



Widening the circle

Increasing opportunities for
Aboriginal people in the workplace

Deloitte's Dialogue on Diversity

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The path from tolerance to acceptance
to diversity to inclusion is a long one.



How can we increase opportunities for Aboriginal people in business?

Recognizing that Aboriginal people make up the fastest-growing segment of Canada's labour force – with a sizeable under-25 population eager to fulfill its potential – Deloitte chose to make “creating connections” between this group and business the focus of our Dialogue on Diversity. The dialogues, held in nine locations from Vancouver to St. John's, began on May 3 and wrapped up on June 14, 2012. We listened and learned from passionate, proactive speakers who shared success stories and best practices as well as their perspectives on the need for a long-term commitment to building relationships; greater collaboration; education; accommodation; and cultural understanding.

As more Aboriginal people attain higher-level education, it is important that Canadian employers provide them with a fair and equal chance at a wide range of careers and advancement opportunities. By including Aboriginal people in their talent pools, employers can take advantage of the new perspectives that often lead to innovation and improved business results, while demonstrating leadership for other businesses. However, there are challenges that employers, as well as Aboriginal communities and people themselves, must recognize and address. Misconceptions, racism and old myths persist. At every opportunity, it is critical that these attitudes be exposed and dispelled through education and communication.

Aboriginal people may also have to deal with different definitions of success and their own cultural bias toward humility instead of “selling yourself.”

But prejudice is only one factor. Numerous barriers to “mainstream” employment arise in sequence from an early age for many Aboriginal people. As children, the formal education that will be later required by most organizations may not be highly valued – one of many persistent issues resulting, at least in part, from the history of residential schools. As youths, they may lack the opportunity to learn about careers beyond those traditionally aspired to within their communities. As adults, the job search may be further limited by location and access to transportation, daycare and technology. Those seeking jobs may not know

how to navigate corporate systems. Company hiring practices may be too inflexible to recognize unconventional qualifications, or they may not have the resources to foster inclusive hiring and training practices.

If they land jobs in large urban centres, Aboriginal people may experience isolation. New cultural norms, unfamiliarity with urban environments, the lack of role models in more senior jobs – or even the absence of a single familiar face in the organization – can contribute to retention problems. As they consider their careers, Aboriginal people may also have to deal with different definitions of success and their own cultural bias toward humility instead of “selling yourself.”

During the dialogues, we sat down with groups of people across the country – many themselves of Aboriginal heritage – who are active in industry, government, education and social services. We heard about these challenges and explored solutions for forging closer, more effective ties between Aboriginal people and business. These solutions stemmed from both practical experience as well as an impassioned desire to move beyond diversity to inclusion.

The full integration into society of any marginalized group – women, people of colour, people with disabilities, immigrants, the LGBT community – starts with tolerance and proceeds through acceptance to diversity and ultimately to inclusion, where conscious efforts are no longer required. As Canada’s Aboriginal people claim their rightful place in society-at-large, progress is undoubtedly being made. Slowly, barriers are coming down and bridges are being constructed in their place. One Aboriginal participant told the story of attending a recent university graduation ceremony to receive an honorary doctorate, and noted that there were 800 Aboriginal graduates in attendance compared with just two twenty years ago.

In this document, we attempt to change the conversation about Aboriginal people in the workforce so that a new story can be written – one full of ideas for ensuring success in a wide range of career experiences.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jane Allen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jane Allen
Partner and Chief Diversity Officer

Just the facts

The Canadian Constitution Act 1982 in section 35(1) recognizes and affirms Aboriginal and Treaty rights. It further recognizes First Nations (60% of the total Aboriginal population), Metis (33%) and Inuit (7%) as the three distinct groups which make up the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

As of the 2006 Census, there were 1,172,790 Aboriginal people in Canada, or 3.8% of the national population, with more than half under the age of 25. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada has identified Aboriginal youth between the ages of 15 and 30 as the fastest-growing population segment in Canada.

The right thing and the smart thing

In recent years, the case for diversity has broadened from “the right thing to do” to “the smart thing to do.” When it comes to Aboriginal people in Canada, both philosophies apply. Not only is there a profound obligation to provide more opportunities for our home-grown population to flourish, there is a business imperative. “We have land, gas, oil, and mines. If you want to do business in this country, you’d better learn to do business with Aboriginal people,” noted one passionate Dialogue on Diversity participant. “There are thousands of bright young people getting ready to seize opportunities. We’re not living in the 60s or 70s anymore.”

“We have land, gas, oil, and mines. If you want to do business in this country, you’d better learn to do business with Aboriginal people.”

With Canada's economy relying largely on extraction and resource development, the need for skilled workers in many regions of the country will only increase. In remote northern communities, more and more organizations are discovering – often the hard way – the value of listening to Aboriginal people and looking to them for guidance. For resource companies, it's not only a question of economic survival, it's an astute risk management policy to engage Aboriginal talent and embrace collaboration.

But even those companies whose business is not based on extraction can benefit from a deeper understanding of the challenges facing Aboriginal people and how organizations can further the path to inclusion. As Aboriginal people seek to improve their quality of life, which for many includes new and expanded career opportunities, numerous issues must be addressed and overcome. For example, unfair stereotypes continue to exist – including the mistaken belief that the majority of Aboriginal people live in small

remote communities and are inaccessible for work in corporate environments. In fact, recent census data suggests that more than half of the Aboriginal population now lives in a major city, meaning that the talent pool is readily accessible. The federal government has pledged funding for Aboriginal education and asked the private sector to provide greater support. As an increased number of Aboriginal people attain higher-level education, the Canadian business community has a responsibility to turn these investments into real job opportunities.

“Our country's DNA is diversity. Part of this is Aboriginal people, so we need to find a solution.”



What we learned

Begin with relationships

In every dialogue session across Canada, a strong theme resonated: the importance of building relationships. There is candid acknowledgment that in order for Canadian companies to engage with Aboriginal people, they must make an effort to connect – to visit Aboriginal communities and inquire about the challenges and successes they face. As one participant said, “Don’t pretend or assume that you know – ask questions.”

Organizations need to listen and learn about the culture of the Aboriginal community before attempting to enter into business transactions, or indeed to be an effective employer. As one participant expressed it, “You have to till the field before you can plant the seed.”

When it comes to embarking on a new relationship with Aboriginal communities or people, the conundrum “You don’t know what you don’t know” came up at almost every session. Participants widely supported the importance of being open-minded and leaving behind assumptions, using the same approach employed when making a foray into international markets. Many participants commented that Canadian businesses are eager to build bridges globally, and take great pains to learn how to deal with other unfamiliar cultures. One said, “If companies applied the same practices for getting to know Aboriginal communities that they use to do business in China, they would be able to avoid many problems.”

“You don’t know what you don’t know.”

How have organizations that have successfully built relationships with Aboriginal communities – and there are many – done so? They start slowly, and demonstrate from the outset an authentic desire to gain understanding. They abandon their own pre-conceived notions, and take time to let the relationship develop naturally. When a level of comfort has been reached, they note greater willingness to open a dialogue about mutual benefits.



During the sessions, it was widely agreed that nothing slows down a project like a rushed, top-down, know-it-all attitude. Companies must invest time into creating long-term partnerships and understand and appreciate Aboriginal culture and business practices. As one participant pointed out, “There’s tremendous value in just listening. Companies, especially those in the extraction sector, can avoid difficult situations by going into communities and getting to know people.”

A member of a financial institution with branches on reserves noted, “Representatives of organizations wanting to do business with an Aboriginal community shouldn’t wear their business hat at the very first meeting. Wait until the next time to introduce business opportunities, and start small.” Examples of “starting small” include sponsoring youth sports teams or making donations to a community centre – without the expectation of anything in return. As one speaker pointed out, “If a young person in the community recognizes a company’s name from seeing it on team jerseys, making the connection when they start thinking about a career later on isn’t such a stretch.”

A speaker told about a unique relationship-building experiment organized by a “native network” employee group in Alberta. “They brought non-Aboriginal people into communities to stay overnight and attend a presentation by elders on cultural differences. People said it was a very positive experience. There may be limitations due to numbers, but it can create ‘buzz’ within the organization about the company’s level of interest and commitment.”

In another example, a Chamber of Commerce in a western city undertook a project to promote the Métis people, who weren’t being hired in significant numbers. The Chamber produced a toolkit for employers, helping them to understand more about this unique group’s background and skills.

Participants in our Dialogue emphasized the value of educating themselves about the Aboriginal communities where they live. Noted one Aboriginal businesswoman, “For too many years, you have expected Aboriginal people to come to you – this is necessary and understandable, but you have to come to us too to understand the subtle differences. Set up offices near our communities so we can see you and find out what you’re all about – and vice versa. There’s not enough getting to know each other going on.”

“For too many years, businesses have expected Aboriginal people to come to them. You have to come to us as well to understand the subtle differences. “

It was acknowledged, however, that the small size of many Aboriginal communities makes it impractical by many standards to open an office or locate nearby. Said one participant, “It is often challenging to support the economics of setting up shop. However, there are many success stories, particularly in remote areas with resource companies. The benefits don’t stop with the one community, but you may have to overlook economics in the short term.”

Another example of building relationships can be seen in the Aboriginal Human Resources Council’s program, “Mastering Aboriginal Inclusion.” In addition to compiling a multitude of cultural information and statistics, it provides recruitment, retention and advancement strategies. The program partners with diverse employers from various sectors, and reports a big change in the attitudes of these organizations and the commitment to developing positive relationships with Aboriginal people and communities. This program has been ongoing for 15 years and is so successful that it is regarded by some immigrant populations as a model.

“Businesses – especially large ones – have the motivation and the money to help communities overcome challenges.”

Commit for the long term

Companies that have successful relationships with Aboriginal communities can create mutually beneficial opportunities, but they must be patient and demonstrate that they are “in it for the long term, not just a quick one-sided win.” Once begun, relationships can be nurtured in myriad ways, from participating in community festivals to speaking at high schools, sponsoring and attending career fairs, inviting youth to company site visits, and providing internships, scholarships, and mentoring programs.

When companies recruit and hire Aboriginal people, it is important to commit to retention through a variety of efforts, including hiring more than just one Aboriginal person so that current and future employees can “see themselves” and relate to peers within the organization.

On the subject of commitment, an experienced social services manager noted that a small local business was modeling a best practice by hiring Aboriginal youths to work in his pizza shop. “It’s all about attitude – you get what you expect. So when a worker is late, this owner sees a typical teenager rather than a lazy Aboriginal kid, and communicates the same ‘get serious’ message that he’d provide to any employee. He’s not bailing after the first little problem; he’s giving them a chance to find out what the working world is all about – something all young people, regardless of race and background, need to learn.”

A speaker noted that large businesses, which can often proceed with less bureaucracy than government, represent a promising route to making positive change. She referenced the progress being made by a diversified mining company in addressing the real issues local Aboriginal communities were facing, such as housing. There was general agreement among participants that business has the motivation and the money to make a long-term commitment to helping communities overcome challenges. "The lead must come from the larger companies. With their continued commitment, we'll see a huge difference."

Bolster skills and education

Significant gaps exist in the education system. Many on-reserve schools have inadequate programs, poor assessment systems, underpaid teachers and unsafe physical conditions. So it is not entirely surprising that more than one-third of Aboriginal people have not completed high school, and only eight percent of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 in Canada have a university degree compared to 23 percent of non-Aboriginal people in the same age group.

At the post-secondary level, there are an increasing number of initiatives designed to help Aboriginal students make a successful transition. Many universities offer outreach to high schools and on-campus support for Aboriginal students, and are partnering with employers to provide scholarships and corporate sponsorships.

University of British Columbia's "First Nations Business Education" Chinook program (see sidebar on page 10) provides students with co-op opportunities and other work experience; it also exposes high school students to programs by offering preparatory math and science courses. Simon Fraser University launched an award-winning longhouse educational project in 2008, and has established a math and science program to introduce students to university and business settings at a young age. The University of Toronto's "Aboriginal Youth Summer Program" fully subsidizes 30 Aboriginal high school students interested in studying law.

Quick facts on education*

- 8 percent of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 in Canada have a university degree, while 23 percent of non-Aboriginals of the same age group have a university degree.
- More than one-third of Aboriginal people have not completed high school.
- Federal funding to support Aboriginal students attending a postsecondary institution has increased at only two percent a year since 1996 while tuition has increased at an average of 4.4 percent a year since 1998.

*Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada

Memorial University in St. John's offers a "Women in Science and Engineering" co-op program which allows Grade 11 female students from across the province to stay in the community during their summer placements, which may be of particular appeal to young Aboriginal women. Explained a Memorial participant in the St. John's dialogue, "They get the scientific piece, but with benefits to the community."

Memorial is also home to a dedicated Aboriginal Resource Office, where students can go for tutoring, mentoring, equipment like computers, photocopiers and textbooks, and a peaceful environment. Every year, the Office organizes an annual Aboriginal Orientation; it also reaches out to isolated communities within the province, providing information about student life and funding sources. Another important role of the Office is to advocate and educate the general university population regarding inclusion. Simon Fraser's Indigenous Student Centre operates under similar principles, as does the Native Centre at the University of Calgary. There are numerous other similar initiatives active in colleges and universities across the country.

First Nations Business Education

- The Chinook Program was initiated by the UBC's First Nations House of Learning and the Sauder School of Business to provide business education opportunities for Aboriginal participants. The Chinook Business Diploma and Bachelor of Commerce - Chinook Option degrees were launched in 2004.
- Simon Fraser University's Executive MBA in Aboriginal Business and Leadership was introduced in 2012 to help Aboriginal managers deal with complex economic development initiatives. The program explores contemporary business issues included in most MBA programs, but in a way that respects the importance of other forms of knowledge. Eight percent of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 64 in Canada have a university degree, while 23 percent of non-Aboriginals of the same age group have a university degree.

While university programs are encouraging, participants agreed that action is needed in the earlier grades to ensure that young Aboriginal students are made aware of career options and provided with the support necessary to pursue their interests. The value of education must be reinforced at the family and community level, something that may be less than intuitive for older generations who have suffered the impact of residential schooling and legislation that prevented Aboriginal people from working. It was suggested that simple things – like opening a bank account to get a basic understanding of finance – should be encouraged in Aboriginal communities. “If the importance of getting an education and being on time for school is not reinforced as a child, it is hard to apply it to your working life,” explained a participant. At the same time, it was recognized that the education system is important to building self-esteem and a sense of pride. The Labrador school board, for example, has engaged elders in the development of a new curriculum at the elementary school level focused on preserving Aboriginal values and history.

Niagara IGNITEs middle-schoolers

In March 2012, the District School Board of Niagara in Ontario held an IGNITE March break camp for Aboriginal students in grades 4-8, sponsored by IBM Canada. The ultimate goal was to support and enhance post-secondary and career choices for the Aboriginal student population. A free four-day program, the camp focused on the building blocks of technology, innovation and creativity including modules pertaining to robotics, engineering and media.



Review recruiting and hiring practices

If young Aboriginal people are to aspire to white collar careers in, for example, accounting, consumer products or insurance, they must know that these jobs exist in the first place. Several participants noted that awareness of careers in banking, retail, teaching and the resource industries is high because these jobs are more visible in communities. The options available in many other areas, however, have not been widely communicated. Accordingly, businesses that are determined to increase their recruiting efforts among Aboriginal people must make themselves accessible. Noted an Aboriginal business manager from Vancouver, “We have to be there to explain that there are no ‘stupid’ questions – and be open and available to answer all questions.”

Companies in “low awareness” white-collar fields seeking to hire interested and qualified Aboriginal talent were advised to visit career fairs, present to universities and high schools with high Aboriginal populations, and partner with Aboriginal recruiting agencies. A creative approach to career fairs was the Aboriginal Human Resource Council’s National Aboriginal People Virtual Recruitment fair held in June 2012, an online tool that allowed interested employers and candidates to participate from any location with an internet connection.

The recruiting process itself can present a barrier for Aboriginal People entering the workplace. It was widely proposed that recruiters need to be more open-minded and recognize that relevant skills can be acquired in unconventional ways. “Leaders of organizations can have very intractable assumptions about job requirements that may not be scientific or justified in reality. Does research prove that three to five years of experience or a specific degree is necessary for a certain job? We need to guard against unrealistic criteria,” said one participant. “Postings can be irrelevant. They can be so customized that people don’t stand a chance in the first place. And employers should watch out for nepotism or any other unspoken employment practices that stand in the way of Aboriginal people competing on an even playing field.”

When skill profiles look different on resumes, it becomes difficult to recognize that someone might be a good fit for the job. One person stated, “On paper, Aboriginal people don’t look like our standard hire. People may have gotten over ‘you don’t look like me,’ but they haven’t gotten over ‘you don’t work like me’ yet.” Further, learning how to communicate between layers of the organization is essential – while the leaders might understand the importance of diversity, they must ensure that “people get it all the way down the corporate ladder.” By implementing a recruiting policy and setting long-term targets and outcomes, managers will be more likely to accept diversity in new hires.

“People may have gotten over ‘you don’t look like me,’ but they haven’t gotten over ‘you don’t work like me’ yet.”

During the interview process or in a performance review setting, Aboriginal people may resist speaking highly of themselves because self-promotion is frowned upon in their culture; they may avoid interrupting during a business meeting to state their opinion for the same reason. An awareness of this reality can help the interviewer/manager adjust the dialogue so that the individual can communicate “their” accomplishments or point of view. In this and other areas where cultural differences exist, it was noted that employers should not simply “try to stream people that are just like them, but to develop processes that allow us to capture the value of all individuals. This is difficult to do, but it’s the ultimate goal of inclusion.” Another participant noted, “We owe it to Aboriginal people to ensure that they are not marginalized for being true to their culture.”

For the fifty percent of Aboriginal people who live on reserves, transportation and distance to industrial centres can be another limiting factor, as is access to computers. Unfortunately, it is a modern reality that young people of all cultures and backgrounds must be prepared to go where the work is. But it was pointed out that if young people have the opportunity to learn about and understand more organizations through company-sponsored city visits or other involvement while they are still young, the prospect of exploring a career with these companies later on may not be so foreign or daunting.

The City of Ottawa and Algonquin College

The City of Ottawa is committed to making a conscious effort to examine its traditional recruiting efforts among several designated groups, including Aboriginal people.

Recognizing that no Aboriginal people were employed as paramedics, the City of Ottawa connected with Algonquin College to correct this imbalance by identifying interested candidates at the high school level.

While an individual company can do much to encourage interest among Aboriginal people, in many cases cooperation among groups can yield even better results. “It can be costly to get programs up and running, so partnerships are happening more and more. Big foundations in Canada are collectively trying to surround issues and solve them.” Collaborating with other organizations who have similar goals – such as resource companies sharing their huge databases of skilled Aboriginal individuals with other employers – can help significantly in terms of building capacity.

“If you want to hire more Aboriginal people, hire more Aboriginal people.”

Noted one participant wryly, “When it comes to hiring Aboriginal people, the point is to find a way to get it done. Affirmative action is great in theory, but if it doesn’t translate into practice, it’s a waste of time. Too often there’s a lot of talk, and that time could be spent more usefully making change. Take a chance. If you want to hire more Aboriginal people, hire more Aboriginal people.”

Foster cultural awareness

Across the country, the need for greater cultural awareness was front and centre at the Dialogue on Diversity sessions. It was widely acknowledged that companies must be willing to appreciate and accommodate Aboriginal culture. A parallel was drawn to the efforts being made to accept the practices of other cultures and question long-standing “Canadian” traditions that are no longer reflective of our multicultural society. As one participant noted, “Culture is a powerful thing, no matter what your roots are. We can’t expect people to ‘leave it at the door’ when they come to work.” Another made the point that although Aboriginal people may have some cultural practices unfamiliar to non-Aboriginal Canadians, they are more alike than different. He said, “John Ralston Saul talks about the values that make Canada distinct in his book *A Fair County*. Those values – inclusion, discussion, collaboration and negotiation – are Aboriginal values.”

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The most common approach to building cultural awareness is employee training. A number of organizations shared their practices, which encompass firm-wide yearly seminars on Aboriginal culture and the history of Aboriginal people, to middle-manager sensitivity training, to casual “Lunch and Learn” sessions where community elders are brought in as guest speakers. The City of Edmonton, for example, provides a “Circle of Courage” three-day training session for new employees and a one-day annual refresher course. Regardless of the training methodology adopted, the majority of participants concurred that the delivery should be carefully considered to ensure it engages all people (e.g. is not condescending or insensitive) and fosters candid but positive discussion.

In addition to training, companies must look within and examine their policies and procedures. They must be open-minded enough to recognize the difficulties an Aboriginal person experiences, such as moving from a reserve to a big city. Special attention should be paid to the importance of cultural traditions, such as the expectation that Aboriginal people attend the funerals of extended family members, or that Inuit people may want the summer months off without pay to hunt. One participant saw giving time off for cultural reasons as analogous to parental leave, secondment, or a lengthy training course – things that were once considered “perks” or inconveniences, but are now recognized as valuable contributors to job satisfaction, loyalty and ultimately retention.

A number of company representatives attending the dialogues reported that they are making solid progress in terms of recognizing the need for cultural awareness. Said one participant in the resources industry, “When we see a gap, where we are losing people or they seem disconnected, we try to adapt with training on attitudes and respect for the land. We are developing a handbook that brings spiritual language into geophysical study to show there is a link between the two worlds. We need employees to respect all the elements, to value them and bring that value back to us as an organization.”

“It shouldn’t be the job of the one native person at the meeting to have to explain things over and over.”

An Aboriginal leader active in business commented that the amount of time required to continually educate non-Aboriginal people about cultural issues can be exhausting. “Organizations should start documenting material, keep it current and up to date, and ensure that non-Aboriginal employees new to a project are up to speed. It shouldn’t be the job of the one native person at the meeting to have to explain things over and over.”

CIBC's Aboriginal Employee Circle

In 2009, CIBC created an Aboriginal Employee Circle to advance the bank's relationships with Aboriginal people and recognize the accomplishments of its Aboriginal employees across Canada. The company also holds a semi-annual national Aboriginal employee forum to promote awareness of Aboriginal culture.

CIBC has a rich history of supporting Canada's Aboriginal communities. The bank has been the lead sponsor of the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards, and has made significant donations to the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation. This education program provides annual bursaries and scholarships to more than 600 First Nations, Inuit and Métis students enrolled in full-time post-secondary studies in a broad range of fields.

Universities, like resource companies, have significant experience in addressing cultural awareness and report seeing a good deal of positive change over the last twenty years. In most cases, formal offices exist to promote awareness and provide practical advice and intervention where appropriate. On a less formal basis, practices once considered foreign are more widely accepted and even celebrated – like traditional medicine in health care settings and smudging ceremonies. To foster self-awareness, Memorial University invested in a software tool called “Intercultural Development Inventory” that gauges attitudes regarding diversity; follow-up skill development is also promoted.

Reach out to small business

A few participants noted that although small and medium sized business may not have the resources to create training and awareness building programs on their own, they can still play a role in overcoming inertia by simply hiring young Aboriginal people and setting an example. The challenge, however, is that in areas where they represent a large part of the business community, “small and medium or family owned companies aren't at the diversity table,” explained a participant in an eastern dialogue. “They're looking for labour, but they're not being purposeful about engaging Aboriginal people to build skills and keep the employment within our own province.” There are many obstacles for smaller companies: insufficient financial resources; lack of awareness of government subsidies, imbedded beliefs, or they simply may not have the HR skills in house.

It was suggested that larger companies and academic institutions can be more purposeful in helping smaller businesses hire Aboriginal youth by using their resources to promote the overall sector. Big companies can adopt a more holistic presence at career fairs, laying out career paths and showing students the value of early experience. For example, in their presentations, an insurance company might explain to students how working at a gas station can help develop the customer service skills they may need to demonstrate on their resume four to six years later. Noted one participant, “We need to be clear about what our requirements are for our careers, and open a whole spectrum of avenues for students to follow. Large companies with Aboriginal resource groups can share their programs and initiatives with the community to build momentum. Then the depth of experience becomes so much more valuable.”

Prevent isolation

When an organization hires only one Aboriginal person – or if there are no role models further up the corporate ladder – the result can be isolation. “If you can’t aspire to higher roles within an organization, the odds aren’t good that you are going to be happy and succeed,” noted a participant. One Aboriginal man who joined a professional services firm a decade ago described why he ended up leaving, despite successfully qualifying as a chartered accountant and doing well in the organization. “I was the only person who looked like me,” he explained. “No matter how well I did, I still felt alone.”

Companies must also help their Aboriginal employees chart their own successful path, and demonstrate that it is possible to aim higher and achieve more. With Aboriginal people at senior levels in organizations, the “tone at the top” is clear – but until that happens, reciprocal mentoring (i.e. having junior Aboriginal employees mentor senior non-Aboriginal leaders) is a popular concept.

“We need to be clear about what our requirements are for our careers, and open a whole spectrum of avenues for students to follow. Large companies can share their programs with the community to build momentum.”



A crucial part of solving the isolation problem is creating mentorship programs to share learning and foster comfort and familiarity – which of course means hiring and advancing Aboriginal people in increased numbers. Mentors can also help in the transition to city life, an often-overlooked part of the isolation factor. It was noted that if this happens at an earlier stage – for example, by providing Aboriginal teenagers the opportunity to spend time in a safe urban setting through university or company site visits, young people will be better prepared for the transition to university life and for future career opportunities.

Aboriginal employees that build connections in organizations through mentoring and affinity groups can significantly decrease the sense of isolation. Organizations with a formal strategy to recognize Aboriginal people as a designated hiring population often establish company-wide networks through self-identification. Some participants suggested staffing all aspects of an organization that relate to Aboriginal matters (as well as Aboriginal recruiting, mentoring and cultural awareness training) with Aboriginal employees, a move that serves to position role models at various levels and departments.

For resource extraction companies, the sense of physical isolation can be an issue for all employees, not just those of Aboriginal descent. One participant offered a straightforward and ambitious solution for projects located close to Aboriginal communities: “Why not make it a goal to have 100% Aboriginal employment for resource projects in community areas? This avoids the need for fly in-fly out employees.”

Leverage goodwill

Attracting Aboriginal people to an organization in the first place – and improving retention – is made easier by engaging with and leveraging the goodwill of community members. It was pointed out that businesses operating in multi-cultural neighbourhoods do this all the time – like Toronto banks having Mandarin or Farsi-speaking tellers on duty. According to one participant, “The best advertising is having people go back to their communities and tell people what a good company you are.”

To make Canadian companies familiar and attractive, the companies should demonstrate that they are supporting, helping, and working with Aboriginal communities – particularly the young people. As discussed earlier, this can be accomplished in a variety of ways like sponsoring a sports event or attending a career fair at Aboriginal schools. Since students begin to discover their interests at a young age, it is essential to connect with them as

early as possible. Having contacts within the community can also be helpful for recruitment, as these individuals can recommend people they believe are the best candidates for the job. Again, it was reiterated that relationships are not immediate: “You don’t do it overnight. You do it one step at a time.”

Focus on retention

Reflecting on why Aboriginal employees leave organizations is crucial for understanding how to retain them. Finding out why people leave is not enough, however; the organization must act on this information and make the necessary changes to corporate culture. “If we’re not willing to find out why people leave and do something about it, we can’t make any progress,” noted a participant.

The usual approach to understanding why an employee leaves – the exit interview – is often counterproductive, as many Aboriginal people find it uncomfortable to talk about themselves, something that also factors into the hiring and advancement processes. In order to create a candid environment, it was suggested that a fellow Aboriginal person should conduct these interviews.

Retention doesn’t occur in a vacuum; it is part of the continuum of inclusion that begins with awareness and culminates in the unconscious acceptance of differences. If recruitment is a challenge, then retention is going to be a challenge as well. Inflexible, closed organizations won’t encourage people to “stick it out.” But if Aboriginal hires become leaders, they can work to change the culture from within, and bring about continuous improvement. Accordingly, it’s crucial to ensure that there are strategies in place to move qualified Aboriginal employees into leadership positions. Best practices shared in that regard are the establishment of a formal.

Aboriginal talent strategy, and having champions at the senior management level who are willing to take risks, if they need to, in order to move people into appropriate positions. “The tone from the top and zero tolerance for people who don’t support advancement are important. Senior management may occasionally have to create opportunities to put people into leadership roles, not only as a reward for their abilities, but to give others someone they can look up to. Occasionally, you may have to stretch the fit a bit – but if you don’t make the effort, you’ll never see change,” noted one participant.

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Dragon's Den nurtures Métis entrepreneurs

In November 2011, the Métis Nation of Ontario partnered with the Ministry of Economic Development and Innovation to launch Generation Innovation: Métis Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge. Modeled after the popular CBC TV program The Dragon's Den, Métis youth across Ontario were invited to compete for business training and prizes by submitting applications describing their business or innovation.

The young people made their pitches to a panel of four judges, each a well-respected business leader. Finalists received business training from the GoForth Institute; attended pitch training with Dr. Leslie Roberts; were coached by successful Dragon's Den applicant Ryan Foley; and attended the Métis Business Forum in Toronto.

Noted one contest judge, "Nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit among these youth will help them create something valuable for their community while developing their passion. Small business is a driving force in Canada's economic success and Métis people are central to understanding what Canada is, and what Canada can be. I'm confident they will make great contributions."

A link was made to the status of women in business: in the past, most companies didn't start identifying potential woman leaders early or placing women in roles where they could develop the expertise and operational responsibilities needed for senior positions. Today, we have to apply that same thinking to Aboriginal employees – and be on the lookout for potential so we can have a pipeline of qualified candidates ready to fill leadership roles.

Align programs

While it was acknowledged by many people attending the dialogues that there are numerous initiatives in place for advancing connections between Aboriginal people and business, there is little alignment. Greater effort should be made by government, business, educators, agencies and communities to bring together various activities for synergy and to avoid program fatigue. It was also noted by several Aboriginal participants that there is a need for Aboriginal leadership to come together as a group to achieve efficiencies and share best practices.

Companies are urged to take advantage of the expertise of agencies like the Aboriginal Human Resource Council which can work with them to develop training programs and service contract agreements, and to identify candidates. Many organizations in remote locations are working with governments on training programs – and the need for increased collaboration was expressed by an Aboriginal participant experienced in this regard. “When working with the government, communities need to gain more control over programs and assess them to ensure they meet their needs and aren’t wasting money.” This speaker related a case where the community identified training gaps and the government redirected dollars to fill them, leading to more hiring.

Other positive stories of unique government programs included one that connects Aboriginal women with companies that provide micro-financing, something that can lead to the greater participation of women in major resource projects. Another was a “Dragon’s Den” competition encouraging Métis youth to compete for business mentoring. Many dialogue participants were pleased to observe that governments are beginning to modify their role from proscribing to facilitating so that Aboriginal people can make the choices they want to make.

Support Aboriginal businesses

To demonstrate commitment to furthering opportunities for Aboriginal people, it was widely agreed in the dialogues that Canadian companies should actively support Aboriginal entrepreneurs. Organizations with significant purchasing power are encouraged to implement a strategy, and be prepared to accept less competitive pricing as Aboriginal businesses achieve economies of scale. Some resource companies have policies that overtly support of Aboriginal suppliers; the goal is to establish a long-term procurement contract that will help the business grow substantially.

As Aboriginal entrepreneurs are often limited in their ability to obtain financing due to lack of collateral, it is important to find creative ways to ensure they are considered as often as possible. Encouraging bids from partnerships or consortiums that include businesses typically considered as ‘too small’ is one example. Another example is structuring procurement agreements so that there is more upfront revenue for small suppliers. Such strategies provide opportunities and benefits to both the company and the Aboriginal suppliers. It was noted that this should not be viewed as a social responsibility, but as a smart business decision that will result in more competition and ultimately better value.

The Aboriginal Meeting Marketplace

In May 2012, the British Columbia Aboriginal Business Association hosted procurement forums that brought together regional industry/corporate representatives and Aboriginal suppliers to identify procurement and contract opportunities.

At this “Aboriginal Meeting Marketplace,” Aboriginal suppliers joined industry/business representatives to discuss opportunities available within the region and qualifications required for each opportunity, as well as the RFP process and procedures.

During the discussions, Aboriginal suppliers identified partnerships among suppliers to meet the criteria for specific regional opportunities.

Break down myths and prejudices

Unfortunately, one of the largest barriers Aboriginal people continue to face in the workplace – and in Canadian society – is systemic racism. Degrading comments and discriminatory hiring practices, often unintended, can especially impact Aboriginal teenagers who are just beginning to form their social identities and may already be weighed down by negative self-worth.

An example of a common misperception is that all Aboriginal people receive extensive preferential treatment from the government, such as not being required in any circumstances to pay taxes. There are many other more hurtful negative perceptions. Overcoming racism and dispelling myths can be very difficult. As one participant said, “Misinformation can spread like poison if it’s not stopped.” Fighting racism requires that leaders speak out against it and communicate clearly that there is zero tolerance.

Tell a new story

Many dialogue participants pointed out that there is very little awareness of Aboriginal society “...what people hear in the media during a crisis situation.” Increased focus should be placed on the strengths and progress of Aboriginal people and communities. A more balanced perspective needs to be presented – but all Canadians should seek to look beyond the headlines.

Despite the statistics, it was pointed out by numerous dialogue participants that Aboriginal youths are just as capable as anyone else. More and more students are enrolling in post-secondary programs – and graduating in record numbers.

During the dialogues, there was a strong desire to celebrate and reinforce successes. “We may need to give Aboriginal students a leg up in the business world now, especially if they are from remote communities, but it will pay off in the future. They are smart and capable. What they need is for businesses to give them a chance to shine.”

Greater efforts must be made to demonstrate that Aboriginal people are strong and resourceful, and that companies are better for hiring them. Changing perceptions can also be fostered on a smaller scale through the stories we tell, noted a number of participants. As one put it, “It’s amazing what can occur if you subtly change the narrative from emphasizing victimization to celebrating empowerment.” Asserted another, “We have the skills, the values and the ability to take charge of our future. We shouldn’t need to bring teachers who have just immigrated to Canada to northern communities to teach our children. We need more native teachers, and we also need more native principals and superintendents.”

Do Aboriginal people pay taxes?

In general, Aboriginal people in Canada are required to pay taxes on the same basis as other people in Canada, except where the limited exemption under Section 87 of the Indian Act applies. Section 87 says that the “personal property of an Indian or a band situated on a reserve” is tax exempt, as is income earned from employment on a reserve. Inuit and Métis people are not eligible for this exemption, and generally do not live on reserves.

The exemption in Section 87 of the Indian Act has existed since before Confederation. It reflects the unique constitutional and historic place of Aboriginal people in Canada. The courts have held that the exemption is intended to preserve the entitlements of Indian people to their reserve lands, and to ensure that the use of their property on their reserve lands is not eroded by taxes.

“I am optimistic about this generation.”



Top 10 best practices

- 1 Partner** with high schools, colleges and universities.
- 2 Provide** students with internships to give them training/experience.
- 3 Question** standard job requirements.
- 4 Review** screening/hiring/advancement practices to recognize unconventional talent and cultural differences.
- 5 Conduct** company-wide cultural training.
- 6 Hire** more than one Aboriginal person.
- 7 Promote** Aboriginal people to senior roles.
- 8 Assess** business/employment practices that could provide barriers to Aboriginal people.
- 9 Develop** an Aboriginal hiring and retention strategy.
- 10 Communicate** and celebrate successes.

Why Dialogue on diversity?

At Deloitte, we believe that the business community must play a lead role in ensuring the talents and experiences of our entire workforce are utilized to their fullest potential. Each year, our firm holds a series of roundtable discussions in cities across Canada on critical diversity issues affecting the workforce.

Our goal is to bring together representatives from the business community, special interest groups, government agencies, employees and those directly affected by diversity issues. Beyond discussing topical issues and challenges, we hope to generate recommendations that will be shared with the broader business community in a variety of ways, including reports like this one.

In 2012, we focused on how Canadian companies and Aboriginal people can forge better connections to create satisfying relationships and launch the careers of thousands of bright and capable people.

Research shows that organizations' diversity goals and priorities don't change significantly overnight, but that the impact of diversity on innovation may be coming into sharper focus as executives increasingly try to harness the power of this issue for driving business goals. As diversity becomes a larger part of our workforces, we will begin – if we are willing – to see the benefits of a diverse workforce which creates more innovation. A diverse workforce can only serve to strengthen our businesses and our country.

Our Dialogues on Diversity began on May 3 in Winnipeg and traveled to eight other cities: Toronto, Regina, Saskatoon, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and St. John's, concluding in Ottawa on June 14. Each session included representatives from business, educational institutes, community-based organizations, and Deloitte professionals. Many of these individuals brought firsthand perspectives.

“Aboriginal people have found our collective voice and are at a point where we can now move forward. The past has been acknowledged, and the future is looking bright.”

Dialogue on diversity participants

We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the following individuals who gave generously of their time, experience and perspective to make each of the dialogues a fascinating and productive working session.

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The Oteenow Employment & Training Society

Kristena Belcourt

Rupertsland Institute

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Roxanne Hall

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Louise Karchie

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Saskatoon**Roberta Bear**

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Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations

Sheri Benson

United Way of Saskatoon

Gary Beaudin

Saskatoon Catholic School Board

Arden Buskell

First Nations Bank of Canada

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Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology

Liz Duret

SIAST

Jodi Fick-Dryka

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Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority
(SLGA)

James Froh

Saskatchewan Ministry of First Nations
and Metis Relations

Doug Kelln

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Saskatchewan Power Corporation

Todd Standing

Mosaic Company

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Royal Bank of Canada

Winnipeg**Josephine Anderson**

Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg

Linda Broda

Royal Bank of Canada, Aboriginal Markets

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Gail Hickey

Worely Parsons

Amy Hudson

Memorial University

Kimberley Mullins

Hebron Project

June Perry

Pilot Communications

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Resources

Aboriginal Business Directory <http://www.aboriginalbusinessdirectory.com/>

Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Conference and Tradeshow <http://www.splatsin.ca/aboriginal-entrepreneurs-conference-tradeshow/>

Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Canada <http://www.foa.ca/>

- Aboriginal Human Resource Council <http://www.aboriginalhr.ca>
- Aboriginal Human Resources Council's program for Mastering Aboriginal Inclusion <http://www.aboriginalhr.ca/en/programs/MAI>
- Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business <http://www.ccab.com/>

Expo Labrador <http://www.expolabrador.com/>

INDSPIRE <http://indspire.ca/>

Industry Council for Aboriginal Business <http://www.icab.ca/a/icab.ca/www-icab-ca/>

National Aboriginal Economic Development Board <http://www.naedb-cndea.com/>

Suggested reading

A Fair Country – John Ralston Saul

Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change – Timothy Wilson

Speaking my Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation & Residential School – Aboriginal Healing Foundation

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