

## From Silicon Valley to Saint John: Workcation success 'almost overwhelming'



Mark Hausen and John Ly, with the Toronto-based company HR Technologies, are the inaugural participants in the Workcation program, a pilot project between the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce and UStation.

Photo: Mike Landry/Telegraph-Journal

Mike Landry | Telegraph-Journal

**SAINT JOHN** • For most, the impact COVID-19 has had on borders is perhaps the worst part of the pandemic. For Mark Hausen, it's been the best.

At the same time the pandemic was restricting travel to the point where, at times, even going to Moncton was prohibited at times, Hausen says the pandemic was figuratively removing all borders. At least when it comes to what we consider to be workplaces.

A senior member with HR Technologies, a Toronto-based company that specializes in workplace management, Hausen is especially attuned to this shift. He says the old idea of

having to base your business out of a handful of international cities has been “totally removed” across the globe.

“You no longer need to go into markets looking for talent,” said Hausen. “You can hire from anywhere and work from anywhere.”

But this isn't just theory. It's an idea Hausen, and his co-worker John Ly, have put into practice as the inaugural participants in the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce's pilot 'Workcation' program.

A partnership with UStation – a shared cafe-like workspace uptown – the idea was to court professionals to spend about a month living and working in Saint John to get a taste of what life could be like out of a large city. The hope was to arrange "workcations" for 20 people, with a goal of getting six professionals to move to the city.

The response was “almost overwhelming,” said Chamber CEO David Duplisea.

More than 300 applications were submitted, he said, and to his surprise he found the applicants were across the board in terms of age, not just the late twenties-early thirties cohort he'd expected.

These applicants included tech workers, but also those in finance, engineering and consulting. The applications provided a volume of data about the types of people interested in Saint John, Duplisea said. What is clear so far is that they all “just want to live, work and play in the same place.”

The success of the program is so significant it's changing the Chamber's focus. Instead of trying to lure “brick and mortar” businesses to the city, Duplisea foresees the Chamber working instead to attract companies and people.

Hausen and Ly arrived in Saint John on July 1 and are here throughout the month. They've been put up in rooms at

Chipman Hill Suites, growing their glutes, they joke, walking up and down Chipman Hill every day.

Hausen spent years in the software mecca of Silicon Valley, where once those with tech aspirations had to flock like would-be starlets to Hollywood. There was no work-life balance in the Valley; just work.

Now he's working from Saint John, showing that you needn't devote your life to your job. It's possible to suit your work to your lifestyle and needs.

Even before they saw a news article about the Workcation program, Hausen and Ly had discussed taking their work on the road. Although they were both keen, there were naysayers at first. But, as their departure date neared, even those who questioned the idea became envious.

"Don't think, just act," is Ly's advice to anyone asking about the program. There's no question for him or Hausen; it will be worthwhile.

Neither has experienced any issues working from Saint John, they said. In fact, being in the Atlantic time zone has made it feel like they have an extra hour compared to eastern markets.

"It just feels like home at the end of the day," Ly said.

They both drove here – which they absolutely insist be done – forking their routes in Campbellton.

Ly said the Chamber's support has been key.

Working with the Chamber's program director John Simpson, the pair have received a bevy of curated experiences, both in the city and all the way up to Burnt Church and Halifax.

Ly has been struck by "the rich history everyone carries around them, in terms of pride of province and country ... they rave about history and the deep roots they have with it."

They've also noticed how it seems people here have a

certain freedom.

“I feel a lot of people are pursuing their passion and the barriers are less,” said Hausen. “There’s more focus on self.

“Most certainly, absolutely, unequivocally it’s something to try ... it’ll exceed every expectation.”