

## **Why are aboriginals more likely to feel isolated at work?**

Métis consultant says lack of awareness of their distinct cultures by employers, co-workers often creates difficult environments

In 1976, roughly 800 aboriginals in Canada had graduated from college or university. Just 30 years later, that number peaked past 190,000, according to Stats Canada. But despite that historic rate of educational achievement, aboriginals across the country still have difficulty finding welcoming employment, says Calgary-based Métis businessman, Robert Laboucane.

The reason, he says, is that employers and co-workers simply don't understand their distinct aboriginal culture.

"They know absolutely nothing about aboriginal people," he laments about some of the employers he meets. "They know way more about New Guineans in South Korea, that's how crazy this is."

Thus Laboucane created Ripple Effects more than 20 years ago. The "aboriginal awareness training company" holds seminars and online tutorials for businesses on how to provide an inclusive environment. They also help recruit aboriginals for companies that can provide that environment, and help the companies retain them.

"Aboriginals are looking for a place where they feel welcome," he says. "They want a place where people will talk to them and where they feel a part of the team."

But all too often, he says, aboriginal post-secondary graduates feel isolated and unwanted on the job because employers and co-workers simply don't know how to talk to them. For Laboucane, this goes back to a basic lack of understanding of aboriginal cultures and issues. Most people, he notes, don't know the difference between Métis, Inuit, and Indians – the distinctly different groups of people who fall under the aboriginal umbrella.

All three groups have struggled in Canada since 1867 and the inception of the Indian Act nine years later, which cast aboriginals aside with different rights than other citizens. Residential school programs saw children forcefully removed from their families. Sacred lands were taken despite protection under various land treaties. Aboriginals were pushed to give up their culture to be enfranchised into Canadian society.

Despite recent attempts by the government to amend for some of these grievances, the wounds remain. And the education gap between aboriginals and non-aboriginals continues to grow.

Aboriginal struggles in the workplace often come about because employers and co-workers are trying not to offend and because people fear the unknown, Laboucane says. Because many are ignorant of aboriginal cultures, they often avoid conversation entirely,

making aboriginals feel like outsiders. Like most people who feel unwelcome, aboriginals often end up leaving.

Laboucane says 97 per cent of aboriginal grads his company has dealt with felt compelled to leave their first job within six months of being hired. “This is horrific,” he says. “And we’ve been working at this brutal problem for the past 25 years.”

It might also help explain why aboriginal grads typically have unemployment rates that double the national average.

Even companies that are aware of the problem are often ignorant to their own complicity, he says. That is why Ripple Effects starts its awareness training by inquiring.

Laboucane says his company first asks about the number of aboriginal employees a company has and how long they have been working there. They ask whether the company has used awareness counselling before, and why they need it now.

“Ripple Effects asks what the employers are doing to reach out to the aboriginal people,” he says. Reaching out can include small things like asking about a person’s family or where they are from, or simply inviting them to tag along for coffee.

“With aboriginal employees, that doesn’t seem to happen,” Laboucane says. “And if that doesn’t happen then they will eventually leave, just like most people would.”

While most companies still don’t provide this type of inclusive environment, the good news, Laboucane says, is that many are now trying.

EDS Canada, a branch of the international IT services company, has had diverse employment objectives for more than a decade. But it was less than three years ago that they started targeting aboriginal people.

“We saw an opportunity,” says Heidi Crann, vice-president, client services and co-chair of the EDS employment inclusivity council. That opportunity was the ability to draw from an untouched pool of talented aboriginal innovators who could bring the company fresh perspectives and help build clientele in aboriginal communities.

If that wasn’t motivation enough, EDS researchers determined shifting demographics could see young aboriginals constituting as much as 20 per cent of the available workforce in 10 years. “That’s a future talent pool that we just can’t ignore.”

Last year, EDS took their employment strategy one step further, and started training their management through Ripple Effects. The idea was management could then transfer the knowledge on to other employees.

One of the managers was Jennifer MacDonald, an aboriginal of undetermined heritage and a self-described champion of diversity.

“The training was great,” she says. “Being able to hear the stories and get more information on cultural specifics of the different aboriginal populations across Canada, just understanding that there are differences and what those differences are.....it was a great opportunity for us.”

A human resources consultant who has worked in both the public and private sectors, MacDonald says she has seen the cultural-based problems aboriginal employees go through.

While some aboriginal cultures believe it is a sign of respect to gaze downward and avoid eye contact, she notes, many employers might mistake the gesture.

“When you look even at interviewing, their behaviours might not be what a private sector employer would be looking for,” she says.

But like Laboucane, MacDonald believes companies are slowly changing their ways.

“Society itself has evolved and we’ve now become so much more aware of all of our unique differences.....especially in Canada.”