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Untapped Potential



Aboriginal population key to building strong, skilled workforce

BY HEATHER HUDSON

There's no question that the construction industry in Canada is booming. In fact, according to a Construction Sector Council report, the construction labour force is expected to increase by 9,100 workers from 2012 to 2020. But 6,900 workers are expected to retire. So where will this workforce come from?

The push is on to engage a variety of sources, including the youth, female and immigrant populations, but DJ Spence, Aboriginal liaison for the Manitoba Construction Sector Council, says there's one sector that's ripe for development and often overlooked.

"Aboriginal people are uniquely suited to (construction). We are taught at a very young

age that if you want something you've got to earn it," he says. "On my former reserve I did everything from housecleaning to hunting and gathering to working on the farm to tracking. We learn not only to keep in touch with our traditions and ways of life, but also how to work hard."

As part of an organization already working to strengthen the skills of Manitoba's construction sector workforce, Spence is focused on bridging the gap between some of the 65 First Nations communities in the province and one of the fastest-growing industries.

But the construction industry and First Nations communities tread lightly around each

other. Theirs is a complicated history, but can these issues be overcome? Spence believes so.

Mistrust

A number of construction projects on or near First Nations reserves have soured the relationship between the industry and the Aboriginal community. Spence cites a few projects in the past that rankled potential workers and left a bitter taste in the mouths of many First Nations chiefs.

Today, he's working to repair relationships, including initiating a meeting between the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the Manitoba Construction Sector Council.



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– DJ Spence, Aboriginal Liaison for the Manitoba Construction Sector Council

"I took the executive director to meet them in the spring and the (chiefs) said they were willing to come back to the table, but they made it known, 'we haven't forgotten that we've been wronged in the past. Bringing outsiders into our

communities when we have capacity and skills to hire locally should not happen," Spence says.

As a result of past wrongs, many communities in the north, such as Spence's home reserve, Peguis, about 200 kilometres north of

Winnipeg, stipulate that a percentage of the workforce must be sourced locally.

"In 2002, we finally got the green light from the federal government to build a new school. When we started meeting with construction companies, part of the condition was that we wanted a certain percentage of our own people hired on the project," Spence says. "It ensures that training, experience and dollars are not leaving the reserve and can instead help revitalize our community. This is happening more often everywhere."

Inflexible HR policies

One of the other problems with retaining an Aboriginal workforce is failing to accommodate cultural traditions. In the fall, for example, many communities hunt, gather and participate in sacred ceremonies.

"HR policies need to be Aboriginal-friendly. If (construction companies) are willing to be flexible about allowing time for sacred ceremonies, they're not going to have good workers quit because they can't participate in their culture," says Spence. "Retention rates will be much higher."



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Windows of opportunity

Providing training and skills to Aboriginal workers means construction projects, particularly in the north, will have a long-term, built-in labour market and First Nations communities will enjoy a bit of prosperity. And good relations could lead to more.

"Peguis signed one of the largest land treaties with the federal government in Canada's history recently, opening up huge potential for building. If you're in good standing with these First Nations, it may mean great opportunities in the future for partnerships and working together in unity," Spence says. "It's good business sense for all parties involved."

But Aboriginal workers aren't just found on or near reserves. Many have left due to natural disaster, the desire to achieve post-secondary education or earn more money and create a more prosperous life for their families.

Desmond Hudson and his family were forced to evacuate their home near Dauphin River last year after heavy flooding. His living as a commercial fisherman was also largely washed away due to high waters.

The Hudsons relocated to Winnipeg where Desmond began a construction training program offered through the Manitoba

Construction Sector Council in partnership with the federal government, Winnipeg Technical College and Employment Manitoba. Among other things, he learned roofing, drywalling and how to work with hand tools, as well as earned a number of health and safety certifications.

"Right now I'm working with QSI Interiors Ltd. doing drywalling, framing and pretty much everything the company offers," Hudson says. "They've also offered to send me to systems mechanic training, which will mean I'll have more skills and be able to earn more money."

Though he still maintains the commercial fishing business on the side, he and his family won't be returning to their community when it opens in two weeks. His kids have settled well in Winnipeg, they're doing better in school and they like what the city has to offer, a common experience for many transplanted Aboriginal families.

"I chose construction because I like it and I'm good at it. I'm a good worker, I'm reliable and employers see that. I haven't had a problem finding a job in the industry," Hudson says.

With success stories like that, it's clear that the Aboriginal workforce is a resource just waiting to be tapped. ■



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— Desmond Hudson,
Aboriginal worker

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