

CEMI searching for a few good ideas

■ 75 supply and service companies are canvassed

BY HEIDI ULRICHSEN

The Centre for Excellence in Mining Innovation (CEMI) wants to help mining supply and service businesses develop ideas that have been sitting in the bottom of desk drawers.

Companies would be connected with academic experts and researchers to bring these ideas to fruition, said Harvey Buksa, R&D program director at CEMI.

"Many times, a small business is unable to finish a good idea because they don't have the technical expertise like a civil engineer or a chemical engineer," he said. "If they said that was their need, that's what we'd provide them with."

CEMI may also bring together two companies that can help each other or help a company develop a business or marketing plan, he said.

Because of the sustained good times in the mining industry, most small and medium sized mining suppliers are de-

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voting all of their resources to filling orders, and don't have much time for research and development, said Mike Grace, project development co-ordinator at CEMI.

"Companies are smart enough to recognize that opportunities are there, but don't have the ability to go beyond the needs of one or two customers," he said.

"CEMI offers them the opportunity to keep their day-to-day business running, but at the same time allows them to work on the side on the next generation of products."

Over the past three months, Grace has visited approximately 75 Sudbury area mining supply and service companies to network and collect ideas that CEMI can help them develop. He said he has come across about six ideas that would be appropriate, but is always looking for more.

CEMI could spend \$10,000 to \$50,000 on each idea, he said.

"I'd rather not talk specifically about what the ideas are, because they're the companies' ideas," said Buksa. "They're great ideas, but I'd like to keep them confidential."

Paul Ballard, president of Fluid Power House, has an idea for an innovation that is currently being considered by CEMI.

He doesn't want to publicly divulge what the idea is at this time, but said his company wouldn't likely be able to develop it for a few years if it weren't for CEMI.

"I think it's wonderful. I think it's been needed for a long time," he said.

"There are a lot of people in town who have been in this industry for 20 or 30 years, and have enough experience, and know what the market wants. Even though they're busy right now, there's an entrepreneurial spirit, and some of them are beyond the scope of the in-



Harvey Buksa, R&D program director at CEMI



Mike Grace, project development co-ordinator with CEMI

house talent.

"What CEMI brings to the table is a link between private industry and the university to overcome some of these research hurdles, and hopefully some of the funding associated with that."

Although CEMI was partly funded by large mining companies, it makes sense for the organization to focus on small mining supply and service sector companies as well, said Buksa.

"The mining industry wants to see long-term research focused on deep mining," he said.

"But they would also like to have some success stories in the short-term. A new widget, perhaps, that suddenly makes their operations better, cheaper, faster or safer. If we help small businesses solve an industry problem, we will immediately be seen as useful in developing something."

When talking to business owners, Grace asked them to convince him there was something CEMI could do to help their operation.

"They'd better make sure their idea is

worthwhile, because we can't help everyone. We're obviously going to go with the best ideas - the ones that have the biggest impact and have a pretty good chance of success."

In some cases, companies are afraid of sharing their idea because they fear someone will steal it once it's out in the open, said Buksa. He and Grace have had to do a lot of work to convince companies of the benefits.

There are already a lot of agencies such as FedNor and the Ontario Centres of Excellence that offer money to small and medium sized businesses, but CEMI offers the advantage of not having much bureaucratic tape to cut through, said Grace.

"It should be a smooth transition. There won't be an eight-month waiting period like a lot of the existing programs with the government. Ours can be moved along very, very quickly."

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