

# Where are Niagara's Young Guns?

The search is on for Tomorrow's Leaders



**"Our community's economic health and future rests on how strong and how supportive a structure we can build for the next generation of business leaders."**

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A couple of years ago, I coordinated a study of youth employment and youth entrepreneurship in Niagara to see what Niagara's youth thought about local employers, their career prospects and their entrepreneurial opportunities. The results didn't paint a pretty picture.

One of the big findings was that Niagara youth didn't see a lot of "career path" opportunities in Niagara. They could find entry level jobs, and they could see some senior positions, but it was hard to find employers where all the steps in between were present. And when we interviewed employers across the Region, we found out that the youth were right—in many cases, the local opportunities for advancement were either limited, or didn't exist at all.

This two-tier structure with a big gap in the middle was a major reason for youth outmigration. In Toronto or London or Waterloo, young college or university graduates could see the same kinds of entry level opportunities they saw in Niagara—but they could also see the next rung on the ladder. This made it possible—and often desirable—for youth with ambition to relocate elsewhere.

Over time this youth outmigration and Niagara's obvious qualities as a retirement destination have conspired to make Niagara one of the oldest communities in Canada. Statistics Canada census data suggests we now have the sixth oldest average age of any region in the country. Which is all well and good, except for a couple of things.

The largest generation in Canadian history—and in Niagara's history—is the baby boomers. The peak of the boomer generation arrived in 1953, meaning the bulk of the boomers are now aged 56 or older. These are the people who launched many of the Niagara Region's existing businesses. These are the people who now hold senior leadership and management positions within local business, government agencies and non-profits. And at 56, they're all about to start retiring.

Normally, this would be good news for middle management. When the top job opens up, somebody's usually in line for a promotion and a move to the corner office. Except we don't have much in the way of

a "middle" to our management—and many of the best, brightest and most ambitious have moved to Toronto, London or Waterloo so they could pursue a career instead of just a first job.

The reality is that Niagara will shortly be faced with one of the biggest business retention crises it's ever faced—and for most of us, it's not even on our radar screens.

There's only one real solution to this challenge. Over the next five years or so, we've got to build up the entrepreneurial base in Niagara, and we've got to focus on young people to do it. Who else is going to buy local businesses when current owners want to retire? Who else is going to launch new businesses to replace those that fade away? Who else is going to build the business management skills to move into senior positions with our larger employers?

We've got to engage the next generation of Niagara's high school, college and university graduates, and give them the tools and support and opportunity to succeed right here in Niagara. We've got to lure those youth who've left the Region back, and convince them to bring their skills and talents home. We've got to make ourselves an attractive destination for young immigrants and the entrepreneurial skills they can bring to our community from all over the world. We must build a new generation of young entrepreneurial hotshots and visionaries, a new generation of Young Guns.

And then we've got to embrace them.

Niagara's business community is tough. It's had to survive lean years and tough times, and it's had to fight for its successes. And sometimes, in the midst of all that toughness, it hasn't nurtured or welcomed or supported or celebrated the next generation of entrepreneurs.

This is something we need to get good at, fast. Now is the time for all of us to unveil new youth entrepreneurship programs, to engage emerging business and community leaders, to show young Niagarans a pathway to success. Our community's economic health and future rests on how strong and how supportive a structure we can build for the next generation of business leaders.

Some places—Silicon Valley, Waterloo, Mumbai, Helsinki—have staked their economies on these Young Guns. They've built them up, created systems to support them, and celebrated them on every step of their entrepreneurial journey. Niagara needs to do the same. Where are our Young Guns?

We'd better find out fast. **BN**

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