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LearnSphere: Embracing Change in the 'New Normal'

By Annette Comeau

There is so much talk these days about getting back to normal. But personally, I hope we don't. Let me explain.

History has taught us that after every major crisis there is a period of reset that is often driven by innovation, changes in behaviour, and huge market opportunities. The COVID-19 crisis exposed the inherent vulnerabilities in our increasingly connected world. According to experts, the coronavirus pandemic will not be the last global event of this nature. With that in mind, SMEs are especially vulnerable if they do not shift their thinking and embrace technology now more than ever.

After every major crisis there is a period of reset that is often driven by innovation, changes in behaviour, and huge market opportunities.

But experts have also said that COVID-19 will fuel the next wave of innovation. Atlantic Canada's innovation assets could be put to good use if we act quickly and strategically. Now is the time for SMEs to re-evaluate and reassess how to conduct business development in the 'new normal.'

Over the longer term, it's expected that COVID-19 will irrevocably change the way businesses compete. Firms that choose to capitalize on these changes will succeed – the ones that don't will likely suffer the consequences. When the COVID crisis hit, LearnSphere pivoted to help as many SMEs as possible weather the storm and prepare for post-COVID recovery.



Rapid Response – Stage I

In March, LearnSphere quickly mobilized to repurpose our services, tools and programs to address immediate and short-term client needs. Those preliminary actions helped over 500 businesses confront the COVID-19 challenge.

- We transitioned our product delivery from in-person to online within 3 weeks. This proved to be a very successful strategy with excellent up-take. We now have a catalogue of 32 online workshops (available in both languages) that can be offered at any time, and we have proudly delivered over 82 virtual workshops since early April.
- We are also offering remote 1:1 consulting to help SMEs survive and thrive. Requested topics include HR, leadership, business planning and positioning, product pricing, marketing and selling online.
- To address the liquidity crunch, we waived participant fees on all our learning products.
- To help SMEs with exporting and commercialization, we successfully negotiated a better funding formula, reducing the required contribution from SMEs by 15% – an essential step in ensuring they can participate.

Rapid Response – Stage II

Now that the initial emergency has passed, LearnSphere continues to strategize and work closely with our funding partners on how we can help our clients adapt to the post-COVID-19 environment. We remain convinced that there are significant new opportunities available to organizations agile enough to adjust their offering and business models. Stay tuned for more information on new LearnSphere programming that meets that opportunity head on. ■



Grow | Business Support for Export and Commercialization in the Atlantic Region

By Amy Boudreau

LearnSphere has been delivering funding programs specific to exporting since 2003 and commercialization since 2009. With funding from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), our Export Market Access (**EMAP**), E-tools for Exporting (**EforE**), and Commercialization Coaching and Mentoring (**CCM**) programs have been supporting Atlantic Canadian SMEs and organizations to grow and thrive.

As the COVID-19 global health crisis unfolded, and we came to understand the gravity of the economic impact on SMEs, we knew we had to act fast to meet immediate needs. As part of LearnSphere's rapid response, we looked to these longstanding funding programs to ensure that SMEs in Atlantic Canada had access to funds to not only help them withstand the crisis, but to prosper post-COVID.



Reaching New Markets

Some businesses are already using the COVID-related “downtime” to position themselves for the rebound, and our programming can help. Our Export Market Access (**EMAP**) and E-tools for Exporting (**EforE**) programs

provide financial assistance to help SMEs market themselves more effectively, thereby improving their exporting performance and growing their businesses. Understanding the cash crunch felt by many SMEs during this uncertain time, working hand-in-hand with ACOA, LearnSphere increased funding available under this program from 65% to 80% of total eligible costs, to a maximum of \$18,462, until September 30, 2020. The extraordinary demand we've seen for this program since re-opening is further proof of the tenacity and resiliency of our Atlantic Canadian SMEs. Full details on this program can be found [here](#).

Getting SMEs Closer to Commercialization

We've heard that COVID-19 will fuel innovation. In fact, despite the challenges we're all facing, inspiring stories of new technologies and ideas from the Atlantic region are already emerging. LearnSphere's Commercialization Consulting & Mentoring (**CCM**) program assists Atlantic Canadian businesses and institutions accelerate their development of innovative products and solutions, and quickly navigate the final stages of commercialization. Again, LearnSphere and ACOA increased contributions of this program from 65% to 80% of eligible costs, up to a maximum of \$20,000, until September 30, 2020. Full details on this program can be found [here](#).

Although the full impact of the global pandemic is still unfolding, we already know that it will spur major changes. Through funding programs like these, LearnSphere with the support of ACOA, is helping SMEs to navigate this uncertainty so that they may assess, pivot and align themselves for success now and in the post-COVID world. ■

Visit learnsphere.ca/our-programs for full details.



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Share | Transformational Change Around the Globe

By Annette Comeau

Twenty-five years ago, LearnSphere was created by a group of visionaries who saw the potential to build an organization that would centralize the knowledge, skills and expertise required to build better business capacity. From the beginning, there was a desire for LearnSphere to have an impact both here at home and internationally.

For almost 20 years, LearnSphere has exported unique learning and development solutions to developing countries to help them achieve resilient and equitable growth. Our expertise has contributed to reducing poverty and inequality – especially for women, youth and disadvantaged populations – by helping to create better skills for the future.

We've worked on international projects with Global Affairs Canada (GAC, formerly CIDA), Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the Organisation

international de la Francophonie (OIF). Our projects have focused on workforce development and support to SMEs.

LearnSphere's efforts to help SMEs rapidly improve their skills, positioning, knowledge and performance to become part of supply chains has recently attracted international attention. Our model is adaptable across industrial sectors – notably mining, agriculture, adaptation to climate change, oil and gas, and green technologies – and has found application in Canada and around the world.

From the beginning, there was a desire for LearnSphere to have an impact both here at home and internationally.

LearnSphere's Concept Proposal Chosen by Global Affairs Canada

Recently, LearnSphere's concept proposal was selected by Global Affairs, among close to 200 received from across Canada, for the development of a detailed proposal in response to a pilot initiative for Canadian small and medium organizations (SMOs). The Government of Canada is dedicating \$100 million to a five-year pilot initiative targeted at engaging Canadian SMOs, such as LearnSphere, in more international development work. This initiative seeks to engage Canadian SMOs in international assistance efforts in areas consistent with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy.

Our proposed five-year project would contribute to poverty reduction by empowering a minimum of 1,000 female entrepreneurs and their families with the technical skills, business strategies, financial capability, and market access needed to integrate and succeed in local supply chains.

Our project would strengthen the capacity of a local, private technical and vocational training institution to deliver necessary business skills and provide

business supports to help women-owned businesses prosper. The project would also work directly with buyers to improve gender equality and non-discrimination in local procurement practices. This initiative was developed collaboratively with our long-term trusted partner in Cameroon, l'Institut universitaire de la Côte (IUC, formerly ISTD).

For far too long, women in Africa have faced discrimination and inequalities in the workforce that negatively impact their families, communities and countries. Economic empowerment is one of the most effective routes through which women can achieve their potential and advance their human rights. By strengthening the role of women as entrepreneurs and economic stakeholders, and enabling them to contribute to economic growth through decent work, we can help them become powerful agents of change.

We're excited about this potential opportunity to share our work more widely. This is only one example of the work LearnSphere is pursuing abroad. ■



Prosper | Opportunities for Indigenous Businesses in Energy Sector Supply Chains

By Laura Maynard



Rose Paul, CEO, Bayside Development

The approximately 43,000 Indigenous-owned businesses in Canada contribute nearly \$12 billion to the national GDP. According to the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, the oil and gas sector alone does about \$1.8 billion of business with Indigenous firms annually, on contracts for such things as construction, manufacturing, retail, and services.

To ensure more equitable access to jobs and opportunities, Indigenous SMEs are working to equip their businesses to successfully participate in complex supply chains. By gaining the right knowledge, skills and tools, Indigenous businesses and First Nations will be best positioned to compete for opportunities. It's about building the right capacity, and increasing access to opportunities, business linkages, and key decision-makers. This is where LearnSphere's proven program, **Supply Chain 1-2-3** comes in.

The success of the program is built on the knowledge and experience of our expert facilitators who brought a combined 70-plus years of experience to the classroom.

In early March 2020, LearnSphere's energy sector experts delivered our **Supply Chain 1-2-3** program to Indigenous SMEs and First Nations in the Atlantic region. The six-day program held in St. John's, NL – the week before the pandemic was declared – focused on the essential elements for success: understanding the purchasing process and lifecycle within the sector; strategically positioning your SME to align capacity with opportunity; understanding safety and the regulatory environment; and finally, tackling the key business development skills needed to become successful.

The program culminated with a "Meet the Buyers" event, which provided participants with the opportunity to put their knowledge and skills to use – learning from companies successfully selling into the sector; gaining information on government departments and agencies offering support;

and networking with buyers within the energy sector's supply chain. Following the event, participants were offered 1:1 coaching to help them apply their new skills and knowledge to their own business.

"The program exceeded my expectation," said John Davis, General Manager, Qalipu Development Corporation. "The information presented, and the quality of the industry presenters, was outstanding. The opportunity to 'pitch' to the industry participants and meet one-on-one afterwards has already resulted in two follow-up contacts!"

The success of the program is built on the foundation of the knowledge and experience of our expert facilitators who brought a combined 70-plus years of energy sector experience to the classroom. Using tools and templates from their own work within the sector, the facilitators offered customized advice to participants, enabling them to build a toolkit to use as they pursue opportunities post-program for their business or First Nation.

Indigenous SMEs are eager to play a meaningful and important role in growing the economy and continuing to build healthy and prosperous communities. In fact, the Government of Canada believes that employment and wealth creation are key components to reconciliation nationally. Our vision at LearnSphere is to be a valued partner for Indigenous SMEs and First Nations by working together to provide more opportunities for skills and learning development. We know economic growth in our region will occur if all communities within it are empowered to better compete for opportunities. ■



Eric Christmas and Jay Hartling



Lead facilitator Mike Bowes speaking to a sector representative



L to R. Back Row: Laura Maynard, Stephen Sayle, Robert Bernard, Eric Christmas, Adam Kennedy, Jonas Nash, Don Jayasinghe, Jean Francois Mallet, Darryl MacDonald, Renee Kuehne. Front Row: Jay Hartling, Hank Rich, Clementine Kuyper, Paul Langdon, John Davis, Mike Bowes, Allen Kendall



Learn | Supply Chain Success in Quebec

By Catherine Dubé

In January, the **Supply Chain 1-2-3** program was delivered for the first time in *la belle province*.

Thanks to a partnership with the Chantier Davie Canada Suppliers Association, 15 Quebec SMEs benefited from this unique training program – one previously offered only in Atlantic Canada and British Columbia.

The Quebec participants have been unanimous in their praise. As Chantier Davie Canada Suppliers Association Vice-President and Spokesperson Pierre Drapeau pointed out:

“The energy of the instructors, the many discussions among participants, as well as the generosity and openness shown by everyone involved all contributed to making the workshops an undeniable success. Over the course of the program, all participating firms will have gained valuable insights that are sure to help them achieve business success.”

Similar sentiments were expressed by Davie Shipbuilding, which places great emphasis on nurturing the companies that make up its supply chain. Frédérik Boisvert, Vice President, Public Affairs at Davie Shipbuilding said:

“We are confident that the LearnSphere **Supply Chain 1-2-3** program will lead to new business opportunities. The participants clearly improved their skills through their discussions and interactions with the expert trainers. We hope that our suppliers will have access to similarly enriching experiences in the future.”

LearnSphere carefully created the **Supply Chain 1-2-3** program to meet the needs of SMEs collaborating on projects at Irving Shipbuilding in Halifax, Seaspan Shipyards in Vancouver and now, Davie Shipbuilding in Lévis, Quebec. Unique in Canada, **Supply Chain 1-2-3** improves skills, collaboration and business opportunities by helping SMEs access supply chains at the regional and national levels.

Due to the global COVID-19 health crisis, additional in-person workshops that were originally planned for Quebec in the spring shifted to online learning. A three-part series “Successful Negotiation Essentials” with LearnSphere Associate Dale Thibodeau launched in mid-May. ■

The Supply Chain 1-2-3 project is made possible by the Government of Canada’s Enabling Accessibility Fund. It is supported in-kind by the Atlantic Provincial Governments.

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