

# For Tom Bursey, a selfless life is a rich life

**It's a philosophy that led him to a CFO position with the Council of Canadian Academies, a nonprofit conducting volunteer-driven studies for the public good** BY JULIE SCHAEFFER



**W**hen the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA) began operations in 2005, its mandate was simple: to be a source of independent assessments of the science underlying pressing issues and matters of public interest. Today, with 21 reports released, it's undoubtedly carrying out its mission—but only thanks to the help of the experts who serve pro bono during the entire 18–24 months it takes to produce a report. To date, various experts have donated \$13 million worth of time to the organization, and CFO Tom Bursey has played an important role in overseeing their work—his efforts informed by his own history of volunteerism.

Before he joined the CCA, in 2008, Bursey was a management consultant with a unique mix of expertise in financial management, corporate governance, and human resources—exactly the skills the CCA was seeking. When the organization approached him, he was intrigued by the opportunity to work with then president Dr. Peter J. Nicholson, who was highly regarded in Ottawa as a thinker and influencer. “I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity, contributing to the greater societal good—versus [making] money [for] a for-profit corporation,” Bursey says.

The Council of Canadian Academies is a not-for-profit organization providing independent, authoritative, evidence-based scientific assessments regarding a broad range of complex, policy-relevant issues. The council has published 21 reports thus far with the support of many expert volunteers, whose give-back attitude CFO **Tom Bursey** finds inspiring as a man committed to a lifetime of volunteer service himself.

FACTS & FIGURES

21

Current expert-panel reports

10

Expert-panel reports that the CCA will release in the next 18 months

612

World-leading experts who have volunteered at the council to date

\$13 million

Monetary worth of the volunteer time leveraged by the council thus far

18

Number of unique assessment sponsors of the council

The CFO has always been drawn to selfless causes, though. As a youth growing up in St. John's and Mt. Pearl, Newfoundland, he had many opportunities to get involved with service organizations—and in fact he was expected to. “It was part of the culture; being a good citizen involved participating,” says Bursey, who eventually became the youngest president of the community-service club and the youngest elected councillor in his hometown. “This idea of getting out and doing something in addition to what you’re paid for—and feeling good about it—gave me a great sense of accomplishment and enriched my life.”

Over time, Bursey expanded his volunteer efforts, eventually becoming involved with the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA). His more than 15 years of work there, which included the spearheading of a total governance overhaul, earned him an HRPA

Honourary Life Award, the organization’s highest form of recognition, in 2010.

At the same time, he founded an annual alumni dinner in Ottawa for his alma mater, Memorial University, that has now been replicated across the country. The achievement helped him take home a J. D. Eaton Alumni Award for outstanding service to Memorial University in 2009. More recently, he served on the board of CODE Inc., which provides solutions to support democratic elections in more than 60 countries worldwide, as well as on the board of CODE Inc.’s sole shareholder, the Canadian Organization for Development through Education, which encourages literacy worldwide by supporting libraries, educator development, and book publishing in foreign languages.

At the CCA, Bursey says, a number of factors drive experts to donate so much of their own time. For one, the subjects are important to them, and serving is a way of advancing knowledge about the complex issues that are important to Canada and Canadians. Also, each expert serves with national and international peers on a panel, helmed by an eminent thought leader, that works to look at its given subject through the lenses of various perspectives and disciplines; and for experts from the academic world, a scholarly contribution to the final report of such a panel can be career enhancing.

Beyond these personal drivers, though, “ultimately, the experts want to contribute to the public good,” Bursey says. “The reward is the hope that the report findings will be used by the sponsor or others to make better programs and policies for the public good.”

The many volunteer roles that Bursey has served may sound in some ways thankless, but Bursey waves off such concerns, secure in his knowledge that the work itself can be its own sort of prize. “Friends would often say, ‘Why are you doing this?’ because it sometimes took an enormous amount of effort,” he says. But he’s thankful for his supportive family and employers because “it does eat up your evenings and weekends, ... [but] volunteering not only makes a positive contribution to your community but also provides an opportunity for personal and professional growth while building a great network of colleagues and newfound friends. I feel like I’m making a tangible difference.” **\_a**

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**TOM BURSEY, CFO**

↓ THE BOTTOM LINE

JOB TITLE  
CFO

INDUSTRY  
Nonprofit

YEARS IN THE  
BUSINESS  
25

WHERE DID YOU  
START YOUR CAREER?  
As assistant manager of human resources with Terra Nova Telecommunications [a CN Telecommunication company at the time].

DESCRIBE YOURSELF  
IN THREE WORDS  
Son, husband, father.

ADVICE TO THOSE JUST  
STARTING IN FINANCE  
Volunteering significantly shaped my career.