

# Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs

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## **Main points**

In this chapter, we report on a provincial government program whose focus is to build a workforce in Saskatchewan where Aboriginal people are represented at all occupational levels in proportion to their provincial population.

Saskatchewan's youth represents about 15% of Saskatchewan's overall population. One in five Saskatchewan young people is Aboriginal. The proportion of Aboriginal people relative to the entire population is increasing. Yet, Aboriginal people remain under-represented in the Saskatchewan workforce. Employers face the loss of retiring "baby boomers" from the Saskatchewan workforce. This makes it critical that employers get ready to employ Aboriginal people and that Aboriginal people are ready for work.

Through the Aboriginal Employment Development Program, the Department engages employers, unions, and Aboriginal groups within the public and private sector to achieve the common objective of increasing the participation of Aboriginal people in the workforce. Using limited resources, it coaches and advises these partners on practical ways to reach this common objective. It builds relationships with its partners to help change attitudes toward Aboriginal people and remove barriers within the workplace.

At October 2002, in common with many government programs, the Department needs to improve its reporting on how the program contributed to increased participation of Aboriginal people within the Saskatchewan workforce. In addition, it needs to take steps to ensure the information it reports is consistent and comparable.

We note that after our audit, the Government announced on March 31, 2003 a number of measurable targets that will help the Department evaluate and demonstrate the results of this Program.

## Introduction

Aboriginal people are under-represented in the Saskatchewan workforce.<sup>1</sup> They have a higher rate of unemployment than the general population.

Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan are primarily First Nations or Métis people and in 2001, made up 13.5% of the population.<sup>2</sup> In 1999-2000, Aboriginal people represented 6.6% of the workforce of Saskatchewan employers with approved employment equity plans.<sup>3</sup> The proportion of Aboriginal people employed varies in different parts of the province and in different types of workplaces. Also, the proportion of Aboriginal people is increasing relative to the entire Saskatchewan population.

The Department of Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs (Department) recognizes barriers exist that deter the employment of Aboriginal people. These barriers include cultural stereotypes about Aboriginal people as well as employers' and unions' general unfamiliarity with Aboriginal people. Often employers and unions may not know how to find qualified Aboriginal applicants or are not fully aware of the impact of their existing human resource processes on their ability to attract and retain Aboriginal people.

Also, the Department notes that many Aboriginal people seldom know about entry-level job opportunities. Many Aboriginal people need improved awareness of the education and skills required to gain access to those opportunities, and the importance of acquiring those necessary education and skills.

The Department further recognizes that collecting reliable information about workforce participation is challenging. Its collection requires the cooperation of Aboriginal people to volunteer information about their ancestry and work history.

### **Aboriginal Employment Development Program**

In 1995, the Department developed a representative workforce strategy to address the high unemployment rate among Saskatchewan's rapidly

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<sup>1</sup> Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, *2001-2002 Annual Report*.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, 2001 Census.

<sup>3</sup> Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, *Employment Equity Report 1999-2000 (6/2000)*.

growing Aboriginal population. The Department's objective for the representative workforce strategy is to have qualified Aboriginal workers represented in all occupational levels (i.e., entry-level, middle, and senior management) in proportion to their provincial population.

The Department uses various initiatives and programs to work toward the achievement of this long-term objective. The Aboriginal Employment Development Program (Program) is one such program. This Program started in 1992.

The Department designed the Program to take a proactive, integrated, and focused approach to promote Aboriginal training and employment.<sup>4</sup> It uses a community-based approach that involves partners in finding solutions. It invites private and public sector employers, unions, and Aboriginal groups to become partners.

By October 2002, the Department had engaged 39 Saskatchewan partners in this Program. The majority of the employer-partners are in the public sector. These partners employ about 9% of Saskatchewan's total workforce.<sup>5</sup>

The Program, with a staff of three, stimulates societal change by changing attitudes, and measures the extent of that change. It does this incrementally. It engages partners and builds relationships with them to help change attitudes and remove systemic barriers in the workplace.

The Department promotes the benefits of hiring qualified Aboriginal people to employers. It emphasizes hiring Aboriginal people when they are qualified for the job, rather than hiring just to meet employment equity targets.

In addition, the Department works with various Aboriginal groups and unions. It helps them better understand employment opportunities and their responsibility to assist Aboriginal people in pursuing these opportunities.

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<sup>4</sup> Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs, Aboriginal Employment Development Program (8/2002).

<sup>5</sup> Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs, Aboriginal Employment Development Program includes approximately 43,000 employees working at the employer-partners. Statistics Canada, "The Daily" at November 8, 2002 states approximately 489,600 people (seasonally adjusted) were working in Saskatchewan.

## **Audit objective and criteria**

The objective of this audit was to assess whether the Department had adequate processes to facilitate effective partnerships to increase the participation of Aboriginal people in the provincial workforce. This audit focused on the Department's processes used during the period April 1, 2001 to October 31, 2002.

Throughout the audit, we followed The Standards for Assurance Engagements established by The Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Criteria set out the main elements that we look for to evaluate the adequacy of the Department's processes. These criteria focus on the processes with the greatest influence on engaging partners and helping them to be effective. We based the criteria listed in the Exhibit 1 on a review of the literature, including the references listed in this report. The Department agreed with the criteria.

### **Exhibit 1—Criteria to facilitate partnerships**

To adequately facilitate effective partnerships to increase participation of Aboriginal people in the workforce, the Department should have processes to:

1. identify key partnership opportunities
  - document the current employment potential of the Aboriginal workforce
  - document the sectors with employment opportunities
  - identify potential partners
2. design sustainable strategies to engage partners
  - promote expected benefits with potential partners
  - resolve barriers to involve partners
  - establish structures to involve partners
3. formalize clear accountability with partners
  - obtain commitment to increase Aboriginal participation in the workforce
  - confirm in writing the role expected of each partner
  - collaborate to identify measurable objectives
  - jointly evaluate progress toward agreed objectives
4. report progress toward increasing Aboriginal participation in the workforce
  - regularly review progress toward expected results
  - inform Minister about results annually

## Conclusion and recommendations

We conclude that the Department has adequate processes to facilitate effective partnerships to increase the participation of Aboriginal people in the provincial workforce, except for its processes to measure and report progress.

- 1. We recommend that the Department take adequate steps to ensure the information used to evaluate its progress toward increased participation of Aboriginal people in the provincial workforce is consistent and reliable.**
- 2. We recommend that the Department inform the public of its progress in achieving short, mid, and long-term measurable targets that contribute to the increased participation of Aboriginal people in the provincial workforce.**

Subsequent to our audit, the Department reported in March 2003 its 2003-04 expectations for this Program to the public in the Government's Plan for 2003-04. These expectations are a part of the Department's strategic plan and are set out in a measurable way.

The next section sets out our key findings based on the agreed criteria.

## Facilitating partnerships—findings

### Identify partnership opportunities

*We expected the Department to identify partnership opportunities by documenting the sectors with employment opportunities and linking potential employers with the Aboriginal community. We anticipated that the Department would identify potential partners that were ready and able to provide employment opportunities.*

The Department had adequate processes to identify partnership opportunities.

The Department uses public information from Statistics Canada and others to monitor the work-readiness of Aboriginal people. It uses its

involvement on a provincial Aboriginal workforce committee to help identify potential sectors and barriers that deter partners.

To identify sectors where employment is most likely, the Department engages a consulting firm to look for employment opportunities in all sectors. It requires the firm to provide it with written quarterly reports that identify potential partners. It uses these reports to document sectors and employers with employment opportunities.

This consulting firm consistently distributes a standard portfolio of information to potential partners. The portfolio:

- ◆ describes the job-readiness of the Aboriginal community in terms of educational attainment and outlines what is expected of partners.
- ◆ explains that the Aboriginal community can be an additional source of qualified candidates for job vacancies.
- ◆ enables employers to self-evaluate their readiness as partners.

It helps potential partners to decide if they wish to pursue, with the Department, the common objective of increasing Aboriginal participation in the workforce.

## **Design sustainable strategies to engage partners**

*We anticipated that the Department would promote the benefits of partnerships. We expected the Department to help partners identify and resolve barriers. We anticipated that the Department would develop structures to coordinate communication and action among partners.*

Partners make a formal commitment to work toward increasing Aboriginal employment in their workplace. Through written agreements, each partner and the Department set out mutually agreed areas for action (see Exhibit 2.) To sustain the commitment of new and existing partners, the Department consistently uses six strategies. Most of these strategies include the direct involvement of the Department as a coach or advisor.

**Exhibit 2 – Areas for Action**

- Most agreements include the following areas for action:
1. Work together in a bilateral or multilateral process that promotes fairness, equity, trust, respect, dignity, and consistency;
  2. Work with the Aboriginal community, unions, and employees;
  3. Develop programs to facilitate constructive cultural and race relations;
  4. Promote Aboriginal employment and career development;
  5. Build links to the Aboriginal labour force;
  6. Develop programs promoting employment opportunities for Aboriginal people; and
  7. Build business development initiatives for further employment opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

First, the Department uses its package of written information (i.e., potential-partner portfolio) along with consistently enthusiastic verbal presentations to promote the benefits of partnership. This package provides each partner with possible solutions to common barriers that limit employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. The use of the same presenters assists the Department in providing partners with strong consistent messages.

Second, the Department encourages each partner to use a steering committee. The steering committee oversees activities related to achieving a representative workforce as set out in its partnership agreement. Committee members typically represent the partner's managers, human resource personnel, and related union representatives. The Department regularly attends committee meetings to encourage progress and help resolve issues or barriers.

Third, the Department strongly encourages each partner to assign staff to coordinate activities specifically related to increasing the proportion of Aboriginal people in the workforce. Most often, larger employers assign a coordinator. These individuals work with the steering committee. The Department establishes a working relationship with each coordinator and informally shares advice and the experiences of other partners.

Fourth, the Department encourages each employer-partner to develop a written action plan that sets out what it will do to increase the proportion of Aboriginal people in its workforce. It encourages the steering

<sup>6</sup> Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs, Aboriginal Employment Development Program (8/02). <http://www.iaa.gov.sk.ca/aboriginal/html/RI/Programs/AEDP.htm>

committee to review and approve this plan. Most employer-partners take two years to develop an action plan.

Fifth, it encourages each partner to address barriers within the workplace. For example, the Department recognizes that a common barrier to employment is that many employers do not know how the educational background of Aboriginal people will fit into their organization. The Department encourages each employer-partner to formally assess the education and skills of each position (i.e., workforce audit). This assessment may recommend the number of positions in each job category for which the partner could seek Aboriginal applicants.

For barriers that extend beyond the employer-partners, the Department works with the related group to address those barriers. For example, if the barrier relates to inability of Aboriginal people to access training, it works with the Department of Learning and with related training institutions. If the barrier relates to provisions in collective agreements<sup>7</sup> that may discourage or limit Aboriginal workers from gaining access to employment opportunities, it works with the related union and alerts the Department of Labour to these provisions.

Sixth, when the Department notes that partners face circumstances that prevent them from employing Aboriginal people, the Department provides some funding. It funds specific activities at partners such as cultural awareness training, coordinators, or workforce audits. The nature and extent of funding depends on the Department's assessment of the barriers the partner faces.

The Department's approach of direct involvement with partners is sustainable with the existing modest number of partners. The Department may need to modify its approach if it is successful in attracting a significant number of partners.

### **Formalize clear accountability with partners**

*We anticipated the Department would confirm partners' roles and to require written progress reports from partners. We expected the*

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<sup>7</sup> For example, provisions that require internal advertising of vacant positions.

*Department to encourage partners to commit resources to increase Aboriginal participation in the workforce. We expected the Department and its partners to jointly evaluate progress toward measurable objectives that included both activities and results.*

The Department has adequate processes to formalize clear accountability with partners. It could improve the processes used to jointly evaluate progress.

The Minister signs the partnership agreement with each partner. Typically, senior officials of the partner sign the agreement. When possible, the Department makes the signing of the agreement a public event (e.g., news release, ceremony). In a second document, the Department describes the role it expects of its partners.

The expectations the Department places on its partners are consistent with its role as coach, facilitator, and advisor. It recognizes that it requires the cooperation and commitment of its partners to make progress in this area. Thereby, it takes a collaborative approach to facilitate necessary change.

Partnership agreements require “co-monitoring” and “co-evaluation”. The agreements encourage partners to invest time and energy to change the workforce environment. In particular, the partners commit to addressing barriers that impede the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal employees. In addition, the agreements encourage partners to develop action plans setting out initiatives designed to facilitate Aboriginal participation in their own workforce.

Shortly after signing each agreement, the Department encourages each employer-partner to gather information on the number of Aboriginal employees on staff. This information provides a starting point for each employer-partner. Some employer-partners gather this information sooner than others do. For other partners such as unions, the provisions of the collective agreements and key human resource policies provide the starting point to help measure future progress.

Capturing and gathering of this information as soon as possible after signing of the agreement is important. It helps both the partner and the Department determine if the Program’s activities contribute to desired

changes in the workplace and to the hiring of more employees that are Aboriginal.

Through periodic meetings, the Department and its partners monitor progress and identify actions to overcome barriers. In 2002, monitoring and evaluation focused on activities completed (e.g., changes in human resource processes, number of cultural awareness training days, number of Aboriginal people hired in a certain period). For some partners, meeting minutes capture the results of the evaluations. For others, the results of the evaluation are not formally documented.

Documenting and sharing the results of periodic evaluations can help both partners and the Department readily demonstrate their progress over the short, mid, and long term. Overcoming the barriers and preparing the workforce for increased participation takes time. To help sustain the necessary commitment of all parties, it is important to clearly identify and share progress achieved with all affected parties.

## **Report progress toward increasing Aboriginal participation in the workforce**

*We expected the Department to regularly review progress toward its objectives by assessing the ability of each partnership to achieve its goals; analyzing and combining the results of individual partnerships; and comparing the combined results within a provincial context. We anticipated that the Department would compare the combined results over time against the Department's expectations. We also expected this information to be shared with the Minister and for summary information to be shared with the public.*

At October 2002, the Department did not have adequate processes to adequately report the Program's contribution toward the long-term expected result of increasing Aboriginal participation in the workforce.

The Department combines the data obtained from its partners for its regular reports to the Minister and to the public. Each of the employer-partners annually reports the number of Aboriginal people hired within the year (e.g., April to March, January to December). The partners also annually report the number of Aboriginal people employed as of March

31<sup>st</sup> each year. The Department requests its partners to break down this information by full-time, part-time, and casual employees.

The Department needs to know how the partners collect and measure the information reported. Given the voluntary nature of the Program, the Department can not expect partners to design their data collection systems to meet its information needs.

Data definitions provide a mechanism to identify information that was measured on a different basis. Defining key terms such as “hired” could include setting out the minimum length of employment to classify an employee as “hired” in the year. The definition would need to allow for casual and part-time work (e.g., fighting forest fires).

As yet, the Department does not provide its partners with definitions for key terms. Providing partners with its definitions would enable partners to determine if they measure data on a similar basis. If not, they can tell the Department how they measure the data reported. With this information, the Department could then make the necessary adjustments to ensure the data it reports is consistent, accurate, and comparable.

On its web site and in annual reports, the Department consistently reports the total number of partnerships signed since 1995, and the total number of Aboriginal people hired since 1995.

At October 2002, it had not set out what results it expected the Program to achieve over the short, mid, and long-term. Measurable expectations would help the Department to better assess and monitor its overall progress toward its long-term objective of increased participation of Aboriginal people in the workplace.

## Summary

The increased participation of Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan’s workforce is critical to the long-term success of Saskatchewan. Incremental steps that help workplaces to be ready for an increased number of Aboriginal employees and that help Aboriginal people to be ready for increased opportunities for employment are important. We look forward to the Department showing how its actions and activities contribute to the achievement of these expected results.

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