

The Purdy Crawford Chair

In Aboriginal Business Studies

Case Studies in Aboriginal Business

Abenaki Associates and Aboriginal Niche
Market Entrepreneurship

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The Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies was established at Cape Breton University in 2010 in response to Aboriginal community leaders' expression of the need for entrepreneurship, business investment, and corporate skills training for the purpose of creating a model of self-reliance.

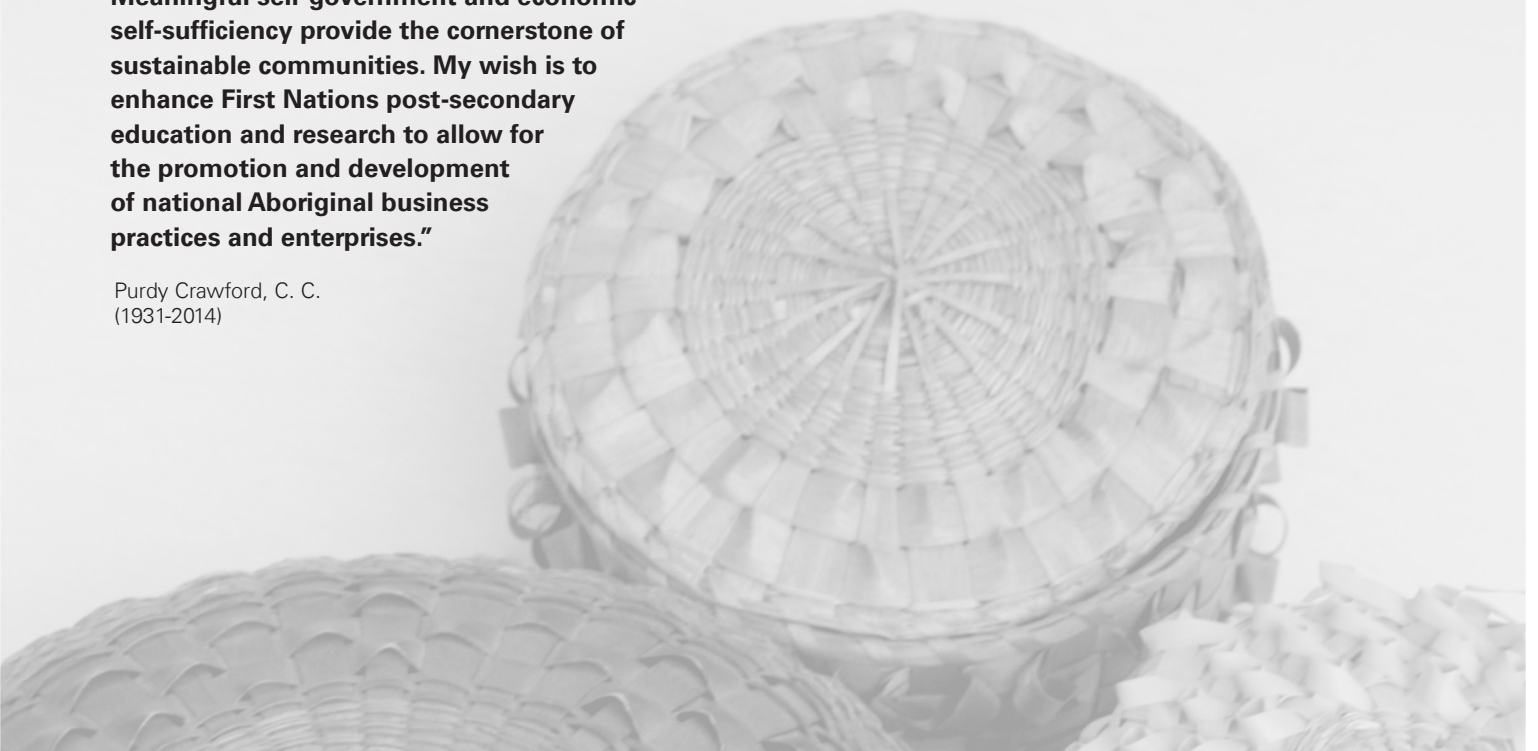
Named in honour of Canadian lawyer and corporate boardroom leader, the late Mr. Purdy Crawford, the Chair aims to promote interest among Canada's Aboriginal people in the study of business at the post-secondary level.

The Purdy Crawford Chair in Aboriginal Business Studies focuses its work in four areas:

- Research on what "drives" success in Aboriginal Business
- National student recruitment in the area of post-secondary Aboriginal business education
- Enhancement of the post-secondary Aboriginal business curriculum
- Mentorship at high school and post-secondary levels

"Meaningful self-government and economic self-sufficiency provide the cornerstone of sustainable communities. My wish is to enhance First Nations post-secondary education and research to allow for the promotion and development of national Aboriginal business practices and enterprises."

Purdy Crawford, C. C.
(1931-2014)



ABENAKI ASSOCIATES AND ABORIGINAL NICHE MARKET ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Based in Miramichi, New Brunswick, Abenaki Associates Ltd. has been providing information and computer software technology to First Nation customers for more than thirty years. Abenaki Associates is one of the longest operating IT companies in Canada, developing innovative and award-winning software solutions for more than 90% of Canadian First Nation communities. The Aboriginal owned and operated company offers nation-wide service to every province and territory in Canada, with the firm belief that the products and services they offer result in improvements in the health, safety, and overall well-being of the Indigenous communities they service.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Abenaki Associates was created in 1984 by founder and president Percy Barnaby and vice president Carol Ann Barnaby. Percy, having previously worked with First Nations Housing as a federal government employee, recognized the importance of accurate information about housing on reserve lands. Thus, Abenaki Associates produced the Abenaki Housing Inventory Management System, an easy-to-use software system that can provide up-to-date assessments of a First Nation housing situation with very little effort. The company also helps to manage everything from finances to social service portfolios through a variety of computer training, IT services, and customized software products (Balderson, 1996). With its head office located in Eel Ground First Nation along the Miramichi River in New Brunswick, Abenaki has trained over 20,000 people across Canada as of 2012. In addition, the federally-incorporated company has offices in Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba, and British Columbia, with over 7,500 clients from well over 400 Aboriginal communities, organizations, and businesses.

Despite its entrance into a niche market, Abenaki enjoys annual sales in the \$1 million range, having developed numerous software and IT services that have revolutionized Aboriginal business and governmental practices in Canada. The company has developed a suite of software solutions with the following components: Case Management, Child and Family Services, Social Services, Water Infrastructure Management, Post-Secondary Student Management, and Community Management Information. Abenaki offers training and capacity development in fixed asset management, community membership, social assistance, and housing, among others. For instance, the Abenaki Housing Inventory Management System provides accurate information about housing on reserves, an essential tool for band councils and housing agencies. The software offers an effective means to gather complete information on all housing units, while also producing analytic reports that can help communities plan future approaches to funding requirements and opportunities.

From Abenaki's initial development, the company was already cementing its place as a leading software provider in Canada. In 1995, it was the recipient of the CMHC Housing Award for its Housing and Inspection Management System. In 2008, it was ranked third worldwide in client satisfaction by partner organization, Sage Software. In 2012, it was the winner of Cando's Economic Developer of the Year Award.

The company is managed by a small, tightly-knit group of employees, including, in addition to Percy and Carol Ann Barnaby, Michelle Poirier, director of development; Peter Barnaby, marketing manager; Melanie Courtney, administrator; and Amy Young, account manager. This small, devoted staff ensures that customers receive comprehensive service. For instance, the Abenaki Software Assurance Plan protects consumers by guaranteeing that they never have to pay for a software upgrade; have free access to staff via email, telephone, and remote support; and receive a 5% discount on scheduled workshops and training (Abenaki Associates, 2017).

CHALLENGES

The development of Abenaki Associates into the successful enterprise it is today was not without its challenges. Training programs require travel from one end of the country to the other, which posed a problem for the burgeoning business. With few means of travel and transportation, the company had to find creative ways in which to follow through on its initial contracts.

Abenaki's first major contract was with First Nations in the Fort Frances area in northwestern Ontario. The contract came with a request to train 24 First Nation staff in basic computer skills. This presented a problem, as Abenaki did not have 24 computers and did not know how to transport computers to Fort Frances.

Utilizing quick thinking and creative business strategy, Abenaki ultimately managed to rent the necessary number of computers, as well as a cube van, from a local rental company and drove for two days to the Ontario location, where they successfully delivered capacity building training to First Nation people in the area. This instance is exemplary of the company's longstanding devotion to providing the best, most comprehensive service to its Aboriginal customers (Cando, 2012).

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: PROJECTS, PARTNERSHIPS, AND INVESTMENTS

The Fort Frances project demonstrated the need for Abenaki to expand to different parts of Canada, leading to a partnership with Eaton's in Ottawa. Abenaki made inquiries into whether or not Eaton's would be willing to let Abenaki use its fully stocked computer labs across Canada. This request was approved with the provision

that Abenaki sell IBM computers and Microsoft software to its clients. The Abenaki-Eaton's partnership was crucial in furthering Abenaki's growth, providing the company with a national presence throughout Canada. The Fort Frances contract also highlighted the need to provide on-site training at any location. As a result, Abenaki placed a newfound emphasis on mobile training, with the company now having three mobile computer labs that can be shipped anywhere and set up in minutes.

Abenaki also negotiated with Basic Software Group (BSG) to become an Accpac Accounting Software reseller for First Nations across the country. Accpac Accounting was ultimately sold to Sage Software, which remains one of the company's most significant and high-profile partnerships.

Another contract was cemented with James Bay Cree First Nation in Quebec. Abenaki visited the community for an evaluation and subsequently signed a contract in Montreal. That included a major installation of networks, IBM servers, and work stations all operating MS-DOS and MS-DOS Software from Microsoft and Corel.

Other clients include Samson Cree Nation, which required a solution that included more than 200 computers and an automated voting service for the Council, as well as the United Steelworkers who wanted to automate searching for their arbitration cases (Cando, 2012).

Furthermore, financial assistance from Atlantic Canada's Opportunities Agency's (ACOA) Business Development Program was key to their effort to modernize their management software into a web-based format. ACOA contributed \$100,000 – more than half the project cost – to the company (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, 2011).

THE FUTURE OF ABENAKI

Abenaki Associates has been long established as a leader in Canada's IT sector. Within the next few years, the company has planned for continued growth and potential expansion into New England.

The company also plans to expand and develop more Cloud-based management tools for First Nation customers, as well as provide training and tools to both large and small on-reserve businesses. Training will be elaborated to cover a broader range of topics and the company will also focus on increasing their social media presence. In a 2011 interview, Barnaby indicated an expectation for a 50% growth in sales in the following years (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, 2011).

Moreover, the Abenaki newsletter currently reaches more than 5,700 First Nation professionals and counting. The Abenaki website's 2017 blog also features an ongoing

series showcasing products made by the company's partners, such as Trailmark and Sage 300. In addition, Abenaki has developed an online database through which consumers can make comments or suggestions about their experiences with the company's products and services. This solidarity with its affiliates and customers alike ensures the maintenance of strong, lucrative partnerships and enduring client relationships (Abenaki Associates, 2017).

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