

Op-ed - Inclusion Works '09: The Business Case for Aboriginal Inclusion

By Kelly Lendsay

I am the first to acknowledge that there's something both bold and odd, about a national recruitment fair in the midst of widespread economic downturn in our economy.

But next month's *Inclusion Works '09* event in Vancouver is not about our current short-term economic situation. It's about meeting the current needs of employers to build effective diversity strategies that build on their business case for Aboriginal inclusion. It's also about a longer-term initiative that is designed to prepare us for the skills shortages Canadian employers' currently face, and will face as we emerge from the current recession and the retirement of the baby boomers.

Inclusion WORKS '09 from April 6 - 8, 2009 is aimed at raising the profile of Canada's Aboriginal workforce and demonstrating that we Canadians have a home-grown solution to many of our current and future human-resource challenges.

The Aboriginal Human Resource Council, a national public-private, not-for-profit organization formed in 1998 to advance the full participation of Aboriginal people in Canada's labour market, is bringing 100 top notch post-secondary Aboriginal graduates and students in their final-year of study to meet some of the country's top diversity employers.

We had more than 400 applications from First Nations, Métis and Inuit students/graduates who wanted to attend the recruitment fair. We have picked the top 100 to showcase the calibre of skills and Aboriginal talent ready to fill existing vacancies and let Canadian employers know that there will be a larger workforce of Aboriginal candidates available when the economy recovers.

And we know this is going to happen. Just last month, the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) released a report showing that by 2016, more people will be leaving Canada's workforce than entering it - and that's a serious threat to our economy, the most serious we will face over the next 50 years, according to AIMS economist Brian Crowley.

Historically, Canada has relied heavily on immigration to meet skills shortages and keep the economy growing. This is due partly to the country's aging population and low birth rate among non-Aboriginal people. Canada's Aboriginal population is growing six times the rate of our non-Aboriginal population and half live in urban centres. This is the home-grown labour market solution.

We also know that there's chronic unemployment in the Aboriginal community, and it's likely to get much worse as the population continues to grow - unless we do something about it. A study released in November of 2007 by The Centre for the Study of Living Standards found that if the gaps in education, employment and income were eliminated between Canada's Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population, our nation's GDP would increase up to \$160- billion by 2017 - a business case for Aboriginal inclusion that shouldn't be ignored any longer.

There is a disconnect between mainstream Canada and the Aboriginal community. While there's no doubt that gap is narrowing and some employers have made great strides towards

the inclusion of Aboriginal people in their workforces, diversity remains the exception rather than the rule.

Our research shows that increasingly innovative and socially responsible companies are looking to build business relationships with Aboriginal communities. They see not only a potential source of skilled labour, but they also see an increased and rapidly-growing labour market, the benefits of a diverse workplace, a warm client group that believes in corporate social responsibility and a stronger socio-economic country. That's a good combination for any economy.

As we see it, the foundation of a more open and trusting relationship is the workforce. Inclusion of Aboriginal workers and increased employee diversity at all levels within companies will help dispel long-held misconceptions and improve understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Inclusion Works '09 is just one step in this process, but an important one. It is an innovative approach to a major long-term challenge. We want employers to look ahead to what their needs will be after the recession and we want them to meet the talented young Aboriginal people who can meet those needs.

That's what inclusion is all about and it's how we should be using diversity to build Canada's economic strength and future prosperity.

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<http://www.aboriginalhr.ca/>