Indigenous inclusion at work is more than just representation – it’s reconciliation

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When the non-profit Indigenous Works was founded 25 years ago, Indigenous people in Canada were largely overlooked in the economic life of the country.

Employment opportunities were scarce and Indigenous-owned businesses were few and far between, says Kelly Lendsay, chief executive officer of the national organization that aims to increase the participation and engagement of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people in the Canadian economy.

The huge gap is starting to shrink, Mr. Lendsay says, driven by changing demographics and growing recognition of the importance of diversity and inclusion in organizations across different sectors.

The employment rate among Indigenous people aged 25 to 54 is currently 72.8 per cent, according to [Statistics Canada](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410035901). While it continues to lag that of non-Indigenous Canadians at 82.5, Mr. Lendsay says it’s a vast improvement from decades earlier.

“It’s all on the upward trend and going in the right direction,” says Mr. Lendsay, who is of Cree and Métis ancestry.

He says it’s important that the employment rate improve for various reasons, not the least of which is that the Indigenous population – including First Nation, Métis and Inuit people – are the fastest-growing group in Canada.

According to the [2016 Census data](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025a-eng.htm?indid=14430-1&indgeo=0), there were nearly 1.7 million Indigenous people in the country, making up 4.9 per cent of the population, an increase from 3.8 per cent in 2006 and 2.8 per cent in 1996. The population grew 42.5 per cent between 2006 and 2017, more than four times the growth rate of the non-Indigenous population over the same period. They’re also much younger, with the average age being 32.1 in 2016, almost a decade younger than the non-Indigenous population average at 40.9.

Some sectors have done better than others at recruiting and retaining from within the Indigenous population, Mr. Lendsay says. For example, the resource sector, spurred in part by court decisions, has been building relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities for decades, he says.

Other sectors, such as manufacturing, hospitality and retail, could learn how to better engage with Indigenous communities from resource companies, he says.

### **How to foster inclusion**

The first step in making room for Indigenous participation in the workplace is building knowledge, Mr. Lendsay says. Know the communities, their histories, and their labour ecosystem. There are 634 recognized First Nations governments or bands in Canada, and all are politically, economically, socially and culturally unique, he says.

Then, apply that knowledge to the workplace, creating an inclusive space sensitive to issues impacting Indigenous communities, such as residential schools. Mr. Lendsay says leaders and non-Indigenous employees need to understand the rights of Indigenous people and their aspirations and make it part of the workplace culture. Employers also need Indigenous inclusion strategies and benchmarks they can track year-over-year, he says.

Mr. Lendsay’s organization recently introduced a [seven-stage strategy](https://indigenousworks.ca/en/partnership/seven-stage-partnership-model/description-7-stages), which includes steps such as engagement and relationship building, to help organizations build partnerships with Indigenous communities.

“Companies like to know what things they should be doing, what strategies and practices to start with,” Mr. Lendsay says. “It’s a more deliberate and purposeful approach. It’s not just empathy and sympathy.”

One of Indigenous Works’ clients is Ottawa-based Calian Group Ltd., a business services and solutions provider with more than 4,000 employees and a global clientele across sectors such as health care, communications and security. Calian has been actively working on recruiting more Indigenous workers to help support its growth, including a handful of new national and international contracts.

“We realize we need to engage Indigenous communities in any of the contracts we’re working on,” says Terri Dougall, Calian’s director of corporate affairs.

Calian is currently working with more than 25 Indigenous communities across Canada, as both an employer and a business partner. For example, the company recently hired an Indigenous-owned marketing company to help design its inaugural environmental, social and governance (ESG) report. Calian also hires elders from various communities to deliver Indigenous training to the Canadian Armed Forces across Canada.

While these types of procurement and partnership arrangements are growing, Ms. Dougall says recruiting and retaining Indigenous workers remains a challenge. There is already a shortage of labour across sectors such as engineering, technology and health, but it’s more pronounced in Indigenous communities given the stringent educational requirements for some positions.

Ms. Dougall estimates Indigenous people may account for less than one per cent of Calian’s current employee roster. The company has developed an Indigenous engagement strategy to try to increase that number.

Calian is working to become a more inclusive workplace by offering some staff reconciliation training – a program Ms. Dougall says will eventually be provided to all of its Canadian workers. It also established a working group that meets regularly to advance its Indigenous engagement strategy.

“One of the things that we’re definitely interested in is the Indigenous element of our population and how we can continue to grow that,” she says.

### **Ensuring equitable access to jobs**

Inclusion is a priority for many organizations, particularly after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) final report in 2015. [Recommendation 92](https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1524506030545/1557513309443) in the report calls on the corporate sector to, among other things, ensure that Indigenous peoples “have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector,” and that their communities “gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects.”

Unfortunately, many organizations aren’t doing enough to make space for Indigenous voices and create a diverse conversation at the table, says Christy Smith, a member of the Komoks Nation and vice-president of Indigenous and stakeholder relations at B.C.-based Falkirk Environmental.

“I think it’s a work in progress,” says Ms. Smith, co-author of the book, *Weaving Two Worlds: Economic Reconciliation Between Indigenous Peoples and the Resource Sector*. “When we talk about reconciliation, companies have their own definition, and it’s not always the definition that the communities hold themselves.”

She says employers need to develop relationships with local First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and collaborate with them on recruiting. To retain employees, organizations need to ensure policies are in place that acknowledge and accommodate traditional values, she says. For example, that may include a general understanding of cultural practices around mourning, or community activities during harvest season.

Companies should make sure they have knowledge about the culture of nations in their areas of operation, as well as training for non-Indigenous staff on the history of Indigenous people in Canada, Ms. Smith suggests. They should also ensure workplaces that are safe spaces with leaders trained on the effects of trauma.

Zach Parker, president of Kamloops-based Tsaa Resource Management, which works with First Nations communities on resource development projects and environmental services, believes both managers and employees have a role to play in engaging Indigenous people in an organization.

The former chief of the Ulkatcho Nation in B.C. has worked with many companies and a wide array of approaches to Indigenous inclusion – some of it good, but some of it not.

When it comes to resource development, in particular, he says more organizations need to understand that Indigenous people are looking for long-term partnerships that provide not just training and jobs, but an economic stake for sustainable success.

“It has to be led by sincerity and true intention,” Mr. Parker says. “I see this changing, but we still have a long way to go.”