

# **A New Magnetic North:** How Canada Can Attract and Retain Young Talent



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A New Magnetic North:  
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# Executive Summary

Canada25 is proud to present *A New Magnetic North – How Canada Can Attract and Retain Young Talent*. The report presents the views of 22 dynamic young leaders on how Canada can become a magnet for talent in the 21st century.

## Why is this issue important? And why now?

Attracting and retaining talent has never been more important for Canada. While the retirement of a generation is creating opportunities for younger Canadians to find their voice, it is also testing our ingenuity in dealing with social stresses. More than ever, we need innovative solutions in all facets of our lives: social innovation to build a fair and equitable society; economic innovation to foster investment; policy innovation to solve the challenges of our demographic profile; and cultural innovation to strengthen our national pride. Innovation is at a premium – and the fuel for innovation is talent.

## What's new about this report?

*A New Magnetic North* is a call to action – a call to action that is coming from the very people whose decisions of where to build a career today will define our future success. Many surveys, statistics, and economic theories shed light on Canada's talent attraction and retention issue – now, for the first time in such a focused way, we can supplement this data with proposals that have been rigorously debated and researched by the young people behind the numbers.

## What is the answer?

*A New Magnetic North* presents Canada25's view that our country must act on two fronts to make Canada a magnet for global talent:

- I Deliver on the Canadian promise of a strong social orientation and a healthy cultural and physical environment
- II Create a culture of innovation that begets challenging opportunities, celebrates success, and empowers individuals to fully utilize their skills and ideas

Action in both of these areas is vital. With only the first, we are just a nice place to retire or vacation. With only the second, we are merely a smaller, colder version of the United States. But with action on both these fronts, we become a land of dynamic challenges and varied opportunities that is also internationally celebrated as the best place in the world to live. There is no question this is a tall order. However, we must remember that highly talented individuals have a world of options – consistently engaging them will take far-reaching action and changes in mindset.

*Canada25* believes that Canada is relatively strong on delivering the Canadian promise, but relatively weak on creating a

culture of innovation. Because of this, and because much of our political debate is centred on strengthening elements of the Canadian promise, we have directed most of our efforts toward how Canada can create a dynamic culture of innovation. This reflects our belief as to where Canada25 can make the greatest contribution, and not a value judgement of one set of priorities over another.

## How do we build a culture of innovation?

A New Magnetic North aspires to chart the course toward a culture of innovation in three ways: (1) by provoking national dialogue about the key values and trade-offs that must be addressed, (2) by articulating potential directions that sectors in society could take to begin building the culture, and (3) by identifying contributions that young people themselves can make to become part of the solution.

### 1. Provoking National Dialogue

Becoming a dynamic culture of innovation is not something that will happen in the background while we carry on our daily affairs. To truly become a magnet for global talent, all of Canada must undergo a far-reaching shift in mind-set – a change that can only occur through national debate of competing values and visions for Canada's future. We discuss many of these value decisions throughout the report; three in particular recur frequently:

**Excellence or equality?** As delegate Eric Miller says, "I don't want Canada to become a thin pancake. We have to focus on a few things and lead the world in them rather than doing everything in a marginal way." The trade-off between focusing our resources on exceptional projects, people, and institutions in a bid to push them to world-leading

levels versus spreading our resources evenly is difficult and unavoidable.

**Creativity or conformity?** "Canada can't beat the US at its own game," contends delegate Linlea Armstrong, "the focus must be on our Canadian strengths rather than trying to be more like others." The country needs to debate the relative importance of copying the policies of other countries in an attempt to remain competitive, versus creating a distinctive Canadian path to success. In taxation, for instance, we felt it was viable for Canada to have higher personal rates than other countries so long as our public services are indisputably better than those of other countries.

**Humility or hubris?** "Canadians' traditional respect for others' opinions has played a key role in developing our civil society and international reputation," says economist John McArthur, "yet at times this respect becomes deference, which in turn impedes the development of a culture of innovation." Our humble, cautious attitude manifests itself in our sporadic image management efforts abroad, our under-investment in start-up ventures relative to other countries, and our persistent doubts of self-identity. We need to debate as a country how to add an edge to our humility – how to show, as one commentator has put it, that the Canadian Beaver has fangs!

## 2. Articulating Policy Directions

Building a culture of innovation extends beyond the realm of government policy – it requires actions from all members of society. As a starting point to a constructive dialogue, A New Magnetic North lays out actions that we believe are positive steps toward creating a culture of innovation. While these are not finalized solutions, we hope they will form the beginnings of ongoing debate and action.

**What can government do?** The government can foster innovation society-wide and be a leading example of innovation itself. It must:

- ensure a vibrant economy that creates diverse, challenging opportunities;
- celebrate innovators from all walks of life at the highest level every year; and
- involve young people in public life to build an innovative policy environment.

**What can business do?** Business innovation is increasingly necessary in Canada to bolster our flagging productivity and create the global champions where our young people want to work. Canadian business should:

- formalize its recruiting presence at top international schools and consulates;
- create uniquely challenging career trajectories for young stars; and
- pursue innovative business strategies that excite tomorrow's leaders.

**What can the research community do?** To continue to be a prolific source of new ideas and to attract the talent that generates these ideas, the sector should:

- set bold aspirations such as producing 1 Nobel Prize per year and dedicate the necessary resources to achieve;
- restructure the Canadian Research Chair program to create the high value awards necessary to attract top talent
- give new professors specific funding to use to attract top graduate students who are hesitant about committing to someone new

**What can health authorities do?** Innovation in our health sector is vital to maintaining the distinctive advantage that will attract talent from abroad as well as from within Canada. The Health sector should consider innovating by:

- creating ways for front-line workers to influence health policy environment;
- offering ongoing learning and retraining opportunities; and,
- ensuring clear and open lines of communication exist between practitioners and researchers.

**What can the arts and culture community do?**

Canadian artistic innovation is crucial to helping build self-confident attitude that will attract talent from abroad. The arts and culture community should:

- develop public arts spaces;
- visibly celebrate Canadian artistic successes; and
- create mentorship programs between current leaders in the field and developing young artists.

**What can voluntary organizations do?** A culture of social innovation will help build Canada's distinctive image as a caring, open society where people want to live. To build Canada's social innovation skills, the sector should:

- create the Voluntary Centre of Excellence to establish Canada as a global leader in social innovation;
- recruit young Canadians more aggressively at universities; and
- create flexible community service alternatives to engage a broader diversity of volunteers.

### 3. Identifying Initiatives that Young People Can Lead to Shape Canada's Culture of Innovation

In addition to providing suggestions for government and other sectors, *Canada25* is deeply committed to identifying opportunities for young people to take action themselves. Accordingly, *A New Magnetic North* offers numerous initiatives that young people can structure, secure financing for, attract partners, and launch. These include:

**The Prime Minister's Fellows.** We believe the federal government should formally recognize Canada's top 30 young innovators each year with a significant monetary award to fund the continuation of their path-breaking work, as well as a one-year posting as "innovation advisors" to the top levels of government. The Prime Minister's Fellows would be celebrated annually at a high-profile event and would meet with the Prime Minister at least once a year. As Mark MacLachlan, a chemistry professor describes, "this is an easy way for government to show everyone it's serious about creating a nationwide culture of innovation, and for it to improve innovation in the policy making environment."

#### **The "If I Were CEO" National Business Plan**

**Competition.** This annual competition would see first-time entrepreneurs receive coaching, advice, and possible funding from a panel of seasoned professionals. "I'm excited about the Network for Entrepreneurs and Business Plan Competition because it makes what can be a confusing process easy for the first-time entrepreneur," says Natasha Kong, a young entrepreneur in California.

**The Health Policy Internship Program.** This program provides Canadian physicians in post-graduate programs with an opportunity to work alongside a health policy analyst in examining and making improvements to health legislation. "I've seen real frustration on the front-lines over a lack of

influence over the policy environment," recounts Samir Sinha, a medical student. "This program will be positive for both policy makers and professionals and can be led by the young people on the front-lines themselves."

**The Voluntary Centre of Excellence.** This centre will centralize and link together numerous disparate research institutes, create a common certification and curriculum for voluntary sector management, and build on our strong international reputation as a leader in social innovation. "This has the potential to make Canada a global leader in social innovation and really boost our international prestige," explains Cynthia MacKenzie, "I'm excited about working on the first steps with those in the field."

Ultimately, all of these ideas will require the cooperation of many social groups to fully execute. However, given the excitement of *Canada25* delegates in building plans and support for ideas such as those above, and the enthusiasm that hundreds of young people around the country and the world have expressed in getting involved, we know that young people can play a decisive role in making them happen and building a culture of innovation.

## Conclusion

Canada has all the strengths it needs to become a powerful magnet for talent and the best place to work, live, and innovate in the world. We are excited about our potential and eager to launch the national dialogue and far-reaching action required to build *A New Magnetic North*.