Aboriginal entrepreneurship profile: Donald Hanson

By Joseph Quesnel, a research associate at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

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Note: This article is part of a series of profiles discussing successful First Nations entrepreneurs in Atlantic Canada, sponsored by the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS). Author Joseph Quesnel, of Métis extraction, is a political scientist, journalist and policy analyst based in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Among the important efforts to improve living conditions on First Nations communities is a greater emphasis and encouragement of entrepreneurship. This ethic improves the wealth and progress of any community, and this series showcases examples of success in the region.

After working for more than a decade in the federal civil service and private initiatives, Hanson, 41, created a band management software—called Lucid—that can vastly improve the ability of band management staff to retain all sorts of government records. The program is designed specifically for First Nation governments and organizations.

Hanson is Mi'kmaw (Mi'kmaq is the plural form) and a band member of Membertou First Nation on Cape Breton Island, but he was raised in Albert Bridge, Nova Scotia—a small rural community in Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Regional Municipality. Hanson had begun his career in the public service with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), now Service Canada. He had worked with HRDC during the summers while a student in business administration at Cape Breton University. From his experience with the civil service, Hanson became enthusiastic about the idea of working with his own First Nation people.

He was far from a neophyte in business matters. While living in Sydney, Nova Scotia he applied his textbook-based business administration knowledge when he started an independent sub shop—Toasties, where he focused on unique toasted products. At the time, however, Subway was also a big player in the community and just launched their toasted products only four months after Toasties opened and he was not able to compete.

"After that, I had to lick my wounds and get back on my feet and try something else," he said.

The idea for the band management software came from Hanson's time working with what is now Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) out of their Amherst office. "I fell in love with working with the First Nation communities," he said.

"It was a time of great change because more and more communities were taking initiatives on their own and controlling their own economic development, their own elections, their own land use—everything."

Hanson worked as a funding services officer (FSO) and his role was as the first point of contact between First Nation communities in the Atlantic region and INAC. Those communities dealt with his office in reporting finances and any new inquiries. His office was responsible for 33 Indigenous communities all over Atlantic Canada, as well as more than 20 Aboriginal organizations.

While working with First Nation communities, Hanson discovered significant gaps in community capacity in areas such as governance documents, human resources and budgeting.

Hanson's interest in his own Indigenous background was heightened later in his life because he only received his Indian status in 2012. His mother had lost her status, but later had it reinstated due to the McIvor Ruling. Hanson obtained his status through his mother's reinstatement.

From his time at INAC, he knew that First Nation communities were having their program funding placed on hold by the government due to late financial reporting. Hence his passion for better software to address this problem.

"The driving force behind wanting to create this system was that it gave these communities some capacity as well as power back to the band government to allow them to perform their jobs better."

Before jumping in to the proverbial deep end, Hanson was able to test the waters of software development with Coretech. Back in 2013, he and his cousin (non-aboriginal) designed a software tool for the oil and gas industry in Alberta. His cousin, who had worked as a coring consultant in the industry, was the Subject Matter Expert in this project. The system helped to manage the recording of the coring process from site to site. Hanson and his cousin realized at that time that everything the industry was on paper as well as on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and this had to change.

"The idea was to provide a visual perspective for this data to the coring consultant, the rig manager, as well as the oil company itself," he said.

"This allowed everyone to see all the information in one place."

Although they later sold the company to an Alberta drilling company in 2015, Hanson took all the insights they derived from that initiative toward his new band management system.

When he first introduced the software idea to band administrations, he found them very receptive. They were looking for innovative ways to do these important individual tasks. At the time, band administrations in Atlantic Canada held all their policies and records on their Personal Computers, increasingly on flash drives, or in old-fashioned binders. Hanson said, "they were looking for a more effective way to manage their information."

"One of the challenges, however, is that not every community is open to change," he said, pointing out that in communities where there are more economic development activities, these communities seem to be seeking more innovative approaches to band management.

"Other communities felt, 'If it's not broke, why fix it?'"

For those communities who have used the management software, Hanson said they "can definitely see the value."

In terms of community feedback, many of the communities said it is a potential game changer, especially for those communities that are looking to expand their operations or are pursuing serious economic development initiatives. Those progressive communities tend to produce more information as their operations become more complex.

Of course, being better organized and transparent is not only of benefit to the band administration specifically, he said. The First

Nation's private sector partners are also interested.

"The private companies our communities work with want to know that the First Nation's proverbial house is in order and Lucid can help with that."

It is no coincidence that the band management software allows First Nations to become more transparent. The First Nations Financial Transparency Act (FNFTA) had become law in 2013 and Indigenous communities all across Canada were forced to think much more about transparency. The new legislation requires bands to provide to government and on a publicly accessible website its audited consolidated financial statements, the schedule of remuneration and expenses, and the auditor's written report respecting the consolidated financial statements.

Hanson took the FNFTA as an opportunity to ensure that his software system incorporated the ability to post all the required documents online, allowing for greater transparency.

"Instead of having the department do that, the First Nation community can manage all of this information on their own terms." Hanson said that within the system any time someone uploaded a band government document, you can make that document public by linking the software system to the community's public website.

"If you want to share or post documents online, you can do that with the click of a mouse."

All of this publicly-available information allowed these First Nation communities to be fully compliant with the FNFTA. Hanson stressed that the software not only allowed band administrations to post salary and benefit data, but also helped the

administration to post jobs with the band, make calls for tender, and post any notices to community stakeholders.

Hanson is now very interested in taking his software out of the pilot phase and try to commercialize it all over Canada. At present, the system is designed for small and medium-sized First Nation communities. Hanson has targeted specific communities to pilot the system at no initial charge. He hopes, of course, that this strategy will lead to eventual community adoptions of the system.

Aside from the Band Management System, Hanson is also preparing to launch a new app. Bidtasker is a web-based and mobile phone application which connects busy people who need help getting their small tasks completed with workers, or Taskers as they like to call them, to improve efficiency.

With BidTasker, users can view and choose to bid on that task if they have the skills to do so. That means a customer can select the best bid for them based on the Taskers reviews and star ratings. BidTasker is a new startup which is scheduled to launch in Atlantic Canada in May 2017, then across Canada by the summer. The App will first be released as a web application with the Android and iOS Apps to follow.

Needless to say, this Atlantic-based Indigenous entrepreneur will be extremely busy during this next year.