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Making Halton the next Silicon Valley

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Chris Herbert and Rick Stomphorst want Halton to become the next Silicon Valley.

With a handful of highways criss-crossing the region, which encompasses Oakville, Burlington, Milton and Halton Hills, the area is home to a burgeoning hi-tech industry.

The industry's growth is thanks in part to a community founded by Herbert and Stomphorst. They started the group and gained members using LinkedIn, an online networking tool.

“About 20 months ago, Rick and I were sitting at a local coffee shop in Oakville lamenting about how we didn't feel there was a grassroots community that was representing the high tech industry, both individual professionals and entrepreneurs . . . who are all trying to build the next (Research in Motion),” said Herbert, the founder of Mi6, a marketing and business development agency in Oakville.

The duo limits group memberships to professionals who live or work in the Halton region, have a proven investment in the community and are interested in helping other high-tech companies be successful.

“We thought, wouldn't it be cool to walk into a coffee shop and say, ‘there's the guy who created the next Facebook and he did it in Halton,’ ” Herbert said.

In hopes of inspiring similar success, they named the group Silicon Halton.

The group now boasts more than 300 members who meet up monthly to exchange ideas, learn how to pitch venture capitalists, look for work and help out those on the fringes of the high-tech community.

“On LinkedIn, that's our online space to collaborate but then we collaborate in person at our events,” said Stomphorst, who works as a consultant. “People need a place where they can engage in person with like-minded individuals . . . When you're busy running a company, it's tough to get out of that isolation mode when you're working.

“(Businesses) have a huge appetite to meet with their peers and to discuss the challenges they have . . . we can’t all live behind our computers.”

Members don’t come out to the meetings blind, Herbert said. They research individuals they’d like to meet by checking out their LinkedIn profiles beforehand.

“We already use LinkedIn as the formal registration tool so . . . people can go and see who else is registered and plan who they want to meet up with.”

The group also welcomes some unlikely members looking for help from the high tech industry.

Technical writers are members, as are science teachers looking for experts who can help them in the classroom, Herbert said.

“It’s important to know this isn’t just for start-ups,” he said. “It’s for anybody that’s interested in high-tech and who has a service to offer or a product to offer.”

The duo plans to nurture the group, and hope it helps turn the region into its own Silicon Valley.

“We’re hugely opportunistic. If we see an opportunity that we can leverage for our members, we’ll jump at it. A long-term vision is to create a Silicon Valley type culture here,” Stomphorst said.

“If you look at Halton, it has all the right building blocks. We have a bunch of major airports a short jaunt away. We’re so close to the Buffalo border. It’s quite an affluent community.”