

Volume 25 Number 19
December 9, 2011

New industry association to accelerate adoption of photonics-driven applications

By Debbie Lawes

The 12-year-old Canadian Institute for Photonics Innovation (CIPI) will be re-born April 1 as a new industry-led organization, marking the end of its two terms as a Networks of Centres of Excellence. Its planned merger with the much smaller Canadian Photonics Consortium will create a new organization that will focus heavily on emerging end user markets and their adoption of photonics-driven products and solutions.

But unlike CIPI, the new tentatively named Canadian Photonic Industry Consortium (CPIC) will not fund research. With an anticipated annual budget of about \$300,000 — compared to CIPI's \$5-\$6 million each year — the new group is encouraging researchers to tap into Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council programs that support industry-academia partnerships.

Under an agreement with NSERC, researchers and corporate partners will submit their applications first to CIPI, and later CPIC, which has committed to vet proposals within two weeks. That initial review and endorsement by a committee of academic and industry scientists will enable NSERC to accelerate its review and approval process.

"We will ensure that the projects fit within NSERC's IP (intellectual property) rules and look at how the proposals can be strengthened," says Robert Corriveau, CIPI's president and CEO. "This will speed up the approval process and increase their chances of success."

The new consortium will primarily focus on networking and knowledge exchange as identified in a 2008 report by the CPC, entitled Making Light Work for Canada. It found that Canada invests strongly in, and excels at photonics R&D, but that the academic research "is often untargeted and translation of the outcomes into commercial success could be greatly improved." It said closer ties between photonics producers and potential customers are needed to develop solutions.

Corriveau says having end users involved in CPIC is critical. The CPC, for example, was founded in 2000 with a focus on what was then the biggest photonics users — telecommunications companies. Today, growth markets for photonics include aerospace, oil and gas, healthcare, automotive and microelectronics.

"These companies want to know what's going on in this sector and what photonics can do for them," he says. "We will be organizing workshops across the country. The first will be in Halifax on how the shipbuilding industry can benefit from photonics, such as sensors and lasers for welding."

CPIC will also seek opportunities to partner with international organizations, including the

Photonics 21 initiative in Europe, the European Photonics Industry Consortium, the Knowledge Transfer Networks in the UK and the International Society for Optical Engineering in the US.

CPC's vice-chairman, Dan Gale, says the new consortium will maintain and build on the relationships that have been established over the past 12 years through both CPC and CIPI. "This is very much an industry-driven initiative," says Gale. "Companies are asking how we can sustain these relationships, between companies and between companies and researchers."

A NEW BEGINNING FOR CPC

Envisioned as a industry-led photonics organization funded through membership fees, CPC's business model struggled as an increasing number of its telecom members fell victim to the industry-wide meltdown early in the last decade.

CPC executive director Mike Scott says without the finances to hire full-time staff, the group has acted primarily as a coordinating entity between the regional clusters of other photonics organizations.

"CPC has acted in somewhat of a holding capacity over the last four or five years," he says. "That will change with the CPIC model, where we will be able to employ people, either full-time or part-time, to run it."

CPIC will receive \$250,000 over one year beginning April 1 from the NCE to help finance the transition. Ongoing funding will come from companies paying \$5,000 annually to become members. Corriveau hopes to sign up about 60 members for an annual operating budget of between \$300,000 and \$400,000. CPIC's goal is to be financially self-sufficient by April 2013.

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