hand, can be transformative — and that's where the real excitement is.

By now, we're all aware of the challenges our largest local tech company, BlackBerry, has faced in recent years, and of the reduced footprint it occupies in the community as it works to overcome them. But many opportunities have sprung from those same challenges, and those opportunities are fuelling positive change.

Younger entrepreneurs, already inspired by BlackBerry's indisputable achievement of changing the world by creating the smartphone market, have been able to grow their businesses more quickly, thanks in part to the availability of seasoned ex-BlackBerry talent and specialized expertise.



Iain Klugman

Additionally, several promising new companies have sprouted from this enriched entrepreneurial soil, led by BlackBerry veterans such as Adam Belsher, CEO of fast-growing Magnet Forensics, whose software is used by law enforcement agencies around the world.

New, high-potential ventures have also grown under the leadership of experienced alumni from other local tech successes such as OpenText. Among them are Shinydocs, whose software increases employee adoption of OpenText's corporate information management systems, and Igloo Software, whose intranets boost employee engagement.

These companies and others, such as Kik, Vidyard and Clearpath Robotics, are expanding rapidly in an ecosystem that grows ever more diverse by the day, as bright young graduates and experienced entrepreneurs alike respond to market opportunities in software and hardware: everything from cloud-based business tools and construction-site communication platforms, to equestrian wearables and Keurig-like cocktail machines.

Meanwhile, larger companies from outside Waterloo Region — and not just

technology companies — are adding to the transformative effect by moving to our community to engage with our ecosystem, or by deepening existing engagements through expansion.

Google's Canadian engineering headquarters will soon occupy 180,000 square feet of space in downtown Kitchener's Breithaupt Block, effectively tripling its local footprint. Ottawa-based e-commerce juggernaut Shopify opened a sales lab in the Tannery this year, as a precursor to a much larger local presence.

And at the Communitech Hub, we've welcomed more partners to our corporate innovation space, which now includes Canadian Tire, TD Bank Group, Canon, Deloitte, Manulife and Thomson Reuters, with others soon to follow.

These large, established companies know how quickly the world is changing around them, and see tremendous value in tapping into the nimble, creative culture of our startup ecosystem. In turn, our startups gain on-the-ground access to potential customers in the form of these big national brands, which they wouldn't otherwise find in a mid-sized community.

These new connections will not only ensure Waterloo Region's tech community continues to grow, but to change in rapid response to the world around us.

And that's truly something we can all be excited about.

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