

Indigenous Labour Force Strategy — Tapping into an Underutilized Pool of Labour Supply

Background

In Alberta the Indigenous population represents the largest untapped labour force in the province. The Indigenous population is younger than the population at large; in 2012 close to half (46%) of Indigenous people in Canada were under the age of 25, compared with 30% of the non-Indigenous population¹. In Alberta, though Indigenous people exhibit similar participation rates in the labour force (70.3 per cent versus to 72.6 per cent²), there is a lack of success in securing and retaining employment. In 2016 Alberta Indigenous employment rates were 6.2 percentage points below the population at large^{3 4}.

The economic slowdown that hit the global economy in 2008 has had a substantive impact on the demand for labour in Alberta. However, over the long term, demographic changes and economic expansion will continue to drive demand for labour in Alberta. It is imperative, therefore, that Alberta position itself to tap into existing underutilized pools of labour in anticipation of the next economic surge.

Recognizing the necessity of addressing this issue, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce completed an in-depth report entitled *Completing the Circle: Realities, Challenges and Strategies to Improve Indigenous Labour Market Outcomes in the Calgary Region*⁵. The following resolution is itself informed by this report.

¹ "Aboriginal Peoples: Fact Sheet for Canada." *Statistics Canada*, Ministry of Industry, 2015, www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-656-x/89-656-x2015001-eng.htm. Accessed 10 May 2017.

² Government of Alberta. 2016 Alberta Labour Force Profile, Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey. Edmonton, April 2017. <https://goo.gl/RAUYRU>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Government of Alberta. 2016 Alberta Labour Force Profile, Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey. Edmonton, April 2017. <https://goo.gl/RAUYRU>

⁵ Brunnen, Ben & Jankovic, Mike. "Completing the Circle: Realities, Challenges and Strategies to Improve Indigenous Labour Market Outcomes in the Calgary Region." Calgary Chamber of Commerce, March 26, 2009.

A compelling case for business

Fully engaging Indigenous people and communities in the economy and labour force creates a compelling case for Canadian businesses.

- The combination of underemployment, a younger than average population, and individuals rooted in the local community makes the Indigenous population an ideal pool of talent for long-term engagement.
- Employing Indigenous people in the workplace creates genuine business advantages, such as access to the growing Indigenous market and improved market knowledge of the local consumer base.
- Indigenous engagement and employment programs help gain public and regulator support for projects, alleviating avoidable project delays and establishing a reputation for corporate social responsibility.
- Improving Indigenous employment outcomes will increase employment income tax revenues and reduce excess government spending on remedial health and social support programs, while also engaging business in the ongoing process of reconciliation being embarked on by all levels of government.

Strategies to improve Indigenous labour market outcomes

Poor Indigenous education and labour market outcomes can be directly linked to decades of publicly recognized repressive government policies and systemic racism, a legacy in which Canadian businesses played a part. The Albertan business community recognizes that we have a moral obligation to actively participate in reconciliation. Taking positive steps to improve Indigenous labour market outcomes can be a part of this effort.

Culturally, Indigenous people have unique histories, customs, values, and protocols that impact how they interact in the workplace. Consensus building as an approach to decision making; working and learning styles that emphasize oral techniques and hands-on instruction; and a flexible approach to scheduling and task management are all characteristics that can influence an Indigenous person's approach to the workplace.

Because of the societal repressions that they faced for much of the history of our nation and our province, statistics indicate that many Indigenous people exhibit poorer health and higher rates of homelessness, addiction, and poverty than non-Indigenous peoples. Indigenous people are also statistically more likely to come from single parent households. These factors adversely impact many Indigenous individuals' ability to successfully secure and retain employment.

Due to the restrictive dictates of the Indian Act, many Indigenous people were limited to reserve communities that are separate and distinct from the mainstream. As a result, Indigenous people in reserve communities have faced structural barriers to employment due to a lack of economic and educational opportunities in those communities, and those who move to urban areas often experience difficulty in adapting to the very different market and social conditions present in urban centres while still having to toil against ongoing systemic racism which continues to limit their opportunities.

In light of this, the Calgary Chamber of Commerce's report entitled *Completing the Circle* has identified four overarching strategies to improve Indigenous economic and labour market outcomes:

http://www.calgarychamber.com/resources/docs/PGA/Policy%26Communications/2009/Publications/Completing_the_Circle_Indigenous_Report.pdf

Align business, government, and Indigenous priorities

Businesses and government agencies seeking to work with Indigenous communities need to align their objectives with those of Indigenous communities. This means approaching issues in a manner that considers the perspectives, interests, and culture of the community, and then assessing how the business opportunity can align with these values.

Single access point for Indigenous employment services

Multiple Indigenous career and employment service providers exist to service particular client groups, however, these organizations do not fully coordinate in linking and referring clients to services. What is needed is an integrated access point to connect Indigenous people to the services, training, programming, and employment opportunities they need to succeed in the workplace. In particular, the process for connecting employers to prospective employees needs to be as streamlined, accessible, and coordinated as possible.

Workplace preparation and support

Cross-cultural awareness training is critical to Indigenous employment success. For employers, this means learning how to harness the unique advantages of a diverse labour force while being sensitive and accommodating to the cultural needs of employees from all cultural backgrounds. For employees, this could involve pre-employment preparation training regarding workplace etiquette and expectations, and multi-cultural awareness training. Indigenous awareness training for employers is a particularly effective approach to improve Indigenous employee retention and success in the workplace.

Skills development and business capacity building

Education is strongly linked to employment which is why innovative thinking, such as provincial involvement in Indigenous education through tripartite agreements, increased use of new media (i.e., e-learning) and high school equivalency or literacy programs, is essential to improving Indigenous educational attainment. Similarly, a more accepting and inclusive work environment which offers its employees applied skills development and upgrading programs can prove rewarding for both the employee and employer.

Finally, the lack of economic development in Indigenous communities as a result of decades of systemic marginalization continues to be a major barrier to improved Indigenous labour market outcomes. It is imperative that government, Indigenous communities, and businesses work together and adopt business-friendly, flexible approaches to improve access to economic development opportunities in Indigenous communities.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends that the provincial and federal governments work with the business community, Indigenous communities, and Indigenous service providers to:

1. Coordinate efforts to improve First Nations economic and labour market outcomes on- and off-reserve, and strengthen off-reserve network linkages to better connect clients to services and employers.
2. Develop and market accessible, competency-based Indigenous awareness programming to small- and medium-sized businesses, and that this training serve as recognition of these organizations as Indigenous employers of choice.
3. Continue to support industry and service providers in the delivery of Indigenous workplace preparation, education, and safety programs.

4. Continue to work through tripartite agreements between the federal government, the provinces, and Indigenous communities to achieve meaningful gains in Indigenous kindergarten to Grade12 outcomes.
5. Prioritize high school upgrading and literacy as key components of federal Indigenous human resource programs.
6. Develop business-friendly governance and regulatory practices within Indigenous communities, and adopt flexible funding approaches that encourage successful economic development partnerships.
7. Continue to develop programs to address socio-economic transition needs from Indigenous to urban communities under an appropriate funding model.
8. Invite business associations, such as the Alberta Chambers of Commerce and their members, to participate meaningfully in reconciliation efforts.