



The Role and Capacity of Communities for an Innovation-Based Economy

Iain Klugman, CEO, NorthGuide

May 28, 2025

About NorthGuide

NorthGuide specializes in building economic strategies that create lasting growth and resilience. Our experience runs deep — we've helped build thriving innovation and tech ecosystems across Canada, and beyond, with strong economic results, working with governments, industry leaders, and community organizations to turn vision into reality.

Why are we here?

The Role and
Capacity of
Communities for an
Innovation-Based
Economy

**Why are we really
here?**

The Role and
Capacity of
Communities for an
Innovation-Based
Economy

To talk about how to
work together and
get s#!t done.







Here's what we'll cover

1. Why community-based strategies work
2. Key ingredients for success
3. Case study
4. Lessons Learned (or what not to do)
5. Things to think about



Why community based strategies work



Why community strategies work

- Leverage greater capacity
- Wield greater influence
- Make more noise
- Increase funding opportunities
- Move faster
- Make a bigger impact
- Reap shared benefit
- Play the long game



Key ingredients for success



Key ingredients for success

- TRUST
- Flexibility & responsiveness
- Alignment on priorities and messaging
- Commitment to the good of the whole
- Generosity with brand, voice, and credit
- Authenticity to your brand
- No public quarrels
- No surprises



Key ingredients

- **People:** entrepreneurs as leaders, global sales pros, mentors, investors, service providers, public partners
- **Policy framework:** immigration, risk capital, procurement, support for innovation infrastructure
- **Place:** accelerators, incubators, programs, civic amenities
-what you don't have, get or make
- **Culture:** normalize generosity, learn from failure, support each other through challenges
- **Brand/story:** say it loud and repeat for global impact!



Key ingredients for success

There's a role for everyone to play.

Every organization must be clear about its desired role & level of commitment.



But does it work?

20 years of Waterloo Region Coalition work = \$Billions invested

- Doubling the co-op employer tax credit
 - Waterloo Accelerator Centre
 - David Johnston Research + Technology Park
 - Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics
 - UW School of Pharmacy
 - McMaster University DeGroote School of Medicine
- Communitech Hub & Data Hub
 - ION - Light rapid transit
 - Velocity - Innovation Arena
 - Daily GO train service
Toronto < > Kitchener
 - StaySafe Waterloo Region
 - SmartWR
 - Community Economic Offence - Challenge Summit



Case study

Waterloo Region, Ontario, Canada

- An hour southwest of Toronto
- Fastest-growing population of 650,000+
- Long entrepreneurial history
- Second-highest density of startups in the world
- Second fastest population growth in Canada



Early 1990's, we were a community of 500,000 people, in decline, losing jobs, shutting down factories – **we had to do something**

Group came together with a
purpose: to ensure the **long-term
prosperity** of our community and
country!

**We built a movement – and did
everything possible to succeed.
We engineered our destiny.**

Ecosystem strategy can be a winning strategy: but it's a **system strategy** (which makes it hard and messy – sorry)

*Ecosystems are complicated and
constantly changing systems.*

*Not static; not linear;
not replicable.*

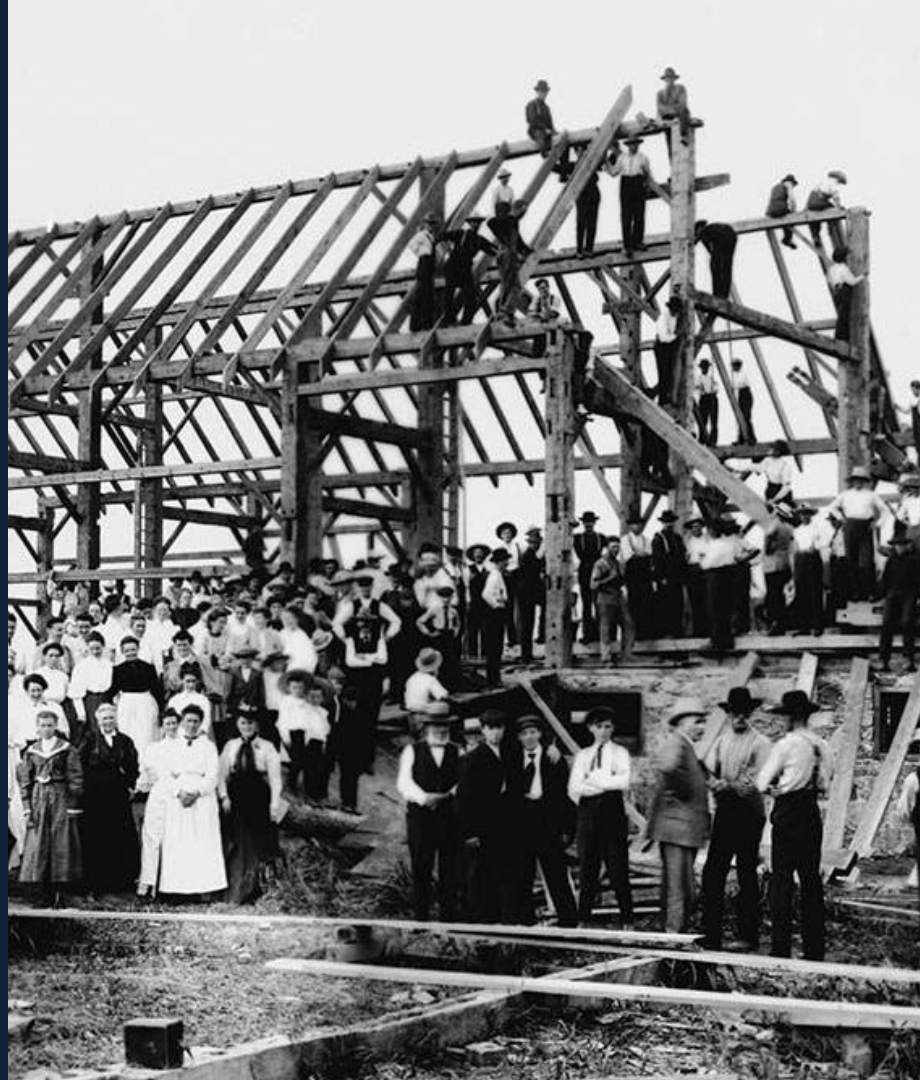
*Common ingredients;
different recipes.*



Our approach:

- 1. Make it authentic to our assets and our history.**
- 2. Think about funnel – “shots on goal”**
- 3. No company left behind**
- 4. Intentionality at every stage – start right, get on growth curve, save from disruption**
- 5. Told a consistent story – over, and over, and over... (Brand!)**

**Collaboration and
humble ambition**
run deeply
in our roots.



Longtime
birthplace of
**world-changing
innovation**



Our postsecondary game is strong.

100,000 students

- 15,000 engineering and computer science students
- 25,000 STEM
- Canada's most innovative university



Diversified Economy:

- Business and financial services
- Advanced manufacturing
- Information and communications technology
- Automotive
- Food processing

Clusters

- Artificial intelligence
- Industry 4.0
- Quantum computing
- Security



History of growing **big Canadian brands**

opentext™

 **BlackBerry®**

Seagram

CHKISTIE®

 **SANDVINE**

DESCARTES™

 **COM DEV**
INTERNATIONAL

 **TELEDYNE DALSA**
Everywhere you look™
Part of the Teledyne Imaging Group

F A I R E

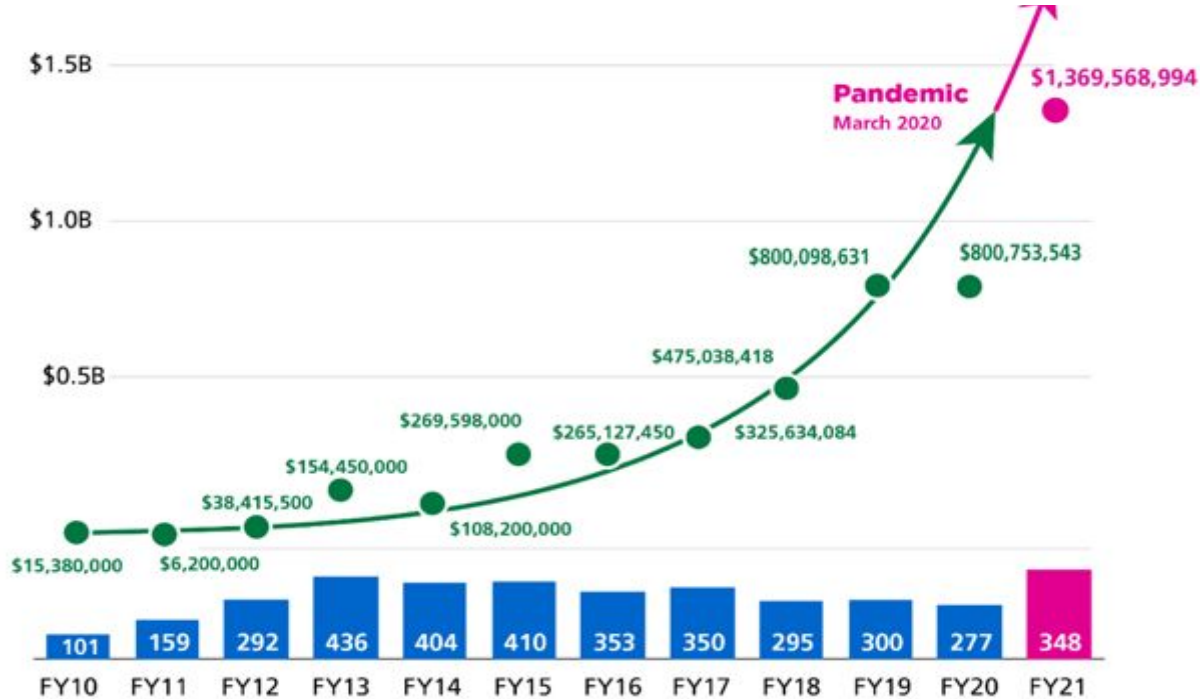
NorthGuide



... and attracting global brands



2010-2020 – A decade of growth for startup and scaleup companies!!



**4073 new
companies
started**

**\$5.9B in capital
raised**

The results?

1. Startup density second only to Silicon Valley
2. Rate of startup activity – 1 per 1000 annually
3. Invested venture capital in top 5 globally per capita
4. World-leading and renowned startup organizations (Communitech, Velocity, AC, R&T Park, Catalyst) and owning YC
5. Cracked the code on startup, scale-up and corporate innovation programming



Lessons learned



Lessons learned: things to avoid at all costs

- Scarcity mindset
- Internal competition
- Duplication of effort & offerings
- Mixed messaging
- Public disagreements
- Dilution of leadership
- Lack of transparency
- The end run



Secrets that helped us win...

1. Bringing the right people together, aligned and committed – results over ego
2. Building an authentic brand, and sticking to it – storytelling and bold moves!
3. Paying attention to a culture of entrepreneurship, while not leaving anyone behind
4. Getting the ingredients right – leveraging the assets you have
5. Finding ways for bigger impact – the competition among jurisdictions is global

And, constantly reinventing as ecosystem and companies mature



Things to think about



Things to think about

- 1.** What strengths and assets do you want to capitalize on?
- 2.** What is getting in the way?
- 3.** Who are the members of your cluster or coalition?
- 4.** What new opportunities are you interested to explore?
- 5.** What does success look like?



Keep your community aligned

1. Don't get distracted; keep the main thing the main thing
2. Remember that competition is global; not local.
3. Don't fall in love with your ideas.
4. Momentum works in both directions.
5. Keep your eye on the customer.



Keep your community aligned

- 6.** Celebrate success.
- 7.** Try stuff. And then try more stuff.
- 8.** Check your organizational ego; work together.
- 9.** Be generous; give others the credit.
- 10.** Play the long game.

Bottom line

The parts of an ecosystem are less important than the **quality of the interactions within it.**

You can have all the parts in place (talent, a good university, infrastructure), but it's the interactions between people that create the **virtuous cycle of growth and evolution.**



Questions?



Thank you

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BlackBerry

Axonify™

Square

CHRISTIE

Wealthsimple

CISCO

NETSUITE

D2L™

Google

UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

FRESHBOOKS
cloud accounting



CLEARPATH
robotics

bridgit

15,000
TECH COMPANIES

200,000
TECH WORKERS

5,200
TECH STARTUPS

salesforce

wattpad

TORONTO

WATERLOO REGION

OPENTEXT

UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

kik



shopify

viduward

EA
SPORTS

hubba

500px

REDKNEE

PointClickCare

REAL
MATTERS

IBM

influitive

16

UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES

6 Million

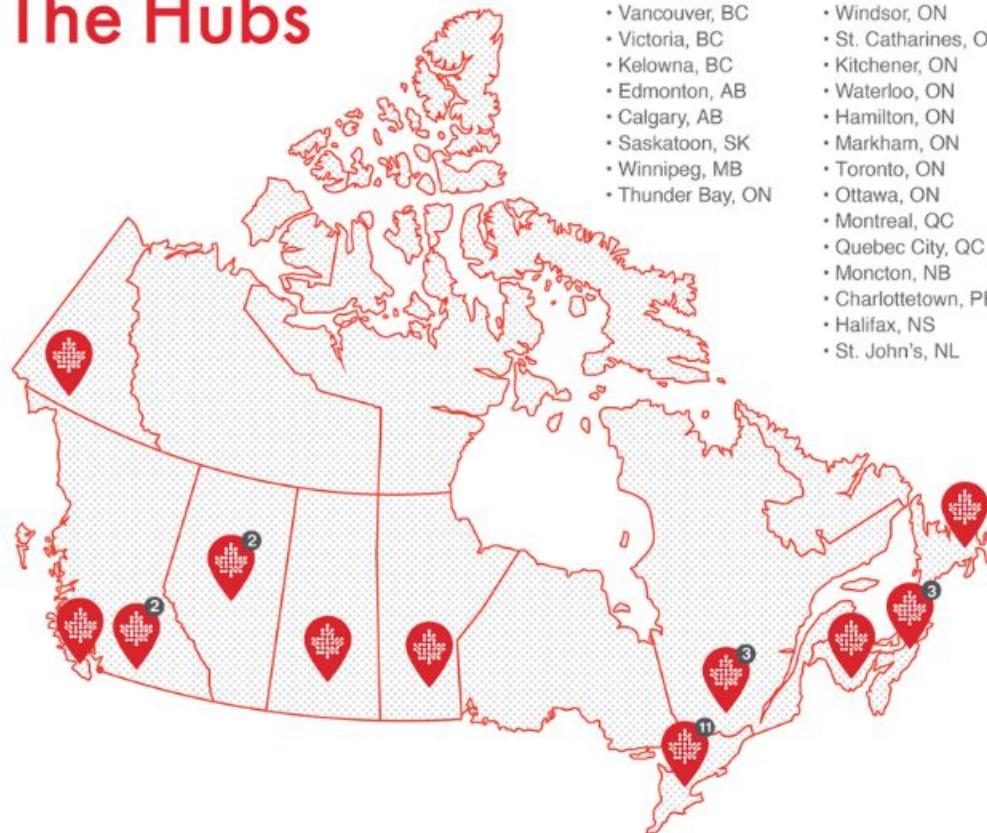
AWESOME PEOPLE

150

LANGUAGES SPOKEN



The Hubs



Communitech takes over Times Square to tell U.S. tech workers: “We Want You”

Extended billboard campaign aims to attract highly-skilled tech workers affected by H-1B visa ban

KITCHENER, ONT., September 21, 2020 —Communitech has just expanded its billboard campaign to key markets in the United States, including the centre of the concrete jungle itself, New York City's Times Square. Across from the iconic NASDAQ and 1 Times Square Plaza, in a once-bustling business hotspot where Dick Clark would drop the sparkling ball every New Year's Eve, a large maple leaf can be spotted blowing in a digital wind, on a screen emblazoned with WE WANT YOU (with apologies to Uncle Sam).

And, to all tech workers affected by the government's pause of its H-1B visa program, we mean it. We really do want you to come join us in the land of the true north, strong and free.

“We were blown away by the response when our billboard campaign launched in San Francisco this past August,” said Iain Klugman, CEO and president, Communitech. “Not only did we get the attention of major media outlets such as the San Francisco Chronicle and CNBC, but we heard from more than 75 U.S. tech workers who were interested in relocating to Canada — and we expect to hear from more now that we've set up camp in the Big Apple.”

This campaign began in early August with the launch of one print and eight digital billboards along Highway 101 in the San Francisco Bay Area. The advertisements, on display for a full month, caught the attention of more than four million people in person and 32 million more online, thanks to coverage from 52 media outlets around the world.

“There are almost too many challenges faced by international tech workers in the U.S., and the threat to their visa status through the suspension of H-1B was a last straw for

LIFE

This guy is plastering billboards in Silicon Valley to lure tech workers to Canada

BY COURTNEY SHEA | AUGUST 24, 2020

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Photo by Daniel Neuhaus

Back in June, when Donald Trump announced he would be suspending H-1B visas—ostensibly to keep Americans first in line for jobs—it was a dark day for the thousands of skilled foreign workers who were working or planning to work in the States. But America's loss may be Canada's gain. Shopify's Tobi Lutke tweeted that workers affected by the visa freeze should “consider Canada,” while the Kitchener-based tech innovation company Communitech launched an in-your-face billboard campaign in Silicon Valley aimed at enticing the best and brightest across the border. Here's Communitech CEO Iain Klugman on his \$100,000