



## We can't afford to waste talent

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Just a few short months ago, there was much hand-wringing.

Alberta Employment and Immigration was predicting the province needed more than 93,000 hard-working adults to keep the province's economy booming through the next decade. Calgary employers consistently rated the labour shortage as their top priority and much ado was made about the need for more bodies to get the work done.

Then the global recession hit.

Companies quietly started handing out pink slips. Suddenly, the few employers hiring were inundated by a plethora of resumes, many from outstanding applicants with graduate degrees and excellent employment credentials. Consternation descended among all who had not previously ridden the notorious boom-and-bust cycles of international commerce.

With great certainty we can predict the hand-wringing will resume. The economy will pick up, boomers will retire and companies will search for new workers.

Only this time, we promise, it will be different.

The business community, having wisely learned its lessons, will spend the downturn shrewdly searching for emerging talent, then hire and train these gifted folks. But where will they come from? It turns out the largest and youngest untapped labour force in Alberta is the Aboriginal community.

Today, the Talent Pool Development Society and the Calgary Chamber of Commerce jointly released their first Aboriginal labour market report entitled, *Completing the Circle: Realities, Challenges and Strategies for Improving Aboriginal Labour Market Outcomes*.

There is a strong business case for employing Aboriginal people. Their employment rates are lower than the population at large and this translates into a pool of 14,000 new staff members already rooted in the province, who can provide firms with a stable and skilled workforce.

Businesses can achieve diversity in the workforce by accessing the growing Aboriginal market for products and services and gain internal competitive knowledge on how to advertise and sell to this segment.

Engaging Aboriginal people in the workplace helps companies develop a capacity and reputation for corporate social responsibility. Aboriginal employment programs help gain regulator and public support for projects, alleviating avoidable delays and cost escalations.

Canadians want to reduce support service costs to the Aboriginal population and improve their employment outcomes. This increases income tax revenues, decreases excess government spending on remedial health and social support programs and lowers Canada's personal and corporate tax burden.



The Talent Pool and the Chamber's report recommend a pathway forward:

- Align the priorities, values and interests of business, the provincial government and the Aboriginal communities to understand the objectives of each group.
- Co-ordinate services and ensure a single access point within the Calgary region to link prospective Aboriginal job-seekers with employers.
- Introduce accessible cross-cultural awareness training to small and medium-sized companies while developing pre-employment training for Aboriginal people to better connect each to the other.
- Use e-learning, high school upgrading, literacy and skills training programs to improve Aboriginal education levels to meet their needs as employees and the goals of entrepreneurs and the business community.

While we all hope this recession is short-lived, the smart and prudent businesses will strategically plan how to weather the storm and position their companies for success. Few can argue with the plan to develop a strong and talented workforce, Aboriginal people included, to make Calgary the economic engine of Canada.