

SUCCESS STORY: CLEARPATH ROBOTICS/ OTTO MOTORS



ABOUT CLEARPATH ROBOTICS/OTTO MOTORS

As a manufacturer of self-driving vehicles for industry, OTTO Motors is redefining how inventory moves in the workplace—whether it’s boxes, carts, bins or shelves.



But that’s not the company’s end goal. In fact, its overall mission is to one day make human driving obsolete—and kickstart a “self-driving revolution.”

As the global industrial automation market continues growing, OTTO Motors is quickly becoming the main source of revenue for its parent company, Clearpath Robotics. In fact, within just three years, the company has grown to approximately 220 employees at Clearpath—with about 70% of them working for OTTO Motors.

Today, OTTO Motors is spread across multiple locations in Waterloo Region, including a 50,000-square-foot integrated test centre for research and development, testing and distribution; and its headquarters, which spans 10,000 square feet of production floor for prototyping and building self-run vehicles.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

The story of Clearpath Robotics and OTTO Motors had very humble beginnings in the region.

Started in a basement by four local university friends who loved building robots, the founders of what eventually became Clearpath saw an opportunity to simplify robotics research.

“The ecosystem in Waterloo was perfect for creating the company here,” says Cam Davies, Director of Marketing for OTTO Motors. “Our first investors and customers were all in the Waterloo Region; and our first employees were graduates of the University of Waterloo. In fact, UW alone is an extremely strong reason why we’re here, because so much talent and innovation related to what we do comes out of there.”

In 2016, Clearpath created the OTTO Motors division to address the growing global need for industrial automation.

AN UNMATCHED COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

While the region is home to several self-driving tech companies, Davies says businesses are continuously motivated to work together.

“Waterloo has a culture of collaboration that I think is unmatched in other areas of the globe,” says Davies.

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“We are one of the top tech centres worldwide, but we have a humbleness about us—and for the most part, we’re all looking to build the region as a collective whole.”

That willingness to help one another—within and across industries—is extremely helpful for new businesses coming to the area, says Davies.

For example, it’s easy to build relationships with top executives in the community. “It’s fantastic because you can reach out to anyone in any position in this town—even a CEO—and have coffee and learn about their business, how they’re doing things, and share war stories along the way.”

To start building those connections, Davies encourages new businesses to network as much as possible.

“If you’re looking to recruit and build your local brand here, it’s very much encouraged and almost necessary to attend peer-to-peer sessions, and go to things like tech socials and events in town,” he advises.



A UNIQUE, AFFORDABLE LIFESTYLE

Making Waterloo Region even more attractive, says Davies, is the cost of living.

“We have a really good sweet spot here in the region,” says Davies. “You’ve got a smaller city with all types of amenities and restaurants and entertainment, but the cost of living isn’t that high. You can actually still get a single-family home for a reasonable price. Basically, you’re able to get some big-city features without the big-city price tag.”



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As light-rail transit expands and more high-rises are being built to serve companies, Davies says this is helping to not only attract but retain more talent in the region.

“In the past, there’s been a ‘brain drain’ of qualified engineers going to California,” he says. “But here you have well-paying jobs that are also really exciting jobs.”

Making the region extra interesting, says Davies, is its proximity to St. Jacobs, a small village also known as “Mennonite Country.” (Traditionalist Mennonites are Christians who have maintained many of the “old ways” of life, versus adopting technology and mainstream culture. Moreover, St. Jacobs is also home to Canada’s largest year-round farmers’ market.)

“As you go north out of Waterloo, it’s not uncommon to see horse-and-buggy parking outside of Home Depot. It’s actually a pretty cool thing to see, and I think that having Mennonites and horse-and-buggies so close has had an impact on how humble and hardworking we are in the city,” Davis says.

COMPLIMENTARY INVESTMENT CONCIERGE SERVICES FOR ALL BUSINESSES

Starting a new business in a new place can certainly be daunting.

However, OTTO Motors/Clearpath VP of Finance Jason Fedy says the region provides a great deal of support to those who come to Waterloo, through organizations like the Ontario Centres of Excellence (OCE), the Accelerator Centre, Communitech, and Waterloo EDC.



“There are tons of government grant programs, all with different criteria, that are out there to help with funding—and Waterloo EDC has helped us navigate through all of them, including identifying which ones we may qualify for, and providing guidance on applications,” Fedy says.

For grant programs that require an invitation to apply, Waterloo EDC has also been able to set up introductory meetings for the company.

“It’s really good to know there are organizations out there to help us out,” says Fedy. “In a lot of cases, we’ve tried to work with government directly but it can be challenging. Having access to a third party that has lots of experience and insight into these programs has been very beneficial to us.”



waterlootedc.ca
info@waterlootedc.ca

Telephone: 519.747.2541
Toll Free: 1.866.233.5133

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151 Charles Street West, Suite 100, Kitchener, ON, N2G 1H6, Canada