

Embracing the 'New' in New Brunswick

Recently, I had the pleasure of moderating an insightful leader's panel discussion as part of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce's CEO Dinner Super Series on skills and immigration in Atlantic Canada that caused me to reflect on my own experiences with diversity and culture.

Growing up in New Brunswick in the 70's and 80's I did not experience much diversity. I had a limited frame of reference to form opinions about other cultures, as I was young and hadn't travelled much. Now 30 years later, I have lived and worked in large and small cities and travelled to many countries. I love the new experiences in a new city or country because of the unique sights, sounds, food, language, customs and more. I also loved coming home to the unique quality of life in New Brunswick. I suspect there are many in New Brunswick who can relate similar experiences.

Upon my return I found a New Brunswick more diverse than when I left. Our universities and workforce include people from many countries who live, work or study here. It's encouraging to see so many newcomers enriching our province and broadening our cultural makeup. Our communities and cities are full of new experiences now.

The transformation in Atlantic Canada has only just begun. Economic growth and individual prosperity are inextricably tied to creating new jobs, increasing immigration and expanding trade with other countries (even more important now because of possible changes to the NAFTA agreement). These priorities are critical because our population (consumers) is aging and shrinking, and technology and automation are changing the nature of the work we do—a trend not slowing anytime soon. Simply look at how rapidly our lives and work has changed in the last 20 years with the introduction of the Internet, mobile computing and smart phones.

Yet local companies are forecasting huge shortages of qualified workers in the coming years, and at the same time, people are saying they can't find jobs. It's a heck of a conundrum, because both statements are true. There is a troubling disconnect between available jobs and qualified people, largely because we are amid a modern day industrial revolution. The nature of work and types of jobs are changing, and so are the skills needed to complete this work.

To overcome this disconnect, we need to train people today for the skills of tomorrow—so job vacancies can be filled and new companies and jobs can be attracted and retained. It also means we need to bring new people here to bridge the knowledge and skills gap to fill the vacancies companies have right now. Whether it's Canadians from other provinces or immigrants, we need to welcome new people to our communities to fill jobs that are currently vacant. If we don't, companies will be forced to compete for the limited talent that is available and those that can't find people may be forced to scale back operations, close or relocate elsewhere.

Attracting and retaining new people will help keep our population growing so we can offset the trend of more deaths than births and pay for the growing costs of public-sector services such as healthcare and

education. And yes, we must create opportunities for our young people who left in search of work to come home. But not all who left will return, so we must also invite newcomers to fill that gap.

Studies have shown jobs are created and economies improve as populations grow. If there are shortages in professions (like doctors), immigration is an effective way to quickly ease these scarcities. Many provinces and other countries are facing the same socio-economic challenges as us, and they are redoubling their efforts to also attract newcomers to improve their economies. Global competition has expanded beyond goods and services, we are competing to attract people.

If we are to be successful in getting our expatriates to return and newcomers to settle in New Brunswick, it's essential we dispel the myths about immigration. We must acknowledge our culture will not be impacted negatively, our jobs will not be taken, and there will not be insurmountable language barriers or integration challenges. It's time to put out the welcome mat and be open to the possibility of enriching our identity and our culture by welcoming new people. When new people join our communities, they contribute. They set up homes, participate in community organizations, fill jobs or open new businesses that create jobs, and offer a myriad of personal characteristics and qualities that enriches our cultural composition.

The Atlantic Chamber of Commerce is part of an alliance of chambers and business associations in New Brunswick who are eager to be part of a solution to bring people and investment to the province. One of our five priorities is labour force development, which includes immigration.

We have many advantages in terms of our quality of life—which we know are the envy of many—and we have a successful track record of welcoming immigrants for more than 200 years. If you ask anyone, they will tell you how special this place is and how friendly people are in New Brunswick. To me that makes our people our most valuable resource—it's time to compound that resource!

Sheri Somerville is CEO of the Atlantic Chamber of Commerce, a nationally accredited organization representing the network of 93 chambers, 25 corporate partners, and more than 16,000 businesses in Atlantic Canada.