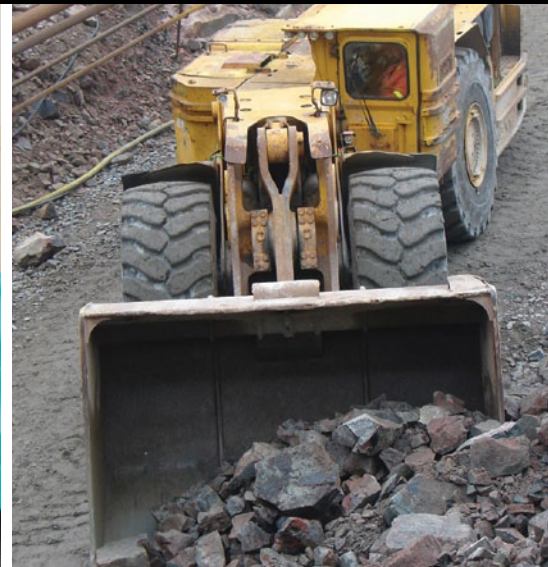
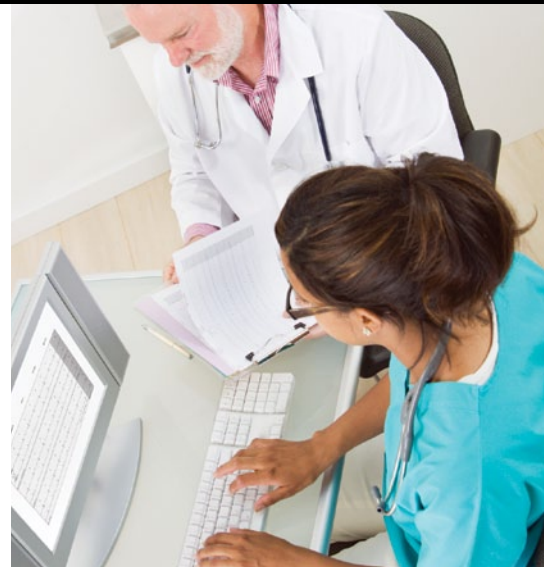




Report July 2012



# Understanding the Value, Challenges, and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit, and First Nations Workers



Understanding the Value, Challenges, and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit, and First Nations Workers  
by *Alison Howard, Jessica Edge, and Douglas Watt*

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## Preface

This report analyzes the challenges and opportunities employers encounter when engaging Aboriginal workers in Canada. A survey was conducted with Canadian businesses about their engagement with Aboriginal workers, and interviews were held with businesses, industry associations, and Aboriginal employment organizations. The report provides recommendations on the steps that employers, Aboriginal organizations, and policy-makers can take to help improve the labour market participation of Aboriginal workers.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Understanding the Value, Challenges, and Opportunities of Engaging Métis, Inuit, and First Nations Workers

### At a Glance

- ◆ Canada's Aboriginal population is the fastest-growing population cohort in Canada and has a key role to play in helping the country to meet its future labour market needs. However, the labour market participation of the Aboriginal population lags behind that of the non-Aboriginal population.
- ◆ While many Canadian businesses would like to engage with Aboriginal workers, they face challenges attracting, hiring, and retaining Aboriginal workers.
- ◆ Businesses that successfully hire and retain Aboriginal workers experience a variety of benefits, which extend beyond finding qualified workers.
- ◆ Strategies that can help improve the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Aboriginal workers include improvement in the educational outcomes of the Aboriginal population; promotion of better understanding of the Aboriginal population among the non-Aboriginal population; simplification of points of contact between Aboriginal organizations and employers; and increased opportunities for the sharing of best practices among Aboriginal employment organizations.

In the years ahead, Canada faces the challenge of not having enough workers with the right skills to meet its labour needs. Canada's Aboriginal population is the fastest-growing population cohort in Canada, and could play a significant role in helping the country meet its labour market needs. However, the labour market participation of Canada's Aboriginal population lags behind that of the non-Aboriginal population. This report analyzes the challenges and opportunities employers encounter when engaging Aboriginal workers. A survey was conducted with Canadian businesses about their engagement with Aboriginal workers, and interviews were held with businesses, industry associations, and Aboriginal employment organizations. The report provides recommendations on the steps that employers, Aboriginal organizations, and policy-makers can take to help improve the labour market participation of Aboriginal workers.

### CHALLENGES ENGAGING ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Many Canadian businesses feel it is important to engage Aboriginal workers, and have taken steps to do so. However, some Canadian businesses also experience difficulties in attracting Aboriginal workers. They face challenges when seeking to attract qualified Aboriginal job applicants, as well as when hiring Aboriginal workers. Businesses that successfully attract and hire Aboriginal workers may then experience challenges with work performance and retention.

The educational attainment of Canada's Aboriginal population lags behind its non-Aboriginal population—a lack of qualifications, skills, education, and work experience are the most significant issues employers face when attracting and hiring Aboriginal workers. Challenges reaching out to potential Aboriginal workers and worker reluctance to move away from home communities for work also impede the successful recruitment of Aboriginal workers. The most common work performance issues that employers experience with Aboriginal workers relate to the skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed for the workplace. The most significant issues employers face in retaining Aboriginal workers are dissatisfaction with career and skills development and cultural issues (e.g., racism and misunderstandings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers).

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCCESSFUL ENGAGEMENT OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Canadian employers use a variety of tools and strategies to recruit Aboriginal workers, including advertising; local employment centres; educational institutions; community organizations; band or treaty organizations; internships or job placement programs; and Aboriginal labour market development organizations. Many businesses that actively recruit Aboriginal workers also have strategies in place to ensure the retention of these workers: Aboriginal-friendly workplace programs and/or policies; learning and development opportunities; competitive compensation and benefits; providing time for Aboriginal workers to participate in seasonal or traditional activities; and mentorship programs.

Those businesses that successfully employ Aboriginal workers experience a variety of benefits that go beyond simply finding qualified staff, such as:

- ◆ Aboriginal workers acting as role models in their communities;
- ◆ better relationships and integration with the local community; and
- ◆ improved employee equity and inclusion, and economic benefits to the community.

## STRATEGIES FOR ACTION

This report identifies the following strategies to improve the labour market outcomes of Aboriginal workers in Canada:

- ◆ Consistently poor educational outcomes and a lack of work experience are significant impediments to Aboriginal Peoples' success in the workforce—therefore, efforts to increase both secondary and post-secondary educational attainment among the Aboriginal population are called for.
- ◆ Aboriginal employment organizations (e.g., Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy [ASETS] Agreement Holders) have limited opportunities to share best practices and learn from one another. Increasing opportunities for them to share knowledge and information would enhance their ability to assist Aboriginal workers.
- ◆ Some employers have difficulty engaging Aboriginal workers because of the complex web of Aboriginal organization networks that exist in Canada—better coordination of information and services among Aboriginal organizations could make it easier for employers to engage Aboriginal workers.
- ◆ Cultural awareness programs can help to overcome racism and misunderstandings in the workplace. Positive stories about Aboriginal people generated by the media, governments, and industry can help to create better cultural understandings outside the workplace.

Canada's Aboriginal population can play an important role in helping businesses meet their current and future human resources requirements. This report acts as a starting point for creating a greater understanding of how to address the labour market integration challenges facing Aboriginal workers in Canada.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Role of Aboriginal Workers in the Canadian Economy

### Chapter Summary

- ◆ In the years ahead, Canada faces the challenge of not having enough workers with the right skills and experience to meet its labour needs. Canada's Aboriginal population is the fastest-growing population cohort in Canada, and can help the country meet its future labour market needs.
- ◆ The labour market participation of Aboriginal people in Canada lags behind that of the non-Aboriginal population.
- ◆ Several factors affect the labour market participation of Aboriginal people: their geographic location; lower educational attainment; and language and cultural issues.

Canada's economic development and ongoing prosperity depends on having a strong and skilled workforce.<sup>1</sup> In the coming years, however, Canada is unlikely to have enough workers with the right skills to meet its labour needs.<sup>2</sup> Falling fertility rates and longer lifespans are aging Canada's workforce at an accelerating rate.<sup>3</sup> The result is not enough younger workers to replace those who are retiring. Further, many

businesses are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and hire qualified workers. This is particularly true in areas with small populations but high demand for skills, such as in Western and Northern Canada where primary industries such as oil and gas, and mineral extraction are flourishing.<sup>4</sup>

Previous research from The Conference Board of Canada concludes that "the now-imminent prospect of declining workforce growth represents a real threat and limit to our future well-being unless there are significant improvements in productivity and increasing technological innovation."<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of potential solutions to address Canada's looming labour shortage:<sup>6</sup>

- ◆ Raise the rate of natural population increase.
- ◆ Increase immigration.
- ◆ Increase the number of mature workers engaged in the workforce.

Demographic projections indicate that future population and labour force growth in Canada will come from international net migration as opposed to natural increases.<sup>7</sup> However, there are important domestic sources of under-represented populations that can contribute to Canada's

1 Martin, *Building Labour Force Capacity*, 1.

2 Hodgson and Shannon, *Mission Possible*, 67.

3 *Ibid.*, 67.

4 Knight, "Petroleum"; Martin, *Building Labour Force Capacity*, 2–3.

5 Shepherdson, *Industrial Relations Outlook 2012*, 8.

6 Hodgson and Shannon, *Mission Possible*, 67–68.

7 Statistics Canada, *Canada Year Book*, 352.

current and future labour challenges, including Aboriginal Peoples, women, disengaged youth, and people with disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

This report focuses on the contribution that Aboriginal Peoples—including Métis, Inuit, and First Nations populations—can make to Canada’s ongoing competitiveness and performance. Through a review of literature and data; telephone interviews with key industry, education, and Aboriginal stakeholders; and a survey of employers, this report explores the extent to which Métis, Inuit, and First Nations can help meet Canada’s current and future labour market and skills needs.

It also identifies the key challenges and impediments that businesses face when recruiting, hiring, and retaining Aboriginal workers. Finally, this report looks at what more can be done by businesses, governments, education providers, and Aboriginal communities to better support and sustain the meaningful integration of Aboriginal people into the workforce and to optimize the contribution they can make to the Canadian, regional, and local economy.

## MÉTIS, INUIT, AND FIRST NATIONS WORKERS: INTEGRAL TO CANADA’S ONGOING COMPETITIVENESS AND PERFORMANCE

The Aboriginal population is one of the fastest-growing populations in Canada, yet Aboriginal people remain significantly under-represented within Canada’s labour force. According to the Aboriginal Human Resource Council, Aboriginal people are not always seen as a solution to filling labour force gaps.<sup>9</sup> The Council points out that “Aboriginal people want to work, they want to contribute, they want to be financially independent, and they need opportunity.”<sup>10</sup> The challenge is to raise awareness among employers of the social and business cases for creating opportunities to involve more Aboriginal people in the labour force.

8 Hodgson, “Aboriginal Workers Can Support.”

9 Crawshaw, “Aboriginals Can’t Sustain.”

10 Ibid.

Increasing the participation of the Aboriginal population in the Canadian labour force will take time. It will require an array of policies, programs, and practices that encourage and promote education, skills development, communications and respect, cultural awareness, and labour force attachment. It will require the Aboriginal population to be aware of the need to develop the right mix of skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed to succeed in different occupations, industries, and sectors across the country.

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### The Aboriginal population is one of the fastest-growing populations in Canada, yet Aboriginal people remain significantly under-represented within Canada’s labour force.

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It also requires employers to be more aware of their skills needs, and to articulate these needs to educators, communities, and employment and training stakeholders. The Conference Board’s 2011 report *Building Labour Force Capacity in Canada’s North* notes that “businesses must commit to learning the culture, goals, history, and experiences of their Aboriginal and Northern workforce.”<sup>11</sup> It further points out that “Northerners [and Aboriginal people] must also learn the business culture of their employers and understand the organization’s goals.”<sup>12</sup>

## ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN CANADA: AN UNDERUTILIZED LABOUR FORCE

As one of the fastest growing populations in Canada, Aboriginal people are a particularly rich source of potential workers. (See box “Census Findings for Aboriginal Populations.”) The Aboriginal population is also significantly younger than the non-Aboriginal population, due to its higher fertility rate. For example, in 2006, 39.8 per cent of the Aboriginal population in Canada was under the age of 20, compared with 24.1 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population.<sup>13</sup> In 2006, the median age of

11 Martin, *Building Labour Force Capacity*, ii.

12 Ibid.

13 Sharpe and others, *The Effect*, 12.



### Census Findings for Aboriginal Populations

In the 2006 Census of Canada, 1,172,790 people identified themselves as Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis, or Inuit) accounting for 3.8 per cent of the total Canadian population. Of those individuals who indicated they were Aboriginal, 50,485 (almost 4 per cent) were Inuit; 389,785 (about 30 per cent) were Métis, and 698,025 (about 59 per cent) were First Nations.<sup>1</sup> Registered Indian status was indicated by 623,780 people.<sup>2</sup>

According to the 2006 Census, between 1996 and 2006 the Aboriginal population grew by 45 per cent, while the non-Aboriginal population grew by 8 per cent.<sup>3</sup> The number of First Nations people grew at a rate of 29 per cent and the number of Inuit grew at a rate of 26 per cent. The number of people identifying as Métis increased by 91 per cent during the same period.<sup>4</sup> The significant increase in the number of Métis is due to both higher birth rates and an increased willingness of individuals to self-identify as Métis on the census.<sup>5</sup>

- 1 Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*. Numbers do not add to 100 per cent due to the exclusion of those individuals who indicated more than one type of Aboriginal identity.
- 2 Statistics Canada, *2006 Aboriginal Population Profile*.
- 3 Some Indian reserves do not participate in the census. In 2006, there were 22 incompletely enumerated reserves. The impact of incomplete enumeration of reserves on data is greatest for those individuals with Registered Indian status.
- 4 Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*.
- 5 Gionet, *Métis in Canada*.

the non-Aboriginal population was 40 years.<sup>14</sup> The median age of Inuit was 22 years, the median age of First Nations was 25 years, and the median age of Métis was 30 years. Further, between 2001 and 2026, more than 600,000 Aboriginal youth are expected to enter the labour market.<sup>15</sup> The implication for Canadian businesses is a potential domestic solution to labour and skills shortages.

14 Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*; Gionet, *Inuit in Canada*; Gionet, *Métis in Canada*.

15 Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, *Fact Sheet*.

## KEY FACTORS AFFECTING ABORIGINAL PEOPLES' LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION

A number of factors impact the degree to which Aboriginal workers in Canada participate in the labour market. Some of these factors limit Aboriginal workers' ability to take advantage of meaningful employment opportunities, while others create barriers for employers to finding and recruiting Aboriginal workers. These include where the Aboriginal population in Canada is located, educational levels, and language and cultural issues.

### LOCATION OF CANADA'S ABORIGINAL POPULATION

The Aboriginal population of Canada is more concentrated in the North, the Western provinces, and rural and remote locations than the non-Aboriginal population.<sup>16</sup> The 2006 Census found the Aboriginal population was most highly concentrated in the territories, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.<sup>17</sup> (See Table 1.) With the exception of Nunavut, the Aboriginal population in all provinces and territories is composed primarily of First Nations and Métis. The majority of the Aboriginal population in Nunavut is Inuit.<sup>18</sup> In 2006, 81 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population in Canada lived in urban areas, while 53.2 per cent of the Aboriginal population lived in urban areas (excluding urban reserves). At the same time, 26.3 per cent of Aboriginal people lived on reserves.<sup>19</sup>

Access to employment opportunities for Aboriginal workers living in remote, rural, or non-urban areas is generally limited to industries and organizations with local operations close to Aboriginal communities.

### EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN CANADA

The Aboriginal population in Canada has lower levels of educational attainment than non-Aboriginal people. The 2006 Census found that 15 per cent of the non-Aboriginal

16 Sharpe and others, *The Effect*, 8.

17 *Ibid.*, 10.

18 *Ibid.*, 11–12.

19 *Ibid.*, 8.

**Table 1**  
Aboriginal Population by Province and Territory, 2006

Province or Territory	Aboriginal Population	Per Cent of Overall Population	Per Cent of Aboriginal Population
Canada	1,172,790	3.8	100.0
Newfoundland and Labrador	23,450	4.7	1.9
Prince Edward Island	1,730	1.3	0.1
Nova Scotia	24,175	2.7	2.1
New Brunswick	17,655	2.5	1.5
Quebec	108,430	1.5	9.2
Ontario	242,495	2.0	20.7
Manitoba	175,395	15.5	15.0
Saskatchewan	141,890	14.9	12.1
Alberta	188,365	5.8	16.1
British Columbia	196,075	4.8	16.7
Yukon Territory	7,580	25.1	0.6
Northwest Territories	20,635	50.3	1.8
Nunavut	24,920	85.0	2.1

Source: Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, 2009.

population aged 25 to 64 had not completed high school or obtained another diploma or certificate, compared with 34 per cent of the Aboriginal population. (See Chart 1.)

Aboriginal rates of post-secondary educational attainment also lag behind those of non-Aboriginal people in Canada. The 2006 Census found that 61 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population had completed a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree, compared with 44 per cent of the Aboriginal population.<sup>20</sup>

The lower educational attainment of Canada's Aboriginal population can be attributed to a number of factors: generally lower socio-economic and health outcomes, more limited access to schools and culturally appropriate curriculum, and the continuing impacts of

residential schools.<sup>21</sup> Lower levels of education negatively affect Aboriginal workers' employability and chances for promotion. Jobs with entry requirements for educational levels, such as high school completion or a post-secondary credential, become unavailable for Aboriginal workers without those qualifications. Similarly, Aboriginal workers without the necessary educational qualifications may be cut out of opportunities for promotion or higher levels of responsibility within an organization. Employers are left with fewer candidates in the applicant pool for job openings and must look elsewhere for workers with the required education.

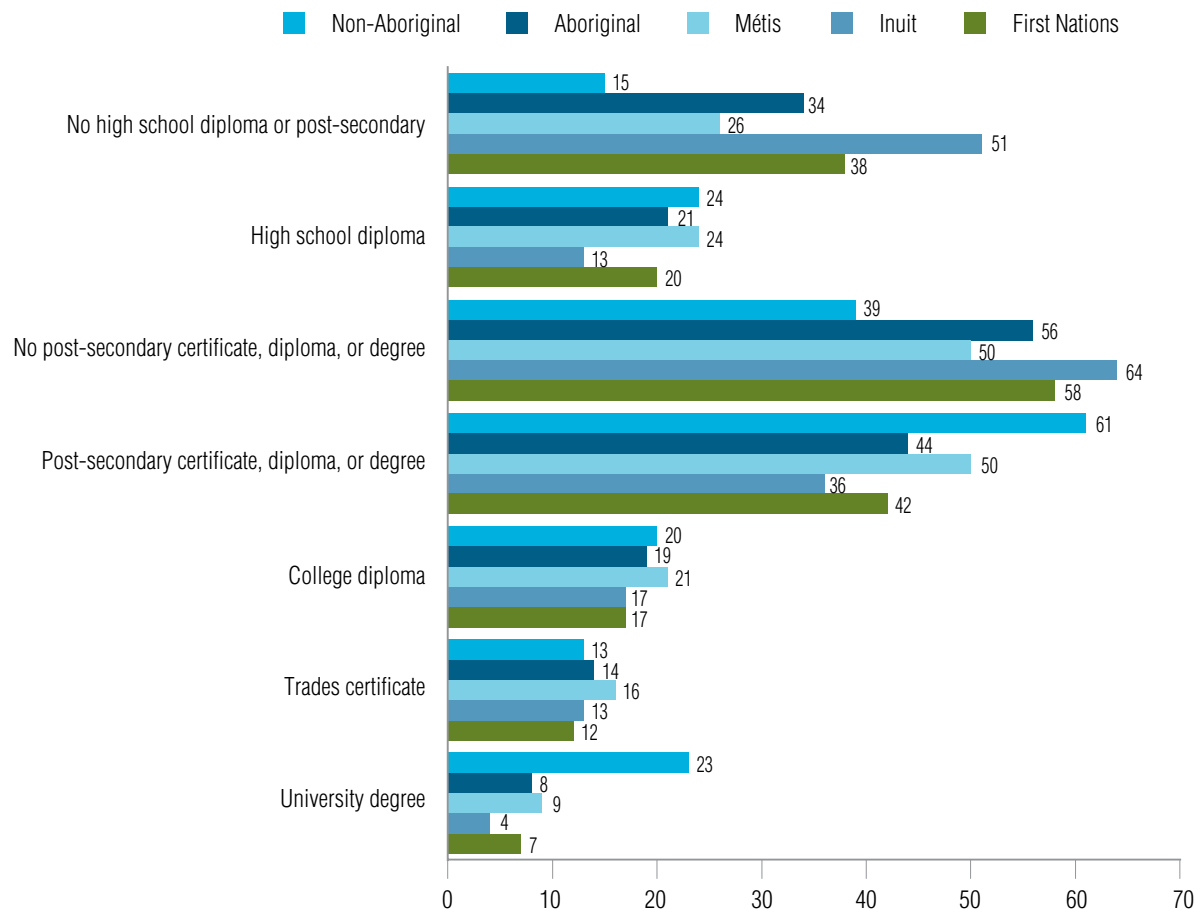
#### LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Aboriginal workers in Canada face a variety of barriers to successful integration in the workforce. Lack of appropriate literacy and language skills is often a key barrier preventing Aboriginal workers from achieving their

20 Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Educational Portrait of Canada*.

21 Sisco and others, *Lessons Learned*, 15.

**Chart 1**  
Canadian Population by Highest Level of Educational Attainment (aged 25 to 64)  
(per cent)



Sources: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Indicators of Well-Being in Canada*, 2011; Statistics Canada, *2006 Canadian Census*, 2009.

workforce potential. Aboriginal workers are often unable to overcome the literacy barrier and develop their skills to “job standard” levels without assistance (i.e., workplace standards of at least International Adult Literacy Survey [IALS] Level 3).<sup>22</sup> Here, literacy skills include three key elements:

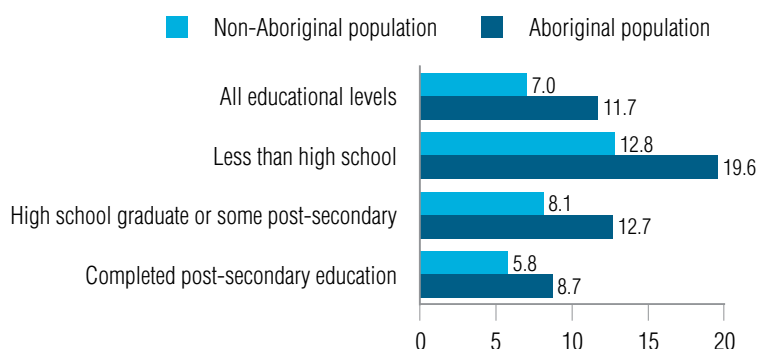
- ♦ proficiency in using documents, reading text, and solving problems;
- ♦ doing these things in the languages in which business is conducted in Canada; and
- ♦ demonstrating such skills against the backdrop of Canadian workplace culture.

Racism is also a challenge facing Aboriginal workers in Canada. While most of the data on racism and Aboriginal people in Canada are anecdotal, a 2009 report by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health found that 37.9 per cent of First Nations adults living on reserves had experienced racism in the last 12 months, and 27 per cent who experienced racism said it had some or a strong effect on their self-esteem.<sup>23</sup>

22 OECD and Statistics Canada, *Literacy in the Information Age*.

23 Reading and Wien, *Health Inequalities*, 23.

**Chart 2**  
Unemployment Rate by Highest Level of Educational Attainment, 2009  
(per cent)



Note: Data exclude people living on reserves or in the territories.  
Sources: Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, 2009; Zietsma 2010.

As such, “racism and its subsequent social exclusion continue to create barriers to Aboriginal participation and productivity in the national economy.”<sup>24</sup> Negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people, as well as a lack of knowledge about Aboriginal people among the non-Aboriginal population can create misunderstandings and conflict in the workplace.<sup>25</sup>

**The 2006 Census found that the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people was 13.2 per cent, compared with 5.2 per cent for non-Aboriginal people.**

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS IN CANADA

In part because of the lower educational attainment of Canada’s Aboriginal population, Aboriginal workers are more likely to be unemployed than non-Aboriginal workers. (See Chart 2.)

24 Ibid., 22.

25 For a more detailed analysis of the current and future labour market performance of the Aboriginal population in Canada, as well as a discussion on labour market policies and programs that support its labour market performance, see the Centre for the Study of Living Standards 2012 report *Aboriginal Labour Market Performance in Canada: 2007–2011*.

The 2006 Census found that the unemployment rate for Aboriginal people was 13.2 per cent, compared with 5.2 per cent for non-Aboriginal people.<sup>26</sup> There were significant differences in the labour force activity of different groups of Aboriginal people. Notably:

- ♦ Inuit had higher unemployment rates (19.0 per cent) than the Aboriginal population as a whole, while Métis had lower unemployment rates (8.4 per cent). The unemployment rate of First Nations was 16.3 per cent.<sup>27</sup>
- ♦ Aboriginal people aged 25 to 54 living on reserves also had lower employment rates (52.1 per cent) and higher unemployment rates (22.9 per cent) than Aboriginal people as a whole and non-Aboriginal people.<sup>28</sup> The relatively high unemployment rate facing Canada’s Aboriginal population cannot be solely attributed to educational attainment. As shown in Chart 2, Aboriginal people are more likely to be unemployed than non-Aboriginal people with the same level of education.<sup>29</sup>
- ♦ Location, language, cultural, or other issues are also likely to factor into the lower unemployment rates for Aboriginal workers, as may the younger average age of Aboriginal workers compared with non-Aboriginal workers.

Canadian businesses have opportunities to tap into the underutilized Aboriginal labour force to fill skill gaps and address labour shortages. It is widely acknowledged that for the Aboriginal population to fully participate in the labour force, general challenges, such as how to raise educational outcomes of the Aboriginal population—especially high school completion rates—need to be addressed. However, global issues of this nature are

26 Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Canada’s Changing Labour Force*. Data from the 2010 Labour Force Survey are not being used because they exclude the territories and therefore do not offer data on the employment activity of much of Canada’s Inuit population.

27 Ibid. In 2011, the labour force participation rate of the Métis population exceeded that of the non-Aboriginal population (66.9 per cent). However, the employment rate (61.4 per cent) and the unemployment rate (9.7 per cent) of the Métis population continue to lag behind the non-Aboriginal population (62.0 per cent and 7.3 per cent, respectively). (See Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2012, for more information.)

28 Statistics Canada, *2006 Census: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*; Sharpe and others, *The Effect*, 19.

29 Sharpe and others, *The Effect*, 24; Zietsma, *Aboriginal People*.

beyond the scope of this report. Instead, it focuses on identifying challenges that employers face today in attracting, hiring, and retaining Aboriginal workers, in addition to any challenges with the work performance of Aboriginal workers.

The positive impacts of employing Aboriginal workers are also explored and potential solutions to the challenges are identified. The solutions found will enable businesses and their employment partners, such as Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy (ASETS) Agreement Holders, to modify or adjust their training and employment programs and strategies to better respond to the labour force challenges facing Canadian industries and businesses. (See box “Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy.”)

### Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy

Through agreements with Aboriginal organizations, ASETS provides federal funding for employment programs and services to help Aboriginal people find and maintain employment. ASETS Agreement Holders design and deliver employment programs to meet the needs of their local Aboriginal population and the local labour market. ASETS Agreement Holders are located throughout Canada.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *ASETS Background*.

## METHODOLOGY

The research for this report involved a multi-faceted methodology:

- ◆ A review of literature focused on general and Aboriginal-specific labour market issues in Canada.
- ◆ Telephone interviews were conducted with different stakeholder groups to identify and discuss any challenges and positive impacts of attracting, hiring, and retaining Aboriginal workers. More than 10 interviews were conducted (including four with business

representatives; five with ASETS representatives, and four with industry associations/sector councils). The interviews were semi-structured, and used a combination of closed and open questions. The questions were customized for each stakeholder group.

- ◆ An online survey asked Canadian businesses to identify their human resources challenges, as well as any challenges they face when attracting, hiring, and retaining Aboriginal workers. Respondents were also asked about any positive impacts of hiring and retaining Aboriginal workers. A combination of closed and open questions were used in the English survey.
- ◆ Invitations to complete the online survey were e-mailed to organizations across Canada between January and March 2012. Survey invitations were e-mailed to individuals in businesses across Canada that were deemed likely to have had involvement with Aboriginal organizations or workers. Survey invitations were also e-mailed to individuals from businesses that met all three of the following parameters: located in either the territories or in the “Northern” and “rural” (i.e., non-urban centres) parts of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia; employed at the management level or above; and working in human resources. These individuals were targeted due to the likelihood that they had experience with Aboriginal workers. Businesses invited to participate in the survey were also encouraged to forward the survey to other businesses. A link to the survey was posted on The Conference Board of Canada’s main website and its Centre for the North website.
- ◆ One hundred and seventy-three organizations responded to the survey. The report’s findings are based on an analysis of top-level frequencies and a number of cross-tabulations by Aboriginal group, industry sector, and location and size of organizations. Given the sample size, results cannot be applied generally to the overall Canadian population or to any one Aboriginal group.

## CHAPTER 2

# Business Engagement of Aboriginal Workers

### Chapter Summary

- ◆ The top human resources challenges of Canadian businesses surveyed are shortages of skilled and qualified workers, difficulties retaining skilled and qualified workers, and the need to replace retiring workers.
- ◆ A significant proportion of businesses surveyed have difficulties attracting under-represented workers, including Métis, Inuit, and First Nations workers.
- ◆ A majority of businesses surveyed feel that it is important to engage with Aboriginal workers, and they have experience in doing so.

Canadian businesses face current and future challenges finding enough qualified workers to meet their needs. The Aboriginal population of Canada, as an underutilized source of labour, could help businesses fill skills and labour gaps. Some Canadian businesses are actively engaged with the Aboriginal population and see Aboriginal workers as a valuable labour source. However, many businesses are not yet aware that hiring Aboriginal workers could potentially solve their human resources needs. Others would like to tap into this labour pool, but are unsure of where to find and how to attract Aboriginal workers.

This chapter discusses Canadian businesses' human resources strategies, along with their current and future human resources challenges. Survey and interview data are examined to determine the extent to which businesses are engaging with Aboriginal workers to address human resources challenges, and the manner in which they engage them.

### HUMAN RESOURCES STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES OF CANADIAN BUSINESSES

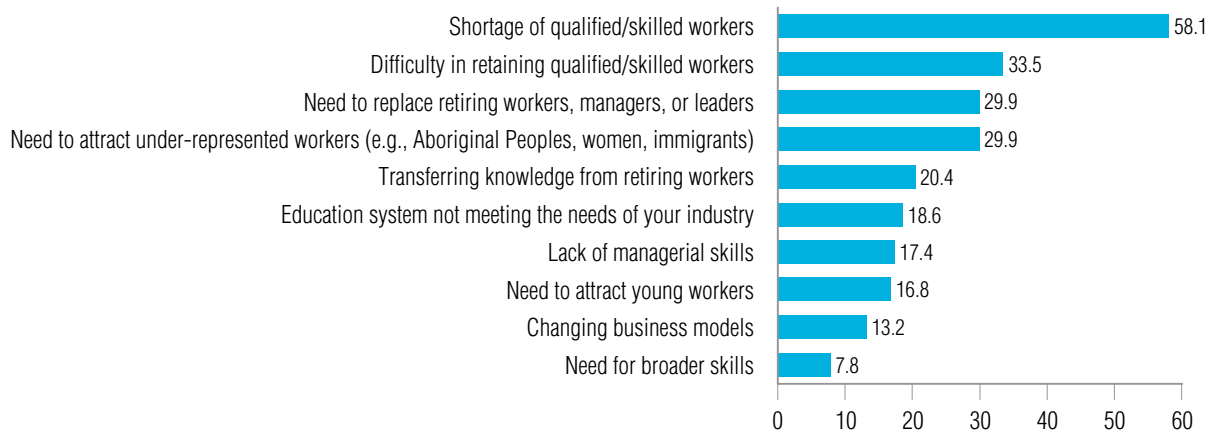
The majority of businesses that responded to the survey (71.8 per cent) indicated they have a human resources strategy for recruiting, retaining, and developing workers (n=170). Most businesses indicated they plan to either maintain (i.e., only replace workers who leave) (43.5 per cent) or increase their staff (42.9 per cent). A small minority of respondents said they plan to decrease the number of workers (8.2 per cent) or are unsure of their hiring intentions (5.3 per cent). The anticipated need for replacement or additional workers points to a future increase in labour shortages.

### ABILITY TO HIRE AND RETAIN SKILLED WORKERS IS CRITICAL FOR SUCCESS

The most common human resources challenge identified was a "shortage of qualified/skilled workers" (58.1 per cent; n=167). (See Chart 3.)

**Chart 3****Top Human Resources Challenges**

(per cent of surveyed businesses facing challenges; n=167)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

- ◆ This skills challenge was particularly pronounced in the health sector (75.0 per cent; n=16), and in Canada's mining (75.0 per cent; n=12), construction (100.0 per cent; n=7), and agriculture and fisheries industries (80.0 per cent; n=5).
- ◆ The shortage of skilled workers was identified more often by businesses operating internationally (72.7 per cent; n=11) and/or in Ontario (76.5 per cent; n=34), the Northwest Territories (72.4 per cent; n=29), Nunavut (90.0 per cent; n=22), and Quebec (90.9 per cent; n=11).
- ◆ Small businesses (71.4 per cent; n=42) and medium-sized businesses (73.8 per cent; n=42) were also more likely to say they face a shortage of qualified or skilled workers than larger businesses.<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ Businesses from the health (62.5 per cent; n=16) and agriculture and fisheries industries (60.0 per cent; n=5) were more likely to indicate this challenge than other industry sectors.
- ◆ This challenge was also more frequently expressed by respondents from Nunavut (45.5 per cent; n=22) and Manitoba (52.4 per cent; n=21), as well as by medium-sized businesses (73.8 per cent; n=42).

#### ABILITY TO REPLACE RETIRING WORKERS IS KEY TO BUSINESS COMPETITIVENESS

The need to replace retiring staff is a particularly important issue for business respondents (29.9 per cent), especially in the public administration sector (52.6 per cent; n=19) and utilities industries (50.0 per cent; n=8). (See Chart 3.)

The second-biggest challenge facing Canadian businesses was the "difficulty in retaining qualified/skilled workers" (33.5 per cent; n=167). (See Chart 3.)

- ◆ Businesses that operate nationally (40.9 per cent; n=22) and/or in Alberta (48.0 per cent; n=25) and Saskatchewan (40.0 per cent; n=25) were particularly concerned about replacing retiring workers.
- ◆ Large businesses were more likely to articulate this concern (52.9 per cent; n=34) compared with small and medium-sized employers.

<sup>1</sup> Micro-sized businesses—1 to 10 full-time employees; small businesses—11 to 100 full-time employees; medium-sized businesses—101 to 500 full-time employees; large businesses—over 500 full-time employees.

- ♦ Related concerns identified by businesses included the challenge of transferring knowledge from retiring workers (20.4 per cent) to younger workers and a lack of managerial skills (17.4 per cent) (n=167).

### EDUCATION MATTERS

A minority of survey participants (18.6 per cent) indicated that the education system does not meet the needs of their industry (n=167). (See Chart 3.) Educational challenges were of particular concern to business respondents from the territories.

- ♦ The education system was seen as an issue by 27.6 per cent of survey participants from the Northwest Territories (n=29) and 45.5 per cent of those from Nunavut (n=22).
- ♦ Educational challenges for businesses in Northern, remote, and rural areas are consistent with the lower educational attainment of Aboriginal populations.

### CHALLENGES ATTRACTING UNDER-REPRESENTED WORKERS

A number of businesses indicated they have challenges attracting under-represented workers (29.9 per cent). (See Chart 3.)

- ♦ Respondents from the health (43.8 per cent; n=16), public administration (42.1 per cent; n=19), and mining industries (41.7 per cent; n=12) placed particular emphasis on this challenge.
- ♦ Large-sized businesses (47.1 per cent; n=34) were more likely to say attracting under-represented workers is a challenge.

However, the labour shortages and skill gaps created by retiring workers represent opportunities for businesses to engage the Aboriginal labour force.

### ATTRACTING YOUNGER WORKERS A GROWING CHALLENGE AND CONCERN

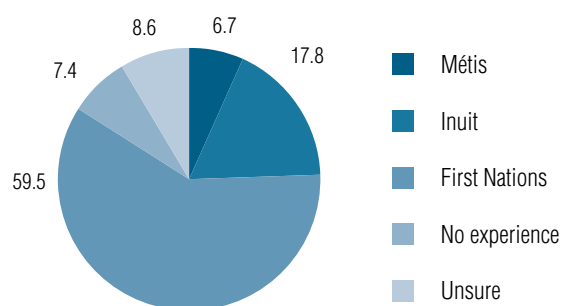
Some respondents also indicated that they face challenges attracting young workers (16.8 per cent; n=167). (See Chart 3.)

- ♦ The issue of attracting young workers was of particular importance among Western businesses—31.6 per cent of survey participants from British Columbia (n=19), 24.0 per cent of those from Alberta (n=25), and 28.0 per cent of those from Saskatchewan (n=25).
- ♦ Businesses in the professional services sector were less likely to identify this as a challenge (8.3 per cent; n=12) compared with other sectors.
- ♦ The findings across different sizes of businesses were consistent with the overall survey results.

## ENGAGING ABORIGINAL GROUPS AND WORKERS

The majority of businesses surveyed have experience engaging with Aboriginal groups. When asked what Aboriginal groups they had the most experience with in the past two years, 6.7 per cent of businesses indicated Métis, 17.8 per cent said Inuit, and 59.5 per cent identified First Nations (n=163). Only 7.4 per cent of respondents did not have experience engaging with Aboriginal groups, and 8.6 per cent were unsure if their business had engaged with Aboriginal groups in the past two years. (See Chart 4.) Businesses that responded to the survey are more likely to engage with Aboriginal groups than are Canadian businesses as a whole. (Survey distribution was predominately targeted at businesses that interact with Aboriginal people.)

**Chart 4**  
Aboriginal Group With Whom Employers Have the Most Experience  
(per cent; n=163)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.



## ENGAGING WITH ABORIGINAL GROUPS AND WORKERS IS THE FIRST STEP

Most of the businesses that responded to the survey believe it is important to engage with Aboriginal workers to tap into the Aboriginal workforce. Of businesses surveyed, 79.1 per cent felt the engagement of Aboriginal workers was either very important or important to their business (n=163). Only 9.8 per cent of respondents felt the engagement of Aboriginal workers was somewhat or not at all important. Those who interact most often with Inuit placed more importance on engaging Aboriginal workers (86.2 per cent said it was either very important or important; n=29) than did businesses that interact most often with other groups.

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### As the Canadian population ages, engaging Aboriginal workers becomes increasingly important to helping businesses solve human resources challenges.

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The majority of businesses surveyed (58.9 per cent) indicated they have a job position that deals with Aboriginal relations (n=158). A significant number of businesses (41.1 per cent; n=158) said they have an agreement or policy that requires them to hire Aboriginal workers (such as an impact benefit agreement). In addition, 31 per cent of respondents said they have a policy or practice that requires contractors to be Aboriginal or to employ Aboriginal workers (n=158).

## AWARENESS OF PROGRAMS TO ASSIST WITH EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS

There are a number of government-funded programs in Canada to assist businesses with finding, employing, and training Aboriginal workers.

Businesses surveyed (n=156) have some awareness of government-funded programs for Aboriginal employment and training. They were most likely to be aware of:

- ◆ ASETS programs (50.6 per cent);
- ◆ ASEP (Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership) programs (46.8 per cent);
- ◆ the Aboriginal Human Resource Council (39.7 per cent); and
- ◆ the Skills and Partnership Fund (18.6 per cent).

Notably, a significant proportion of businesses (31.4 per cent) were not aware of, or have limited knowledge of, any government-funded programs for Aboriginal employment and training, potentially diminishing the effectiveness and reach of these programs.

The proportion of survey respondents who are aware of programs that support Aboriginal employment and training is likely higher than that of the general population of Canadian businesses, as a large number of businesses surveyed had a significant proportion of Aboriginal workers and/or agreements (e.g., impact benefit agreements) to hire Aboriginal workers.

## CONCLUSION

As the Canadian population ages and businesses are faced with the prospect of increasing labour and skills shortages, engaging Aboriginal workers becomes increasingly important to helping businesses solve current and future human resources challenges. The majority of businesses surveyed felt it was important to engage with the Aboriginal population of workers. While most businesses have a desire to engage with Aboriginal workers, many face barriers in doing so. The following chapters explore the challenges Canadian businesses face in attracting, hiring, and retaining Aboriginal workers.

## CHAPTER 3

# Attracting and Hiring Aboriginal Workers

### Chapter Summary

- ◆ Businesses are challenged in their efforts to attract and hire Aboriginal workers. Those who engage most often with Métis populations are less likely to have such challenges, while businesses that engage most often with Inuit populations are more likely to have such challenges.
- ◆ The most significant challenges employers face in attracting and hiring Aboriginal workers are a lack of qualifications, skills, education, and work experience.
- ◆ Difficulties contacting potential Aboriginal workers and worker reluctance to move away from home communities for work are also barriers to the successful recruitment of Aboriginal workers.

**M**any businesses in Canada would like to improve their ability to attract and hire qualified Aboriginal workers, but face challenges or impediments to doing so. The greatest challenges for businesses are due to the inadequate qualifications, skills, education, and work experience of some Aboriginal workers. Difficulties contacting potential Aboriginal workers and worker reluctance to move away from home communities for work are also barriers to the successful recruitment of Aboriginal workers. Using survey and

interview data, this chapter analyzes the challenges Canadian businesses face in attracting and hiring Aboriginal workers.

### BACKGROUND—ABORIGINAL EMPLOYMENT

To provide context for the challenges discussion, this section describes the proportion of Aboriginal workers in the businesses surveyed. Most businesses surveyed (61.8 per cent) track the number of Aboriginal workers (n=157).

- ◆ 51.0 per cent of businesses said 0 to 24 per cent of their workers are Aboriginal.
- ◆ 14.0 per cent indicated that between 25 and 49 per cent of their workers are Aboriginal.
- ◆ 7.0 per cent said between 50 and 74 per cent of their workers are Aboriginal.
- ◆ 14.6 per cent revealed that 75 to 100 per cent of their workers are Aboriginal.
- ◆ Only 7.6 per cent have no Aboriginal workers, while 5.7 per cent are unsure what percentage of their workforce is of Aboriginal descent.

Micro- and small businesses answering the survey tend to have the highest proportion of Aboriginal employees. Twenty per cent of micro-sized businesses (n=40) and 24.4 per cent of small businesses (n=41) have a workforce that is between 76 and 100 per cent Aboriginal. In comparison, only 7.5 per cent of medium-sized businesses (n=40) and 6.5 per cent of large businesses (n=31) have a workforce that is between 76 and 100 per cent

**Table 2**  
Challenges Attracting Potential Aboriginal Workers  
(per cent)

Aboriginal Group*	Not at All	Not Really	Undecided	Somewhat	Very Much
Aboriginal workers (n=153)	21.6	9.8	17.0	35.9	15.7
Métis workers (n=11)	27.3	9.1	27.3	27.3	9.1
Inuit workers (n=28)	10.7	14.3	7.1	39.3	28.6
First Nations workers (n=92)	19.6	10.9	17.4	37.0	15.2

\*with whom employers have the most experience  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Aboriginal. These results may be partly because on-reserve businesses tend to have smaller numbers of employees.

Many of the businesses surveyed have experience employing more than one Aboriginal group; however, the survey focused on the group they have had the most experience with in the past two years. Of those businesses surveyed that employ Aboriginal workers, 41.3 per cent indicated that they employ First Nations workers; 28.6 per cent that they employ Métis workers; and 19.7 per cent that they employ Inuit workers. Only 9.4 per cent of businesses were unsure what Aboriginal groups they employ, and 0.9 per cent indicated they did not employ any Aboriginal groups (n=125).

Minor differences are evident in the industries where Aboriginal Canadians and non-Aboriginal Canadians typically work. Aboriginal workers are more likely to be employed in the following industries: public administration, construction, forestry, fishing, mining, oil and gas, health care, and social assistance. Non-Aboriginal workers are more likely to be found in professional, scientific, and technical services; finance, insurance, real estate and leasing; manufacturing; and retail and wholesale trade.<sup>1</sup>

Like all Canadians in the labour force, Aboriginal workers have a diverse range of skills and experience. However, Aboriginal workers are more likely than non-Aboriginal workers to occupy lower-skilled positions.

Occupations where Aboriginal workers are more likely to be found include trades and transport equipment operators, sales and service occupations, and occupations related to primary industry. Non-Aboriginal workers are more likely than Aboriginal workers to be in management or natural and applied sciences occupations.<sup>2</sup>

## CHALLENGES OF ATTRACTING AND HIRING ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Businesses in Canada differ in the extent to which they face challenges attracting and hiring Aboriginal workers. Survey respondents were asked specifically about the various challenges they had experienced with attracting (i.e., creating awareness of employment opportunities) and hiring (i.e., employing) Aboriginal workers.

### CHALLENGES OF ATTRACTING ABORIGINAL WORKERS

A significant proportion of survey respondents indicated they were very or somewhat challenged (51.6 per cent; n=153) in attracting Aboriginal workers. (See Table 2.) Survey respondents that have the most experience with the Métis population were less likely to be very or somewhat challenged (36.4 per cent; n=11) in attracting Aboriginal workers. Survey respondents that have the most experience with Inuit workers are more likely to say that they were very or somewhat (67.9 per cent; n=28) challenged. The responses of employers that primarily deal with First Nations were consistent with the overall survey results.

1 Usalcas, "Aboriginal People," 18.

2 Ibid., 19–20; Interview findings.

Large businesses surveyed were more likely to have challenges attracting Aboriginal workers—67.8 per cent said they were very or somewhat challenged (n=31). A significant proportion of businesses that operate internationally were somewhat challenged attracting Aboriginal businesses (54.5 per cent), although only 9.1 per cent were very much challenged (n=11). Challenges attracting Aboriginal workers were also more likely to be indicated by businesses operating in Nunavut (72.8 were very or somewhat challenged, and only 4.5 per cent were not challenged; n=22) and in Quebec (72.8 were also very or somewhat challenged; n=11).

### TOP CHALLENGES OF ATTRACTING POTENTIAL ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate the top three challenges faced by their business in attracting potential Aboriginal workers. (See Chart 5.) The top challenges overall were:

- ♦ skill levels of potential workers too low (skill examples: literacy, technical, leadership) (70.2 per cent);
- ♦ lack of work experience (59.6 per cent);
- ♦ worker reluctance to move to job site/away from the community (39.1 per cent);
- ♦ language or cultural issues (20.5 per cent); and

- ♦ inability to communicate or reach out to potential workers in Aboriginal communities (16.6 per cent) (n=151).

Only 6.0 per cent of respondents indicated they were not challenged in attracting Aboriginal workers.

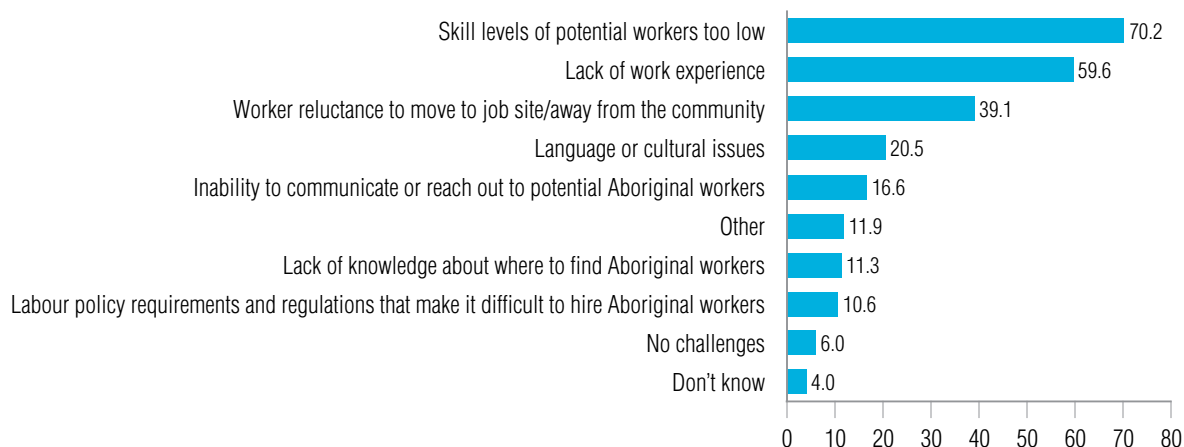
Interestingly, businesses that deal mainly with Métis workers were more likely to say they were not challenged in attracting Aboriginal workers (27.3 per cent; n=11) compared with responding businesses as a whole (6.0 per cent; n=151). Businesses that deal mainly with Inuit workers were more likely to select the following challenges: skill levels of potential workers too low (85.7 per cent), lack of work experience (75.0 per cent), and worker reluctance to move to the job site or away from the community (57.1 per cent) (n=28).

### CHALLENGES OF HIRING ABORIGINAL WORKERS

When asked about the extent to which they face challenges hiring Aboriginal workers, 46.4 per cent of business respondents to the survey indicated they were very or somewhat challenged in hiring Aboriginal workers (n=153). (See Table 3.) Businesses that deal mainly with the Métis population were more likely to say they were not challenged (27.3 per cent; n=11) in hiring Aboriginal

**Chart 5**

Top Challenges in Attracting Aboriginal Workers  
(per cent of businesses surveyed; n=151)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

**Table 3**  
Challenges Hiring Potential Aboriginal Workers  
(per cent)

Aboriginal Group*	Not at All	Not Really	Undecided	Somewhat	Very Much
Aboriginal workers (n=153)	17.6	11.1	24.8	26.8	19.6
Métis workers (n=11)	27.3	0.0	27.3	36.4	9.1
Inuit workers (n=28)	3.6	14.3	17.9	25.0	39.3
First Nations workers (n=92)	15.2	13.0	25.0	27.2	19.6

\*with whom employers have the most experience

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

workers. Businesses that engage most often with the Inuit population were more likely to say they were very challenged (39.3 per cent) in hiring Aboriginal workers, and less likely to say they were not challenged (3.6 per cent) (n=28).

Some industries experience greater challenges hiring Aboriginal workers than others. Respondents from the education sector were most likely to say they face challenges hiring Aboriginal workers—64.3 per cent of respondents said they were very or somewhat challenged and no education respondents indicated they were not challenged (n=14). The mining sector also appears to have a harder time hiring Aboriginal workers—50.0 per cent of mining businesses said they found it very challenging to hire Aboriginal workers, while only 8.3 per cent indicated they were not challenged (n=12). However, businesses from the public administration, professional services, and finance industries were less likely than respondents as a whole to say they were challenged in hiring Aboriginal workers.

Survey results were consistent across different sizes of businesses. However, there were some geographical differences in the extent to which businesses are challenged in hiring Aboriginal workers. Challenges were most significant for those businesses in the Northwest Territories (57.1 per cent said they were very or somewhat challenged; n=28), Nunavut (63.7 per cent were very or somewhat challenged; n=22), and Quebec (63.7 per cent were very or somewhat challenged; n=11).

### TOP CHALLENGES OF HIRING ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Many of the challenges businesses face when hiring Aboriginal workers are similar to those they face when attracting Aboriginal workers. As shown in Chart 6, the top challenges include:

- ◆ lack of qualifications, formal documentation, or certification (57.0 per cent);
- ◆ skill levels of new hires too low (e.g., literacy, technical, leadership) (49.0 per cent);
- ◆ lack of work experience (39.6 per cent);
- ◆ differences in expectations between workers and employer (28.2 per cent); and
- ◆ worker reluctance to move to job site/away from their community (26.8 per cent) (n=149).

A small proportion of businesses indicated they were not challenged in hiring Aboriginal workers (9.4 per cent). Those businesses that interact mostly with the Métis population were less likely to indicate a lack of qualifications, formal documentation, or certification (0.0 per cent), and differences in expectations between workers and employer (0.0 per cent) as challenges (n=11). Employers that interact mostly with First Nations were more likely to say differences in expectations between workers and employers (40.8 per cent; n=87) were a challenge.

### LACK OF QUALIFICATIONS, SKILLS, EDUCATION, AND WORK EXPERIENCE

A lack of qualifications, skills, education, and work experience are the greatest challenges faced by employers in their efforts to attract and hire Aboriginal workers. As discussed in Chapter 1, the educational attainment

**Chart 6****Challenges in Hiring Aboriginal Workers**

(per cent of businesses surveyed; n=149)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

of Canada's Aboriginal population lags behind that of the non-Aboriginal population. Aboriginal adults also have higher levels of unemployment than do non-Aboriginal adults. Aboriginal workers may lack post-secondary education, a high school diploma, or basic educational skills such as literacy and numeracy. Some Aboriginal workers may also lack the basic employability skills needed to succeed in the workforce, such as an understanding of the need to be punctual for work or how to go about applying for a job.<sup>3</sup>

Business participants in the survey most frequently indicated (70.2 per cent; n=149) that low skill levels are a challenge in attracting potential Aboriginal employees. The second most commonly reported challenge (59.6 per cent; n=151) was their lack of work experience. Aboriginal workers with low skill levels and/or a lack of work experience may have difficulty finding jobs, or applying for these jobs, due to their limited qualifications or, in some cases, a lack of confidence. In some cases, employers may have challenges attracting Aboriginal workers for highly skilled positions in their company due to a lack of suitable applicants. The most

commonly cited challenges of hiring Aboriginal workers were also related to a lack of education, skills, and experience: a lack of qualifications, formal documentation, or certification (57.0 per cent); skill levels of new hires being too low (49.0 per cent); and a lack of work experience (39.6 per cent).

In many remote and/or reserve communities, Aboriginal youth may have limited educational opportunities compared with urban youth—high schools may not offer the classes needed to be accepted into post-secondary programs. Math and science classes may be offered only by distance education or online courses, or they may be taught by teachers with limited knowledge of these subjects—this can negatively impact the quality of education Aboriginal students receive.<sup>4</sup> The Conference Board's Centre for the North has noted the impact that significant teacher attrition has on the quality of education in many Northern communities: "The high turnover rates and the transiency of teachers impede the formation of strong and trusting relationships needed to facilitate learning."<sup>5</sup>

3 Interview findings.

4 Interview findings.

5 Sisco and others, *Lessons Learned*, 28.

Aboriginal people living in small, remote communities must generally leave home to attend post-secondary educational institutions (which may be located a significant distance away from home). All students from small, rural communities may face challenges pursuing post-secondary education far from home, especially due to the increased financial cost of doing so. However, pursuing post-secondary education away from home may be especially challenging for Aboriginal individuals because of strong ties between members of Aboriginal families and communities.<sup>6</sup>

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**Some Aboriginal workers may be reluctant to seek employment in companies or industries with historic or current conflicting relationships with Aboriginal communities.**

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The extent to which a lack of work experience is an impediment to Aboriginal workers varies. In some industries, such as the forest products sector, training for a number of positions takes place on the job and may not pose a significant barrier.<sup>7</sup> In other industries, a lack of work experience is a significant obstruction to employment. For example, in the construction sector, an employer may not want to hire a worker with limited experience to work on expensive machinery in case the worker's inexperience leads to errors or damages to the machinery.<sup>8</sup>

**DIFFICULTIES REACHING OUT TO POTENTIAL ABORIGINAL WORKERS**

Some employers have difficulty knowing how and where to reach out to potential Aboriginal workers. Of businesses surveyed, 16.6 per cent indicated they lack the ability to contact potential Aboriginal workers, while 11.3 per cent of respondents pointed to a lack of information about where to find them (n=151). The large number of Aboriginal organizations that exist in Canada acts as a labyrinth of information that is too complex for employers to navigate in their desire to reach out to

potential Aboriginal workers.<sup>9</sup> One ASETS Agreement Holder interviewed stated that employers in their region may have to contact between 10 and 15 different Aboriginal organizations to find and successfully recruit Aboriginal workers.<sup>10</sup>

**LACK OF AWARENESS OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Aboriginal workers may have a more difficult time accessing social and other networks to connect to potential employers. As some Aboriginal communities may not have significant historical experience in the wage economy, some Aboriginal workers may not have connections to family members or friends who can act as a source of information about different career paths and employers and/or help them gain employment in particular industries.<sup>11</sup>

Some Aboriginal workers may also be reluctant to seek employment in companies or industries that have historic or current conflicting relationships with Aboriginal communities.<sup>12</sup> Negative perceptions of some industries may impede the ability of employers to recruit Aboriginal workers. For example, the forest products industry has struggled to recruit both youth and Aboriginal workers because it is often viewed (incorrectly) as a sunset industry with an uncertain future. Young workers will be reluctant to train for a job in an industry that may be perceived as unable to offer long-term career prospects.<sup>13</sup>

**WORKER RELUCTANCE TO RELOCATE**

Many Aboriginal communities are located in rural and/or Northern locations at a significant distance from urban centres. The third most commonly cited challenge by survey respondents in attracting Aboriginal workers was worker reluctance to move away from their community (39.1 per cent; n=151). In addition, reluctance by workers to move away from the community (26.8; n=149) was noted by businesses as a significant challenge when hiring and retaining Aboriginal workers (24.8 per cent;

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6 Interview findings; Sisco and others, *Lessons Learned*, 21.

7 Interview findings.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

n=137). This challenge was also highlighted by a number of the businesses, industry associations, and ASETS Agreement Holders interviewed.

As noted above, the close-knit nature of Aboriginal communities makes some Aboriginal workers reluctant to relocate.<sup>14</sup>As Merrill, Bruce, and Marlin state, “There is a large quantity of evidence that ‘geographical location’ is a barrier to success for students and workers . . .

Many Aboriginal people have a strong desire to find employment in their home communities, reflecting not only their living preferences but also their culture, identity, and tradition.”<sup>15</sup>

Jobs in some sectors, such as mining or oil and gas, may be located in Northern and remote areas, but not close to communities where Aboriginal workers reside. Jobs in these sectors may require workers to live at the job site for an extended period of time (such as two weeks at the job site, two weeks off work). Both Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal workers can have difficulty with these types of work environments that remove them from their families and communities. However, this type of arrangement can also work well for some Aboriginal workers because it allows them longer periods of time between work commitments to pursue traditional activities such as hunting and fishing.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Many businesses are aware of the value and importance to their operations of tapping into the Aboriginal labour force. Potential solutions and remedies for the challenges of lack of qualifications, skills, education, and work experience; difficulties reaching out to potential Aboriginal workers; and worker reluctance to move away from home communities for work are presented in the final two chapters of this report. The next chapter examines additional challenges for businesses, specific to the work performance and retention of Aboriginal workers.

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14 Interview findings.

15 Merrill, Bruce, and Marlin, *Considerations for Successful Transitions*, 39.

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16 Interview findings.



## CHAPTER 4

# Work Performance and Retention of Aboriginal Workers

### Chapter Summary

- ◆ Businesses experience challenges with the work performance of some Aboriginal workers, and with retaining qualified Aboriginal workers. Those who engage most often with Métis populations are less likely to have such challenges, while businesses that engage most often with Inuit populations are more likely to have such challenges.
- ◆ The greatest work performance issues of Aboriginal workers relate to the skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed for the workplace.
- ◆ The most significant challenges employers face in retaining Aboriginal workers relate to dissatisfaction with career and skills development, and cultural issues (e.g., racism and misunderstandings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers).

Once they have overcome the barriers of finding and hiring Aboriginal workers, some businesses experience challenges with the work performance of Aboriginal workers on the job. Further, some businesses have problems retaining their Aboriginal workers. The greatest work performance issues of Aboriginal workers relate to the skills, attitudes, and behaviours needed for the workplace. The most significant barriers for businesses in retaining Aboriginal

workers relate to dissatisfaction with career and skills development, and cultural issues (e.g., racism and misunderstandings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers). Using survey and interview data, this chapter analyzes the challenges Canadian businesses face in the work performance of Aboriginal workers and their ability to retain Aboriginal workers.

### CHALLENGES WITH THE WORK PERFORMANCE AND RETENTION OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Businesses in Canada differ in the extent to which they face challenges with the work performance and retention of Aboriginal workers. Survey respondents were asked specifically about various challenges they had experienced with the work performance and retention of Aboriginal workers.

### CHALLENGES WITH THE WORK PERFORMANCE OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS

A sizable proportion of businesses surveyed indicated they were either very or somewhat challenged (41.9 per cent) by problems with the work performance of Aboriginal workers. (See Table 4.) Businesses that interact mainly with the Métis population have fewer challenges with the work performance of Aboriginal workers (36.0 per cent said they were not challenged, while only 9.1 per cent said they were very much challenged; n=11). Greater challenges with the work performance of Aboriginal workers were experienced by businesses that interact

**Table 4**  
Challenges With Work Performance of Aboriginal Workers  
(per cent)

Aboriginal Group*	Not at All	Not Really	Undecided	Somewhat	Very Much
Aboriginal workers (n=153)	17.0	15.7	25.5	21.6	20.3
Métis workers (n=11)	36.0	9.1	27.3	18.2	9.1
Inuit workers (n=28)	3.6	17.9	17.9	17.9	42.9
First Nations workers (n=92)	13.0	19.6	25.0	25.0	17.4

\*with whom employers have the most experience  
Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

mostly with the Inuit population—only 3.6 per cent indicated they were not challenged with the work performance of Aboriginal workers, while 42.9 per cent said they were very challenged (n=28).

The extent to which employers face challenges with the work performance of Aboriginal workers varies by industry. Businesses from the mining industry were more likely to indicate they have challenges with the work performance of Aboriginal employees—75.0 per cent of respondents indicated they were very or somewhat challenged, and none indicated they were not challenged (n=12). Work performance challenges are also significant in the construction industry, where 57.2 per cent of respondents said they were very or somewhat challenged by the performance of Aboriginal employees and no respondents said they are not really challenged or not challenged at all (n=7). Businesses from the health, professional services, and finance industries were less likely than respondents as a whole to say they have challenges with the performance of Aboriginal workers.

While the extent of challenges with the performance of Aboriginal workers was consistent across different sizes of businesses, there was some variation depending on the location of business operations. Businesses that operate internationally were more likely to indicate challenges with the performance of Aboriginal employees—54.6 per cent said they were very or somewhat challenged, while only 9.1 per cent were not challenged (n=11). Businesses with operations in the following locations also indicated greater challenges with the work performance of

Aboriginal workers: Northwest Territories (57.1 said they were very or somewhat challenged; n=28); Nunavut (77.3 per cent were very or somewhat challenged; n=22); and Quebec (54.6 per cent were very or somewhat challenged; n=11).

#### TOP WORK PERFORMANCE CHALLENGES OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Businesses surveyed shared the top challenges they face with the work performance of Aboriginal workers:

- ♦ absenteeism (44.6 per cent);
- ♦ productivity or performance issues (37.4 per cent);
- ♦ inadequate skills levels for the workplace (e.g., literacy, technical, and leadership) (33.1 per cent);
- ♦ quality-of-work issues (20.9 per cent); and
- ♦ substance abuse issues (19.4 per cent). (See Chart 7.)<sup>1</sup>

However, 19.4 per cent of businesses had no problems with Aboriginal workers' performance (n=139). Substance abuse was less likely to be indicated as a challenge by those businesses that work mainly with the Métis population (0.0 per cent; n=10). Businesses that primarily interact with the Inuit population were more likely to say that quality-of-work issues (36.4 per cent; n=26) were a challenge.

<sup>1</sup> While employers were asked to indicate the work performance challenges they have with Aboriginal workers, this survey does not directly compare challenges with the work performance of Aboriginal workers explicitly to non-Aboriginal workers. A direct comparison of the extent to which employers face challenges with Aboriginal workers compared with non-Aboriginal workers is beyond the scope of this project.

**Chart 7**  
**Top Challenges for Businesses With Work Performance of Aboriginal Workers**  
 (per cent of businesses surveyed; n=149)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

**Table 5**  
**Challenges With Retention of Aboriginal Workers**  
 (per cent)

Aboriginal Group*	Not at All	Not Really	Undecided	Somewhat	Very Much
Aboriginal workers (n=152)	14.5	13.8	26.3	27.0	18.4
Métis workers (n=11)	27.3	0.0	27.3	36.4	9.1
Inuit workers (n=27)	3.7	29.6	18.5	14.8	33.3
First Nations workers (n=92)	9.8	14.1	23.9	32.6	19.6

\*with whom employers have the most experience  
 Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

**CHALLENGES WITH THE RETENTION OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS**

The retention of Aboriginal workers was a significant issue for survey respondents—45.4 per cent indicated they were very or somewhat challenged in retaining Aboriginal workers. (See Table 5.) Retention refers to both voluntary and involuntary employee turnover within a business. The extent to which retention was an issue for businesses varied depending on which Aboriginal group a business had the most experience with:

- ◆ Businesses that deal mainly with the Métis population had fewer challenges retaining Aboriginal workers—27.3 per cent indicated they were not challenged, while only 9.1 per cent indicated they were very challenged (n=11).
- ◆ Businesses that interact mainly with the Inuit population were more likely to say they have challenges retaining Aboriginal workers—33.3 per cent said they were very challenged, while only 3.7 per cent were not challenged (n=27).

- ◆ Businesses that have the most experience with First Nations populations were slightly less likely to indicate they were not challenged (9.8 per cent) in retaining Aboriginal workers and slightly more likely to indicate they were somewhat challenged (32.6 per cent) (n=92).

The extent to which businesses have difficulty retaining Aboriginal workers varies by industry. For example, 71.4 per cent of businesses responding from the education sector indicated they were very or somewhat challenged in retaining Aboriginal workers, and none indicated they were not challenged (n=14). Mining and construction industry participants were also significantly challenged to retain Aboriginal workers: 63.7 per cent of mining businesses (n=11) and 57.2 per cent of construction businesses (n=7) were very or somewhat challenged. Businesses from the professional services, utilities, and finance industries were less likely than respondents as a whole to indicate they have challenges retaining Aboriginal workers.

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**Respondents with operations in Saskatchewan, Nunavut, and Manitoba were more likely to indicate retention challenges with Aboriginal workers.**

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Survey results were consistent across different sizes of businesses, with the exception of large businesses that indicated greater challenges in the retention of Aboriginal workers (64.5 per cent indicated they were very or somewhat challenged; n=31). Businesses that operate internationally were also more likely to have challenges, with 63.7 per cent saying they were very or somewhat challenged (n=11). The extent to which businesses have problems retaining Aboriginal workers also varies depending on the province(s) where they operate. Respondents with operations in the following provinces and/or territories were more likely to indicate retention challenges with Aboriginal workers:

- ◆ Saskatchewan (52 per cent indicated they were very or somewhat challenged; n=25);
- ◆ Nunavut (68.2 per cent were very or somewhat challenged; n=22); and
- ◆ Manitoba (71.4 were very or somewhat challenged; n=21).

**TOP CHALLENGES WITH THE RETENTION OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS**

In their efforts to retain Aboriginal workers, business respondents cited the following challenges most frequently:

- ◆ limited career advancement opportunities (28.5 per cent);
- ◆ hiring of Aboriginal workers by other companies (24.8 per cent);
- ◆ worker reluctance to move to the job site/away from the community (24.8 per cent);
- ◆ lack of ongoing training or development opportunities (23.4 per cent); and
- ◆ inadequate compensation (19.7 per cent).

A number of respondents (18.2 per cent) indicated they had no challenges in retaining Aboriginal workers (n=137). (See Chart 8).

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**Businesses that interact mainly with the Inuit indicated they were more challenged with the retention of Aboriginal workers.**

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Businesses that engage mostly with the Métis population were less likely to say they encounter the following challenges retaining Aboriginal workers: hiring of Aboriginal workers by other companies (0.0 per cent); worker reluctance to move to the job site or away from the community (10.0 per cent); and language or cultural issues (0.0 per cent) (n=10). A further 30.0 per cent of these respondents indicated they were not challenged in retaining Aboriginal workers. Businesses that interact mainly with the Inuit population indicated they were more challenged with the retention of Aboriginal workers than were respondents as a whole—in particular, 42.3 per cent said the lack of ongoing training and development opportunities was a problem (n=26). None of these respondents said they were not challenged in retaining Aboriginal workers.

**EDUCATION AND SKILLS ISSUES**

Although absenteeism scored as the first challenge in Chart 7, three related issues, when considered together, present more significant challenges for business in

**Chart 8**  
**Top Challenges With Retention of Aboriginal Workers**  
 (per cent of businesses surveyed; n=137)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

attracting and hiring Aboriginal workers.<sup>2</sup> In fact, three of the top four work performance challenges cited by business survey participants can be attributed in part to a lack of education and workplace skills limitations among some Aboriginal workers:

- ♦ productivity or performance issues (37.4 per cent);
- ♦ inadequate skill levels for the workplace (e.g., literacy, technical, leadership) (33.1 per cent); and
- ♦ quality-of-work issues (20.9 per cent) (n=139).

### ABSENTEEISM

Absenteeism was the work performance challenge most commonly cited by employers surveyed (44.6 per cent; n=139). Interviewees noted that a key reason for absenteeism with Aboriginal workers is due to a desire by Aboriginal workers to participate in traditional or seasonal activities, such as hunting and fishing. For example, Aboriginal employees may work at a job until hunting season and then leave their job to hunt.<sup>3</sup> Providing time

to participate in seasonal or traditional activities was cited as a work performance challenge by 7.2 per cent of survey respondents (n=139).

The absenteeism of some Aboriginal workers may also be attributable to family and cultural issues. A number of interviewees noted that when there is a death in an Aboriginal community, the entire community may shut down because all members are expected to attend the funeral.<sup>4</sup> If a business employs a significant number of Aboriginal workers from that community, they may see a significant absence in their workforce at such a time. In Aboriginal communities with considerable social issues, funerals may also be more frequent occurrences.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, some Aboriginal workers with limited work experience and few family members with experience in the wage economy may be unfamiliar with how to approach employers regarding an absence or the need to notify employers about an absence due to issues such as death or illness.<sup>6</sup>

2 See Chapter 3 of this report for further discussion of the educational and skills challenges facing Aboriginal workers.

3 Interview findings.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

### LIMITED CAREER ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES— BETTER PROSPECTS ELSEWHERE

Businesses may struggle to retain Aboriginal workers because they are unable to offer adequate career advancement opportunities (28.5 per cent) and/or Aboriginal workers are hired away by other companies (24.8 per cent). Challenges are also experienced due to worker reluctance to move to a job site away from their community (24.8 per cent) (n=137). (See Chart 8.)

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#### **Workplace training opportunities enable Aboriginal workers to move up the ranks and take on new positions and added responsibilities.**

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Also related to limited career development is a lack of ongoing training or development opportunities (23.4 per cent). Workplace training opportunities would enable Aboriginal workers to move up the ranks and take on new positions and added responsibilities. Some interview respondents also emphasized the importance of these issues. At times, Aboriginal workers may be hired into a position created just for an “Aboriginal,” but are then given limited opportunities to gain new skills and/or advance. Some Aboriginal workers become frustrated with this work arrangement and move to another employer that offers greater opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Inadequate compensation was also mentioned by 19.7 per cent of respondents.

### SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND CRIMINAL RECORDS

Substance abuse issues can also impede the work performance of Aboriginal workers—19.4 per cent of businesses surveyed stated substance was an issue (n=139). Some employers require employees to undertake drug tests or criminal record checks. Both interviewees and survey respondents indicated an inability to pass drug tests or a criminal record check as an issue for some Aboriginal workers. Requirements for drug tests or criminal record checks were indicated as a work performance challenge by 8.6 per cent of employers surveyed (n=139).

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7 Ibid.

### LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Cultural issues (i.e., racism and misunderstandings between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workforce) are also an impediment to the successful recruitment and employment of Aboriginal workers. While only 10.1 per cent of businesses surveyed stated language and cultural issues are a challenge when hiring Aboriginal workers (n=149), language and cultural issues were identified as an issue in attracting Aboriginal workers by 20.5 per cent of respondents (n=151) and by 16.1 per cent of respondents in the retention of Aboriginal employees (n=137). Additionally, 28.2 per cent of employers surveyed indicated that differences in expectations between workers and the employer were an issue when hiring Aboriginal workers (n=149). Interviewees also consistently identified cultural issues as a challenge for Aboriginal workers.

Some challenges related to cultural issues are specifically due to misunderstandings between employers and employees. For example, one interviewee noted that Aboriginal employers in their community typically take a relaxed approach to workplace expectations such as being on time, showing up for work, and how hard you need to work for a certain length of time. Non-Aboriginal employers may have different expectations of workers, which may lead to misunderstandings between Aboriginal workers and non-Aboriginal employers.

Cultural differences also influence Aboriginal worker behaviour at work. For example, in one reported case, a non-Aboriginal foreman assumed that an Aboriginal apprentice did not like his job because he was quiet and did not ask many questions. However, rather than dissatisfaction with the job on the part of the apprentice, this was actually due to cultural differences in how Aboriginal people treat elders.<sup>8</sup> As such, “patience, respect, and trust—built on a foundation of communication—are required to build labour force capacity. Businesses and communities must invest time and effort to clearly explain job requirements . . . .”<sup>9</sup> In addition, in industries that are

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8 Interview findings.

9 Martin, *Building Labour Force Capacity*, 2.

dominated by non-Aboriginal workers, it may be difficult for Aboriginal workers not to feel discriminated against or uncomfortable in their work environment.<sup>10</sup>

In regions with large Aboriginal populations, cultural issues may not be as significant a challenge because employers are generally more informed about local Aboriginal cultures and have more exposure to the local Aboriginal populations. Employers with a lack of exposure to Aboriginal culture are more likely to be uncertain of how to recruit Aboriginal workers or interact with them. In some cases, managers responsible for hiring may view Aboriginal workers negatively due to stereotypes.<sup>11</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Businesses in Canada indicate they face challenges with the attraction, hiring, work performance, and retention of Aboriginal workers. A lack of education, skills, and work experience are the most common impediments facing businesses in their efforts to employ Aboriginal workers. Other key challenges that impede employers in the successful recruitment and employment of Aboriginal workers are absenteeism, cultural issues, and reluctance on the part of some Aboriginal workers to move away from their communities.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview findings.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

### Lessons Learned at Agnico-Eagle's Meadowbank Mine

Agnico-Eagle's Meadowbank gold mine near Baker Lake, Nunavut, reports that human resources and other issues are impeding existing cost controls to the point where the lifespan of the mine has been considerably shortened. Management points to challenges with human resources issues, such as absentee workers, as contributors to unexpectedly high operating costs. In 2011, the company experienced 80 per cent turnover in its Inuit workforce at the site. During the same period, 5.6 per cent of workers, on average, were absent each day.

The business is taking a multi-pronged approach to addressing its labour issues: offering more cross-cultural training; hiring human resources officers from local communities; improving orientation for workers by including family members; and re-examining its understanding of "benefits" for workers, communities, and within the company. The lessons learned will be applied at other company mine sites to ensure they are economical and sustainable sources of company revenue and community benefits.

Source: Bell, "Nunatsiaq Online."

Businesses may have a difficult time attracting and hiring Aboriginal workers because of a lack of knowledge about how and where to reach out to Aboriginal workers. Once Aboriginal workers are hired, some businesses may have difficulty retaining them—for example, if they do not offer adequate career advancement opportunities for Aboriginal staff. The following chapters will discuss strategies to help overcome these challenges and successfully engage Aboriginal workers in the labour force.

## CHAPTER 5

# Strategies for the Successful Engagement of Aboriginal Workers

### Chapter Summary

- ◆ The tool and strategies employers most commonly used to recruit Aboriginal workers are advertising, local employment centres, educational institutions, community organizations, band or treaty organizations, internships or job placement programs, and Aboriginal labour market development organizations (e.g., ASETS Agreement Holders).
- ◆ Businesses use a variety of programs, tools, and strategies to motivate and retain Aboriginal workers, including Aboriginal-friendly workplace programs and/or policies, learning and development opportunities, competitive compensation and benefits, providing time for Aboriginal workers to participate in seasonal or traditional activities, and mentorship programs.
- ◆ Businesses see the following positive impacts most frequently from successfully employing Aboriginal workers: Aboriginal workers acting as role models in their communities, better relationships and integration with the local community, improved employee equity and inclusion, and economic benefits to the community.

**W**hile the participation of Aboriginal workers in the Canadian labour market continues to lag that of non-Aboriginals, many Canadian employers are realizing that Aboriginal workers can play a significant role in meeting their human resources needs. Although Canadian employers face challenges in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal workers, many employers have strategies for recruiting and retaining Aboriginal workers. These strategies help to build awareness among Aboriginal Canadians of the opportunities offered by different companies and industries. They also create a more inclusive work environment for Aboriginal workers, thereby increasing worker retention and performance. In addition to improving recruitment and retention, strategies currently being used by companies benefit a company's reputation and relationship with the local community.

This chapter draws on our survey of Canadian businesses, as well as interviews with Canadian businesses, industry associations, and ASETS Agreement Holders. It explores strategies for the successful engagement of Aboriginal workers and the extent to which employers are using these strategies.

### TOOLS AND STRATEGIES TO RECRUIT ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Employers use a variety of partners, tools, and strategies to recruit Aboriginal workers, including advertising; working with local Aboriginal groups, employment



**Chart 9**  
Partners, Tools, or Strategies Used to Recruit Aboriginal Workers  
(per cent of businesses surveyed; n=138)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

organizations, and educational institutions; and internships and job placement programs. Partners, tools, and strategies for the recruitment of Aboriginal workers vary in their effectiveness and the extent to which employers are using them.

Not surprisingly, businesses surveyed indicated they use paid or unpaid advertising most frequently to recruit Aboriginal workers (61.6 per cent; n=138). (See Chart 9.) One interview respondent noted that an increasing number of companies are now reaching out to Aboriginal workers through advertisements placed specifically in Aboriginal publications.<sup>1</sup>

Second to advertising, businesses were most likely to use a variety of partners to recruit Aboriginal workers: their local employment centre (43.5 per cent), educational institutions (e.g., high schools, colleges, universities) (43.5 per cent), community organizations (42.8 per cent), and band or treaty organizations (38.4 per cent) (n=138). Many businesses surveyed recruit Aboriginal

workers through Aboriginal organizations. However, the type of Aboriginal organization used varies depending on the Aboriginal group with which an employer has the most contact:

- ◆ Employers that indicated they have the most experience with the Métis population were more likely to indicate that they use Métis organizations (70.0 per cent; n=10) to recruit Aboriginal workers).
- ◆ Employers with the most experience with the Inuit population were more likely to indicate they recruit Aboriginal workers using Inuit organizations (57.7 per cent; n=26).
- ◆ Employers with the most experience with the First Nations population were more likely to indicate they recruit workers using band or treaty organizations (58.1 per cent), and less likely to recruit workers using Inuit organizations (9.3 per cent) (n=86).

Industry organizations and businesses interviewed also indicated they leverage the knowledge of a variety of organizations to assist them in recruiting Aboriginal workers. Other organizations and stakeholders can act as a go-between or bridge between Aboriginal workers

<sup>1</sup> Interview findings.

and employers. Organizations interviewed that have had success in recruiting Aboriginal workers exhibited a marked willingness to engage with a variety of organizations, including Aboriginal ones, to make workers aware of their company's human resources needs and requirements and to encourage Aboriginal workers to apply for a position in their company. For example, one business hosts lunch-and-learn sessions at post-secondary educational institutions for Aboriginal students, to make them aware of jobs at the company and to encourage them to apply for employment opportunities.<sup>2</sup> Some businesses also make use of Aboriginal liaison officers to recruit Aboriginal workers and work with Aboriginal organizations.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, while half (50.6 per cent; n=156) of businesses surveyed were familiar with ASETS programs, less than one-third (29.0 per cent; n=138) indicated they make use of Aboriginal labour market development organizations, such as ASETS Agreement Holders. However, businesses that deal mainly with the Métis population were more likely to make use of Aboriginal labour market development organizations (50.0 per cent; n=10) to recruit Aboriginal workers. A number of employers with successful Aboriginal recruitment programs that were interviewed also work with ASETS Agreement Holders.<sup>4</sup> Some interviewees noted that some ASETS Agreement Holders are struggling to build effective partnerships with local businesses and may lack the skills to deliver effective assistance to employers and Aboriginal workers.<sup>5</sup>

Many survey participants reported partnerships with local or regional organizations to recruit Aboriginal workers, but were less likely to partner with provincial, territorial, or federal government organizations. Only 25.4 per cent of businesses take advantage of federal, provincial, or territorial government initiatives to recruit Aboriginal workers (n=138). While 50 per cent of employers that deal mainly with the Métis population

use federal, provincial, or territorial governments to recruit Aboriginal workers (n=10), only 11.5 per cent of employers that deal mainly with the Inuit population do so (n=26). Sector councils were used to recruit Aboriginal workers by 9.4 per cent of respondents. This lack of engagement with provincial, territorial, or federal government organizations may stem from a lack of awareness of the programs offered by these organizations to assist in the recruitment of Aboriginal workers or a lack of effective programs or tools to help recruit Aboriginal workers, or it may be that locally oriented organizations are better attuned to local labour market needs.

A significant proportion of interviewees and businesses surveyed (31.9 per cent; n=138) stated they use internships, mentoring programs, or job placement programs to recruit Aboriginal workers. Survey results show that these strategies are particularly popular among employers looking to recruit Inuit workers—50.0 per cent of respondents that deal mainly with the Inuit population indicated they use these types of strategies (n=26). Job-shadowing programs or internships give Aboriginal workers information and advice about the opportunities offered by specific career paths or industries. These tools are particularly effective in reaching out to Aboriginal youth. For example, one company has a program that allows high school students to visit its job site, which is located in a remote location. As noted in Chapter 3, Aboriginal workers with limited experience or exposure to the wage economy may have limited awareness of the opportunities and requirements needed to work in different industries or companies.

## PROGRAMS, TOOLS, AND STRATEGIES TO MOTIVATE AND RETAIN ABORIGINAL WORKERS

Businesses surveyed and interviewees reported making use of programs, tools, and strategies to motivate and retain Aboriginal workers. Along with learning and development opportunities (56.6 per cent), survey respondents most commonly cited the use of Aboriginal-friendly workplace programs and/or policies (56.6 per cent) (n=136) to motivate and retain Aboriginal workers. (See Chart 10.) Businesses also said they use cultural programs (25.7 per

2 Interview findings.

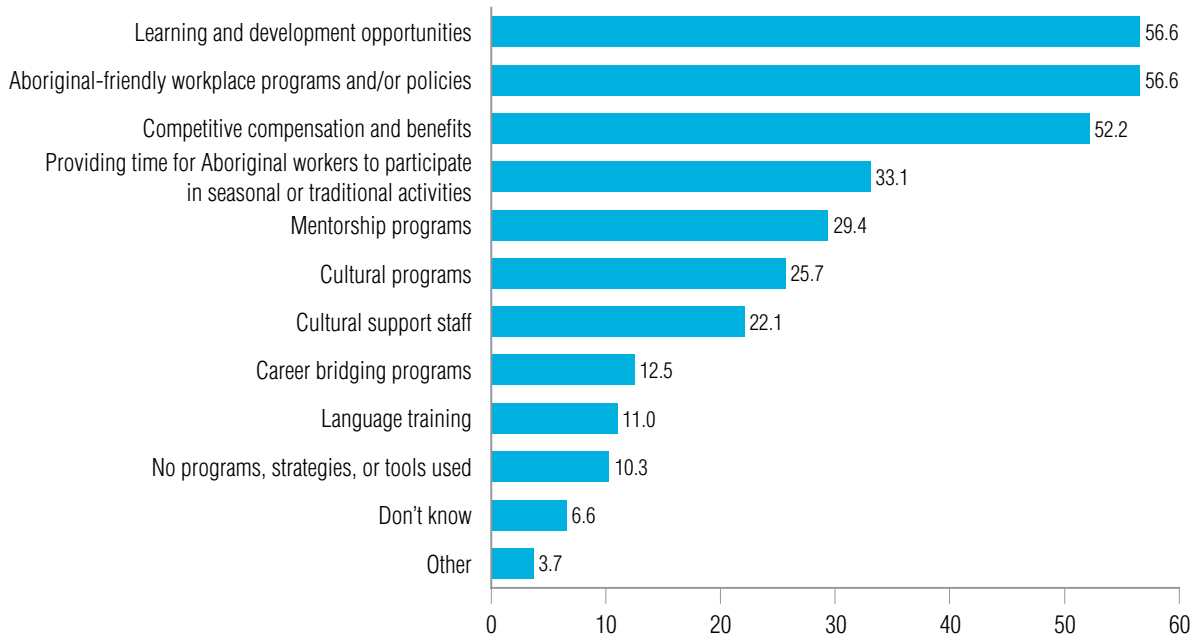
3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

**Chart 10**

Programs, Strategies, and Tools to Motivate and Retain Aboriginal Workers  
(per cent of surveyed businesses using program, strategy, or tool; n=136)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

cent) and cultural support staff (22.1 per cent) to motivate and retain employees. Employers that deal mainly with the Métis population are more likely to use cultural programs (55.6 per cent; n=9) to motivate and retain workers. A related strategy used by a number of businesses is providing time for Aboriginal workers to participate in seasonal or traditional activities (33.1 per cent; n=136). Employers that have the most experience dealing with the Inuit population are particularly likely to use this strategy (53.8 per cent; n=26).

Ontario Power Generation's Lower Mattagami River hydroelectric project uses strategies such as mandatory cultural awareness training and policies on providing time for Aboriginal workers to take part in seasonal or traditional activities. (See box "Reconciling the Past With New Opportunities.") Another company interviewed celebrates National Aboriginal Day to help promote awareness and understanding among its employees of local Aboriginal history and traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Mentoring and career-bridging programs provide support to Aboriginal workers starting in a new position. They can assist Aboriginal workers in developing skills for workplace success. Of employers surveyed, 29.4 per cent have mentorship programs and 12.5 per cent have career-bridging programs. Businesses that have the most experience dealing with the Métis community were more likely to indicate they have career-bridging programs (33.0 per cent; n=9). A number of businesses interviewed also offer these types of programs for Aboriginal people, particularly for Aboriginal youth. For example, BC Hydro's Youth Hires Program provides youth transitioning from school to work with the opportunity to spend a summer being paid to job shadow trades and technical occupations.<sup>7</sup> The program is specifically promoted to Aboriginal youth; of about 20 youths hired annually into the program, about 50 per cent are Aboriginal.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> BC Hydro, *Youth Hires Program*; Martin, *Building Labour Force Capacity*.

<sup>8</sup> Interview findings; Martin, *Building Labour Force Capacity*.

<sup>6</sup> Interview findings.

### Reconciling the Past With New Opportunities: Ontario Power Generation and the Moose Cree

The Lower Mattagami River hydroelectric project is a five-year, \$2.6-billion project to significantly increase the generating capacity of four existing hydro stations in Northern Ontario.<sup>1</sup> The project includes an agreement—the Amiskoo-skow Agreement—with the Moose Cree, who will also have up to a 25 per cent stake in the project.<sup>2</sup> When the hydro stations were originally built in the 1960s, they displaced the local Aboriginal population. The agreement focuses on reconciliation and ensuring opportunities for local Aboriginal workers.<sup>3</sup>

The agreement includes preferential hiring for Aboriginal workers. The job site for the project is remote and requires workers to live there for weeks at a time. Several tools and strategies have been put in place to create an inclusive work environment for Aboriginal workers, including:

- ♦ mandatory Cree cultural training for all workers on the job site;
- ♦ Aboriginal counsellors available at the job site;
- ♦ spiritual ceremonies and cultural celebrations at the job site;
- ♦ policies on seasonal activities; and
- ♦ bereavement policies cognizant of Cree culture.<sup>4</sup>

These policies and strategies have helped to recruit and retain Aboriginal workers. In February 2012, more than 800 workers were employed on the project, 220 of whom are First Nations or Métis.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 25 local Aboriginal workers are also registered as apprentices and are receiving their certifications through their work on the Ontario Power Generation project. The project has created other benefits for the local Aboriginal community through contracts and joint ventures with local Aboriginal businesses.<sup>6</sup>

1 Spears, “OPG and Moose Cree.”

2 Ibid.

3 Spears; interview findings.

4 Interview findings.

5 Ontario Power Generation, *Lower Mattagami Update*.

6 Interview findings.

A substantial proportion of businesses surveyed employ learning and development opportunities (56.6 per cent) and competitive compensation and benefits (52.2 per cent) to motivate and retain Aboriginal workers (n=136). However, businesses that deal mainly with the Métis population were less likely to indicate they use learning and development opportunities (33.3 per cent; n=9). Eleven per cent of survey respondents indicated they use language training to motivate and retain Aboriginal workers. However, there may be a greater need for language training among Inuit workers—26.9 per cent of employers that have the most experience dealing with the

Inuit population indicated they offer language training (n=26). As discussed in Chapter 3, if companies do not provide Aboriginal workers with opportunities equal to non-Aboriginal workers to develop and advance in their field, they may have trouble retaining Aboriginal employees, particularly those who are highly motivated and ambitious.

### POSITIVE IMPACTS OF EMPLOYING ABORIGINAL WORKERS

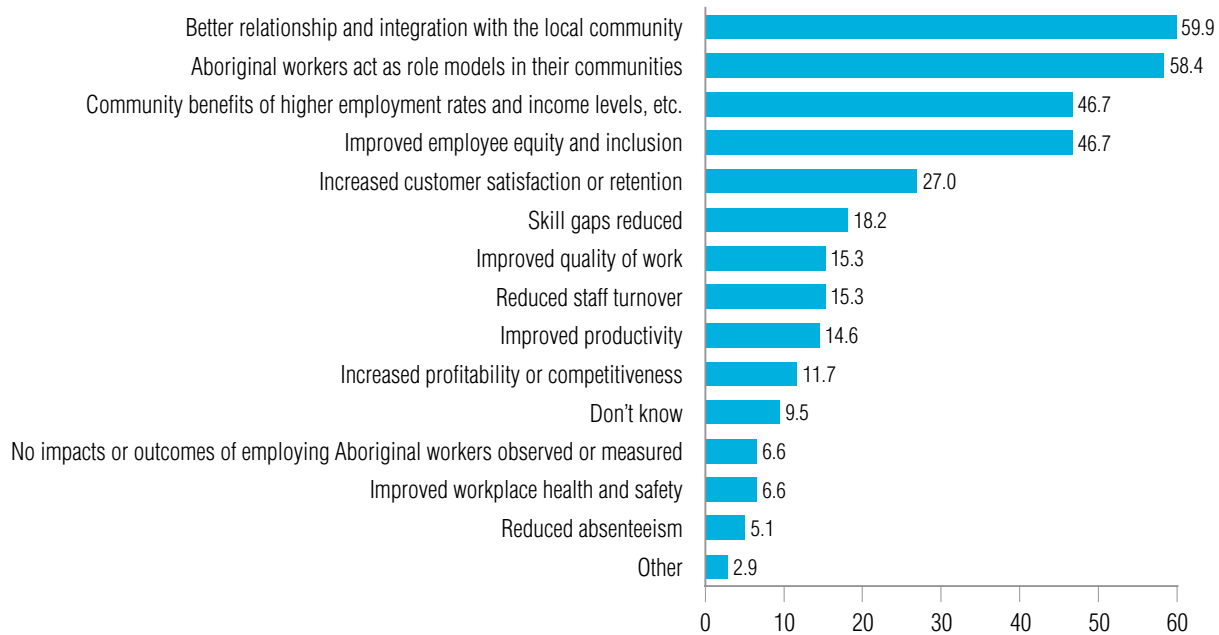
The successful employment of Aboriginal workers has benefits for the worker and the employer as well as the local community. Businesses surveyed and individuals interviewed indicated that the main benefits they see from the successful employment of Aboriginal workers involve the local community, particularly the local Aboriginal community.

The most commonly cited benefit for businesses in employing Aboriginal workers is a better relationship and integration with the local community (59.9 per cent; n=137). (See Chart 11.) This finding is supported by interviews with businesses and industry associations as well as ASETS Agreement Holders. For example, one company representative interviewed noted that when it has an Aboriginal worker, the level of trust in the company from local Aboriginal communities increases.<sup>9</sup>

For businesses that employ Aboriginal workers, improved relationships and integration with local communities may also be due to economic benefits, such as reduced local unemployment. Of businesses surveyed, 46.7 per cent saw community benefits of higher employment rates and income levels, etc. (n=137). Respondents that deal mainly with the Inuit population were particularly likely to say that they saw economic benefits to the local community (61.5 per cent; n=26). Relationship-building and integration between businesses and local communities facilitates mutual understanding of Aboriginal cultural issues and of business pressures.

9 Interview findings.

**Chart 11**  
**Positive Impacts of Employing Aboriginal Workers**  
 (per cent businesses indicating positive impact, n=137)



Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

A significant proportion of businesses surveyed (58.4 per cent; n=137) reported the positive impact of Aboriginal workers acting as role models in their communities. Interviewees also emphasized this positive outcome from the successful recruitment and retention of Aboriginal workers. Aboriginal workers who are hired and find success in a job can provide information, support, and encouragement to other Aboriginal people in their community about the career path they have chosen. These positive outcomes may be particularly significant in the case of remote and/or Northern Aboriginal communities. As Martin states, “Many Northerners have grown up without role models who have careers. They have not had the opportunity to see how additional education can result in personal economic success or see family and community members progress ‘through the ranks.’”<sup>10</sup> Several interviewees from remote areas noted how once one worker or a few Aboriginal workers from a community completed apprenticeships, they told others in

the community about the benefits of their training, resulting in more Aboriginal workers choosing to pursue apprenticeships.<sup>11</sup>

Individuals interviewed and businesses surveyed (46.7 per cent; n=137) indicated that the employment of Aboriginal workers improves employee equity and inclusion in the workplace. One company representative noted that having more Aboriginal employees can help improve Aboriginal awareness internally, leading to a more welcoming work environment for Aboriginal people. Some survey respondents also cited improved quality of work (15.3 per cent) and improved productivity (14.6 per cent) as positive outcomes of hiring Aboriginal workers. A number of businesses surveyed also reported that reduced staff turnover (15.3 per cent) was a positive outcome of employing Aboriginal workers. In remote communities,

10 Martin, *Building Labour Force Capacity*, 6.

11 Interview findings.

Aboriginal employees hired from the local community may be more likely to remain in the community than employees hired from other areas.<sup>12</sup>

A reduction in skill gaps is another positive outcome of employing Aboriginal workers. Of businesses surveyed, 18.2 per cent indicated that they saw skill gaps reduced (n=137). Aboriginal organizations and businesses interviewed noted that employers that have hired Aboriginal workers have helped reduce skill gaps in the regions where they are located. When BHP Billiton first opened the Ekati Diamond mine in the Northwest Territories in 1998, the company operated a workplace learning program to help workers upgrade their essential skills.<sup>13</sup> Now that the mine has been operating for over 10 years, workers have seen the benefits of a career in mining and the company has greater access to potential employees with qualifications such as a Grade 12 education.<sup>14</sup>

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**The majority of businesses surveyed feel that successful employment of Aboriginal workers leads to positive outcomes for workers, employers, and local communities.**

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Twenty-seven per cent of businesses surveyed found the employment of Aboriginal workers led to increased customer satisfaction or retention (n=137). While only 10 per cent of respondents that deal mainly with the Métis population indicated this to be a positive outcome of hiring Aboriginal workers (n=10), 50 per cent of respondents that deal mainly with the Inuit population see this

as a positive outcome (n=26). Similarly, 11.7 per cent of all respondents said the employment of Aboriginal workers has led to increased profitability or competitiveness (n=137).

Of businesses surveyed, only 6.6 per cent indicated that they saw no outcomes or impacts from employing Aboriginal workers, while 9.5 per cent of businesses were unsure what positive impacts and outcomes arose from the employment of Aboriginal workers. Thus, the majority of businesses surveyed feel that successful employment of Aboriginal workers leads to positive outcomes for the individual workers, the employer organization, and the local community.

## CONCLUSION

Businesses in Canada use a wide variety of strategies to successfully recruit and retain Aboriginal workers. Some of these strategies, such as advertising employment opportunities, working with local employment centres, providing opportunities for training and upgrading, and competitive benefits packages may be targeted at both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers. Other strategies, such as Aboriginal-friendly workplace programs and policies, specifically target potential Aboriginal workers and challenges they may encounter in the workplace. Employers indicate they see numerous benefits from hiring Aboriginal workers—for Aboriginal Canadians and businesses as well as the surrounding communities. Thus, better integration of Aboriginal Canadians into the labour market is expected to have far-reaching public and private benefits.

12 Interview findings.

13 Campbell and Kitagawa, *Building Essential Skills in the Workplace*.

14 Interview findings.

## CHAPTER 6

# Conclusions and Lessons Learned

### Chapter Summary

- ◆ Many Canadian employers recognize that Aboriginal workers can help them meet their human resources requirements, but have challenges with the attraction, hiring, work performance, and retention of Aboriginal workers.
- ◆ Strategies that can help improve the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Aboriginal workers include improvement in the educational outcomes of the Aboriginal population; promotion of better understanding of the Aboriginal population among the non-Aboriginal population; simplification of points of contact between Aboriginal organizations and employers; and increased opportunities for the sharing of best practices among ASETS Agreement Holders.

As Canada's population ages, many industries and businesses struggle to find and keep enough workers with the appropriate skills and experience to meet their needs. As the fastest-growing population in Canada, the Aboriginal population is a rich source of potential workers. However, the Aboriginal population lags behind the non-Aboriginal population in workforce participation, and Aboriginal workers are more likely than non-Aboriginal workers to be employed in lower-skilled occupations.

Our survey and interview findings suggest many Canadian employers recognize that Aboriginal workers can play an important role in helping them to address human resources challenges, such as a shortage of qualified workers or the replacement of retiring workers. Many employers feel it is important to reach out to Aboriginal workers, and a number of them are already taking advantage of initiatives and strategies to engage with the Aboriginal population.

Despite these initiatives, both survey and interview evidence suggest employers in Canada face significant challenges with the attraction, hiring, work performance, and retention of Aboriginal workers. Many of these challenges are due to the educational attainment of Canada's Aboriginal population, which lags behind that of the non-Aboriginal population. In addition, some Aboriginal workers lack basic skills (e.g., literacy, numeracy, and how to apply for a job) and work experience. Negative stereotypes and racism can hinder the success of Aboriginal workers in their efforts to find and keep engaging jobs. Misunderstandings between employers and Aboriginal employees about workplace expectations can also impede the labour market success of Aboriginal workers.

Based on survey data, interviews, and a literature review, a number of potential strategies or recommendations to improve the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Aboriginal workers emerge. These strategies can help businesses to better engage with Aboriginal workers, and help Aboriginal workers to better succeed in the labour market.

## STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE RECRUITMENT, HIRING, WORK PERFORMANCE, AND RETENTION OF ABORIGINAL WORKERS

### IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Improving educational outcomes among Canada's Aboriginal population would make a significant contribution to improving its workforce participation. Survey data, interviews, and literature on Aboriginal workers all consistently point to poor educational outcomes, along with a lack of basic skills and work experience, as the most significant factors contributing to the underrepresentation and underutilization of Aboriginal workers in the workforce.

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**Some Aboriginal workers need access to educational programs that allow them to learn or upgrade basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and how to apply for a job.**

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Aboriginal people in Canada need access to quality secondary school education that will provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to obtain work or to enter and succeed in post-secondary education—this is particularly the case in Canada's Northern and remote communities. High school completion is a key area for improvement, particularly for some trades where a high school diploma is the minimum standard. In addition, as Aboriginal attainment of university degrees is particularly low compared with the non-Aboriginal population, strategies to increase the attainment of university degrees by Aboriginal Canadians should continue to be explored and pursued. Several ASETS representatives interviewed have had some success offering post-secondary training programs for occupations such as nursing and social work in remote communities.

Some Aboriginal workers also need access to educational programs that allow them to learn or upgrade basic skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and how to apply for a job. Those Aboriginal workers who lack basic skills may face a range of barriers to their success in the workplace (e.g., they may be single parents, have a history of substance abuse, and/or have limited experience in the wage economy), and may need extra support when upgrading their skills and/or entering the workforce. The Conference

Board's Centre for the North has noted the important role that career preparation programs, adult learning centres, and employment gap transition programs can play in improving educational outcomes among the Aboriginal population.<sup>1</sup>

The 2012 federal budget included several measures aimed at improving the educational outcomes of the Aboriginal population. To improve on-reserve schools and increase First Nations graduation rates, the government announced that it would pass a First Nations Education Act in September 2014, as well as pledge \$275 million for on-reserve schools. In addition, the federal government announced that its income assistance programs for on-reserve First Nations workers would be aligned with the provinces, to encourage job training.<sup>2</sup>

Employers can also help contribute to improving the educational outcomes and increasing the work experience of the Aboriginal population by offering mentoring, internships, and job-shadowing opportunities to Aboriginal workers. They can also work with ASETS or other organizations on training initiatives for Aboriginal workers.

### INCREASE INFORMATION AND BEST PRACTICE SHARING AMONG ASETS AGREEMENT HOLDERS

Increased opportunities for ASETS Agreement Holders to share information and best practices among themselves and with other organizations would strengthen their ability to provide services to both workers and employers. A number of ASETS Agreement Holders indicated a willingness to exchange best practices with other ASETS Agreement Holders and improve their skills. Currently, ASETS Agreement Holders across Canada have limited opportunities to do so. However, individual ASETS Agreement Holders provide valuable information and services that promote the development of the Aboriginal workforce. Their continuing ability to provide services would also be reinforced by further research and analysis of future Aboriginal labour market development issues.

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1 Sisco and others, *Lessons Learned*.

2 Payton, "Old Age Security Changes."



## **SIMPLIFY POINTS OF CONTACT BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND ABORIGINAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Better coordination among Aboriginal organizations to simplify points of contact for employers would make it easier for employers to find and engage potential Aboriginal workers. A number of employers, industry associations, and ASETS representatives interviewed observed that some employers have challenges engaging potential Aboriginal workers because of the complex web of Aboriginal organization networks. Often, many Aboriginal organizations must be contacted in order to reach Aboriginal communities and workers. Contacting multiple groups can be a time-consuming and complicated exercise. Survey data similarly revealed that some employers have challenges reaching out to Aboriginal workers.

## **RAISE AWARENESS OF ABORIGINAL CULTURES**

Cultural awareness programs increase understanding and communication between non-Aboriginal workers and Aboriginal workers and help to create more inclusive work environments. Cultural issues (including negative stereotypes about Aboriginal workers and misunderstandings between Aboriginal workers and employers) are an impediment to the success of Aboriginal workers in the labour force. ASETS Agreement Holders or other Aboriginal employment organizations can also help by decreasing misunderstandings between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers. They can help businesses reach out to engage potential workers in Aboriginal communities. At the same time, they can help Aboriginal communities and workers to better understand the pressures facing businesses, such as tight timelines and margins. Some ASETS representatives interviewed stated that they have successfully served as intermediaries between Aboriginal workers and employers or organized labour—for example, by clarifying employer expectations to Aboriginal workers or helping to foresee and prevent potential misunderstandings.

There is a role for governments, industry, and media to play in helping to publicize positive stories about Canada's Aboriginal population. While businesses see numerous

public and private benefits from the employment of Aboriginal workers, negative stereotypes and racism about Aboriginal people are an ongoing problem. Many individuals interviewed emphasized the need for more positive media about Aboriginal people. Media stories about Aboriginal communities often focus on issues such as extreme poverty and substance abuse. The positive benefits of employing Aboriginal workers and upbeat stories about Aboriginal achievements should be better publicized to encourage employers to engage with Aboriginal Canadians and to help combat negative stereotypes about Aboriginal people among the non-Aboriginal population. While Aboriginal organizations can and do play a role in publicizing success stories about Aboriginal people these stories may not be perceived as having as much legitimacy as they would if they came from non-Aboriginal organizations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This report acts as a starting point for creating a greater understanding of how to overcome the labour market integration challenges facing Aboriginal workers in Canada. It offers an overview of the challenges that employers face in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal employees and provides strategies they can pursue to overcome them.

Further research to enhance the understanding of which industries face the most significant challenges in recruiting Aboriginal workers is called for. There is also a need for more in-depth research on the most effective strategies to recruit and retain Aboriginal workers. In addition, businesses would benefit from a better understanding of the workplace impacts of different strategies to address Aboriginal worker recruitment and retention challenges.

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## APPENDIX A

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