

**AFOA**  
Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada

# THE JOURNAL OF ABORIGINAL MANAGEMENT

FEBRUARY 2010

**Celebrating a Decade  
of Success Building  
Aboriginal Management  
and Prosperity**

# 2010



**AFOA**

Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada

*The best source of information and training on Aboriginal finance and management*

## JAM The Journal of Aboriginal Management

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*The best source of information and training on Aboriginal finance and management*

# THE AFOA – REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE OF PROGRESS

By *Suzanne Werhar-Seebach, CAE*  
Director, Programs, Services & Communications, AFOA Canada

## The Beginning

AFOA Canada's origins began in January 1998 when the Government of Canada responded to the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* with a long-term broad-based plan called "Gathering Strength – Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan" designed to enhance the quality of life of Aboriginal people and promote self-sufficiency.

The Plan identified capacity development, especially in financial management and accountability, as an essential pre-condition to self-government. It recognized that healthy, successful Aboriginal communities must be built on a strong foundation of good governance and effective financial management.

In March of that same year, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the Certified General Accountants Association of Canada (CGA Canada) began to put the Plan into action by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) aimed at enhancing First Nation financial skills and standards and building the foundation for self-government. An AFN-CGA Working Group was formed shortly after to implement the MOU's objectives.

AFOA Canada is a legacy of this vision. Over the last ten years the Association has provided the bricks and mortar for the foundation of good governance and effective management in Aboriginal communities across Canada.

Since its incorporation in 1999, thousands of Aboriginal individuals and many communities in the country have looked to AFOA to help improve their finance, management and governance practices. They have done so by accessing the Association's expanding suite of programs, products and services. These include capacity development research and learning resources, professional development training and certification, networking and the promotion of best practices, activities that recognize management leadership, initiatives to encourage youth to enter into the finance profession and programs that support Aboriginal accountability and governance efforts.

The Association has overcome challenges and evolved into one of the most respected non-political Aboriginal organizations in Canada and internationally, with a reputation for success, a high standard of excellence and a visible commitment to contributing to Aboriginal prosperity and helping create a better quality of life.

At the cusp of 2010, AFOA has eight Chapters across Canada and represents almost 1,500 members. Over 450 CAFM designations have been granted. The National Conference now attracts over 800 delegates. In 2009/2010, over 3,000 people participated in our training programs. We have a comprehensive certification program for Certified Aboriginal Financial Managers (CAFM), and an expanding suite of programs, services and educational products.

How did we get there and what lessons were learned along the way?

## Early years and a bump in the road

In December of 1998, the CGA-AFN Working Group received a mandate from the Chiefs-in-Assembly to facilitate the incorporation of a national association of Aboriginal financial officers. For the first five months of 1999, the AFN-CGA Working Group worked with the provincial precursors of AFOA Canada – the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of British Columbia and the First Nation Financial Managers Association of Manitoba – and other key Aboriginal organizations, to develop the foundation of the association and an Aboriginal professional accounting designation.

AFOA Canada  
ational Conf  
Building Capacity for Future Genera

**“MANY TALK ABOUT THE NEED TO EMPOWER MORE ABORIGINALS. THE AFOA HAS SPENT A DECADE PRODUCING RESULTS”**

*Tony Ducie* FCGA  
Chair of the Board,  
CGA-Canada  
(CGA Magazine,  
September 2009)

In July 1999, the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association Canada was founded as a not-for-profit association. The fledgling Association had incorporation documents, draft competency standards for the Certified Aboriginal Financial Manager (CAFM) designation and a founding Board of Directors. The first National Conference was held in Winnipeg in February 2000 attracting 300 delegates. Fourteen individuals received their CAFM professional designation at the first Convocation Ceremony. At March of 2000 the Association reported in its Annual Report that it had just over 100 members. In May 2000, the Association hired its first Executive Director and moved into its present office space.

By 2002, the Association had fine-tuned the Aboriginal Financial Manager (AFM) program and curriculum of 14 courses and introduced the First Nation Fiscal Planning Calendar. AFOA had 174 members with 74 individuals receiving the CAFM designation through Special Arrangement provisions. The partnership with CGA Canada was solidified and new partnerships were being formed with like-minded organizations both within and outside Canada.

In June 2003 the organization suffered its first and only setback. AFOA's Board of Directors suspended AFOA's President & Chief Operating Officer as a result of information arising out of the annual audit which identified serious breaches of procurement policies and financial irregularities. The President subsequently resigned from his position.

In a press release issued immediately afterward, the AFOA's Chair stated: "... the most important message here is that our audit policies and processes worked and that we have acted to ensure that the integrity of AFOA is maintained."

The RCMP Commercial Fraud Department launched an investigation which resulted in a conviction. The AFOA successfully launched civil litigation against the former President & COO and recovered the losses incurred.

AFOA took important steps to prevent further fraudulent activities. A Financial Review Committee was set up to make recommendations on strengthening AFOA's control practices and policies. The Recommendations were implemented in October 2003. AFOA's Auditor stated that the recommendations "...address virtually all the concerns... the document is a well-thought out approach to protect the organization and allow for the implementation of good administrative practices".

By March 2004 AFOA Canada had hired its current President & Chief Operating Officer and filled virtually all positions with new staff members. The organization had held focus groups and undertook a comprehensive survey of its members and other stakeholders to ascertain the profile of the constituencies which AFOA served, the key challenges they faced and their priorities for capacity development. The results were used to develop a strategy for expansion of AFOA's products and services. The Board of Directors had engaged in a comprehensive planning exercise and developed a n ambitious strategic plan to guide AFOA for the next three years. Membership was at 500 and AFOA Chapters were established in Alberta, BC, Manitoba, NWT, Ontario and Saskatchewan.

The Association was poised to renew its efforts and was to experience a period of unprecedented growth and success in the next several years.

## Full speed ahead

In the next six years AFOA Canada accomplished seven key things that were instrumental in the success it has achieved. The Association:

- 1 significantly expanded its programs, services and educational products and enhanced the CAFM program to meet stakeholders' needs;
- 2 supported key initiatives impacting Aboriginal finance, management and communities
- 3 extended its reach across Canada through effective communications and marketing strategies;
- 4 developed and implemented comprehensive, targeted strategic and business plans;
- 5 successfully raised AFOA's profile among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders;
- 6 initiated improvements to its management infrastructure and Chapter relations; and,
- 7 created positive change in Aboriginal communities.



**Suzanne Werhar-Seebach** is Director, Programs, Services & Communications with AFOA Canada. She has been with the organization for over seven years. Prior to joining AFOA, Suzanne was Director, Programs & Services and Director, Communications with the CCAF – a non-profit foundation that provides leadership and conducts research for effective governance, management and accountability in the public sector.

**“WE BELIEVE AFOA IS ONE OF CANADA’S LEADING AND MOST RESPECTED ORGANIZATIONS IN BUILDING AND ENHANCING FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT CAPACITY WITHIN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY...”**

**Jack Jamieson**  
Vice-President, Aboriginal Services, TE Wealth, TE Investments Council Inc.

**1 EXPANDED PROGRAMS, SERVICES AND EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTS AND ENHANCEMENTS TO CAFM PROGRAM**

New courses were added to AFOA’s educational and on-line offerings, including *Business Law; Community Economic Development and Values & Ethics in the Aboriginal Workplace*. A new series of Management Certificate on-line courses were developed focusing on Aboriginal management practices and program management.

AFOA released the Aboriginal Finance and Management Capacity Development publication series – nine resources focusing on issues ranging from risk management to developing a business plan to document management to audits and presenting financial information.

Several research initiatives resulted in the development of publications, courses and workshops on three key capacity areas: *Performance Measurement and Reporting in First Nations; Developing an Effective Remedial Management Plan; and An Introduction to Comprehensive Community Planning*. Two day workshops on these subjects and others noted above are now offered across the country on a scheduled basis as well as on request in individual communities.

With the assistance of CGA Canada, three CAFM Examinations were finalized and a three day CAFM Examination Preparation Session was developed. Over 100 individuals have written the Examination and attended the Preparation sessions. A CAFM Maintenance of Certification (MOC) policy was developed to ensure that CAFMs continue their professional development to maintain their professional standards.

In 2005 the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Aboriginal Management* or *JAM* was published. Since published twice a year, the Journal, the first of its kind in Canada, focuses on professional trends and innovations in Aboriginal management, interviews with leaders, articles from experts and profiles of community based initiatives.

The CAFM competencies and Aboriginal Financial Management educational program underwent a comprehensive review in 2007 to reflect changes in the Aboriginal financial manager’s role and working environment. This resulted in the adoption of revised, updated CAFM competencies and the inclusion of *Values & Ethics in the Aboriginal Workplace* as a required course in the CAFM educational program. All AFM on-line courses were revised and updated, most recently the *Aboriginal History & Developments* course – a core course in the AFM program. A new on-line course portal was developed to enhance engagement with students.

Considerable effort was made to integrate CAFM courses into the curriculum of universities and colleges across Canada to enable the CAFM educational program to be accessed directly through these institutions. Licensing agreements have been reached with six colleges to date, and plans are underway to develop a national framework for delivery of the CAFM program by Canadian universities and colleges in the next year.

A Leadership Awards program was developed with the support of Xerox Canada which is now in its sixth year. Recipients of the Award include national and regional Aboriginal leaders from across the country.

A new website was launched which introduced a Members’ Only resource centre, access to resources, toolkits and best practices, a discussion forum and other new features. A web based application called the Distributed Knowledge Sharing (DKS) Project was made available through the website which serves as an interactive on-line catalogue of financial management codes developed by and for First Nations.

**THE ABORIGINAL PERFORMANCE WHEEL**



*AFOA research on Performance Reporting – from Performance Measurement and Reporting in First Nations*

The organization introduced the AFOA Aboriginal Fellowship (AFP) Program in which Aboriginal financial professionals had the opportunity to receive on-the-job training at the Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

Significant effort was also invested in making AFOA a truly bilingual association and most of AFOA's products including its website had been translated and made available in French by 2007.

### **The National Conference**

AFOA's National Conference is arguably the cornerstone of the Association's efforts. It is at the Conference that all AFOA's initiatives and efforts come to fruition in what is now known as the largest networking and professional development event of its kind in Canada. Over the years AFOA has continually enhanced the Conference program and other Conference features. The program is an ambitious one that features over 50 speakers and focuses on the challenges and opportunities Aboriginal managers and decision-makers face as they strive to provide effective management and governance. The Conference is one of the most successful attracting over 900 senior First Nation, Inuit and Metis managers and leaders from across the country.

### **Putting the Spotlight on Youth**

There is a great demand both within and outside of Aboriginal communities and organizations for Aboriginal financial professionals. However, very few of our young people are pursuing an education in finance after high school, and many communities have considerable difficulty attracting and keeping financial management staff.

That is why AFOA has focused its attention on providing support to Aboriginal youth to pursue a career in financial management.

Several initiatives have been launched. The Aboriginal Youth Financial Management Conference Awards, supported first by Grant Thornton and more recently by Meyers Norris Penny is the most ambitious of these. The Awards, now in its fourth year, are open to Aboriginal youth in grades 11 and 12 across the country. Through essay competition and teacher testimonials, three students are selected to participate in a special youth program at the National Conference designed to provide information on the financial profession.

Other efforts include the Norman Taylor Memorial Scholarship Program, participation in career fairs and marketing aimed at Aboriginal high school students.

## **2 SUPPORTING KEY INITIATIVES IMPACTING ABORIGINAL FINANCE, MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNITIES**

There are three key initiatives that AFOA has supported that impacted Aboriginal finance, management and communities.

**One** – in 2007, on the strength of its growing reputation and background in education and certification, AFOA was asked to help develop First Nations Housing Managers' competency standards and guidance on recommended educational program curriculum.

**Two** – also in 2007, the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants (CICA) embarked on a ground-breaking study on First Nations financial reporting. Although accounting standards existed for a range of public sector entities, First Nation governments had not been explicitly included in these standards. Attempts by the original AFN-CGA Working Group to define First Nation accounting standards did not meet with success. In the study, the CICA looked at the changing environment for First Nations financial reporting, the needs of users, objectives of financial statements and how financial reporting in First Nations compares with other public sector organizations.

AFOA was closely involved with this initiative, represented on the CICA Study Group, and holding focus groups on CICA's behalf to get input into the study from members.

**“THE ABORIGINAL FINANCIAL OFFICERS ASSOCIATION HAS HELPED ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES TO REALIZE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL. BEING 800 MEMBERS STRONG, AFOA'S ROLE IS ENCOURAGING, EFFECTIVE, AND RESPONSIBLE. IN SIX YEARS, THE AFOA HAS AMASSED AN IMPRESSIVE LIST OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS, WHICH THE ORGANIZATION SHOULD BE PROUD OF. THE AFOA'S EFFORTS TOWARDS TRAINING FINANCIAL MANAGERS ... SERVE TO ENRICH THE PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY OF ITS MEMBERS AND ULTIMATELY BENEFITS ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES.”**

*Rod Bruinooge MP  
Former Parliamentary Secretary  
to the Minister of Indian &  
Northern Affairs*

**“YOUR ASSOCIATION ENABLES FIRST NATIONS TO ACQUIRE THE FINANCIAL KNOWLEDGE AND MANAGEMENT EXPERTISE THEY NEED TO THRIVE. THANKS TO YOUR ORGANIZATION, MORE AND MORE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES ARE IN A POSITION TO REALIZE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL – AND ALL CANADIANS BENEFIT, THE AFOA IS TO BE CONGRATULATED FOR ITS LEADERSHIP ROLE, ITS COMMUNITY LEARNING INITIATIVES, AND FOR ITS AWARDS PROGRAM”**

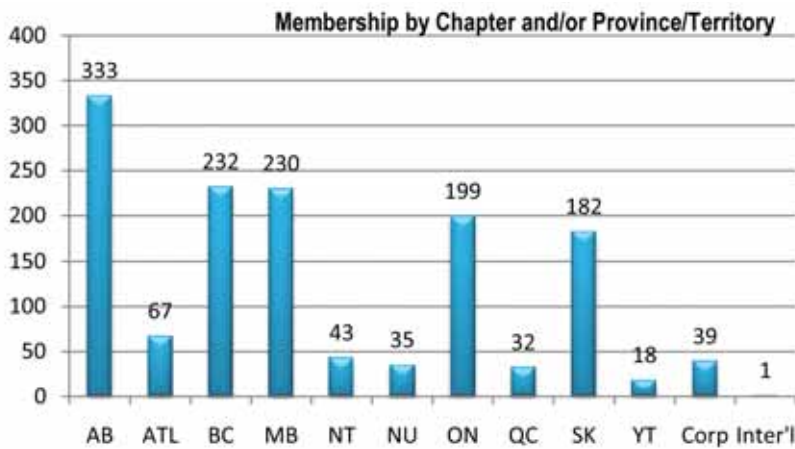
*The Honourable Jim Prentice  
Former Minister of Indian &  
Northern Affairs*

While the study was being undertaken, CICA also implemented a major change impacting Generally Accepted Accounting Principles or GAAP for governments as outlined in its Public Sector (PS) Handbook. To this point First Nations were required by INAC to follow the “Local Government Reporting Model” as outlined in the Handbook. The CICA introduced a change that made the Local Government Reporting Model the same as the Senior Government Reporting Model. This model was referred to as the Common Government Reporting Model.

The CICA Study Group report recommended that First Nations follow the Common Government Reporting Model. INAC subsequently introduced that requirement in its Year-End Reporting Handbook. This change had significant implications for First Nations. To help them prepare, AFOA undertook a number of projects including a series of eight cross-country workshops focusing on the key challenges with close to 800 total participants held in 2008; development of a detailed Manual to support the workshops; a second series of 15 workshops focusing on Tangible Capital Assets with another 800 participants held in the fall of 2009 and a publication to support this workshop. AFOA continues to undertake activities that will help First Nations meet this challenge.

**Three** – in 2006 important federal legislation – called the First Nation Fiscal and Statistical Management Act (FSMA) - was passed establishing four First Nation institutions: the First Nations Tax Commission, the First Nations Finance Authority, First Nations Financial Management Board, and the First Nations Statistics Institute. Collectively, these institutions are intended to improve the First Nation property tax system and facilitate the rapid development of First Nation economic infrastructure. In 2008 the First Nation Financial Management Board (FNFMB) contracted AFOA to engage in a project to develop an educational program to provide First Nations with information on the FSMA, the Financial Management Board (FNFMB) Financial Administration Law and FNFMB Certification standards and procedures, and support their capacity to successfully enter into the First Nations Finance Authority (FNFA) borrowing pool. This course was launched this year.

**3 EXTENDING REACH ACROSS CANADA THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING STRATEGIES**



tions.

To be considered truly successful AFOA’s programs and services need to be promoted and made available to all Aboriginal communities and organizations as well as its members. AFOA’s communication and marketing strategies have had clear results in this regard. These are the efforts that resulted in increased membership, CAFM applications, product sales, course registrations, workshop participation, Conference registration, and other program uptakes. A clear communications strategy, development of a comprehensive marketing database and the production of professional, quality communications and marketing material set AFOA apart from other similar organiza-

**4 DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING COMPREHENSIVE, TARGETED STRATEGIC AND BUSINESS PLANS**

Key to AFOA’s success is the organization’s strategic planning process. Over the years extensive strategic planning exercises have been undertaken with the Board of Directors and Chapters resulting in three or five year Strategic Plans that are based on member surveys, external and internal environmental factors, progress made on previous year’s plans, Chapter input, and the identification of key capacity development issues that need to be addressed. Every year an annual business and workplan is developed based on the Strategic Plan. In this way AFOA remains focused on key objectives and follows a performance reporting regime that is guided by results.



## 5 RAISING AFOA'S PROFILE AMONG ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL STAKEHOLDERS

AFOA has strived over the years to raise its profile through communication strategies, participation in conferences and trade shows, through exposure to the media and through partnerships with like-minded organizations and other initiatives. Two particular developments demonstrate AFOA's success.

In 2006 AFOA Canada was honoured to receive the 2006 Community Learning Award from the Conference Board of Canada. The Community Learning Awards – sponsored by the Office of Learning Technologies of the Department of Human Resources & Skills Development Canada, and the Conference Board of Canada – are designed to recognize innovative and effective community learning initiatives that help communities to build their capacity for informal learning, by using information and communications technology.

And, in 2008, First Nations Chiefs passed a resolution at the Assembly of First Nations Annual General Assembly recommending that First Nation members obtain financial and management training and pursue the CAFM designation through AFOA. The Chiefs also expressed their support of the role that AFOA plays in enhancing Aboriginal financial management.

## 6 INITIATING IMPROVEMENTS TO MANAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND CHAPTER RELATIONS

Along the way AFOA's management and Board of Directors have not lost sight of AFOA's obligation to "walk the talk". Management has introduced internal policies and procedures throughout the years that have significantly enhanced how the organization is run. These include: Financial Policies, Personnel policies, a Board of Directors' Manual, By-Law reviews, membership codes, privacy policies, and other important work.

Chapters play an important role and have significant value impacting AFOA Canada's mandate and objectives. Importantly, AFOA Canada has focused significant efforts on its Chapters – enhancing Chapter relations, establishing special Task Forces, developing Chapter regulations and protocols to guide AFOA Canada and Chapter relations, instituting Annual Meetings, helping to set up Chapters in those regions without, assisting in getting funding, and supporting Chapter development and activities wherever it can. Today there are Chapters in every province/territory in the country except the Yukon and Nunavut where efforts are being made this fiscal year to set up chapter networks.

## 7 CREATING POSITIVE CHANGE IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

All these efforts have led to the development of capacity and positive change in Aboriginal communities and organizations across Canada. How do we know? We know because communities and organizations are better managed. There is less government intervention in First Nations. There is an increase in Aboriginal "success stories".

We know because more and more people are accessing our programs and services, becoming members, entering into the CAFM program, registering for our conferences, registering for our courses and applying for Awards programs.

We know because we are being told by members, funders and other stakeholders.

### What's next?

AFOA will be launching some noteworthy initiatives in the year to come that will build on its achievements to date.

### *Certification for Band Administrators – The Next Frontier*

The health and success of First Nation communities can be directly linked to the effectiveness and capacity of its administration. In addition to financial managers, Band administrators are key to a community's viability and well-being. The knowledge and skills they require are varied and extensive. Since the 1970's, the role of the Band Administrator has steadily increased in significance and importance. Currently there

**“I FOUND THE COURSES TO BE VERY BENEFICIAL... THE COURSES ALLOWS STUDENTS TO WORK ON THE COURSE MATERIAL AND COMPLETE THE ASSIGNMENTS AT THEIR OWN PACE, WHICH WORKS WELL FOR ME...I WOULD RECOMMEND THE AFM COURSES TO THOSE INDIVIDUALS WHO WORK IN FIRST NATION ENVIRONMENTS AND WHO WISH TO EXPAND THEIR KNOWLEDGE”**

*Gary Lee CAFM, CMA  
Chief Financial Officer,  
Onion Lake First Nation*

**“THE ABORIGINAL FINANCIAL OFFICERS ASSOCIATION HAS CHANGED THE FINANCE AND MANAGEMENT LANDSCAPE OF THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY FOREVER. WE ARE PROUD TO BE A CORPORATE MEMBER AND SUPPORT THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING OBJECTIVES COMPLETELY. WE SHARE WITH AFOA, CHAPTERS AND ALL MEMBERS A KEEN DESIRE FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, LEARNING, LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION.”**

*Kevin Warren  
President & CEO, Xerox Canada  
Sponsor of the Excellence in  
Leadership Award*

is no certification that directly targets the needs of professional First Nation administrators. AFOA believes that it is essential that First Nation Band managers/administrators be supported and provided professional training through a national certification process similar to the CAFM.

In 2009 AFOA signed an MOU with the National Centre for First Nations Governance which focuses on supporting First Nation administrators by working collaboratively to develop national certification for Aboriginal Administrators and Managers. This will include establishing national competency standards, standards of ethical conduct and certification standards, and developing an educational program to meet those standards.

This is a very exciting challenge for the Association and one that will contribute significantly to Aboriginal economic and social prosperity and to the success and growth of the organization.

### **Building Support from Corporate Canada**

One of AFOA's key challenges remains the ability to continue to fund the Association's expanding programs and services as well as finance new initiatives that will benefit members.

To address this issue, AFOA has begun focusing on developing a business strategy to build AFOA's profile with Corporate Canada, increase corporate partnerships and build corporate support.

AFOA has developed a comprehensive corporate relations strategy designed to generate revenue and corporate support. This strategy will unfold and be implemented in 2009/2010. If successful, the strategy will open up the way to unprecedented opportunities for AFOA.

### **Towards an Aboriginal Management Degree Program**

One of AFOA's ultimate objectives is to launch an Aboriginal Management degree program that will build on both the CAFM designation and the Band management designation. This will offer Aboriginals an unprecedented unique educational and career opportunity. In 2010 AFOA will be taking steps towards making this dream a reality.

## **In appreciation of our Board of Directors, volunteers and staff – The final ingredients to success**

There are two final key ingredients that have made AFOA successful – its volunteers and its staff.

AFOA's work has been both volunteer and staff driven. Over AFOA's journey it has been its volunteers, including the Board of Directors, and the dedicated staff that have contributed to the Association's successes. Without their support, commitment and hard work, none of this would be possible.

Whether they are members who come forward to sit on committees, or a member of the AFOA National Board of Directors or Chapter Board who volunteer valuable time and effort, to individuals who teach our courses or mark Exams with virtually no compensation, volunteer commitment is a major factor in where the organization stands today.

Finally, the Association's outputs and accomplishments are a direct result of the dedication, professionalism, energy and effectiveness of AFOA's small secretariat. With a secretariat that ranged from eight to ten individuals in the last six years, AFOA's accomplishments sometimes seem to far exceed the capacity of its resources. The organization has repeatedly been told that the quality and quantity of its efforts are on par with those of much larger, more resource-rich organizations.

There is no doubt that the most valuable lesson that AFOA has learned is that an organization can identify all the right goals and put in place what on paper appears to be an effective plan to get there, but progress will not be possible without committed and competent people to put it into action.

# JAM



## AFOA CANADA

*Building a Community of Professionals*

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