



Aboriginal Workforce Symposium links business to largest source of untapped talent

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Business and First Nations leaders, government officials and Aboriginal service providers gathered at a Calgary Chamber of Commerce Symposium on March 25 and 26 to discuss how to improve labour market outcomes of Aboriginal people and fulfill businesses' need for a local and reliable workforce.

"Our members recognize the importance of education and skills development to prepare for the next economic surge," said Geoff Pradella, Symposium moderator and Vice-President of Public & Government Affairs with the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. "In a recent survey, they rated 'workforce development' as a top priority, and more effective engagement of underrepresented sources of talent as a significant component."

A major research report released by the Calgary Chamber of Commerce at the Symposium found that increasing Aboriginal employment rates to levels similar to the non-Aboriginal population may provide 14,000 additional workers to the provincial economy.

"We can't lose sight of the big picture as we read the day-to-day headlines," stated Pradella. "Economic expansion and demographic changes will continue to create job opportunities in our province, and Aboriginal people are a key source of talent that can be found locally. In fact, they are the largest untapped labour force in Alberta."

The Chamber's research report *Completing the Circle* offered four priority actions themes to engage this workforce:

- Workplace preparation and support
- Align business, government and Aboriginal priorities
- Skills development and business capacity building
- Create a single access point for Aboriginal employment services

These themes were reflected throughout the Symposium. Presenters from Aboriginal service providers discussed the importance of cross-cultural awareness, both for Aboriginal employees and for the companies they work for. Expert speakers suggested that those seeking business opportunities with the Aboriginal community should explain how their project meets the vision of the community, and if that vision does not exist, then business people must take a collaborative approach to help the Aboriginal community define it.

Education was also a major theme, with all presenters stressing that skills development is the most effective strategy to improve economic opportunities.

Keynote addresses from Treaty 7 Grand Chief Charles Weasel Head and Peter Manywounds from the Tsuu T'ina Nation showcased the exciting economic development initiatives on-reserve. In June, Tsuu T'ina band members will vote on a proposal to transfer land to the province for the southwest ring road, providing access to a new business park that will create more than 15,000 jobs.



As a sign of the Symposium's relevance, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Minister Chuck Strahl made a special lunchtime address to unveil the government's plan to invest in skills training and provide additional housing funding in Alberta.

"This Symposium showcased the power of collaboration, where business, government and the Aboriginal community all work together to improve economic opportunities and enhance quality of life," said Pradella. "I hope this Symposium serves as an enabler - for businesses to ensure the Aboriginal community is a vital part of their human resources strategy; for businesses to partner with the Aboriginal community on economic development issues; and for Aboriginal service providers to connect with the business community."

The Chamber plans to create an online site for all Symposium-related information.

The Symposium was made possible through support from the Province of Alberta and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.