



Elevating local heroes

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The Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation is considering creating a technology hall of fame that would recognize Ottawa "pioneers" such as Terence Matthews and Michael Cowpland.

The agency hopes to give a boost of confidence to the technology industry, still recovering from the telecommunications crash three years ago, by celebrating the city's greatest entrepreneurs.

"What we're trying to do right now is talk it up in the community to gauge if this is something people want to see," said Jeffrey Dale, president of OCRI, an economic agency that represents the city's technology industry.

"It's still at the discussion stages, but OCRI is certainly looking at the option."

The idea started at a lunch last month between Don Hewson, head of marketing agency Hewson Bridge and Smith, and Algonquin College president Bob Gillett.

"We were lamenting that the city hasn't been celebrating its local heroes lately, which it used to do quite a bit," said Mr. Hewson. "Do we have to always be on a roll to celebrate these people?"

He pitched the concept of a hall of fame to OCRI, which has been exploring issues such as a suitable venue and nomination process.

"Maybe there's a possibility we could get a public space that would be donated so we could start to recognize these people," said Mr. Dale, adding that the agency has yet to approach the City of Ottawa about such a plan.

If OCRI follows through, it would likely set up a nominating committee of industry experts and establish selection criteria, which are sure to be a touchy subject.

For instance, should the award go to entrepreneurs who sold their company to outside interests or to ones who stayed on board (even when the ship was sinking)?

How much of a nod should be given to the city's deep roots in Nortel Networks Corp., where many of Ottawa's business leaders began their careers? Should membership be restricted only to those who lived in Ottawa?

How many former executives from the Nortel pantheon should be inducted? Should a spot be reserved for former chief executive John Roth, once worshipped for turning the company into an Internet high-flyer and now vilified for cashing out as the telecommunications market imploded?

What about non-technology players such as developer Bill Teron, who played a leading role in building the town of Kanata, now the epicentre of Ottawa's technology industry?

Would industry expansion have been possible without the network of government research labs and academic institutions in the capital? Should former National Research Council president Arthur Carty be

eligible?

Should the hall of fame be dominated by the telecommunications industry, or is there room for biotechnology entrepreneurs as well?

And should nominees be judged on their charitable contributions to the community, not simply their resumes?

These are some of the issues that OCRI will have to tackle.

Mr. Dale said success could be measured in a number of ways, such as building a "market-defining" company, creating jobs in Ottawa, and raising the city's international profile.

Shoo-ins would include industry icons such as Mr. Matthews and Mr. Cowpland, who co-founded network equipment supplier Mitel in the early 1970s.

Others, to pick out just a few names, who would be eligible on their first try could include Michael Potter, who led Cognos's transition from a consulting firm to a business-software provider, and the late Des Cunningham, co-founder of defunct remote-access equipment maker Gandalf Technologies.

And eventually the ranks of pioneers should be joined by "second-generation" leaders such as Ron Zambonini, the colourful former chief executive of Cognos who grew the company into a global player, suggested Mr. Dale.

He acknowledged that not everyone will be in the mood to celebrate the accomplishments of Ottawa's technology leaders, given the tens of thousands of jobs that have been lost since the technology downturn.

But he believes the project would be well supported in the technology community, and he hopes it would serve as an inspiration for the new generation of entrepreneurs that leads the city into its next growth cycle.

Mr. Hewson said an Ottawa technology hall of fame shouldn't be afraid to highlight the failures of serial entrepreneurs such as Rod Bryden, the former head of Systemhouse and WorldHeart who recently filed a proposal to creditors to stave off personal bankruptcy.

"We should be talking about these guys and celebrating both their successes and failures. Each one is a building block to overall success in Ottawa."

There are a number of hall of fame-style websites and awards ceremonies dedicated to technology entrepreneurs in North America, but few permanent monuments, even in well-known industry hubs such as San Jose, Boston and Raleigh, North Carolina.

The Canadian Science and Technology Museum on St. Laurent Boulevard has a science and engineering hall of fame that has honoured 34 innovators, including Alexander Graham Bell and Frederick Banting.

It was established in 1991 in partnership with the National Research Council, Industry Canada and the Association of Partners in Education.

Since then it has expanded into an interactive section of the museum's Canadian innovation exhibit, said spokeswoman Leeanne Akehurst. Visitors can view artifacts related to the inductees' accomplishments or listen to audio recordings about their lives. The museum organizes a special weekend program for visitors when it announces new inductees.

"We tried to make it more interactive, because people don't relate to a plaque," said Ms. Akehurst.

Mr. Dale said OCRI will also look for a more interactive way to tell the stories behind the city's

entrepreneurs. The agency might pilot the project on its website before pursuing a permanent venue.

Another option would be to incorporate the concept into its annual awards dinner in the spring.

Mr. Dale said the next step is to set up a working committee to discuss details such as how many nominees would be inducted in the first year.

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On the web for seven-day subscribers: The Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation is considering the establishment of an Ottawa Technology Hall of Fame. Who do you think should be in it? And who do you think shouldn't be? Send your nominations to ottawatechgiants@canada.com.

www.ottawacitizen.com

Technology Hall of Fame

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