



# Aboriginal employment: Making the connection

BY CAROLINE GEORGE

**Aboriginal people are still an untapped staffing source. Companies are just starting to realize this and make an effort to connect.**

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**T**he economy may be at a standstill, yet there is one sector of the employment market that is still growing, namely jobs for Aboriginal peoples. According to Statistics Canada's latest Labour Force Survey, the overall employment rate for Aboriginal peoples living off reserve is 59 per cent, with the highest level of employment occurring in Alberta at 77 per cent for individuals aged 25 to 54.

"It's about connecting communities and people, which starts with relationship building between employers and Aboriginal groups," says Kelly Lendsay, president and CEO of the Aboriginal Human Resource Council of Canada (AHRCC), a national public/private, not-for-profit organization that helps advance the integration of Aboriginal people in the workforce. The council has become a "catalyst for continued partnership building," helping employers develop Aboriginal inclusion within the workplace, Lendsay says. "Our training programs focus on improving retention and advancement. One of the things we do is research and provide solutions for retention. We're working intensely to develop an approach to understanding the barriers to retention and how to overcome them."

However, the market is still largely untapped, Lendsay says. The AHRCC reports an estimated shortage of one million workers in Canada by 2020, mainly for highly skilled positions, yet the burgeoning Aboriginal workforce will contribute approximately 400,000 more people. "It's the fastest growing, single source of labour in the country, growing six times faster than the remainder of the market, but there has been a disconnect between employers and the Aboriginal market." The situation is improving, says Lendsay, but employers still tend to look elsewhere than Aboriginal communities when recruit-

ing potential hires. "Often employers are going overseas to look for talent instead of traveling to a First Nations, Métis or Inuit community."

## Mining a valuable resource

Mining is an early adopter in the race for Aboriginal employees. According to the latest Canadian census, Aboriginal employment in mining grew to 7.5 per cent or 4,515 Aboriginal people. Furthermore, partnerships between mining companies and Aboriginal communities have established training programs to create educational and apprenticeship opportunities. The result has been several successful partnerships between the mining sector and Aboriginal communities in northern Canada.

"Our mandate is to maximize the Aboriginal northern workforce to the greatest success possible," says Hilary Jones, general manager of the Mine Training Society in the Northwest Territories. The society offers a number of training programs including mineral processing and underground mining in connection with industry partners like Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership (ASEP), De Beers Canada and Yellowknife's Dene' First Nation. "Our model (with ASEP) is so successful because we do have a true partnership at the table – industry and Aboriginal governments. Politics are left at the door...mines need the employees and Aboriginal governments have the people, so we bring them together and everybody brings something to the table."


Jones also attributes the success of training programs to their incorporation of traditional Aboriginal teachings like the medicine wheel. "The tenets of the wheel – emotional, physical, spiritual and mental – are part of a stu-

dent's training," she says. "You have to deal with the person as a whole. What affects them outside the classroom affects them within the learning experience." Jones says the programs also allow graduates to come out with more than the skills to acquire a job, but the skills to retain a successful and rewarding career. "After completing our program our trainees are very enthusiastic," Jones says. "A graduate came to me and, after bursting into tears, said 'Now I have a life'...we like to think of success as one person at a time." Five hundred program graduates within the last four years have received mining jobs, she says.

## Energy too

Mining isn't the only area where Aboriginal employees are in demand. One of Canada's largest energy marketing companies, NEXEN is also helping to bridge the gap between employers and Aboriginal communities through an Aboriginal Partnership Strategy. "We have to focus not only on employment but capacity as well in the Aboriginal communities," says Jessica Saunders, programming and planning advisor for Aboriginal relations at NEXEN. "We have an Aboriginal employment strategy that's heavily focused on campus recruitment and involvement."

Recalling her initial involvement with NEXEN as a summer student of the Partnership program, Saunders says recruiting and retaining Aboriginal grads is something important both to herself and to the company.

"Don't be afraid to ask questions. Take any opportunity to get to know people." 

**For more information on employment for Aboriginal people visit [www.aboriginalhr.ca](http://www.aboriginalhr.ca)**