

NEWS

# COM DEV is breaking down barriers

If you visit the COM DEV employee cafeteria, you notice right away how highly the company values its employees' skills and heritage. The flags of 66 countries hang from the walls, one for each country represented within its diverse workforce. CEO John Keating calls the company the "United Nations of industry."

I shared breakfast with John this month to discuss employee diversity, community leadership and how businesses can help remove barriers inside the company and within the community.

Here's a snapshot of our breakfast chat:

**Jan:** What are your own personal views on giving back to the community? How do these views motivate you in your role as CEO?

**John:** Opportunities didn't come easily to me early in life. I'm very conscious of the need to help others who are disadvantaged - often through no fault of their own, but through circumstance or misfortune.

I grew up in a family of seven kids, with parents who shared a difficult relationship and a mom who struggled to raise us during their frequent separations. Between ages five and 14, I moved many, many times and went to 10 different schools. I left school at 16 to help my mom pay the bills and look after my younger siblings.

Lots of people have worse situations than mine, so I don't look for sympathy. But I'm very aware of how people struggle. This is why COM DEV's areas of focus for giving - youth, education and community - touch my heart personally. These are areas where we can make a difference in people's lives. These efforts can help minimize the hurt, damage and danger people face.

**Jan:** What was the turning point for you in your life?

**John:** When I left school at 16, I could have ended up in any dead end job, but I had a stroke of good luck. Literally on our way to a soccer game, my friend and I crashed a community "Open House" at Marconi, a

radar manufacturer. We went in only for the free food and drinks. The company was recruiting apprentices, but the recruiter walked right past me and offered my clean-cut friend an application. He resisted giving me an application even when I asked for one, because I had long hair and looked somewhat like a soccer hooligan.

Of course, I wanted it only because I was offended that he judged me based on my looks. He humoured me, and we walked out with full stomachs and job applications in our hands.

Fast-forward a few weeks, and I was hired on as an apprentice in Marconi's defence electronic business.

**Jan:** Did you cut your hair?

**John:** No, I didn't. My mother was a strong socialist and raised me to be vehemently anti-racist. I felt it was almost a form of racism to judge my intelligence and value based on my hair or clothing or accent. It's important to me to this day that we make sure people are treated with dignity no matter what they look like, what gender they are, what religion they believe in or what language they speak.

At COM DEV, I see my role as removing barriers that get in the way of people's performance, commitment or contribution. That's what we do in the community as well.

**Jan:** It sounds like being told you couldn't do something was a strong motivator.

John: I think that's true for all of us. But it takes more than that to be all you can be. I couldn't have succeeded in that first job just because I was trying to prove myself to others. It also takes self-discipline and an environment that encourages you to become engaged and perform at your best. You can't make people behave in a certain way. But you can provide an environment where they can apply themselves and access the supports they need - if they so choose.

**Jan:** Looking after others sounds like it's a

big part of who you are. Is it about treating people equally?

**John:** I strongly believe that everyone should be given equal treatment and opportunity, but I don't support equality of reward. If people are given the same opportunity to be successful, and one is more successful than another, I think that extra hard work and talent should be rewarded.

Growing up in England, I had a family that regularly tangled with the legal system and relatives suffering from mental illness. Back then I was a card-carrying member of the Young Socialists.

I would have told you that everyone should be rewarded equally in society.

But I realize now that it's not about equal reward. It's about removing the barriers and addressing the underlying social issues so that everyone gets an equal opportunity. People still need to choose and behave based on free will, and not everyone can or will seize the opportunities.

**Jan:** In 2008, COM DEV won Campaign of the Year and a Leadership Award from United Way of Cambridge and North Dumfries after raising more than \$150,000. This exceeded the company's target and was the highest result in COM DEV's history.

**John:** In fact, the company has more than doubled donations from five years ago. There's huge enthusiasm at all levels of the organization. We exceeded our target for Leaders (individuals who donate \$1000 or more to United Way) in 2008 as well. In 2007, the company had 13 Leaders and the goal for 2008 was 20. The final result was 23 Leaders, again the best result in the company's history. I think this sets a great example within the organization and I'd like to see even higher leadership levels.

**Jan:** You speak of internal leadership. As a public company, how do you balance the external focus on shareholders and customers with the internal focus on employees?

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**John:** The internal and external stakeholders aren't mutually exclusive. It's not a choice at all. In fact, it's all linked. If employees feel that they belong to something worthwhile, and that they have the opportunity for individual achievement and reward, they're more connected to and engaged with the success of the company. This always results in more satisfied customers and therefore more return for shareholders. The values, commitment and dedication of the people working here are at the heart of everything.

This culture and values then extend to the community. I truly believe that our behaviour, inside and outside of the organization, can make the world a better place.

*Note: I'm 'taking reservations' for this column. If you'd like to meet me for breakfast and a discussion, please drop me a note atjvarner@uwaykw.org.*

## Impact of fed funding

By JAN DEAN

There's been a lot of grousing about the pace at which the feds announced which municipal, regional and recreational infrastructure projects would get the stimulus funding, but it came through at last to the delight and relief of many.

That 12 billion bucks the feds pledged for infrastructure projects back in January as part of their \$40 billion stimulus package was praised and lauded by municipalities. Faced with a limited tax base that is pretty well guaranteed to shrink at the same rate as the economy, mayors and their councils saw the federal money as a life preserver - although one that came with protocols and application forms.

They filled out all the forms, submitted their wish lists and waited to hear the

results. What cities and regions would get how much for which projects. When the announcements did come, most figured the wait was worth it.

Stimulus funding was supposed to jump-start local economies, provide local jobs and invest in infrastructure. It does all that.

The problem as I see it, is that it's a one-time deal for specific projects.

What happens a few years down the road when the recession has ended and federal-provincial windfalls slow down?

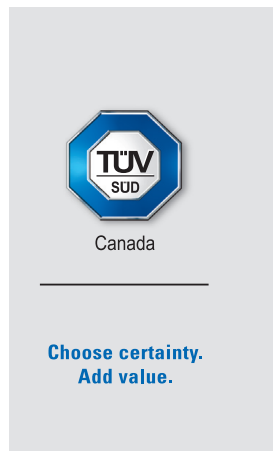
Ever since the provincial Harris government downloaded services to the municipal level without giving the locals a realistic way of generating income to pay for them, local governments have become eternal supplicants.

At the same time selected cities have been targeted,

Cont. on page 3

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## Technology is the future

Cont. from page 1

And he admits he's still worried for manufacturers and exporters.

He believes our future lies with technology and innovation. "Canadians are just punching way above what anyone would expect," says Goodyear. He says research projects that are creating DNA decoders, hand-held MRI machines and lab-testing filtrations systems are exciting. Our only problem? "We're not as strong to move that intelligence to the market," says Goodyear. "We need to get better at commercialization of our work."

Despite complaints that the feds are not moving stimulus money out quickly enough, Goodyear defends the government program and its pace, saying the government is acting as quickly as possible to get stimulus money out to the appropriate municipalities and institutions.

Goodyear loves his role as Minister of Science and Technology, saying, "this is a great portfolio that will have a great impact on our future." He says that what his government is doing is working.

Because of that he says he "desperately doesn't want an election right now. The economic situation is still acute, the country is fragile. What we're doing is working and I don't think we can afford the expense or distraction of an election."



Gary Goodyear  
Minister of Science and Technology

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