

Cross-Cultural Employer-Employee Issues

Opportunity Report

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Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse**

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Introduction

Anyone dealing with labour market issues in northern Alberta has heard stories of conflicts between aboriginal workers and non-aboriginal employers. Often, these seem to be based on miscommunication or misunderstanding. One side does not understand the needs or interests of the other. While similar issues do arise between employers and employees of the same background, cultural differences can make them harder to prevent or resolve. These conflicts play a role in the high rates of unemployment in many aboriginal communities.

This report takes a look at the most common forms of conflict and at what the Clearinghouse partner colleges can do to help both sides avoid, and deal with, them. The essential problems, and the colleges' possible contributions to their solutions, centre on two main points; awareness on the part of employers and preparedness on the part of employees.

Please be aware that this report does deal with fairly broad generalities. Many aboriginal workers and non-aboriginal employers work well together, and many aboriginal workers thrive in the broader workforce. This report looks at the issues that do arise and that can cause workplace conflicts.

This report is based on conversations, formal and informal, with a number of people working in positions related to aboriginal employment, as well as on previous Clearinghouse reports and the proceedings from the NADC conference, Together Toward Tomorrow (February, 1997).

Employer Expectations

The Together Toward Tomorrow conference was designed to bring oil and gas companies together with aboriginal contractors, sub-contractors and workers in the Cold Lake region. Many common themes came out in sessions dealing with employers' expectations of their employees. In general, oilfield employers look for:

- commitment to the employer
- punctuality
- persistence - the person who shows up early every morning looking for work will eventually get a job.
- safety training
- team work
- willingness to follow company rules, including safety rules and drug and alcohol policies

Other Clearinghouse reports have also found that a person's attitude toward their job is probably the most important factor in their success.

What is important to note here is that these expectations hold true for all employees, regardless of their background. Most employers in this field say that they hold all employees up to the same standards.

Common Issues

The fact that many employers do look at and treat all workers, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, the same can be a source of conflict. Different cultural backgrounds often result in different interpretation of ideas. A career counsellor told a story that illustrates this well:

Several aboriginal job-seekers taking an employment preparation course were filling in a questionnaire asking them to describe their personal qualities. When asked to rate their level of loyalty they all rated themselves at the high end of the scale. A local employer who was involved in the session questioned this, suggesting that the people from the

group who had worked for him in the past had shown him no loyalty. In particular, he said that they never even called if they couldn't make it in to work.

The employer assumed that "loyalty" meant loyalty to him, the employer. For most of the people answering the questionnaire, their first loyalty was to their families, then to their communities. The employers were farther down the list of those to whom loyalty was owed. Understanding this difference would help both employers and employees to avoid conflicts.

One interviewee explained cultural differences quite well when he stated that people coming from different backgrounds will respond differently to the same stimuli. This means that a set of incentives that motivates non-aboriginal employees may have little meaning for their aboriginal co-workers. This difference in cultures extends to learning styles as well. Aboriginal people tend to be private learners, taking time to digest new information before acting on it. By contrast, non-aboriginal learners tend to speak and act immediately, processing new ideas in a more public manner. Awareness of these differences can help employers to assign new employees to the jobs best suited to their particular talents.

In addition to cultural differences, employers must also be aware of education and training levels. As both aboriginal and non-aboriginal contacts pointed out, aboriginal people, on average, have lower academic skill levels than non-aboriginals. High school graduates from aboriginal communities may not have as strong reading skills as those from other backgrounds. This, combined with the differences in learning styles means that new aboriginal employees may take longer to learn job skills. By recognizing and addressing these training issues up front, employers can help to prevent them from resulting in conflicts and firings.

Another aspect of the training issue is the availability of qualified workers for some positions. Many companies, like Suncor, try to hire a certain percentage of their employees from nearby aboriginal communities. One problem that they run into is the lack of enough aboriginal people who have the academic qualifications that they require, especially for positions requiring university education.

The issue of training is central to the preparedness of aboriginal workers for the non-aboriginal work world. Those seeking post-secondary education have to be prepared for the demands of their chosen programs. This requires realistic assessments of their current skills and may involve upgrading some skills prior to beginning post-secondary. As one contact from an earlier Clearinghouse report on aboriginal training needs pointed out, it does a person no good to enter a training program if they are not ready to succeed. Once prepared for success, any student would do well to talk to potential employers to make sure that the program that they plan to take will give them the skills needed for the job they want.

Another aspect of the preparedness issue is the would-be employee's awareness of the workplace culture. Just as employers should recognize where employees come from, the employees have to know the world that they are entering. They have to be aware of the importance of time and timeliness for most businesses. As several contacts pointed out, employees have to understand the expectations that employers have regarding showing up for work or calling in when sick or otherwise unable to work. It may help for employees who have grown up on a reserve or settlement to learn more about non-aboriginal society in general in order to place the workplace culture within a broader context.

The Role of Colleges

The Clearinghouse partner institutions may be able to help both sides deal with these issues and avoid conflict. Given the number of non-aboriginal employers in the region, most of whom are in a position to hire aboriginal workers, there may be a substantial market for short training programs aimed at them. These courses could teach supervisors and human resource personnel about the culture of the local aboriginal groups and about how those may differ from that of the broader society. Possible topics include concepts of time and how they differ (dealing with the idea, or myth, of "Indian time"), and styles of learning in different cultures.

On the other side, colleges can help both aboriginal and non-aboriginal students avoid future workplace problems in several ways. First of all, realistic assessments of the educational levels of incoming students would set the stage for academic success. Those whose skills are not sufficient for post-secondary work should be encouraged to improve those skills at the outset.

Secondly, any employment-focussed program should include significant training in the culture of the workplace. Students must be aware of employers' expectations. As mentioned above, this could include some education about the broader society as well for the sake of context. What may also be helpful is for employers and employees to take at least part of their cross-cultural training together, allowing for a direct exchange of ideas.

Thirdly, colleges that have connections with employers may be able to keep track of their graduates' progress within the workplace, offering support and, perhaps, additional training as needed. This is an extension of the traditional role of colleges but it may also be useful in fostering ongoing relationships with industry and in establishing credibility for their graduates if employers see that their investment in a new employee is backed up by a college.

Summary

Clearinghouse colleges are well-positioned to play significant roles in helping aboriginal workers and their non-aboriginal employers to deal with the cross-cultural issues that often lead to conflict in the workplace. Training programs aimed at employers can help them to recognize and address the needs and the strengths of their aboriginal employees and appropriate pre-employment training will help aboriginal people adjust to the culture of the broader work world.

The combination of these efforts could significantly increase the rates of retention of aboriginal employees.

Sources

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