**Naturallia educates businesses on the North**

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It's Christopher Schmidt's first visit to Sault Ste. Marie, but he doesn't expect it to be his last.

Over the past three days, Schmidt has learned more about what Sault Ste. Marie - and other Canadian companies - has to offer in the mining and mineral resources sector and how they can match their products to our customers," he said. "For me, I now have a better understanding of Northern Ontario business and the region and I have business contacts here.

Schmidt is one of almost 200 delegates participating in the Naturallia three-day conference in Sault Ste. Marie. The conference wrapped up Wednesday night.

"I am at every mining conference in Canada," Schmidt said. While Naturallia includes more than just the mining industry, the business-to-business conference has allowed him to tour local industries that he believes will help the industry in his home country Germany.

"The industry tours we did were very important so we could see the shops and factories and learn how flexible the companies are and if they can match their products to our customers," he said. "For me, I now have a better understanding of Northern Ontario business and the region and I have business contacts here."

The conference included four key areas that have a regional economic significance, including the manufacturers of specialized products, value-added forest products, mining supply and services, and smart energy development, supply and services.

The conference included one-on-one business meetings with like-minded businesses, often called "speed dating" for business.

For Soo Foundry president Robert Cohen, the one-on-one business meetings are a unique opportunity to make connections that are different from a traditional trade show. While Cohen said it's difficult to measure the success of the conference and his participation, he said those results will likely be more known a year down the line.

"We could see possible bids in the future and we've met people who wanted to know about us and didn't expect would," he said. "This was very interesting to us." In addition, Cohen said he was able to renew or reinforce existing business relationships through the conference at a relatively low cost considering it takes place in Sault Ste. Marie.

Matt Kynenvaara, a biocarbon expert of Sole Proprietary, a Finland-based business, said he was interested in the conference after he learned more about Northern Ontario and the similarities of the climate and forestry nature to Finland.

"I first met a Canadian delegation in Sweden and kept the contact and learned of this," he said. "Kynenvaara said he's looking at the possibilities of getting involved in the Canadian market and the conference would help him make initial connections with industry players.

"It definitely looks like something could come of this," he said between business meetings, "I'm getting some good leads and contacts and we'll see what we can begin negotiations." Jessica Mooney, owner of Fuzeditions Creative Studio Inc., specializes in marketing and communications and helps businesses with their communication challenges.

To the Sault Ste. Marie entrepreneur, the conference opens up new business opportunities for foreign companies who may need assistance or advice in getting their message out in the North American market. Mooney said that it's just about making connections while at other times you can come up with the spot solutions because you're having a 30-minute conversation with another business and a decision-maker.

Mooney was disappointed that two business meetings with companies from Africa didn't pan out because of a last minute cancellation and she wished those two shots could have been replaced.

Cohen expected more Canadian companies, larger manufacturers and resource companies to attend the event but understood that Sault Ste. Marie's location may be a factor in that decision making.

"When people come to Sault Ste. Marie, they actually see the opportunities and they see that Sault Ste. Marie just isn't another small city," Mooney said.