

Creating a wave of native talent Aboriginal leaders and business owners plan to offer 1,000 tech scholarships to natives, writes Christopher Guly of the Ottawa Citizen.

Having built six-year-old Donna Cona Inc. of Ottawa into Canada's largest aboriginal-run systems-integration company, founding president John Bernard offers a lament familiar to his fellow high-tech chief executives, but one that is far more acute within the country's First Nations community.



The Ottawa Citizen Donna Cona president John Bernard helped start TeKnoWave, a program that will train 1,000 badly needed aboriginal IT workers who, as part of their education, must create a project for their home community. 'It's a huge win-win,' he says.

"I have such a hard time finding qualified employees -- there's just not a whole lot out there," explains Mr. Bernard, a Maliseet from northern New Brunswick.

He says that while roughly half of Donna Cona's 40-person payroll consists of aboriginal technology specialists, most of them had little to no experience when they were hired and achieved their expertise on the job. "I can't tell you how many times I've been really disappointed or have seen disappointment in the face of aboriginal students who have come to me looking for a job and we both realized that what they've studied has nothing to do with what I'm looking for."

All that could change in a few months.

Donna Cona (named after Iroquois chief, Donnacona, the first native leader to meet explorer Jacques Cartier in 1534) has signed up to be the first corporate partner of an unprecedented national program to train 1,000 aboriginal people from across Canada to become information technology professionals by 2005.

Called TeKnoWave and scheduled to be launched in Ottawa this fall, the initiative emerged from a scholarship recently established by the president and chief executive of Willis College of Business and Technology.

Last September, Rima Aristocrat unveiled an \$18,000 scholarship, named in honour of Mohawk Grand Chief Joe Norton of Kahnawake, which would be awarded annually to an aboriginal, Inuit or Métis student to pursue IT studies at Willis College. An additional \$12,000 was raised from various partners, including Donna Cona, to cover the living expenses of a student from outside Ottawa.

Through a partnership with the University of Winnipeg, scholarship students would receive university credits after completing 12 weeks of coursework in management studies from the university and a diploma following 38 weeks of study in Willis's accredited IT program. Students also receive industry certification.

Inspired by a call from Mohawk activist and music conductor John Kim Bell for Canada's business leaders to work with the aboriginal community to design and implement a 21st-century aboriginal education model, Ms. Aristocrat decided to transform the Norton Scholarship into TeKnoWave.

Some time next month, TeKnoWave will have a national board of directors that will review applications from native communities that require high-tech expertise for projects and will screen candidates from a pool of aboriginals who wish to study IT.

As part of the pilot project, Willis educators will begin offering courses to the first batch of students -- expected to number as many as 20 -- at the Odawa Native Friendship Centre in Ottawa starting in September. Students will also be assigned to work on an IT project -- whether it's creating an e-commerce site or building a network -- for their own communities back home.

Ultimately, the plan is to raise money, including funds from the federal government, for TeKnoWave's expansion to include other companies, aboriginal organizations and educational institutions from across the country.

"This is something that's never happened before," explains Ms. Aristocrat, who has committed Willis to funding scholarships in nine more cities. "Students will pay no tuition to receive university credits,

a diploma and experience from participating in an internship for their own communities. Aboriginal communities and organizations, in turn, will receive completed IT projects tailor-made for and at no cost to them."

She estimates that the value of IT applications developed through TeKnoWave will exceed \$10 million. As Mr. Bernard adds: "Not only are we creating real programs and applications that communities can use, but we're also training 1,000 aboriginals

-- so it's a huge win-win."

March 7th, 2002