

# What's the BIG idea?!

For #thinkBIG2018, *Atlantic Business Magazine* asked participants to share their ideas for unlocking Atlantic Canada's growth potential. Associate editor Gabby Peyton looks into why we're all a little tongue-tied when it comes to pie-in-the-sky brainstorming—and how unpacking the big ideas can lead to even bigger ones.

BY GABBY PEYTON

Coming down off my #thinkBIG2018 road trip high, I began reviewing the suggestions submitted by participants of our four regional thought leadership workshops—and quickly became disheartened.

*Atlantic Business Magazine* had challenged attendees to tell us about their high-in-the-sky-apple-pie kind of visions that could reverse decades of have-not, flip-flopping economies and naysaying which have given us East Coasters an inferiority complex. What do we want our future to look like? What does our society stand for? How can we maximize our almost surreal resource potential? But over and over, the same generic responses droned on and on: improve health care... decrease taxes... reduce red tape... increase collaboration... get government to fix... Don't get me wrong. These are all worthy goals, but it was not the revolutionary thinking we had hoped to hear—and there was nary a word about “how” to make it happen.

And then I saw it.

“Teleporting.”

At first I laughed. “How foolish,” I thought. But as I continued down the page—de-regulate air travel... hyperloop throughout Atlantic Canada—my mind started embracing the improbable. Regardless of whether the Charlottetown attendee who submitted these ideas had meant them as a joke, I found myself getting excited by the ‘what if’. How would more economical travel impact Atlantic Canada? What would a hyperloop—the 700-plus MPH air tube transportation system proposed by Elon Musk in 2013—mean for shipping costs and remote workers? Would more young professionals be willing to stay in the region if travel were cheaper and more accessible?

Since achieving the improbable starts with embracing the impossible, here's a few of the bolder ideas that came out of #thinkBIG2018.



## PHISHING FOR CULTURAL CHANGE

“It’s only a matter of time before you’re going to be hacked,” warned Jennifer Gillivan, president and CEO of the IWK Foundation, during her Halifax panel presentation. “The next battle in the world is not going to be on a field, it’s going to be on a keyboard.”

On May 23, 2018, Gillivan became an honorary colonel with the Canadian Forces Reserves. She wasn’t quite sure what her role would be or how she could be useful—until she started working with the intelligence division. That was when she realized her business connections could be leveraged to create a symbiotic relationship between businesses and the Reserves. And that her women’s advocacy efforts could help boost the number of women in the intelligence division (currently at 30 per cent, she hopes to bring it up to 50 per cent).

“Intelligence and security and cybersecurity and all that that entails are huge,” said Gillivan in a post-event phone interview. The numbers back her up. In March 2018 the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) released a study stating that of the 2,000 businesses they interviewed, more than 19 per cent of companies reported being hit by ransomware in 2017 and 32 per cent admitted to having unintentionally divulged information to phishing tactics. Small businesses are particularly vulnerable; many people know some company that has had their information held hostage in exchange for Bitcoin.

Gillivan’s big idea is to encourage employees from small businesses that can’t afford cybersecurity training to enlist in the Reserves’ intelligence division. The interested employee would join the Reserves with their employer’s support, which includes time off during the summer for training—training that can make a significant contribution to the technological security of a small company.

“It’s a whole new way of looking at the Reserves,” says Gillivan. “What you are getting is a highly trained intelligence officer back into your business, which helps your business because you couldn’t afford to do that training. But you’re also keeping Canada safer. It’s win-win.”

For Gillivan, it’s not just about learning the latest ransomware tactics. It’s also making sure small businesses in Atlantic Canada understand what’s going on all over the world and getting access to security training that they can apply to their daily business activities. “It’s a smart move for the Canadian military and the business community to actually find that sweet spot to play together,” says Gillivan.

After the Halifax event, Karen Fegarty, the regional vice president of sales for N.S. at Mariner Innovations, approached Gillivan about her idea. Mariner Innovations is a private sector company which does IT consulting services in areas like technology advisory and big data analytics. Gillivan connected Fegarty with her commanding officer and that bold idea has since become reality. They are now looking at a formal partnership where those who work at Mariner Innovations can work part-time and sign up for the Reserves. Organizations like Mariner Innovations, who have employees on contract who are already predisposed to working with the Armed Forces, can connect with the Reserves and make money while advancing their careers.

“(This proves) that when you do put an idea out there, you know what? Stuff can happen,” says the honorary colonel.



## OUR BOOM(ER) AND BUST ECONOMY

Senioritis takes on a whole new meaning when it comes to the senior entrepreneur in Atlantic Canada. As reported by SHIFT (Nova Scotia's Action Plan for an Aging Population), the 50-plus age bracket is the fastest-growing area in the startup world. Concerns about the region's aging population were a common theme throughout the #thinkBIG2018 events, but the big idea here isn't about convalescent homes or long-term healthcare solutions. It's about shifting the perspective of what retirement looks like in Atlantic Canada.

The average age for retirement in Canada is 63 but with life expectancy breaching 80 over the past decade, many will be retired for almost as long as they were working. Having those people continue to be involved in the workforce well past 65 is an idea that's come of age.

"When you get to 60 or so, if you could retire or whatever, do you want to be spending 30 years cutting coupons or going on cruises? It's nice if you can, many people can't," says John Hamblin, the founder of Halifax's Startup Canada chapter. The 72-year-old who is "not ready to go to pasture yet" attended the #thinkBIG2018 workshop and introduced his big idea during the roundtable discussions.

After reading the 1,278-page *Now or Never: An Urgent Call to Action for Nova Scotians* (generally known as the Ivany Report) from cover to cover in 2014, Hamblin knew he had to take action. "It painted seniors as being these debilitating people taking all the money out of healthcare, and almost that we (as a society) would be better off if we just shot them all." He admits that's an extreme summary, but says there are people who retired from their jobs to "sit home and do nothing."

Hamblin believes focusing on keeping seniors in the workforce and the rise of the seniorpreneur can have many positive ramifications both for the wellbeing of seniors and the overall economy. It's a trend that's already on the rise (the BDC reported a 14.5 per cent increase in the rate of older workers from 51.3 per cent in 2001 to 65.8 per cent in 2016), and Hamblin would like it to continue that growth trajectory.

"(They) keep saying there is a labour shortage, and certainly there is, but the fact is they base a lot of the labour shortages on statistics based on people retiring at 65," says Hamblin. "If you look at right now in Nova Scotia, there are 1,000 people turning 65 every month. If half of them worked until they were

68 you've taken care of a huge part of the labour shortage."

While older workers are known to be dependable employees, they still often have trouble finding gainful employment after Old Age Security kicks in. That's why many seniors have chosen to start their own businesses—which comes with another set of challenges. By way of example, Hamblin says ageism is an issue when applying for a loan: "If you go into a financial institution and you are 68 and say you want to start a business—their eyes roll."

Despite the hurdles, Hamblin says senior-owned small businesses can have a big impact. "If you have 10 businesses in a small town started by seniors, with each employing five people, it's keeping people in the small communities, keeping them gainfully employed and helping the economy as a whole. It's not going to be the solution for all the problems of Atlantic Canada but it's one element that we should work a lot harder to support."

Rick Emberley is a perfect example of a boomer starting a business over the age of 65. His startup has him matchmaking seniors who want to continue to engage with the workforce, but don't necessarily need a retirement package. After decades in marketing and advertising, Emberley has started *BoomersPlus.com* which pairs senior leadership with companies wanting to hire experienced staff on contract or part-time. The website currently has a growing database of more than 5,000 boomers, most of whom are Atlantic Canadians, and it's growing by the day—since their expansion into Ontario in summer 2017, 40 new people are signing every day.

"In reality, they aren't looking for full-time jobs, but they have 20, 30, even as much as 40 years of built-up expertise and they don't necessarily want to go playing golf three or four days a week," says Rick Emberley about their database of retired CEOs, retired business owners, and senior level professionals. It's not just about making some extra dollars either; *BoomersPlus* also places people in mentorship roles and helps not-for-profits find board members to volunteer to sit on their boards.

"If we leave all of this talent out there, slowly atrophying, it's to our disadvantage... It's almost like a disgrace."





EVERYBODY GETS AN ELECTRIC CAR!

## ELECTRIFIED INGENUITY

When conjuring up images of the future, inevitably Jetson-like flying cars are whirring around in the background somewhere, but Jesse Rodgers of Volta Labs doesn't think it's so far-fetched. In fact, he'd like to give everyone in Nova Scotia an electric car. "This is something that's crazy but I like the crazy ideas because even going through the process of figuring them out, you learn something," said Rodgers at the event.

In a phone interview with *Atlantic Business Magazine*, Rodgers explained how that thought bubble popped into his head. The starting point was what makes Nova Scotia unique and how that puts the province on the world stage. Here's where it gets electrifying.

"Why is Emera unique?" asks Rodgers of the province's publicly-traded energy utility company. "The power generation, consumption, global expertise... they are willing to take risks as demonstrated in trying to make tidal power, which is hard, extremely hard to figure out." Rodgers believes Emera's unique position as Nova Scotia's energy supplier and its innovative attitudes could transform the province into a groundbreaking test case for complete conversion to electric cars.

"There are no Teslas here. There is no infrastructure for electric cars really. So there's an opportunity here where you could really do that big leap," says Rodgers. Currently, there are more than 200 electric car charging stations in Atlantic Canada, 100 of the public stations servicing Nova Scotia's 170 registered electric cars. The region is still at the starting gate when it comes to electrifying their fleet. Take New Brunswick: a CBC article reported last year that, because there are still so few electric cars in the province, the charging stations are estimated to lose money until 2028.

In Newfoundland, Chad Bennett, a reporter with *The Overcast*, says that the province could save \$231 million by converting all cars to electric. Not only would it help the environment, but it would save Atlantic Canadians money. A report released in September 2018 by environmental group The 2 Degrees Institute showed Canadians could save from 66 to 77 per cent of fuel and operating costs by driving electric cars. Atlantic Canadians can save approximately \$26,610 in fuel and maintenance over a 10-year period.

Eliminating gasoline-powered vehicles across a whole province (let alone a region) is a huge undertaking, but Rodgers says it needs to be all or nothing. "It's likely the economies are going to take 200 years to switch over, or a hundred years anyway. What if we just decided to make that switch? What would the actual cost be on a bottom line? It doesn't seem so crazy."

"There are knock-on effects of this discussion that's not just about giving everyone an electric car," says Rodgers. Beyond the culture shock of just giving everyone a free car, the move would also change the way power is distributed to homes and businesses, as well as create an immediate need for new charging stations. "What would it mean? Well, you could switch out how you deliver power to homes, how you deliver power to anything. It's a large investment but the return is huge. Now all of a sudden, Emera is a world leader in understanding how to deliver this. Everyone who is researching electric cars, automation, how to deliver power on this consumer level, they would all come here."

**OUR #THINKBIG2018** efforts might not have saved Atlantic Canada from its hamster wheel of doom and gloom, but it did get minds racing. Those big ideas could have big impacts if we aren't too afraid to unpack them. The Paradigm Hyperloop team (comprised of students from post-secondary schools in St. John's, N.L.) just moved on to the next phase of the 2019 Hyperloop Pod Competition, the annual contest held by Elon Musk's SpaceX. They finished in second place two years ago and made history by launching the world's first successful run of a Hyperloop pod.

Perhaps a quick 10-minute trip from Charlottetown to Halifax isn't pie-in-the-sky after all.



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### FEEDBACK

✉ [dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com](mailto:dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com)

🐦 @AtlanticBus; #thinkBIG2018