

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – MIT REAP, TEAM WESTERN NOVA SCOTIA

In 2020, a group of regional stakeholders from Western Nova Scotia was brought together by the Nova Scotia Government to learn about the MIT Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (MIT REAP). Recognizing the opportunity to fast-track local momentum and to help overcome inertia as a region, stakeholder representatives were recruited to participate in the program, with Pam Mood, a local mayor, as the Team Champion, and Angélique LeBlanc, CEO of the regional economic development organisation, as Team Manager. Together, the Team has built a strategy to accelerate innovation.

Regional Context, REAP Framework and Stakeholder Engagement

The first phase of the program focused on understanding regional challenges and determining regional competitive advantage. With a population of 48,093, Western NS is globally renowned for its' seafood sector, contributing 32.1% of \$1.16B Canadian lobster exports in 2019. The region is top ranked in both specialized boat building and boat building attractiveness. It is abundant in renewable energy, including optimal solar exposure and the highest tidal ranges in the world. The region also benefits from a time zone advantage and access to major Northern US markets. Challenges include chronic labour shortages resulting in a reluctance to invest in projects which will require additional labour needs; attitudinal barriers which make innovation difficult; and an underground economy impacting work force, tax base and data used to determine public policy and programs.

Our survey assessment of E-Cap versus I-Cap concluded in a disproportional weight in favor of E-Cap. Generally, our communities are raised with very entrepreneurial mindsets and numerous role models. Starting a business is second nature. People are hard-working and risk-taking in traditional industries is prevalent. Innovation, on the other hand, is in short supply. Covid, as much as it has hurt, has been the largest push on local businesses to adapt and change their practices, however business owners show pride in their ability to adapt. We see this as our open door through which to push even more innovation.

Team Western evaluated the region's assets and assessed its weaknesses from a qualitative and quantitative perspective, sought feedback from stakeholders and industry to determine pain points for growth and innovation.

As a result of the research and analysis, Team Western focused on four main issues for the region:

- 1) Labor market –this clearly highlighted issue cannot be ignored, but approach can be refined to address how technology and innovation can help.
- 2) Risk capital – A void in the region however, instead of working to create it, it was concluded that risk capital follows innovation.
- 3) Innovation culture – The region lacks visible role models to even have this as part of residents' thought process.
- 4) Export value – Most business markets are limited to the local region. (*NOTE: Concerns that our sample selection misrepresented current export rates*)

Regional Vision and Strategy

Team Western has defined three key strategic themes, along with specific actions for each theme:

1. [Using Technology and Innovation as Labour Force Solutions](#)
2. [Growing and Recreating a Culture of Innovation](#)
3. [Moving Entrepreneurs to Think Beyond Traditional Products and Markets](#)

The strategy will be the innovation roadmap for the Western region, with stakeholder engagement woven into the implementation plan.

Must win battle (MWB)

A MWB is a project that a team chooses to focus on that has the potential to accelerate the ecosystem, sharpen the common agenda and create shared measures. MWBs always align with the overall REAP strategy of the team.

Identified as an immediate way of gathering momentum, Team Western decided to launch a Hackathon series called Fishing for Solutions to work on growing and recreating a culture of innovation.

Challenge Statement:

During the past year a group of business and government leaders has embarked on a process with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) called the Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (REAP) and today the local team is coming to you to help develop solutions to one of the problems our area faces. Every year thousands of pounds of waste wash onto the shores of Southwestern Nova Scotia, much of it the by-product of the fishing industry in the area. Items such as rope, traps, various plastics and more are lost of boats or otherwise become free in the ocean.

Today we are asking you: what innovative ways can beach waste be repurposed?

We are looking for you to consider commercial viability, environmental impacts, sustainable business models, the processes of bringing your idea to market and if possible, how you integrate technological innovation.

The Hackathon series was postponed due to low enrollment, which we attribute to Zoom fatigue and several competing events but is also a result of challenges identified in the REAP process. Multiple innovation efforts exist across the region, but with little stakeholder coordination for broader impact. Rather than considering it as a failure, the Team is eager to learn from the process, move forward and effect change in a resourced, coordinated fashion. The plane has been built; it just needs a pilot to fly it.

To continue the work, Team Western has received funding support to launch the strategy, with the Team members having the option to stay on in an advisory role.