**The Kira Systems team at the company off-site retreat in Collingwood, Ont.**

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When Kira Systems’s sales team travels to do business overseas, rather than show up with suitcases full of samples, they bring something more abstract — brain power.

Artificial brain power, to be more precise. Toronto-based Kira exports artificial intelligence (AI) to legal and business firms. “We’ve built a machine learning concept that’s able to analyze legal contracts,” say Kira’s chief executive officer and co-founder Noah Waisberg. Kira is an example of a segment of innovative Canadian exporters — companies that trade not necessarily in raw materials, goods or even services, but in ideas.

It doesn’t require a long corporate history or wide international experience to become an idea exporter, says Vinay Nair, Kira’s senior vice-president of marketing. “We’re a second-stage company — we’re beyond start-up because we have raised a few million dollars among investors,” he says.

Like traditional exporters, new-economy exporters offer something that customers abroad value.

Normally, teams of lawyers explain the details of a contract but this takes up costly billable hours. The idea Kira markets is to streamline all this, both for law firms and, in some cases, for companies directly.

“We help law firms and businesses be more accurate in their analysis of contracts and help them to be more efficient,” Mr. Nair says. Kira uses proprietary AI to locate and then explain common elements in contracts, and also to look for gaps if there is something commonly included that is missing in a document. The company markets its system in Britain and Germany, as well as in North America.

“If you think about what contracts actually are, they can seem like unstructured texts [because they’re not all identical], but they have information in several broad areas that the people involved in the contracts really need to know,” Mr. Waisberg says. There are 160 people in the company, Mr. Waisberg says, and it does about 5 per cent of its business in Canada. According to [World Bank statistics](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.EXP.GNFS.ZS) (for 2017), about 30 per cent of Canada’s gross domestic product comes from exports. Canadians often think of their exports as raw materials, such as minerals, energy or lumber, or as goods, such as cars and trucks or high-end goose down winter coats. But innovative, ideas-based companies are growing in importance as Canadian exporters.

This is particularly true among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). According to [Statistics Canada](https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/061.nsf/eng/h_03090.html), SMEs (companies with between one and 499 employees) contributed nearly 42 per cent of Canada’s $483.6-billion worth of exports, as measured by value, in 2017. More than 97 per cent of the 48,000 Canadian companies that exported were SMEs. The performance of SMEs is even more significant when measured by the types of industries that export. In 2017, SMEs contributed more than 72 per cent of the exports among Canadian industries that were not suppliers of manufactured goods, raw materials, wholesale goods or management consulting.

Within that category is a sub-category of “professional, scientific and technical services,” into which Kira would fit. Nearly 70 per cent of the exporters in this sub-category were SMEs.

“The new world of exports is a pretty good one,” Mr. Waisberg says. Exporting is made easier when products and services can be transferred with a click or a screen touch rather than a massive shipping container.

“A lot of the times you’re selling to people without any physical presence in Canada. So while we can sell in Montreal, it could just as easily be Paris,” he says.

“We just completed a large contract in Germany. We have users all over — in Brazil and Norway, for example. We have clients in India — until recently, none of us had been there but we could still sell to them,” he adds.

But even technology exporters need to establish in-person connections.

“Even though it is software, people do appreciate getting to know you, to shake your hand. This does vary from country to country, but in some places, such as the United Kingdom, they like to get to know you, to have us show that we care about them,” he says. There is definitely an advantage to being a Canadian exporter, he notes. “People have a positive impression of Canada.”

Maria Cartagena, Kira’s senior vice-president for people operations, adds that international markets are also impressed with the diversity among the company’s staff. In addition, customers take note of Canada’s growing reputation as a tech centre, and immigration policies that make it relatively easy to hire qualified international tech experts here.

“We try to hire within Canada but we do look internationally, too,” she says.

When selling abroad, Kira also bears low-tech gifts. “We bring customers ketchup chips — apparently Canadians are the only ones who have them,” Ms. Cartagena says.

“Customers have never seen them before, and they think they’re delicious,” she says.