

Global Practice Leads: The Private Sector Perspective

By Campbell Morrison

Rich Neill, an aerospace global practice lead at DFAIT, was at a conference in Los Angeles, Ca., when he and the trade commissioners met with a U.S. aerospace company looking for a specialized aluminum casting part. Drawing on his experience as a senior executive in the private sector, Neill suggested that he and the trade commissioners go back to the company for more details—a lot more details. They needed to understand, in very specific terms, what the company required before they could find a Canadian company to deliver it.

Armed with a clearer understanding, Neill and the trade commissioners were able to narrow the list of potential Canadian suppliers from about 30 to half a dozen. One British Columbia firm was ultimately successful.

But Neill, the former CEO of Magellan Aerospace Corp., who has also held senior positions with Rolls Royce Motor Cars Ltd. and General Electric Co., provides much more than advice to individual trade commissioners. He and his colleague, Dale Hunt, whose business experience is in smaller aerospace firms, provide leadership born of decades in the private sector. Together, they co-chair the Aerospace Advisory Board, which is composed primarily of leaders from the private sector.

“Rich and Dale, through the Aerospace Advisory Board, guide DFAIT’s aerospace strategy,” says Gregory Rust, Deputy Director of the Aerospace Practice. “They bring their extensive experience, vocabulary and, most important, knowledge to the table. As corporate engineers, they talk the talk, which provides both Canadian aerospace companies and us with greater confidence that we can work together and succeed together.”

A survey of trade commissioners found that the global practice leads possess rich and in-depth sector knowledge of their industries, provide sector intelligence and credibility in client meetings, and bring high-potential clients to the Trade Commissioner Service (TCS).

“I think what we bring to the TCS is the ability to focus on Canada’s capabilities,” says Neill. “Just as we did in California, we need to drill down into the weeds and understand the real competencies of the Canadian sectors so that we can optimally match them up with the intricacies of global demand.”

In addition to the aerospace sector, there are DFAIT global practice leads in four other promising sectors: information and communication technologies, cleantech, infrastructure and life sciences. Each has an advisory board that bridges the public and private sectors, providing strategic advice to DFAIT.

“You have to get close to and understand the customers so you can deliver what they need rather than what you think they need,” says Denis Connor, the cleantech global practice lead and a former executive of such top companies as Bell Labs and Bell-Northern Research. Bringing that level of knowledge to the TCS is key. “Resources are always limited. We have to choose the sectors with the greatest opportunities. It is absolutely the right thing to do.”

The unique perspective of the global practice leads and advisory boards complements the other tools available that enable the Trade Commissioner Service to provide excellent service to the Canadian business community.

“We want to give the trade commissioners as much sector knowledge as we can, and working side by side with experienced senior executives helps us understand the private sector’s interests, needs and expectations so we can provide them with the best possible services,” says Peter MacArthur, Director General, Global Business Opportunities. “The in-depth advice we receive from the global practice leads is invaluable to our ability to help our colleagues abroad.”



Aerospace Global Practice Lead Rich Neill (second from left) chairing the annual Aerospace Advisory Board Meeting on Sept 14, 2011