



The Virtual Organization: Network of Relationships for Innovation

A country is as inclusive as its least included group of people, and for Canada that group is Indigenous people. To address the issue, Indigenous Works developed a competency model for Indigenous people inclusion in the Canadian economy.

Workplace inclusion is not an easy topic because of the many cultures represented in Canadian businesses and other organisations. Canada is deeply committed to diversity and has proactively promoted immigration, yet there continues to be a shortage of skilled and unskilled labour.

One of the solutions is ensuring there is as strong a commitment to inclusion of all working age Canadians as there is to diversity, including Indigenous Canadians who have historically been excluded. It is a monumental challenge to change cultural perceptions and to develop a business case and competency model for Indigenous inclusion, but that is precisely what Indigenous Works set out to do 20 years ago.

Pathways to Inclusion

Indigenous Works, previously known as the Aboriginal Human Resource Council, is a national nonprofit social organisation that is ISO 9001 certified. The organisation formed as a result of recommendations made in the "1996 Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples."

Indigenous Works established a clear mission which in essence is to work with a variety of organisations to improve Indigenous employment, workplace engagement and inclusion.

This is an especially challenging mission because Aboriginals (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) have historically been excluded as a result of a series of events over the last 145 years that kept them on the fringes of society and the economy. The result: Indigenous people were excluded from participating in the labour market, and a deep bias against Aboriginals developed. Ending stereotyping, creating equal access and training opportunities, and helping organisational leaders develop cultural intelligence about Aboriginals is a pathway to engaging and employing Indigenous people and utilizing Aboriginal businesses.

Taking a methodical approach, IndigenousWorks mapped organisational competencies that businesses need to engage Indigenous people, businesses and communities. The focus is on developing relationships because they lead to a deeper understanding of Indigenous history, cultures, social and business issues, and perspectives. Developing honest relationships promotes trust and respect, both of which are necessary to effectively communicate and to change biases.

Because relationships are not suddenly formed, IndigenousWorks identified a seven-stage continuum model of developing relationships to achieve full inclusion. It begins with indifference in



which inclusion is not considered. The second stage is intimidation, meaning inclusion is forced compliance. In stage three, image becomes a factor, making inclusion part of the public relations campaign for brand building.

Making Inclusion a Business Imperative

Notice that in the first three steps inclusion is not considered a business imperative. It is not until the fourth stage of initiation that inclusion becomes a business imperative, setting the stage for the remaining competencies. Stage five is incubation in which inclusion is nurtured as a core competency, and stage six is integration which means inclusion is a catalyst for growth. At stage seven, the organisation maximizes performance to achieve full inclusion.

The competency model can be used for any group of people, but it must be relevant. For an Indigenous workplace inclusion system, the organisation must develop the right strategies and practices for effective engagement, the right knowledge to guide the strategies and practices, and the right measurement and benchmarking information. Lumping all diverse people into one group is not a good practice because it hides exclusion of particular people.

The seven-point inclusion continuum model underlies a nine-point inclusion framework. The first part of the framework is investment and resources because they are needed to shift a company's strategies, practices, employee training, and relationship building efforts specifically for Indigenous inclusion. Next is employee engagement, and establishing responsibility and accountability.

In the positioning step, the organisation builds a positive brand of inclusion and signals its interest in working closely with Indigenous people and communities. This requires leadership and governance systems that set the design, tone, and direction for creating partnerships. The framework includes social impact, relationships and trust in which the organisation's changed values, practices, and commitment transform relationships and trust with Indigenous people.

The last two framework elements are organisational culture, and value and validation. Culture refers to a workplace where all employees are working toward developing and nurturing the relationships. Value and validation is the assessment and verification system for measuring progress.

Beginning the Process.

Inclusion of Aboriginals in the economy is a moral imperative, but there is also a business case for inclusion. Including Indigenous people in the workforce and supply chain promotes innovation, addresses the labour shortage, closes the talent gap, and gives businesses insights into and access to Indigenous markets and customers. It is a win-win effort. Everyone should have equal opportunities to build careers and develop their human resource potential.



Bias and misperceptions have proven to be formidable barriers to inclusion. Despite the barriers, thousands of Aboriginals are already on the road to success. The Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business has 550 members and growing, and trade schools and universities are establishing cultural-based programs and services to grow the number of Aboriginals who have a certificate, diploma, or degree.

As employers gain more knowledge of the Indigenous culture, perspectives, experiences and history, they are developing relationships that are growing the rate of employment of Aboriginals, but there is still a long way to go. The physical distance of some Aboriginal communities was once a major barrier, but technology is breaking it down, too.

Cultural competence involves more than just knowledge. It embraces attitudes, values, behaviours, knowledge, communication skills and systems. It explains the reason IndigenousWorks' inclusion model has seven steps, and the framework has nine elements.

Organisations that truly want to achieve inclusion and cultural competences must understand it is an ongoing process and not a single initiative. However, a process must begin in order to progress. IndigenousWorks is ready to help.

Canada needs all of its people to be included in its economy, and it will take the honest and full effort of its employers to make it happen.