

Let's tap into our 'global Canadians'

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Globalization and shifting patterns of trade are a wakeup call for Canadians. In emerging giants such as China and India, our share of the import market has not kept pace with economic growth, or with our competitors. Our national prosperity and livelihood depends on our ability to do business abroad and we need to employ all our assets toward this end.

Let's start with our biggest and best asset – our expatriates. An estimated three million Canadians live and work abroad. Highly educated, multi-skilled and well-connected, their personal and professional networks can benefit Canadian businesses seeking advice and a foothold overseas.

Our expatriate ranks already include an abundance of global leaders, including Nokia CEO Stephen Elop (Finland), McKinsey & Co. managing director Dominic Barton (Britain), and former Trader Classified Media founder and CEO John McCall MacBain (Switzerland). Canada also boasts academic leaders such as Lap-Chee Tsui, the vice-chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, and entertainers like Mark Rowswell, known as Dashan to his adoring Chinese fans.

For Canadian businesses and governments that seek to expand trade and promote business development, global Canadians are in a position to make connections, broker deals and offer advice to these businesses and governments where their interests align.

Countries such as Scotland and Australia are already demonstrating the value of global networking. In 2001, Scotland created a powerful network of citizens abroad called GlobalScot and, as of 2011, more than 1,000 GlobalScots give freely of their time and expertise to assist with business deals, leverage finance and establish contacts. Australia's global network, Advance, has forged connections with the one million Australian expatriates since 2002, drawing on their experience and networks to open doors and opportunities for Australia and Australians around the globe. What began in Scotland and Australia has now expanded to at least four other countries – Mexico, Chile, Singapore and New Zealand – all of which have built vibrant networks of their high-profile expats.

India has gone a step further. In 2002, a full-fledged Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was created to manage the country's substantial diaspora. To recognize and connect with their most successful expatriates, the ministry created the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award to honour exceptional Indians abroad. The president of India bestows the prestigious award upon 12 Indian expatriates each year.

Technology now makes it possible to more easily track expatriate Canadians. Let's reach out to them and establish a global Canadian network of advisers and supporters who will open doors, broker deals and build connections for Canadians at home and abroad.

Some outreach to Canadian expatriates has already begun. In networks like the U.S.-wide connect2canada or Silicon Valley-based Digital Moose Lounge and the C100 group of venture capitalists, these connections have already proved their worth. But more can and should be done to create network of global Canadians who would advance Canada's economic interests abroad.

Let Canadian expatriates give back to their country. Give Canadian business the connections they need to go global. In an age of digital networks – Facebook and LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube – the network motto can be summed up in that iconic phrase: "I am Canadian!"

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