

# Issue in Focus

---

August 2015

## “Let’s Try That Twice”: Strategies for Aboriginal Engagement and Retention

**Core Issue:** There is a labour shortage in Saskatchewan at the same time as there are many underemployed or unemployed Aboriginal people. This paradox is reflective of the separation between opportunity and reality. There are many great examples of businesses who have hired Aboriginal people, resulting in long-term productive employees for the business and positive careers for the individuals. Unfortunately, some businesses and individuals have experienced negative work connections.

When asked about hiring Aboriginal workers some of these business people now say, “We tried that once and it didn’t work out.” It is time businesses and workers agree that we all try again. The Saskatchewan Chamber is encouraging businesses to “try that twice” – or more, if required. Only through committed effort by business and individuals will we see results.

The Saskatchewan Chamber has gathered input from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people for this document, to provide information to help both employers and workers enhance their relationship. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, nor will it reflect the full experiences of the entire Saskatchewan business community, but it is a positive step forward.

### **The Foundation - An Understanding of Each Other**

The understanding of the challenges some Aboriginal communities face is well beyond the experience of most non-Aboriginal people. While many people may think they can imagine, in truth they cannot. Even for people who have faced significant and complex issues in their lives, no one can really understand what another person has experienced or how it affects them.

Aboriginal communities with very close family ties are different than most other cultures. Living with extended family members and ‘customary adoptions’ are common, if not unique, to the Aboriginal community.

While there is no need to be overly sensitive to Aboriginal people, it is important to know their histories, traditions and culture are different in many ways from others. Knowledge and willingness to learn will serve everyone well, and offer the ability to successfully share in a rewarding employment relationship.

Some points about potential First Nation and Aboriginal employees:

- They may have a strong sense of family, including the extended family concept;
- It is customary to engage in different bereavement processes, wakes, or other services prior to funerals;
- They may come from remote communities, and so travel home takes longer;
- They may be seeking their first job;
- They may have achieved a lower level of completed education.

### **Early Steps in the Engagement Process**

- It is advisable to provide cultural awareness training to all existing staff so that no issues arise out of ignorance. These can be easily provided by various agencies and done via webinar, seminar or video sessions.
- Provide clear expectations of the new worker in writing. Outline expectations of punctuality, dress, conduct and ramifications of not adhering to the expectations. Speak with new employees about their expectations of the job; you can clarify what flexibilities the position does offer and can avoid future disappointments for both parties. Make no assumptions around dress code/safety gear, and don't assume the employee will have easy or quick access to these items.
- It is advisable to check in with the new employee often during their first few weeks to identify any challenges that may have come up. Like anyone who starts a new job and possibly moves into a new place, there are hiccups and challenges. It can also be lonely for the person who may have moved away from a close knit family and not yet made new connections in the new location.
- Discuss with the worker their accommodation, childcare, and transportation situation. The purpose of this is to determine if consistent access to transportation is available and if not, what alternative arrangements can be made.
- Do not give any one worker or group of workers special leeway as it may cause other employees to feel they are being treated unfairly. However if one staff person is having short term issues with their car or their babysitter, or has challenges with their living arrangement, it makes sense to respect and support them.
- Connecting a current employee to work with the new person as a job coach or 'buddy' is a great way to ensure they have someone to lean on when starting out. Ask this person respectfully and make sure to ask them - not tell them – to do this role, so as to ensure both employees are comfortable and that they will fully embrace the work relationship.
- Creating a training plan for the person will paint a picture of how their skills will be enhanced. Their value to the company will increase, and their personal confidence in the

new role will be elevated.

- Review your company's wellness plan, looking at ways to incorporate flexibilities which would support some of the uniqueness that stems from First Nations culture. Some First Nation workers may prefer or be more comfortable using traditional supports such as access to Elders, Sweats, etc. to pursue their journey to wellness and balance. Create access to traditional wellness supports to complement the existing wellness supports offered. The more defined and comprehensive your wellness strategies are, the better your company can work through challenges, including more complex issues should they arise.
- In today's world of busy times, with increasing demands both in the workplace and at home, employees are continually taxed with increased demands and stress. It is very important for employers to offer wellness supports, utilizing outside professionals or Elders if preferred by Aboriginal employees. Such supports will make a huge difference to a person's career and, in some cases, their life. Ensure all employees know how to access these services easily.
- Be creative in businesses where it is possible to job share. It may be possible to have two people do one job, even if it means they may be in on the same day in some cases. This allows for a longer and perhaps smoother transition into full time positions for people without long work histories.

## **Recruitment**

If an individual needs to drop a child off at 8:30 a.m. for childcare, then catches a bus that will get them to work at 9:03 a.m. it makes sense to schedule their start time at 9:15 a.m. instead of 9:00 a.m. They can make up the time with a shorter lunch hour. That way they are not "always late" and it provides enough flexibility to make everyone more comfortable.

There are many places to recruit workers of any background, and to attract Aboriginal workers is no different. In most cases it will serve the business and the hiring process well by taking time to develop a relationship with the agencies you are dealing with when seeking prospective employees. These include tribal council offices and band employment agencies. Some other great resources include:

- Schools and training facilities:
  - Contact local area or provincial facilities to ask about training programs for workers like those you need, and for workers who have undertaken skill enhancement programs. Be as clear as possible on what skills and aptitudes you are looking for.
  - Many of these short courses offer students for practicum placement, which is a great way for both parties to get to know each other.
- Casinos and/or Aboriginal organizations:

- While on-reserve casinos can offer higher wages and tax advantages for treaty persons, there are many people within those organizations who want to work in other sectors and may be seeking less shift work, etc.
- Aboriginal governance agencies may also have people who are looking for new opportunities or whose term positions are ending.
- Most organizations have many applicants each year, so from within that pool there may be good candidates for your business.

The simple fact that these organizations have hundreds of fully engaged, working Aboriginal people makes them a great source of candidates or to offer referrals. The key is to speak to them first and explain your needs, rather than poaching staff.

### **What is Needed for SME Expansion of Aboriginal Workers?**

- An easily accessible awareness program and general information for SME to use.
- A process where job coaches could be made available within a community to link people with opportunities and to mentor the worker in the first year of work. This could be a great local chamber project.

### **Current options for information for small and medium sized enterprises (SME):**

- Aboriginal Human Resource Council website has great content and many program overviews, including the 'Inclusion Classroom' concept: [www.aboriginalhr.ca](http://www.aboriginalhr.ca)
- Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council provides "Ready to Work" training in several tourism/service sector occupations: [www.stec.com/ready-to-work](http://www.stec.com/ready-to-work)
- Saskatchewan School Board Association website has online webinars of John Lagimodiere presentations on Aboriginal awareness: [www.saskschoolboards.ca](http://www.saskschoolboards.ca)

Most tribal councils have employment programs, as do several of the larger bands, and they are also great contacts. One consideration of going onto a First Nation is that without ensuring there is training taking place there, you may be getting someone who is not yet 'work ready.'

Finding a new person who has proven their desire and ability to commit to training will increase their longevity in the new job. For someone who has not taken training recently or has not had job for some time, the transition to a new job may not be easy.

The future success of Saskatchewan business will depend on engaging Aboriginal people within the work place. It is important for business, for the people, and for the health of the province overall.

## **General Observations**

- Banks, government and northern mining are well engaged, as are some retail and service industry businesses in Prince Albert and across the north.

- There are not enough 'work ready' Aboriginal people to fill all the available jobs. Most Aboriginal people with degrees are employed, as are many people who have taken diploma programs.

- Many employers seeking Aboriginal workers find it a challenge to hire as many Aboriginal people as they have jobs available. This is a reflection of the low number of people in the 'work ready' pool and the social challenges that face some people no matter what their skill level. This can leave human resource people with two options: changing their focus from recruitment of Aboriginal workers to retention of existing, or looking to provide essential skills training and supports for employees working through the challenges of their first job.

**To contact First Nations employment agencies, or for more information on Tribal Councils and First Nations visit [www.FSIN.com](http://www.FSIN.com).**

**First Nations Jobs Online is an online recruitment platform which matches employment opportunities with a pool of qualified talent: [www.firstnationsjobsonline.com](http://www.firstnationsjobsonline.com).**

*Disclaimer: This document was created by the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce to aid businesses in beginning to enhance their First Nations-friendly business climate; it is not to be considered an exhaustive list of efforts to that purpose.*