

August 22, 2006

## **Short-handed A blueprint for a solution**

**In Regina, training gives natives the tools to fix the construction industry's shortage**

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Eight years ago, Jamie Lerat was just one more aboriginal worker in Saskatchewan mired in a dead-end job.

Mr. Lerat, then in his mid-20s, had heard the standard lectures growing up: Get training, get skills. He finished high school and got a full-time job. But training programs centred on postsecondary education and, with only a tenuous connection to the marketplace, held little interest for him. He picked up work pouring concrete floors, but soon realized there was scant prospect of raises or advancement. "I hit the ceiling there," he says.

Mr. Lerat began to wonder how he could get a better job. At the same time, Saskatchewan's construction industry was beginning to run out of skilled tradespeople: the carpenters, plumbers and electricians who form the backbone of the industry.

In most of Canada, Mr. Lerat's ambition and the industry's need would never have intersected. It is a stunning irony that the worst labour shortages in Canada are often only a short trip from pockets of the worst unemployment and underemployment -- First Nations reserves and aboriginal people who live in cities.

A complex brew of factors contribute to that disconnect, but the biggest is a failure of imagination on both sides of the gap. Businesses simply don't conceive of aboriginal workers as a solution to a labour shortage, and many training programs for aboriginals fail to forge links with employers.

"There is a disconnect between the employers and the aboriginal labour market," says Kelly Lendsay, president and chief executive of the Aboriginal Human Resource Development Council of Canada.

But a series of coincidences in Regina in the late 1990s rewrote that equation for Mr. Lerat and thousands of other aboriginals, and rescued Saskatchewan's construction industry from the worst ravages of a skilled-labour crunch. And this success for Regina's builders might just be the foundation of a national strategy to help ease Canada's labour shortage -- and weave aboriginal workers into the wider economy.

Since 1998, a targeted training program that began in Regina and has since spread to other parts of Saskatchewan has funnelled more than 6,000 workers into the construction industry. Most of those recruits, more than 80 per cent, still work in the sector. Nearly 300 aboriginal apprentices have been drawn into construction trades, with scores now becoming fully qualified journeymen, just as Saskatchewan -- like most of Canada -- is running out of skilled hands.

Mr. Lerat was the first person in the Construction Careers program to become a journeyman. He was also the first journeyman from his family, and the first from his reserve, the Cowessess First Nation. He'll soon have lots of company, though. His two brothers and several cousins are enrolled as apprentices.

"A lot of people are following in my footsteps," the 34-year-old says.

Despite its impressive track record, the Construction Careers program was an accident. In the mid-1990s, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations was building a new educational facility, and stipulated to the general contractor that half of its work force would have to be aboriginal. There was just one small problem; there weren't enough qualified aboriginal workers to employ, says Manley McLachlan, at that time the executive director of the Saskatchewan Construction Association.

Aboriginal leaders and construction industry entrepreneurs tackled that problem, but were stymied until someone had a flash of inspiration to pattern the skills-training program on the model of swimming lessons. The thinking: Some will be able to head directly into the deep end of the pool, others will need some guidance to strengthen their skills and some will have to start in the shallow end, learning the basics under constant supervision.

That epiphany laid the foundation for the Construction Careers program. There would be close consultation with industry to determine precisely what basic skills were needed for an aboriginal worker to be productive from the get-go. The curriculum included such basics as how to use a ruler and how to sink a nail with one hammer blow. Another key precept was assigning job coaches to those in the program. Those coaches had to be familiar with the construction industry, and the aboriginal community. Finally, there was a guarantee for employers: If someone fails to turn up at a work site, the job coach will find a replacement, that morning.

For Mr. Lerat, the job coach was a marked change from other training programs for aboriginals, which left participants pretty much on their own when it came time to approach an employer. "You go there, and you go there, and do your own PR [public relations] work, and try to get the guy to like you and respect you. It's pretty tough, that's right." (Today, he is a job coach in the program.)

By the time the Regina program was ready to go, the construction project that had inspired it had been temporarily shelved. But the construction industry went ahead with the initiative anyway, with the employment-equity roots of Construction Careers gradually supplanted by strict self-interest of wanting to increase the supply of day labourers and, someday, skilled tradespeople.

Not that there wasn't still resistance from some company owners who were still smarting from government-issued edicts tying contracts to levels of aboriginal employment, with the result usually being a payroll padded with low-productivity workers. "I only need so many floor sweepers," was a typical objection, Mr. McLachlan recalls. "There were some pretty red necks around the table."

Eight years on, those objectors have become some of the program's biggest fans, he says, as the simple reality sinks in that the aboriginal community is an invaluable source of labour, particularly as shortages of skilled labour start to bite.

The lesson does indeed seem simple, so Mr. McLachlan was certain that he could simply duplicate the program in British Columbia when he moved there two years ago to become the president of the B.C. Construction Association.

Not so, he sighs. The industry and government were unwilling to embrace such a project without a B.C. experiment -- Saskatchewan's experience being judged irrelevant. That effort is now starting to accelerate, with one job coach on Vancouver Island placing 200 people in just five months. And next month, the federal government will unveil a training program for immigrant workers based on the structure of the Construction Careers model.

Mr. McLachlan is puzzled as to why the success in Saskatchewan hasn't been copied. "It's the best kept secret in Canada," he says, later adding that the depth of industry involvement seems to dampen enthusiasm -- at least initially -- among politicians and bureaucrats.

For Mr. Lendsay, at the aboriginal human resource council, such successes are all too rare. Some First Nations reserves likely have unemployment rates upward of 70 per cent, he says, though no one knows for certain since Statistics Canada does not include the population of reserves in its monthly measurement of national unemployment.

Yet, the spreading shortage of labour in Western Canada is a unique chance to finally close the gap between aboriginals and the wider Canadian economy, he says.

The council is trying to increase ties between employers and aboriginal communities by sponsoring a series of networking events across the country, an effort that has already borne fruit. This summer, a new Safeway Canada store in Chilliwack, B.C., hired 23 members from the Sto:lo First Nation reserve abutting the city. Store manager Russell Janus met with aboriginal representatives in Vancouver and made the Sto:lo part of his hiring plans.

The curious thing is that Mr. Janus needed to go to Vancouver to discover that the Sto:lo reserve -- seven kilometres from his store -- was a solution to his labour crunch. Mr. Janus, like so many managers, simply hadn't conceived of looking at the reserve just down the road.

"There are things that you don't know, and things that you don't know you don't know."

### **Solutions: Existing resources**

Canada needs to make better use of its existing population, and that means looking closely at how to encourage more women and older people to keep working.

#### **Women**

Among Canada's women, 61.8 per cent are in the work force -- high by global standards but lower than the male participation rate of 72.9 per cent.

Even a marginal increase would mean thousands of extra workers.

Accessible, high-quality, affordable daycare makes a significant difference, research by Statistics Canada and McGill University shows.

New mothers in Quebec flooded back to work after daycare subsidies grew, while many of Alberta's moms stayed home as daycare capacity dropped.

Government-sponsored care for the elderly, especially programs that allow ailing seniors to live at home, can free up working-age women.

#### **Older people**

The participation rate of older workers is lower in Canada than in the United States and Britain.

Canada's public benefits for retired workers are considered well financed; federal rules for private pensions and the Canada Pension Plan encourage early retirement and discourage even part-time work past the age of 65.

Mandatory retirement rules still exist in several provinces and industries, making 65 the quasi-official retirement age; recommendations to abolish mandatory retirement are growing.

CPP could be made more flexible to allow older workers to collect benefits and work part time at the same time.

Ottawa could change pension rules and income tax provisions to make private pension plans more flexible, encouraging pensioners to continue part-time work without penalty.

Some suggest Ottawa consider making registered retirement savings plans less attractive in order to remove the incentive for workers to retire early.

### **Solutions: New resources**

Immigration is only part of the answer to closing the labour gap.

### **An overview**

The "inventory" of workers waiting to get into Canada is 474,074 names long.

That database cannot be searched by prospective employers.

By the time immigrants on the list enter Canada, labour market demands have often radically changed.

Provincial governments and employers can recruit outside the list, creating a patchwork system.

Temporary programs allow for quick fixes, but it's hard for temporary workers to bring their families, make long-term plans or gain access to benefits and social services.

Canada's point system for immigration favours academics over much-needed skilled tradespeople.

Even a radical increase in immigration levels would likely not meet demand for labour in the future.

### **The challenges**

Once immigrants arrive here, it doesn't get much better:

Recognition of credentials varies from province to province.

One survey shows the majority of employers rarely read immigrants' résumés.

Immigrants are often not eligible for government training and skills programs.

There is no systematic way of evaluating skills and credentials gained overseas, creating a risky situation for employers.

## **What could change**

Government could:

Put the inventory list of skilled workers on-line so that employers can post their job openings and immigrants can post their skills.

Allow skilled worker applicants to earn as many points for trade experience as for academic credentials.

Set up Canadian internships, with the help of subsidies, to encourage new immigrants to get Canadian experience.

Designate a neutral third party to assess foreign credentials and translate them into terms Canadian employers can understand.