

Digital media 'Hub' opens in the Tannery building

BY ROSE SIMONE, RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER — It is a physical space where digital dreams will become reality.

But on Thursday, The Communitech Hub, a digital media and mobile accelerator centre, was itself a dream come true, as it officially opened on inside the 30,000-square-foot space it now occupies at the Tannery building in downtown Kitchener.

It is the home of more than 30 small early-stage digital media companies, but there is also a shared lobby area, and big companies such as Research In Motion, Open Text, Christie Digital and Agfa Healthcare have spaces there for showcasing new technology, collaborating and coaching the new companies.

Beyond One Eighty Ltd., run by 28-year-old Taylor Nicholls, is an example of a new emerging company located in The Hub. It makes advanced software that consolidates information on a computer screen, for military and security forces.

"Being in The Hub is fantastic," Nicholls said. "I came here as a one-man company, but now it feels more like an eight-person company because of all the mentorship and the knowledge I am getting," he added. "It is allowing me to take another look at my company and figure out how to position it to grow properly."

Communitech is working in partnership with the Accelerator Centre in the University of Waterloo Research and Technology Park, which is managing the applications for the spaces in both centres.

Academic institutions, including Wilfrid Laurier University and Conestoga College, also have space in The Hub, to provide new companies with business, advertising and marketing expertise.

Laurier president Max Blouw said more than 1,000 Laurier graduates already work in the region's technology companies.

"No matter how good the technology is, if you don't have really good business skills business acumen and connections, you are going to struggle. So we are very much hoping that we can provide strength in that area and work with young companies and also some of the other partners that are in here," Blouw said.

Meanwhile, Christie Digital has donated a "cave" to allow a person to walk into a virtual reality world, much like a Star Trek holodeck, and interact in a virtual showroom, or any other environment the companies want to simulate.

"Our vision is that young startup companies will be able to use this equipment that they could never afford to use at their early stage, and do amazing things with it," said Bob Rushby, chief technology officer for Christie Digital.

The collaborative setting will accelerate the growth of new digital media companies in this region and in Canada, said Kevin Tuer, managing director of the Canadian Digital Media Network, which will have a home in The Hub, but is an organization that has already linked together eight digital media clusters across the country.

"This is their sandbox. This is where they can bump into each other often and have those conversations that will accelerate the entire commercialization process," Tuer said.

Ian Klugman, president of Communitech, said \$100 million in public and private sector funds has been raised to run The Hub over the next five years. About 40 per cent is from the public sector and 60 per cent comes from the private sector, he added.

The central reason for the heavy funding is simple — the global digital media market expected to grow into a \$2.2 trillion industry.

This is "where the puck is going," Klugman said in an interview. "We want to make sure that Waterloo Region companies, and Canadian companies, are going to be front and centre and be able to capture those new markets."

Glen Murray, Ontario minister of research and innovation, said the Ontario government invested in The Hub because the province's economy is undergoing a transformation.

"We are in a dynamic economy where production is being replaced by innovation," Murray said.

"Digital media is changing all our lives," said Tom Jenkins, executive chair and chief strategy officer of Open Text and the chair of the Canadian Digital Media Network.

In a global world, whatever is built in The Hub in Kitchener "will be used almost immediately around the world. That is an amazing thing to contemplate," Jenkins said

"It will be very interesting to see what all these organizations and entrepreneurs come up with," Jenkins added in an interview. "I don't think we can even really imagine the creativity that will come out of this."

rsimone@therecord.com



Philip Walker, Record staff
Communitech CEO Iain Klugman CEO (left) and Tom Jenkins, executive chairman and chief strategy officer of Open Text stand inside an immersive environment during the opening of the Communitech Hub on Thursday.