



Introduction

Historically, Aboriginal people have experienced many issues in their efforts to take full advantage of the employment opportunities stemming from major projects. This negative cycle has been repeated many times. Too often there is insufficient time spent on the lead up to major projects and Aboriginal communities have not built their capacity or done the training needed to prepare themselves for the job and employment opportunities. Projects then advance to a start-up stage and by then the timelines take over and it's too late. Skilled workers have to be brought in from elsewhere and local people are displaced.

What can be done to break this cycle?

Giving Aboriginal communities a longer lead time to prepare for employment opportunities is part of the answer. The thinking around developing more robust Labour Market Information (LMI) is that this gives communities a better understanding of the longer term opportunities stemming from major projects near their communities. The additional time gives them the space to implement the training programs

and employment supports needed. There may be direct or indirect employment opportunities. So, to this end LMI research is extremely helpful. But the provision of LMI data is not in itself a solution. That's because Aboriginal participation issues are very complex. It is more than simply showing what and where the job opportunities



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are. This is what we want to explore here briefly. What are the broader contextual issues which are precluding Aboriginal participation in major projects, assuming that there is a willingness to participate? Below are ten issues pertaining to Aboriginal employment and participation in major projects. Some remedies are offered as well.

Issues and Barriers: Aboriginal Participation in Major Projects

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Issues and Barriers: Aboriginal Participation in Major Projects

Opportunity Assessments: While a project is still at the planning stages it may be difficult for communities to fully appreciate the many employment opportunities that major projects will bring. The sheer scale of the project may be beyond the terms of reference of community residents' experience.

- ▶ Some communities have successfully done visioning exercises which invite them into a process where they can build their understanding of the range and kind of employment opportunities. The visioning exercise may be done over several facilitated sessions allowing community leaders and residents a better opportunity to build their knowledge and expand their terms of reference as to the possibilities. It is part education but also active scenario planning can be encouraged to consider how the community and its residents will choose to position themselves in relation to the many opportunities that are presented to them. This kind of active planning also helps build the relationship between the company and the community.

Career Knowledge: Communities may lack an understanding of the technical nature of some jobs. For example, where would some communities have been exposed to some of the jobs in mining?

- ▶ There are many resources available to communities to give them a better idea of careers and occupations. For example, in the case of the mining sector the Mining Industry Human Resource Council has programs available to build understanding about Careers in Mining. Companies can assist communities by facilitating access to resources like this. Career awareness programs like Guiding Circles and career planning strategies like those developed by the Council need to be part and parcel of companies' recruitment strategies. If it's a long term project then career awareness can be sponsored over a longer period. Working with primary as well as secondary schools companies can do a good job of creating a pathway to careers.

Psychological Exclusion: Years of exclusionary policies have had an impact on communities. Aboriginal people may not be able to see themselves in the jobs that larger companies have to offer in their major projects.

- ▶ Companies need to be aware of the barriers that Aboriginal people may face. There needs to be incremental effort paid to laddering Aboriginal people into positions. Pre-employment programs will be important. As well, it is important to work with families to build a support system for new Aboriginal employees. Job coaches are one of the proven strategies for success. Company employment ads need to feature Aboriginal people in their workplace.

Education Levels: Some jobs advertised by major project companies stipulate education levels which may be a barrier for Aboriginal people due to lower education attainments.

- ▶ Some companies will carefully review all their job descriptions to make sure that the education levels that are referenced in job descriptions are truly needed. Companies need to be sure that they are not imposing an artificial barrier to hire. Other strategies that companies are using include reference to essential skills in their job descriptions. Assessments focus on whether the individual has the skills to do the job rather than on education credentials.

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Community Planning: Companies can assist Aboriginal communities to increase their participation in major projects especially when those strategies can be aligned with the community's broader socio-economic development plan.

- ▶ Many Aboriginal communities have adopted community economic development plans. They should be encouraged to do so. If there is a plan and a governance structure to guide that process then companies should be involved in assisting that structure and plan to the extent that the community invites them to do so. There will be many opportunities for Aboriginal business development to leverage the business and procurement needs of large scale developer companies. Even greater leverage may occur when that business development aligns with the broader socio-economic plans developed and adopted by the communities. Communities may choose to specialize in a particular area of a major project and focus their training programs in those areas. For example, some communities may choose to become very involved in the camp facilities which are integral to major projects. This development focus then helps drive the training programs for the communities. Another example, some communities have done well to focus on the environmental businesses and employment opportunities which align with the needs of major projects.

Digital Connectivity: Some companies rely on web-based systems to hire employees. Aboriginal people living in remote communities may not own computers or they may lack the familiarity with the systems to apply for jobs on-line.

- ▶ Large companies are using on-line systems more and more because they are convenient and cost effective. However, they may need to put into place systems that enable Aboriginal people to access and use these web-based systems. Training or coaching programs are one way of assisting Aboriginal people to develop the learning needed to use the company's preferred e-application systems.

Workplace Brand: Companies may be experiencing issues on the uptake of their job and career opportunities. What are some ways to approach this dilemma to encourage more Aboriginal uptake?

- ▶ One of the issues facing companies is how to get the word out that their company is a good place for Aboriginal people to work and build their careers. It is important to get more Aboriginal people into supervisory positions and promote the fact that some of the Aboriginal people already hired have advanced in the company. Progression and advancement are two good things to promote in hiring ads.

Employment Partnerships: In order to encourage more Aboriginal participation in major projects companies need to help coordinate employment partnerships. What does that look like?

- ▶ Companies need to focus their efforts on local Aboriginal employment offices. There are 80+ "Aboriginal Skills Employment and Training Agreements" (ASET) across the country. Then there are sub-agreements with several more front-line offices that deliver services. These ASET holders and their service delivery points, work to help Aboriginal people find employment.

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They support training initiatives to prepare people for employment opportunities and assist with work supports by at times offsetting costs for transportation, relocation, special equipment and other needs. ASET holders also sometimes develop training to employment programs or support short term training costs for clients. It should be noted that they most often do not have the ability to support multi-year post-secondary degree programs. Companies may want to work with one ASET holder in particular but since the talent demands in large projects are great then it is more likely that a cluster of ASET holders might be called upon for assistance. Combining their interests with those of training and education providers results in a partnership that can address the short to long term needs of the project while also providing the means for Aboriginal participation. Government may have a seat with this partnership as well, providing funding, information and expertise. These partnerships and their planning tables operate effectively when there are goals which are collectively set. Sometimes the coordination work itself is a big job and another partner is brought in to assist with that task. This was the multi-party arrangement developed for the successful Alberta Aboriginal Apprenticeship Project which involved numbers of companies as well as Aboriginal NGO's, education facilities and government.

Retention & Advancement: Aboriginal people may join a company that is trying to advance a major project but the initial recruitment success then takes a turn and the Aboriginal employee exits the job and the company. What are some of the reasons why retention becomes an issue for companies?

- ▶ This is actually a complex matter. It could be argued that retention starts way back in the early recruitment stages. The ways that Aboriginal people are attracted to company's positions and the initial reception and on-boarding support they receive from the company may have a lot to do with whether they choose to stay with the company. Buddy systems or Aboriginal employee networks are helpful supports. But if the company supervisor has no experience working with Aboriginal people, then the employment experience may not be too positive for the Aboriginal employee. Helping supervisors to obtain cross cultural awareness and actually putting those lessons into practice may have a big impact on Aboriginal retention. Don't forget, word travels in Aboriginal communities. If a company experiences wide-spread Aboriginal employee exits then this will have a big impact on the company's future recruitment efforts with the community. Companies that work with their Aboriginal employees to help define the supports that are needed in the workplace are likely to have better success.

Self-Identification: Aboriginal employees may be reluctant to self-identify. So companies are never confident that they know how many Aboriginal people are working on their project.

- ▶ Aboriginal employees may not see self-identification as beneficial to their own employment circumstances. Many say that they would prefer to be considered solely on the basis of merit and may not want to receive "special consideration" by virtue of their ancestry. Others may see no merit to contributing to company's statistics since they may not be clear how the company will use that information or who may have access to the data. Also, some Aboriginal employees are asked to self-identify at the time of their recruitment and not having any experience with the company, they may be unwilling to share that information. The question might be better posed at a later date when the employees have had a chance to gain some comfort with their new employer and workplace.

Conclusion

There are many issues which have a bearing on Aboriginal participation in major projects. The provision of good Labour Market Information will be valuable to companies and to Aboriginal communities alike. But it is unlikely to be a full solution for Aboriginal participation. Rather, we know that Aboriginal participation in major projects involves multi-faceted issues. There are effective strategies and practices that companies

need to do in order to better attract and retain Aboriginal talent. Those strategies are important. But companies also need to consider how inclusive their workplace really is. What is the employment experience for their Aboriginal hires? Is the company a place where Aboriginal employees are supported? Can they succeed there? These are some of the bigger questions which need to be considered.

Resources

We invite you to preview our new eLearning training courses suite, the Inclusion Classroom. The Inclusion Classroom eLearning courses suite - delivers comprehensive training for your entire organization—brought right to individual workstations. The rich-media interactive, inclusive workplace-focused learning is relevant for every business division: leadership, human resources, procurement, marketing and communications, and corporate social responsibility.

*Developed in partnership with Axium eLearning, a division of Knightsbridge - human capital solutions.

We provide onsite instructor-led trainings, which can be customized/branded - to best support your teams' inclusive workplace training goals. The Council would be happy to share more about our onsite training options and discuss developing a training strategy for your company. We can also answer any questions that you might have about the six courses or the Mastering Indigenous Inclusion certificate package.

- ▶ To view an informational video about the Inclusion Classroom suite of courses, visit <http://aboriginalhr.ca/classroom> and click play on the embedded video.
- ▶ To see the entire list of six courses and two packages, visit the products catalogue page: <http://inclusionclassroom.skillbuilder.ca/product-list>. By clicking on individual course packages that you are interested in, you can also view a specification sheet pdf, which provides full details about each course.

The courses suite is available in both French and English and is compliant with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

The Aboriginal Human Resource Council has good information and expertise it can offer companies in this area of major projects planning. Founded in 1998 the Council is one of very few Aboriginal organizations that is ISO certified. It has a suite of workplace products and services and works primarily with large companies to help build inclusive workplaces that help build engagements and relationships with Aboriginal people, businesses and communities. The Council appreciates the assistance of the federal department of Employment and Social Development Canada for its financial contribution in support of its labour market project "Making Better Use of LMI Information Data to Increase Aboriginal Participation in Major Projects."