
Best Practices in Aboriginal Workforce Development

A Literature Review

Our aim in this review is to identify and analyze literature relevant to the design, implementation, and evaluation of Connecting Aboriginals to Manufacturing (CAM) as a workforce development pilot project.

We examine available literature for evidence of best practices in the elements of CAM. There is a vast literature on workforce development as an approach; the literature specifically on Aboriginal workforce development is limited but growing in recent years, originating almost entirely in Canada and Australia. A few studies provide general overviews based on both literature reviews and primary research (Dockery and Milsom 2007; Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009a; Harrison and Lindsay 2009); these have been particularly useful for our review. Almost all of the studies we have identified can be classed as “grey literature,” that is, working papers and reports by research groups, foundations, government departments, parliamentary committees, chambers of commerce, industry associations, and suchlike, rather than academic books and articles.

We have organized the findings around the major elements of CAM’s “continuum of success factors,” as follows.

Effective Aboriginal workforce development programs are holistic in design

Workforce development is an approach to economic development that has evolved in several OECD countries over the past two decades (Giguère 2008). The central feature of this approach is its recognition of the need for programs that address all significant barriers, and engage all available assets in a community or region, in order to achieve successful labour market outcomes – successful from the points of view both of employers and of employees. From the employers’ perspective, the aim is to recruit, develop, and retain a suitably skilled, reliable workforce. For the employee, success is defined as stable employment in an inclusive workplace with a living wage and opportunities for career advancement. Achieving these outcomes demands more than vocational training and/or job placement services, important as these elements of a strategy may be. Experience has shown that to be successful a program may also need to attend to a wide range of other needs and issues of prospective employees, notably personal supports such as child care and transportation, basic life skills, and mentors in the workplace. It is equally important to engage with employers who are in need of workers for entry-level positions, who offer pathways to more skilled, better-paying positions, and who understand that investing in the development of their workforce will increase their productivity and enhance their competitiveness and profitability (Gilothe 2000; Fleischer 2008; King 2008).

This concept of workforce development aligns well with thinking on Aboriginal learning. As the models for Aboriginal people developed by the Canadian Council on Learning advise, learning is most effective when it is holistic, contributing to the development of the whole person and of the broader community, when it is lifelong, when it is experiential, and when it is rooted in Aboriginal culture and values. The models recommend the integration of Aboriginal and Western knowledge as the most effective way to develop citizens who can take on the responsibilities of their nation while also preparing them to participate as full members of Canadian society (Canadian Council on Learning 2007).

Aboriginal people have experienced generations of oppression, dispossession, disrespect, and marginalization from mainstream settler societies, both in Canada and in Australia. The effects of this experience must be taken into account in the design of Aboriginal workforce development programs. We find this perspective reflected throughout the literature on best practices for Aboriginal workforce development (e.g. Dockery and Milsom 2007; Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Harrison and Lindsay 2009; Taylor et al. 2009).

Partnerships are essential elements of effective Aboriginal workforce development programs

Partnerships that bring together Aboriginal communities and elders, employers, service providers, governments, and any other funders, will help to ensure that the needs of all stakeholders are being addressed in the design and delivery of workforce development programs. (For a variety of perspectives converging on the importance of partnerships, see NWT & Nunavut Chamber of Mines 2005; Dockery and Milsom 2007; Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009b; Harrison and Lindsay 2009).

Partnership is a term that often masks significant imbalances in power and influence (Taylor et al. 2009: 49ff). One study in British Columbia found that lack of Aboriginal leadership in program planning and decision-making has been one of the greatest challenges to effective employment programming for Aboriginal individuals and communities (Imagination FX and OARS Training Inc. 2009). Studies in Australia also emphasize the importance of Aboriginal involvement in all aspects of employment programs for Aboriginals and Torres Islanders, including the board of directors, management, advisory committees, and staffing (Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009a: 18).

Employers, too, need to be involved in the design of workforce development programs, both in specifying training needs and in the actual program design. Failure to meet employers' needs, as well as programs that are not based on analysis of labour market demand, are among the most common reasons for the failure of employment programs (Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 37).

Service providers are usually the linchpins of these partnerships; it is important for them to maintain strong relationships with both employers and Aboriginal communities. In some cases, these may be informal and personal, in others more structured and formal, but in either case the critical element is trust. When the Aboriginal community trusts the service provider to understand their needs and their culture, and when the employer trusts the service provider's judgement and the quality of their pre-employment training programs, the outcome is more likely to be successful (Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009: 5).

Effective partnerships are the key to addressing one of the most common barriers to effective employment programs, namely lack of coordination across the continuum of success factors. (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2007; Commonwealth of Australia 2008; Fleischer 2008; Harrison and Lindsay 2009; Imagination FX and OARS Training Inc. 2009).

Recruitment and selection methods should be appropriate to the program's goals

On the surface, there appears to be a high degree of complementarity between the aim of meeting labour market shortages in the manufacturing sector and that of promoting labour force participation by Aboriginals in Manitoba. There is, however, a tension between the two aims that cannot be ignored.

A program designed primarily to meet labour shortages within a particular sector, such as manufacturing, will naturally prefer to recruit and select the best qualified candidates. As noted by Giloth (2000: 343), this tends to result in the phenomenon of "creaming" those with the fewest barriers to employment. Even if the recruitment and selection are focused in a community with chronically low employment rates and high levels of poverty, those experiencing the greatest barriers to labour-market participation will tend to be screened out, reinforcing exclusion and inequality in the community. Aboriginal people with disabilities, for example, are liable to be denied the same access to employment as others (MacDougall et al. 2006).

As an alternative to sectorally-focused workforce development strategies, Giloth considers place-based strategies, but these have well-known limitations of their own, notably low-paying, insecure jobs that do not provide opportunities for career development.

In the literature we have surveyed, we have not found any exemplary practices of recruitment and selection for sectorally-focused workforce development programs for Aboriginals, either in Canada or Australia. It will, therefore, be useful for CAM as a pilot project to document its experience with this aspect of the program, particularly the effects on individuals who are screened out in the selection process, and the impact these effects have on the community.

Holistic pre-employment training is essential

Pre-employment training should be based on a thorough assessment of the trainees' needs; elements that are almost certainly necessary include life skills, Essential Skills, basic employment readiness skills, as well as vocational training relevant to the type of employment, including both soft and hard skills necessary to success in the workplace. Trainees with multiple barriers to employment, such as poor social skills or drug and alcohol dependency, may need extended time in special programs to address these issues (Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Constable 2009; Harrison and Lindsay 2009; Imagination FX and OARS Training Inc. 2009).

Harrison and Lindsay (2009: 17), citing a study by Ball (2004), stress the importance of making pre-employment training relevant to Aboriginal people's lives, set within an appropriate cultural context, with methods appropriate to their experience. In general, hands-on, experiential training methods appear to be more successful than classroom-based instruction (Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009a: 17).

Pre-employment training is best located in Aboriginal communities whenever possible, especially when these are in remote areas, to minimize the disruption to people's lives (Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 19), with trainers who are either Aboriginal or who relate well to Aboriginal trainees (Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009a: 17).

A survey of good practices in Indigenous employment programs in Australia concludes that "support-intensive training" is important to meet the trainees' needs and achieve successful outcomes. This often depends on having highly committed training staff who are prepared to go beyond the scope of their formal roles to give trainees individualized attention and gain their trust (Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009a: 17). At the conclusion of pre-employment training the trainees should receive some form of accreditation or formal recognition (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2007: 123)

Employers tend to assume that pre-employment training is the government's responsibility, but there are cases where industry has worked with public agencies and colleges to design vocational training programs for Aboriginal workers to be employed in their operations. This is most likely to happen where companies have made a commitment to hire a certain number of Aboriginal workers as part of a broader agreement with an Aboriginal community or region. In the mining, oil, and gas sectors, for example, this is becoming a more common practice, both in Canada and Australia, as a component of community benefits agreements (NWT & Nunavut Chamber of Mines 2005; Tiplady and Barclay 2007).

Taylor et al. advise against over-reliance on employer-provided training, which tends to be focused on the skills needed for specific jobs, neglecting portable skills and the broader learning needs of the individual and the community. "The larger issue [they note] seems to be about who controls education and training in communities and to what ends. A key premise of the three models of holistic lifelong learning developed in consultation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, is that the purpose of learning is to 'develop the skills, knowledge, values and wisdom needed to honour and protect the natural world and ensure the long term sustainability of life' (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007: 18). This broad view of learning is arguably eclipsed by policies focused strictly on short-term formal education and training programs for employability" (Taylor et al. 2009: 40).

Training must continue in the workplace

Following pre-employment training and job placement, training should continue in the workplace. In some cases, this might be a formal apprenticeship leading to accreditation, but in many cases it will be an informal process of on-the-job learning. At this stage, the best practice is considered to be supported, gradual skill development focused on a particular job, position, or occupation, but with a view to future career development (Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 21-25).

Effective workplace-based training serves the interests of both employer and employee by promoting workforce retention and career advancement. Surveys of Aboriginal workers have shown that skill training and career development – along with good wages, benefits, and an inclusive workplace – are among the most potent ways of ensuring a stable workforce (Barker and Brereton 2004; Barker et al. 2004; Tiplady and Barclay 2007; Constable 2009).

Professional and cultural mentoring are best practices

The literature on Aboriginal employment programming is unanimous in recommending mentoring to facilitate successful transitions into the workplace (Caverley 2006; Dockery and Milsom 2007; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2007; Tiplady and Barclay 2007; Brunnen and Jankovic 2009; Constable 2009; Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009; Harrison and Lindsay 2009; Imagination FX and OARS Training Inc. 2009; Saskatchewan School Boards Association 2009; Taufatofua and Brereton 2010; Fogarty-Radloff n.d.).

Constable (2009: 44-47) identifies two distinct types of mentoring, professional and cultural. A professional mentor is a person within the workplace, or the industry, who provides support and advice to the mentee related to skill development, career planning, and other work-related issues; the mentor should be someone other than the mentee's direct supervisor. A cultural mentor is a person from the Aboriginal community, preferably an Elder or a trained counsellor from an Aboriginal organization, who is available to talk to the mentee about any and all issues arising in their workplace and in their personal life.

Mentors themselves can benefit from training and supporting materials, such as manuals with guidelines on roles and responsibilities. (See, for example, Taufatofua and Brereton 2010; Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of BC n.d.; Connecticut Learns Workplace Mentoring Committee n.d.). Professional mentors who are non-Aboriginal may also require cultural awareness training (Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 26).

There is an argument for making mentoring a mainstream support for all new employees; restricting it to new Aboriginal workers may tend to stigmatize the practice (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2007: 97-98). To be successful, employers must commit sufficient resources to their mentorship programs, recognizing that it is an investment in the productivity and stability of their workforce (Taufatofua and Brereton 2010).

Diversity training helps to make the workplace more inclusive

Racism, stereotyping, and social exclusion are common experiences of Aboriginal workers in Canadian and Australian workplaces (Robinson and Hughes 1999; Barker et al. 2004; John Samuel and Associates Inc 2006; Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2007: 147-150).

Training that promotes cultural awareness, cross-cultural communication, and understanding of the history of colonization and its legacy can help to create a supportive and welcoming workplace for Aboriginal people (Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 26).

Aboriginal workers may also need to develop a better understanding of the dominant culture in the workplace, where cultural assumptions and norms of behaviour may be different from their own (John Samuel and Associates Inc 2006: 40).

Harrison and Lindsay (2009: 26-27) point to literature suggesting that diversity training should be distinguished from education about the historical legacy of oppression of Aboriginal people. Diversity training promotes tolerance for many forms of difference in a workplace, and is a valuable practice, but a specific focus on the oppression, dispossession, and marginalization of Aboriginal people promotes a better understanding of the particular challenges faced by Aboriginals in the workplace and in society generally.

Support in the workplace should continue for as long as it is needed

Most employment programs are only able to provide support for a limited time after job placement. For many Aboriginal trainees and workers, success means not only getting a job but also changing their lives, often in profound ways. This may require a long-term process of healing and empowerment (Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009a: 19; Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 25).

BladeRunners, an employment program for disadvantaged youth in Vancouver, is a rare example of a program that offers support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for as long as it is needed, covering everything from assistance with housing, transportation, and child care to personal guidance and crisis management (Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 25).

Knowing that there is on-going support reassures the employer, who will be more confident hiring an employee with this kind of back-up (Harrison and Lindsay 2009: iii).

Employers need to recognize the particular issues faced by Aboriginal people who must migrate from their homes to their workplaces. In some cases, this involves travel to a remote location, such as a mine, for extended periods (Barker et al. 2004; NWT & Nunavut Chamber of Mines 2005). In others, the travel may be from a remote community to a major urban centre, as in the case of the CAM project. In both cases, the absence from family and community creates hardship for Aboriginal workers (Canada. Parliament. Standing Committee on Human Resources 2008: 86). We have not found any useful exemplary practices that address this issue in the literature, apart from cases of employers who are flexible in arranging for absence from the workplace in order to facilitate workers' participation in the life of their families and home communities (Mathurin 1996). Analysis of the CAM experience will provide a useful contribution to the literature.

Effective monitoring and evaluation require a clear definition of success

It is common for Aboriginal employment programs to define their goals broadly, for example in terms of long-term sustainable livelihoods for individuals and poverty reduction for communities, but to restrict monitoring and evaluation to a focus on short-term, quantitative indicators, such as job retention for 18 months (Giddy, Kristine et al. 2009a: 12).

More effective monitoring and evaluation require a clear linkage between goals and evaluation criteria and methods. More longitudinal data would help to assess the long-term impact of Aboriginal workforce development programs (Dockery and Milsom 2007; Harrison and Lindsay 2009: 38).

Effective monitoring and evaluation are important for purposes of accountability, not only to funders but also to the Aboriginal communities. Where companies are operating on Aboriginal land, the Aboriginal employment provisions contained within the community benefit agreements require that the company "monitor, calculate and publish" information describing the results achieved under the agreement (NWT & Nunavut Chamber of Mines 2005: 13). This kind of accountability would be appropriate even where no such formal agreement exists.

Further research is required

There are gaps in the literature relevant to the design and delivery of the CAM project. Documenting the experience of the CAM project could make a significant contribution to knowledge in this field. Questions outstanding include:

- What are the best practices in addressing "commuter lifestyles," where employment is located far from the home community?
- What are the best practices in addressing the tension in a program that arises between the goal of addressing labour shortages in a particular sector and the goal of meeting the needs of communities with chronically low employment rates and high rates of poverty?
- What are the advantages, and what issues arise, in using a developmental evaluation approach with an Aboriginal workforce development program?

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