OPENING CONTACT LISTS, OPENING DOORS: MAKING THE HUMAN CONNECTIONS TO HELP IMMIGRANTS AND GRADUATES LIVE IN HALIFAX

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The Greater Halifax Partnership is the lead economic development organization for Halifax, Nova Scotia working to attract and retain talent, business and investment to Halifax and help the city grow and thrive. As a recognized leader the Greater Halifax Partnership is a public/private economic development organization with strong relationships in all three levels of government; municipal, provincial and federal. For more information visit www.greaterhalifax.com.

An extensive report (2014) released by the Nova Scotia Commission on Building Our New Economy, One Nova Scotia, found that one of the greatest challenges facing the province is a shrinking population and as a result, a shrinking economy. Despite being Nova Scotia's capital city and the economic hub of Atlantic Canada, Halifax is not immune to this trend. Halifax's population grew only marginally last year – by four tenths of one percent. This pace is slower than most Canadian cities and half the normal rate of growth. One Nova Scotia has been a wake-up call and a catalyst for change in our city and province. It forces us to take a hard look at why we are losing people and the actions we can take to not only stem the tide of population decline, but to become a magnet for talent.

Part of our challenge comes down to attracting and retaining young professionals, international graduates, and immigrants. Yet, as the One Nova Scotia report (2014, 26) states, "newcomers to Nova Scotia have difficulty gaining a foothold in the province…There are clearly additional barriers stemming from negative attitudes and even racism when it comes to welcoming new people into our communities and hiring people 'from away' ". To address these barriers the report recommends that,

> *"Nova Scotians everywhere - in their communities, educational settings and workplaces - need to demonstrate that we are an open and welcoming society so that our tourists, new immigrants and international students will communicate this Nova Scotia 'brand' throughout the world" (59).*

Over the past number of years, The Greater Halifax Partnership and our partners have been working on making our city and province a more welcoming place for skilled professionals from all over the world. The partnership's Connector Program is one initiative that is making a difference. Originally developed as an immigrant retention initiative, Connector is a simple but effective networking program that helps immigrants, international students, and recent graduates build a professional network, and connect with local job opportunities, helping them put down roots in Halifax.

Connector puts pre-qualified program participants directly in touch with business owners and operators, civil servants, and community leaders in their field who volunteer as Connectors. Connectors and Connectees meet one-on-one to discuss the local labour market, industry trends, and job opportunities. The Connector then provides three referrals to the Connectee. This process is repeated and the Connectee's professional network grows exponentially, increasing their likelihood of finding a job in their field. The most significant outcome of the Connector Program is that it addresses labour challenges for both the employer and the Connectee – keeping businesses operating and citizens working. It is a win-win for everyone involved.

With over 1,000 participants and 640 Connectors, the Connector Program has demonstrated the success of a personal approach; helping nearly one in three participants find jobs and stay in Halifax. The Connector Program however, is not simply about job matching. It focuses on building relationships and creating important connections. Simply put, the Connector Program shows communities at their best by helping business reach out to new talent by offering them the precious gift of time and professional networks.

News of the program's effectiveness is spreading. Even the New York Times published a feature story entitled "Immigrants Welcome Here," giving a nod to its success. This success has garnered interest across Canada, as many communities face declining workforces and fall short in welcoming and, more importantly, retaining immigrants. Through the National Connector Program, the Partnership is assisting other communities and industry associations in developing their own programs to help immigrants across Canada successfully settle into their new cities and towns. To date, fifteen communities from Vancouver B.C. to Charlottetown P.E.I., have adopted the Connector Program. The Connector Program is helping to address the attitude change the One Nova Scotia report called for. By opening their Blackberry contact lists, industry professionals are opening doors for participants. The Connector Program is an authentic and personal demonstration of how a community is opening their businesses and networks up to immigrants and young talent all while challenging and emulating what a true Halifax welcome can mean.