Hiring and Retaining Aboriginal Apprentices
AN ACTION PLAN FOR EMPLOYERS

Métis • First Nation • Inuit
Funded in part by the Government of Canada’s Workplace Opportunities: Removing Barriers to Equity program.
1.0 Introduction

Training Aboriginal apprentices today ensures your company has the core workforce and leaders required to solidify future contracts and business relationships with Aboriginal communities. Across the country, savvy employers are building strategic partnerships and integrating Aboriginal apprentices into their skilled trades workforces. This guide provides you with their insider experience and tips and strategies for success. Learn from employers in mining, oil and gas, shipbuilding, construction and transportation. Find out about First Nation, Métis and Inuit organizations who offer recruitment and retention supports tailored to meet your needs.

2.0 Hiring Aboriginal Apprentices: The Business Case

A workplace that is inclusive of Aboriginal peoples provides employers with access to a stable and local workforce, supports the positive reputation of the company and creates new business opportunities with Aboriginal communities.

2.1 Skills Shortages

Canada’s shipbuilding, mining and transportation sectors will face workforce challenges related to retirement and general skills shortages:

- Looming retirements are expected to impact the mining industry as “the average age of the mining workforce exceeds 45 years, far above the total economy average of 41 years.” The Mining Industry Human Resource Council estimates that by 2024, 53,000 employees will retire from the sector, representing nearly 25% of the industry’s current workforce.

- The transportation sector is preparing for the loss of workers due to retirement as “more than 40% of drivers are 55 years or older and expected to retire in the next 5 years.” By 2030, the labour shortage in the transportation industry is expected to result in a gap of 26,000 full-year jobs.

- BC’s Occupational Projection Model has identified that “skills gaps are projected for all shipbuilding and repair occupations through 2020.” It is predicted that these gaps will “not be filled without changes in training approaches and/or other workforce strategies.”

Aboriginal communities have a young and growing population. While the non-Aboriginal population of Canada grew by 5.2% between 2006 and 2011, the Aboriginal population grew by 20.1%. Thousands of working age Aboriginal youth will enter the labour market over the next decade. Employers able to attract and retain a diverse workforce will be well-positioned to cope with the changing demographic make-up of the Canadian labour market.
2.2 Local Labour Force

Companies that operate on Aboriginal land, have Impact Benefit Agreements or work in proximity to local Aboriginal communities all need to engage and work effectively with the local Aboriginal labour force.

Aboriginal communities are located in close proximity to current and future development sites. The Mining Association of Canada estimates that “approximately 1,200 Aboriginal communities are located within 200 kilometers of some 180 producing mines and more than 2,500 active exploration properties.” Aboriginal peoples make up approximately 53% of the population of Canada’s north where “one-quarter of Canada’s discovered and undeveloped resources of conventional petroleum are found.”

By employing the local labour force, employers have access to a stable, local workforce with employees who are acclimatized to local conditions and want to remain near their communities. The cost associated with transporting these employees to work sites is significantly less than those from larger centres.

2.3 Enhance Corporate Reputation and Competitiveness

Hiring and training Aboriginal apprentices and tradespeople in your company will enhance your reputation because shareholders and the general public care about how companies manage their relationships with Aboriginal peoples. According to the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board, “Corporate image and reputation have become important in marketing goods and services, and even in the ability to access certain markets. A positive image with respect to Aboriginal relations can be a significant competitive advantage in the marketplace.”

Employers that build relationships with Aboriginal employees and communities may have greater success securing business deals and contracts as Aboriginal peoples gain control over territory through land claim settlements.

“The Aboriginal communities we work with have regularly expressed an interest in employment and contracting. As a result, we were motivated as a company to develop a strategy to assist with this. The strategy extends beyond apprenticeships, but supports the corporate culture that we feel increasingly makes us an attractive employer to communities.”

-Employer Oil and Gas Company
3.0 Strategies for Hiring and Retaining Aboriginal Apprentices and Tradespeople

The business case for hiring and retaining Aboriginal apprentices and tradespeople is clear, but how do employers do it successfully? Employers have adopted a variety of strategies, approaches and initiatives to support the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal apprentices and tradespeople. These experienced employers shared their best practices and strategies to help employers like you get started.

3.1 Build Partnerships for Today and Tomorrow

In order to maximize opportunities locally and benefit from the regional labour force, employers need to build long-term relationships with partners and make Aboriginal initiatives a priority. Establishing these partnerships and apprenticeship training programs requires dedication and focus but, given the realities of skills shortages, securing the company’s future workforce is a business imperative. An investment in Aboriginal apprentices will pay off for years to come with a reliable and knowledgeable workforce.

Establishing support from senior company leaders and front-line staff is an important first step. If leaders set the tone and support partnership-building and Aboriginal hires, other staff will embrace diversity as well. Leaders can ease the transition by consulting employees and listening to their concerns. Offering cultural awareness workshops builds inter-cultural understanding.

An employee of one mining company spoke positively of the president’s commitment to Aboriginal initiatives. When the president sends letters of congratulation or encouragement to apprentices who pass or fail their technical training, it has an incredibly positive impact on apprentice attitudes and motivation.

“We believe that the most important aspect of working with Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities is building mutually beneficial relationships.”
-Employer Oil and Gas Company

“Engage with the field or operations side of your business, assess their readiness for Aboriginal employment, and gather feedback or concerns about implementing an Aboriginal hiring initiative. They will drive the process and policies day-to-day (on the apprentice side), so it’s very crucial to have their buy-in and understanding of the importance to the business very early on.”
-Employer Oil and Gas Company
“To have a successful Aboriginal employment strategy, you have to think long-term and measure successes incrementally.”

-Employer Oil and Gas Company
“Ensure that Aboriginal awareness training is mandatory across your business with high-level messaging from your senior leadership on why the training is mandatory and why the Aboriginal hiring initiative is important to the core of the business.”

- Employer Oil and Gas Company

Reaching out to local Aboriginal organizations is also important. These organizations offer a variety of services, such as helping you prepare and find qualified candidates, learn about local culture and access financial supports.

As a part of the partnership-building process, companies may need to address community concerns about how environmental concerns will be addressed. A formal contract between companies and local Aboriginal communities that outlines the impacts of the project, the responsibilities of both parties and the community benefits may be required.

3.2 Create Awareness about Skilled Trades Careers

To make your apprenticeship program and recruitment strategy successful, consider creating awareness about apprenticeship and skilled trades careers by visiting local high schools. Outlining educational requirements helps students realize they need to stay in school and obtain a diploma to prepare for an apprenticeship.

Supporting shop classes at the high school and “try a trade” opportunities gives students a chance to explore the trades “hands-on.” It is important to involve the community in these exploration activities. Offering worksite tours or student workplace programs are additional ways employers can engage students and community members.

Some companies offer incentives to encourage individuals to pursue high school and post-secondary education. One company provides each Grade 12 graduate covered by the Impact Benefit Agreement with a free laptop as a reward for staying in school. Scholarships are also awarded to full-time students enrolled in post-secondary, including apprenticeship programs.

Adults can also be engaged in learning about careers in the skilled trades. When company representatives go to a community, they should bring information about job availability, wages, educational requirements and the application process. Presentations about the realities of camp life, social issues, money management, employer expectations, time management and career paths within the company provide a realistic overview of

“Working with Aboriginal people and communities is all about relationship-building. Don’t assume you know what’s best for the community. Ask them for advice in implementing or even developing your Aboriginal policies and programs.”

- Employer Oil and Gas Company
what a career in the skilled trades entails. Employers should make it clear if the job requires a driver’s license. Potential candidates may need to address shortcomings before they can apply for jobs.

Family members may need to be engaged in these discussions. Some companies offer programs where partners discuss the fly-in and fly-out schedule, decide how they will manage the household and each other’s expectations.

A list of accredited and non-accredited programs should be made available to ensure that individuals pursue education and training that will be recognized by the provincial/territorial apprenticeship authorities.

“It is important that when creating and implementing polices/practices, that an organization works with its community partners and have them involved in the process. This allows for the organization to learn about the Aboriginal culture, diversity, etc. and allows for the community partners to learn about the organization and their upcoming recruitment needs. The partnership should be continuous to allow for both parties to work together for recruiting and skills development.”

-Employer Shipbuilding Company

“Ask for advice from Chiefs and Councils, elders and/or youth committees about the best ways to engage with a community on employment or capacity-building.”

-Employer Oil and Gas Company

“Build a relationship by stepping out of your comfort zone: go to the communities, meet the elders and students, attend Pow Wows and other celebrations.”

-Employer Power Company
Mining Rocks Earth Science Program

As a part of this program, Grade 10 students engage with “hands-on” learning activities to find out about mineral exploration and mining careers. Employers support the program. For more information see: [www.pdac.ca/mining-matters/aboriginal-programs/mining-rocks-earth-science-programs](http://www.pdac.ca/mining-matters/aboriginal-programs/mining-rocks-earth-science-programs).

Career awareness materials about apprenticeship and the skilled trades, such as guides dispelling myths and outlining the apprenticeship process, promotional videos and presentations, are available for employers to use in their own career awareness efforts. Go to the Careers in Trades website to learn more: [www.careersintrades.ca](http://www.careersintrades.ca).

3.3 Recruit Candidates

Employers provided these tips and strategies for recruiting Aboriginal candidates:

- Attend job fairs
- Go to Pow Wows and other community events and discuss available jobs
- Make announcements on local radio stations
- Post jobs at high schools
- Create posters that show someone working and the statement “this could be you” and/or posters where team work and mentoring are emphasized
- Develop targeted recruitment materials that outline Aboriginal policies and practices at the company
- Encourage teachers and trainers at the local alternative learning centres to bring students to the company

If these strategies aren’t working, you may want to consider these alternative strategies:

- Develop contacts within the community and when a job is available reach out to your contact who will identify interested individuals
- Post the job internally for three weeks before it goes external and encourage existing employees to apply for apprenticeship postings
- Offer individuals opportunities to work as labourers first. If an individual proves themselves in that role, transition him or her to other positions within the company
Companies also formalize the commitment to hiring Aboriginal peoples in contracting and procurement policies. They make an effort to award contracts and subcontracts to qualified Aboriginal firms for each phase of a project. Others implement a “best effort policy” that stipulates that contractors make efforts to hire Aboriginal employees.

Once you have selected a candidate, be sensitive to cultural differences during the interview process. Keep in mind some candidates may be shy or have difficulty articulating or marketing their skill sets. Ask candidates to provide examples of when they learned from others. Learning as a community endeavour is a key learning principle in many Aboriginal cultures and this question may resonate with the candidates.

Employers discussed the difficulties new apprentices face navigating complex apprenticeship systems, including the paperwork that must be completed prior to becoming a registered apprentice. Employers advise helping new hires with this process and explaining all technical training requirements upfront.

3.4 Outline Expectations

Once hired, apprentices and tradespeople must understand the rules and expectations from the beginning. In addition to the contract that an apprentice signs with the province or territory, one employer asks apprentices to sign a contract with the company that outlines expectations. Reviewing and signing this contract helps instill a sense of accountability and responsibility. Another employer explains the technical training requirements and expects that apprentices must make an effort to do their assignments and pass their technical training. Apprentices cannot remain in the program if they fail two levels of technical training.

Employers also put in place clear rules about missed flights, so that employees understand the consequences if flights are missed.

“Be open and honest with Aboriginal employees when discussing difficult subjects like expectations, performance management [and] any issues of absenteeism.”

-Employer Oil and Gas Company
3.5 Prepare Candidates for Success

Preparing candidates for success is another crucial step to implementing a successful apprenticeship program with Aboriginal candidates. When one or two Aboriginal apprentices improve their skills and are successful, it encourages additional hires and supports future programming within the company.

Assessments, academic upgrading and exam supports may be required so the apprentice can complete their technical training and pass the multiple-choice certification examination. Supports should be offered throughout the life cycle of the apprenticeship to avoid apprentice isolation and frustration. Here are examples of how to improve basic skills and facilitate workplace learning:

- Assess the candidate’s skills to understand their strengths and weaknesses and target the training to meet their specific needs.
- Implement aptitude tests. One company evaluates potential apprentice skills in reading comprehension, math skills, mechanical aptitude and writing levels. The success rate for apprenticeship completions is 80%, much higher than it was prior to the introduction of the aptitude test.
- Offer opportunities for improvement. At one company, individuals who are not ready to enter an apprenticeship, but who are interested in the trades, are able to work in an entry-level position for a year. During this time they receive support, including time in the classroom to develop their math and English skills. This employee may become a future apprentice candidate.
- Make the training accessible. Provide access to an adult educator onsite or tutors to provide help with math and reading. Apprentices or tradespeople may not travel for upgrading courses so the training should be accessible.
- Give employees the opportunity to obtain their General Equivalency Diploma onsite.
- Ensure the support is structured and systematic, especially for apprentice technical training and exam preparation. One company requires that apprentices must spend time working with a workplace educator every month.
- Essential skills support must build on and reinforce the skills required in a progressive manner. Training should include practical and theoretical components.

3.6 Facilitate Effective Workplace Communication

Different cultural standards and practices may impact employee behaviour at the workplace and explain employee absences. Being sensitive to these differences will help you facilitate effective workplace communication, which is crucial to a positive apprentice and journeyperson mentor relationship.

A desire to avoid confrontation or make negative comments about others may prevent employees from speaking up. Make sure your employees have a chance to voice their concerns in a manner in which they feel comfortable.

Co-workers may be considered a part of the family or community and when a co-worker leaves this may be considered a significant loss. Sensitivity around these relationships may be required.

Ensure you communicate with your employees about the rules for taking time off. Employees may want time off to participate in cultural and traditional events like hunting expeditions and multiple-day funerals. Employees should be encouraged to specify the days off that will be required in advance. Employers can implement Cultural Day Leaves to accommodate these employees. Absences may also be explained because the employee was dealing with a problem at home. One mining company delivered a pilot program to reduce this type of work absence by encouraging better communication among partners, especially when the employees are working fly-in and fly-out schedules and are absent for extended periods.

“Most of the time, when we see an Inuk leaving his or her job, some communication problems occurred. Sometimes, it is a joke that didn’t seem so funny, sometimes it is a misunderstanding about some instructions. If both parties can communicate properly... they will be able to work together in an even better way...”

- Makivik Construction
“When an individual is successful in the workplace, it can bring more employers to the table that are willing to hire and train Aboriginal peoples. This creates a positive domino effect; the greater the success in the workplace, the more likely employers are to hire Aboriginal peoples, the more opportunities there are for individuals, families and communities.”

- College Educator
Hiring an Aboriginal liaison coordinator facilitates workplace communication. The liaison coordinator ensures there is clear communication amongst employees and with community members. These individuals can develop the policies and practices related to hiring Aboriginal employees, ensure employees do not miss flights and manage cultural awareness committees.

Onsite job coaches may also help. Job coaches make sure that Aboriginal employees have the information and support that they need. The employee has someone to talk to about their problems and the coach can help resolve issues of misinterpretation and act as a mediator if workplace conflicts arise.

Another way to improve workplace communication is to teach supervisors and forepersons how to identify culturally-based behaviour and react appropriately. One company conducts regular performance reviews with forepersons based on how they interact with Aboriginal employees. Forepersons are motivated to do well in this area as it is linked to their performance.

Educating journeypersons about Aboriginal culture and learning models to support better connections with their apprentices is another strategy to facilitate productive mentoring relationships.

## Linking Apprenticeship and Aboriginal Learning Principles at the Workplace

Employers can incorporate Aboriginal learning perspectives into their training to facilitate integration, team cohesiveness and workplace learning and communication.

There are learning principles common to First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures that are based on a rich history of culture and tradition. Learning is a continuous process where “knowledge and wisdom, acquired through a lifetime of learning are transmitted to younger learners in a process that repeats itself with successive generations.”

In traditional education, “teaching by parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles helped young people build skills and knowledge.” Elders play a significant role in the transmission of knowledge as they “teach responsibilities and relationships among family, community and creation, reinforcing intergenerational connections and identities.”

These perceptions of learning align with the apprenticeship training approach where learning by doing is the core part of the program and apprentices are trained by a team including employers, teachers, trainers and the journeyperson mentor. Emphasizing the similarities and links will resonate with Aboriginal employees, making workplace training more effective.
3.7 Support Mentoring and Positive Role Model Relationships

Although journeypersons mentor apprentices on-the-job and teach them the trade, employers suggest having additional mentors for Aboriginal apprentices and tradespeople.

One company hires site elders through a competitive application process and with local leadership approval. These site elders offer critical support to employees and facilitate retention at the workplace. In order to be effective, the site elders must have a clear mandate and role that is distinct from human resources staff.

Another company, at the request of contractors, has mentors come to a site for one week to provide apprentice supports. The key to the success of this program is the connection that the mentors have with the apprentices, which is built over time. The employer says these mentors support skills development and productivity.

One Aboriginal organization delivers training in the Aboriginal community, followed by training in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. By training in the community first, relationships between the participants and instructors are created and then reinforced at the Yellowknife training session. Attempts are made to have at least two members of each community attend training at the same time. The familiarity supports the success of the employee because they have people they know and with whom they feel comfortable.

One company connects strong Aboriginal employees with new employees. The purpose is to promote positive role models.

3.8 Reward Achievement

Rewarding achievement is important for the individual and the community. Incentives reward apprentices who reach key milestones. A mining company reimburses apprentices for the financial costs associated with their apprenticeship program as long as the apprentice passes each level of their technical training. A construction company gives financial awards to individuals who have completed 1,000 hours of training. Recipients travel to various communities to be celebrated and may appear in the local news.

“We have found that it is all about incremental success and being diligent with the supports to the trainees as well as to the coaches who will be working with the trainees.”

-Employer Oil and Gas Company
“Help build champions internally and externally. Aboriginal communities need these people to help them be successful in industry. Give them recognition, support them in any way possible, offer training to help them grow and provide funding to help them implement their programs. Create a win-win situation.”

- Employee Power Company
4.0 Ready to Take the Next Step?

If you are ready to take the next step, there are resources available to support you. Apprenticeship administrators who work for the provincial and territorial apprenticeship authorities can help guide employers through the registration process and ensure they are appropriately documenting apprentice skills and hours. Tax credits and wage subsidies may be available. Check out the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum’s Skilled Trades Network for financial supports: http://caf-fca.org/skilled-trades-network/.

Across the country, Aboriginal training and employment organizations deliver a wide range of programs. Services vary depending on the organization and region, but may include:

- Career counselling and mentoring based on employer input
- Job readiness workshops and training or pre-employment courses that prepare individuals for success in the workplace
- Pre-screening candidates for employers, including reference checks
- Providing employers with candidates to interview that meet employer criteria
- Workshops and onsite training, including industry-approved safety training
- Cultural awareness programs, access to elders and job coaching
- Financial supports for Aboriginal peoples to support further education and training, including money for tuition, courses and tools
- Wage subsidies for employers
- Follow-up support for both the employee and the employer

5.0 Conclusion

These tips and strategies have been tried and tested by employers like yourself. They stand to help position your company to tackle skills shortages, attract additional business and access the skilled and productive workforce you need.

“Apprenticeship programs help northern residents gain the skills, knowledge and hands-on experience needed to excel in their path toward journeyperson status. Strengthening the northern and Aboriginal leadership in our company is a priority. We have a robust program for working with our Aboriginal employees to provide the training needed for positions of higher responsibility within the company.”

- Dominion Diamond Corporation
References


Thank you to all the employers and stakeholders from across the country who shared their experiences with the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, including Dominion Diamond Corporation and Makivik Construction. Your contribution is appreciated.