

GRIC switches to virtual mentorship program amid COVID-19 pandemic, says organization's new president

BY JESSE CNOCKAERT

Undeterred by the physical distancing required by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government Relations Institute of Canada (GRIC) is turning its annual mentorship program into a virtual event this year, according to Jason Kerr, who was announced as the new GRIC president in a Twitter post on Sept. 28.

"This particular year, we've asked that phone calls happen, that virtual meetings happen. Ideally, it would be through virtual platforms," said Kerr. "This is just an extension of what is a successful recipe, and probably, for the foreseeable future, will have to be done virtually."

Kerr, who previously sat on the GRIC board as vice-president, is also a senior director of government relations for the Canadian Automobile Association. He was appointed to the role of GRIC president by a resolution of the board of directors on Sept. 21. He takes over from past president Alayne Crawford, who decided to step back from the role, according to Kerr.

The GRIC mentorship program, which has run annually since 2016, was switched to be a completely virtual experience this year because of the pandemic, Kerr said.

The program pairs experienced professionals in the government relations space with individuals starting their GR careers. GRIC's membership includes more than 100 organizations, which include trade associations, charities, as well as government relations firms such as Crestview Strategy, Summa Strategies and Global Public Affairs. Those interested in participating in the program are surveyed to find out their areas of expertise and career goals, so they can be assigned the best match.

The mentors and mentees typically commit to at least four meetings. The application process for the program will close on Oct. 2. The program itself will launch later in the month and conclude in the spring of 2021.



Jason Kerr, a senior director of government relations for the Canadian Automobile Association, was appointed to the role of GRIC president by a resolution of the board of directors on Sept. 21. *photo courtesy of Jason Kerr*

"Maintaining social distancing is, of course, important. [But] it's the fact you have someone at the end of the phone that you can reach out to for experience, for some guidance. I think anyone who has a mentor would say it doesn't have to be in person over a cup of coffee to have an impact," said Kerr.

The pandemic has made 2020 a tumultuous year for GRIC, according to Kerr. Planned events for the spring and fall that would have allowed GRIC members to network in person had to be cancelled in favour of socially distant virtual events.

"Events are always one of the key focal points for our membership. They love the networking aspects of events," said Kerr. "We're going to continue to adapt our event model to provide members with valuable programming, notwithstanding the current circumstances. We'll look for ways to keep them well-engaged on interesting and timely topics."

GRIC is now focusing on events such as online panel discussions and webinars, according to Megan Lockhart, GRIC's vice-president. Lockhart, formerly GRIC's corporate secretary, was also appointed to her new role during the September board meeting.

"We wiped the slate clean and started fresh. We looked at different digital platforms to host panels and more information sharing [events]," she said. "Getting the membership together and engaging with one another is really important."

During the pandemic, GRIC conducted a virtual panel event in July to discuss the economic impact of COVID-19 on different industries. Panelists included Susie Grynol, the president and CEO of the Hotel Association of Canada, and Bill Dempster, CEO of 3Sixty Public Affairs. On Sept. 8, GRIC hosted a webinar to discuss the role the provinces play in Canada's relationship with the U.S.

Looking ahead to the fall parliamentary session, many lobbyists are anticipating the release of the mandate letters for the federal ministers, according to Kerr.

"[The mandate letters] are not out yet, but hopefully coming soon. Lobbyists are going to comb through those for details and fine-tune their strategies. I would also imagine the federal pandemic response is going to remain a front-burner issue for sure," said Kerr. "Businesses are still in survival mode, and as we head into the second wave in parts of Canada, supply chains for PPE, securing vaccines, as well as sector-specific financial support ... are going to continue to be key areas of activity."

Another impact of the pandemic is that it may further delay the already overdue review of the Lobbying Act, according to Kerr.

The House ethics committee last reviewed the act in 2012, and the statutory five-year review was originally expected to take place in 2017. The review didn't occur as planned in part because Nancy Bélanger, who was appointed as lobbying commissioner in December 2017, needed time to establish a dialogue with lobbyists. Another reason for the delay was a move by the ethics committee to prioritize a study on the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal.

A date for the review has yet to be announced. The Lobbying

Act review may also not be a high priority for Parliament because of the possibility that a federal election may be called, according to Kerr.

"It doesn't look like it's going to be happening. Certainly, not this fall session. I feel pretty confident saying that. There are other, far more important priorities," said Kerr. "Who knows what the spring will bring? At this point, we're on the runway to an election. The runway could be quite long still, but we're in that."

When a review of the Act does happen, GRIC may raise concerns with the federal government related to the five-year lobbying ban for designated public office holders (DPOH), according to Kerr.

Under the Lobbying Act, a ban on lobbying is imposed on all former DPOHs, preventing them from serving as consultant lobbyists or in-house lobbyists for organizations for five years after leaving government work.

"The five-year ban is one of the key points we do hear about from members. It is a frustration point, an issue that keeps certain individuals from moving into the public sector," he said. "It can truly impact one's career opportunities when they come out of government. It's not to say there shouldn't be some form of cooling-off period. But the notion would fall on the line that five years is overly harsh."

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