

CMC prototyping network moves closer to reality with PROMPT-Québec MOU

CMC Microsystems and PROMPT-Québec have signed an MOU that could lead to the establishment of the first regional node in a planned CMC Microsystems Prototype Network. The two organizations will immediately collaborate to develop a handful of pilot projects and an overall business plan which they will take to the federal and Québec governments for financing.

If successful, the CMC-PROMPT collaboration will advance a key plank in CMC's ambitious strategic plan — to stimulate microsystems prototype development. It will also help PROMPT to establish itself as an R&D accelerator and project broker of national scope. Both organizations are being positioned as fourth pillar organizations, which aim to foster collaboration between government, academia and industry.

The MOU is the first such agreement stemming from a CMC call earlier this year for expressions of interest for partners to help create cluster nodes for a national prototyping network. Officials from both organizations won't estimate how much it will cost to run the network until the business plan is complete.

"We see this initial business plan as what's required to replicate across Canada with other partners," says Dr Brian Barge, CMC's president and CEO. "We want to build a funding envelope for companies and then go to the federal and Quebec governments. This is a business plan to serve Canadian interests."

Barge says the concept behind the Network and its emphasis on partnering and cluster development is to expand microsystems capabilities into various sectors of the economy by making the technologies market-ready and bringing the industry closer to potential sources of financing.

The MOU provides an important starting point because PROMPT has close connections with companies in Quebec that require microsystems prototypes and they have provincial funding for pre-competitive research. For its part, CMC has equipped universities across Canada with tools and technologies to conduct complex microsystems prototype development. The result is prototypes which are required by the financial community as a precursor to product development financing.

For PROMPT, the opportunity to collaborate with CMC dovetails with its mandate to mitigate risk for private sector investment in information and communications technologies (ICT) by serving as a broker for companies seeking prototype services and creating major R&D projects. Funded by Valorisation-Recherche Québec, PROMPT is actively seeking partnerships with organizations like CMC and Alberta's iCORE, as well as financial investors across Canada and internationally. Such a pre-competitive strategy would inject much needed public and private funding into areas that are currently too risky for investment.

“There’s a crying need from early-stage companies for prototype development ... across the various subsectors of ICT — networks, software and applications,” says PROMPT president Dr Charles Despins. “The MOU with CMC is designed to build a business plan to define the nature of this first regional network office and then present it to the feds and the Quebec government. The idea is for PROMPT-Québec to build bridges with other provinces and partners and make partnering easier with federal agencies.”

CMC’s Barge says the business plan and several pilot projects should provide powerful ammunition for government to finance the full prototyping network, estimated in the tens of millions of dollars.

“The areas we are addressing are very complex matters in the system of innovation,” he says. “A prototyping network offers enormous potential by bring microsystems into many industrial sectors. Therefore, the government needs to intervene so Canada can play in this enormous microsystems opportunity.”

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