



## Eyes on Home Integrating Aboriginals into the Canadian Labor Force

One of the solutions to Canada's labor shortage is found right at home. Aboriginals are underutilized and employers need talent, so developing a set of strategies for successful market integration is needed.

Canada has an acknowledged labor shortage and has focused on attracting global talent. However, Canada has its own under-developed and under-utilized talent pool. One of the fastest growing populations is the Aboriginals – Inuit, Métis and First Nations – but at the same time the Aboriginal participation in the labor force remains significantly lower than the participation of the non-Aboriginal population.

Canadian businesses want to attract and engage Aboriginal talent but are frequently uncertain as to the best strategies to employ. Understanding and overcoming the challenges will take time and require effort on both sides. Aboriginals must advance their educational and skills levels, and employers must develop the ability to successfully find, attract and integrate Aboriginals into the workforce.

Integrating Aboriginals into the Canadian labor force is a complex issue because it requires that both Aboriginals and employers overcome their own challenges and find ways to meet in the middle. Myriad factors limit the employability of Aboriginals, and an equal number of factors impact employers willing to hire Aboriginals.

The Conference Board of Canada has spent considerable time studying the challenges and opportunities that employers experience when engaging Aboriginals. The report titled "Understanding the Value, Challenges and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit and First Nations Workers" takes an in-depth look at both sides of the issue – Aboriginals and Canadian employers. Following are some key points from the report.

### Aboriginal Challenges

Raising the rate of the Aboriginal population participation in the labor force faces several challenges.

One is the location of the population. A little over half of Aboriginals live in urban areas where most of the jobs are located, and 26.3 percent live on reserves. Job opportunities are limited in remote, rural areas

Another critical challenge the Canadian government must address, in cooperation with tribal leaders, is the low rates of education. Thirty-four percent of Aboriginals never completed high school or obtained any type of diploma or certificate, which is more than double the rate of the non-



Aboriginal population. More than half of the Inuit never completed high or post-secondary education. Forty-four percent of Aboriginals have completed a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree. Most jobs require completion of high school or post-secondary educational programs, so lack of education is a serious impediment to employment.

A third challenge is culture related. Many Aboriginals lack business language skills or have difficulty applying skills in a workplace setting.

There also remains the issue of racism or discrimination, making many Aboriginals hesitant to attempt mainstreaming into the labor force.

Yet another challenge Aboriginals must overcome is lack of understanding or awareness of the social networks where they can connect with potential employers or locate employment opportunities.

### Employer Challenge

Canadian employers face a shortage of skilled talent and retention of talent once employed. The problem is exacerbated by an aging population that is increasing retirement rates of experienced employees.

Though many would gladly hire Aboriginals, they do not know how to attract and engage Inuit, Métis and First Nations workers. They are also stymied by the need to overcome impediments to employment like lack of work experience and inadequate skills.

The top challenge to hiring Aboriginals is the lack of qualifications or formal certification. That issue is followed by low skill levels and lack of work experience. Also impacting hiring are differences in expectations between Aboriginals and employers on many levels, including relocation, long-term career planning, and involvement in the Aboriginal community.

Once hired, retention of Aboriginals presents another set of challenges. The Conference Board survey of Canadian businesses found that employers are experiencing problems with Aboriginal absenteeism, productivity levels and quality of work. Employers also have difficulty retaining Aboriginals because they offer limited career advancement opportunities to younger workers, and they lose qualified and skilled Aboriginals to competitors. Another reason retention rates are low is that employers fail to provide ongoing training and development, an issue closely connected to career planning.

### Developing Success Strategies

Employers are using a variety of approaches to increase their Aboriginal workforce population. Some companies have employed someone who has knowledge of and expertise in Aboriginal relations.

The Conference Board survey found that 41.1 percent of Canadian employers have an impact benefit agreement in place which requires them to hire Aboriginal workers in certain areas, and some



employers require contractors to employ a certain percentage of Aboriginals or utilize Aboriginal suppliers. Many companies are using advertising, local employment centers, educational institutions, and community organizations to locate qualified Aboriginals.

Surprisingly, more than 31 percent of employers surveyed were not aware of several large government programs for Aboriginal employment and training. ASETS programs, the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP) programs, the Aboriginal Human Resource Council, and the Skills and Partnership Fund are important resources.

Businesses can make major inroads into engaging, employing and training Aboriginals by utilizing the resources already in place.

Taking advantage of Aboriginal training programs is one side of the equation. Employers should also offer cross-cultural training to its managers and employees. Creating an Aboriginal-friendly workplace, coupled with learning and development opportunities, is a best practice for improving the engagement and retention of Aboriginal workers. An Aboriginal-friendly workplace allows workers to participate in traditional community activities, for example. Cultural sensitivity training, culturally trained support staff, mentorship programs, and career bridging programs are tools and strategies forward-looking companies have put in place.

Employers should also build relationships with Aboriginal communities. Overcoming the challenges of attracting, hiring and retaining Aboriginals is not possible unless all stakeholders concerned with the success of Canada are involved – government, nonprofits, Aboriginal communities and employers. The right alliances will bring the fastest results

Though establishing policies is important, they do not guarantee progress.