



## Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business

Looking at the statistics, it's reasonable to deduce that First Nations-owned and -operated enterprises may offer some of the best employment opportunities for Canada's growing aboriginal labour force. Clint Davis, President and CEO of the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business (CCAB) has few doubts about that potential. The entrepreneurial know-how already demonstrated by First Nations business leaders may be a primary answer to creating meaningful careers for tens of thousands of aboriginal young people.

"Our mission is committed to the enhancement of aboriginal peoples' participation in the Canadian economy, which is a pretty big goal to say the least," Davis says of the organization he's headed since January. But the role of the corporate community, along with First Nations leaders and a possible re-thinking by governments in terms of support, are key factors in ensuring that aboriginal business in Canada meets its full potential.

Davis, an Inuk from the Nunatsiavut community in Labrador, was National Director of Aboriginal Banking at BMO Bank of Montreal, and has held senior positions with the department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Treasury Board Secretariat.

A 2002 report, he says, showed that entrepreneurship among aboriginal business people was growing at a rate nine times that of the mainstream population. The report from Aboriginal Business Canada also revealed there were 27,000 aboriginal-owned and -operated businesses in Canada. And the average age was significantly younger – not surprisingly, since the aboriginal population is far younger than the rest of Canada.

Davis estimates the number of aboriginal businesses has grown to almost 33,000. And while many are small- or medium-sized enterprises, employing a relative handful of workers, they could be providing worthwhile and rewarding employment for at least 25 to 30 percent of the 300,000 to 400,000 members of the country's aboriginal working-age labour force.

"There's a tendency of aboriginal business to actually hire aboriginal people," he says. "For a large portion of aboriginal people within the workforce, there is that almost emotional connection or significance to either work for an aboriginal business, an aboriginal association or an aboriginal economic development corporation. With the growth of these businesses, that's seen as a very good way to engage people in what they would view as meaningful work."

He also believes that the younger generation sees employment as something more than simply a paycheck. "They want to ensure they have effective work-life balance and feel that they have some emotional connection to their employer and to the work that they're doing – that's there's meaning behind that," he says.

From the perspective of the CCAB, none of this can happen, however, without involvement of the three primary stakeholders: the aboriginal communities, the entrepreneurs themselves, and the corporate community.

"What we're trying to do is to act as a conduit between corporate Canada and aboriginal entrepreneurs and aboriginal communities," Davis says.

The other critical factor for success is leadership within First Nations communities, Davis stresses, including Chiefs Clarence Louie of the Osoyoos Band, Jim Boucher of Fort McKay and Nellie Cournoyea, CEO of the Inuvialut Regional Corporation in the Northwest Territories.

"They have done a remarkable job in bringing their communities along and to say this is the way for the future," he says, adding that leadership can come from an entrepreneur, a young person or a community elder. "It's an individual who will bring attention to the need to develop economic opportunity within the community and building support for that."

That kind of driving force and transparent, stable leadership are critical in attracting investment in community enterprises. "Investors want a general sense of predictability if they're going to invest in an aboriginal community," he adds.

The CCAB has two levels of corporate partners that help ensure its success: patron members who provide strategic advice through representation on its board, and corporate members who reach into the aboriginal community, either by finding new employees or establishing business partnerships to bring products and services to the marketplace.

Davis also has a message he would like governments to hear: While billions of dollars are spent on programs to assist the country's aboriginal population, an effective way all levels of governments could help would be through establishing procurement policies that target aboriginal businesses, he says. Government could also use tax incentives to encourage the private sector to invest in aboriginal businesses.



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“I think that government clearly does have a role to play,” Davis says. “The money is there and so it’s not asking for any additional investment.” **D!**

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For more on this topic:

<http://www.ccab.com>

<http://www.ccab.com/par/> (Progressive Aboriginal Relations Program)

<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ps/abc/index-eng.aspx>  
<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ps/abc/ab00313-eng.asp>

