

Research for **communities**

EMPLOYING ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN THE BANKING INDUSTRY

A new study highlights successful strategies to increase the employment of
Aboriginal people in Manitoba's financial services sector

The banking industry has been experiencing a dramatic technological change over the past two decades. Technologies, such as telephone banking, ATMs, online banking, and electronic funds transfers, have allowed financial institutions to reduce branch and sales staff (and even close branches), as customers use automated telephone lines to carry out routine transactions. At the same time,

use of information technology in banking has created new opportunities for highly educated workers while decreasing the demand for workers without a postsecondary education.

These changes have taken place at the same time that Aboriginal people have become a significant presence in the Manitoba workforce. The 2001 census indicates that Aboriginal people comprise 13.6% of Manitoba's population and 8.2% of Winnipeg's population. Approximately 1 in 3 Aboriginal persons in Manitoba were under the age of 15 in 2001. Further, 23.1% of Manitobans between the ages of 0 and 14 were Aboriginal, as were 14% of individuals in Winnipeg. Unfortunately, Aboriginal people have yet to become such a presence in the banking workforce in this province.

According to a recent study of Aboriginal employment in the banking industry, the proportion of Aboriginal persons working permanently, full-time in the banking sector in Manitoba ranges from 1.2% for CIBC to 5.6% for Royal Bank. The Bank of Nova Scotia has the highest proportion of Aboriginal permanent part-time



Art work created by Art City participants. Photo
courtesy Assiniboine Credit Union.

Assiniboine Credit Union branch manager Brian
McIvor.

the need for skilled knowledge workers to perform complex back-office information processing has increased. This increasing

employees at 5.5%, or 8 of 146 employees. In comparison 1.4% (1 of 71) of the permanent part-time workforce at the Bank of Montreal is Aboriginal. In Winnipeg, the Royal Bank has the largest proportion of Aboriginal persons among permanent full-time and part-time staff, at 5.2% for full-time and 4.3% for part-time employees.

Titled *Aboriginal Employment in the Banking Sector in Manitoba*, the study was carried out by Kathleen Sexsmith with Aaron Pettman for the Manitoba Research Alliance on Community Economic Development in the New Economy. The report noted that Winnipeg's three Aboriginal financial institutions (First Nations Bank, MeDian Credit Union, and Peace Hills Trust) have been able to attract and maintain very high percentages of Aboriginal employees at all employee levels. However, Assiniboine Credit Union was the only non-Aboriginal financial institution which had been able to successfully recruit and retain a significant number of Aboriginal workers. The rest of this paper summarizes the study's examination of why the Assiniboine model is so successful.

THE ASSINIBOINE ACCOMPLISHMENT

Assiniboine Credit Union has the highest proportion of Aboriginal people as a share of total employees. At ACU 11.7% of the workforce is Aboriginal, a proportion that had remained constant in 2003 and 2004. These Aboriginal workers were distributed from entry-level positions through to management.

MISSION

Assiniboine Credit Union's approach to

Aboriginal employment is designed to satisfy its employment mission statement:

We are committed to employing a workforce that is representative of the community and that is well paid, well trained, respected and empowered, working in a safe, healthy environment of continuous improvement.

Assiniboine aims to maintain the ratio of Aboriginal employees to its total workforce at the same rate at which Aboriginal people are represented

in the surrounding community. The company is not federally legislated to meet diversity regulations, but rather that it chooses to

do so out of commitment to employment equity as a business principle. A turnover rate for Aboriginal people of less than 1% has been attained, which is 10 times lower than the Aboriginal turnover rates of most other similar organizations.

RECRUITMENT

The Assiniboine Aboriginal recruitment strategy is succinct and thorough, and could be used as a model by other financial institutions for its success. This strategy has eight components:

- the establishment of relationships with Aboriginal networks, and employment and education agencies

"The Assiniboine Credit Union Aboriginal employment strategy is exemplary for its respectful modelling of Aboriginal culture."

- the use of work experience and job shadowing programs and summer employment opportunities for students
- the definition of parameters around full-time and part-time employment
- flexibility in compensation negotiations
- the concerted effort to hire from colleges and universities and to provide on-the-job training towards positions in technical, professional and management roles
- the provision of scholarships or bursaries for college or university students with the offer of potential employment upon graduation
- referrals from existing Aboriginal employers
- the inclusion of an Aboriginal person on the selection committee when hiring Aboriginal employees

The company recruits directly from Aboriginal centres whose students are making life changes, such as Urban Circle, the Manitoba Aboriginal Youth Career Awareness Committee, Red River College, adult learning centres, and Aboriginal job fairs. It has also hired employees from the New Directions, Reaching Equality and the Centre for Human Resource Development, and has partnerships with the Interprovincial Association of Native Employment and the Manitoba Employment Equity Practitioners Association.

PLACEMENTS

Short-term work placements are an

important component of Assiniboine's Aboriginal employment strategy. Through its partnership with Urban Circle adult learner centre offers students are given job-shadow opportunities and are then offered employment upon graduation from the training program. These employees start at entry-level positions and subsequent efforts



Photo courtesy Assiniboine Credit Union.

are made to advance them through the organization, some being advanced through to the management stream.

Assiniboine has also participated in the Aboriginal and Black Youth Internship program in partnership with Manitoba Education and Training, through which three students were hired for six-week job shadowing placements from Gordon Bell and R.B. Russell High Schools. Finally, the company has participated in the Manitoba Career Start program, which offers full-time summer employment to eligible individuals attending postsecondary education.

CULTURE

The Assiniboine Credit Union Aboriginal employment strategy is exemplary for its respectful modelling of Aboriginal culture. This is evident in the company's approach

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to new employee training programs, which is concerned with both performance expectations and competency development. Competencies are considered by Assiniboine to be the “soft skills that are the foundation for the application of technical skills and knowledge,” and are “relevant to the Aboriginal workforce because they are values based, they consider the whole person and their potential and they foster development by consistently clarifying expectations.” The holistic approach to employee development, as echoed in the emphasis on “soft skills” and in phrases such as “values based” and “whole person,” underscores the cultural appropriateness upon which the Aboriginal employment strategy is based.

OTHER STRENGTHS

Other outstanding aspects of the employment strategy include:

- a workplace mentorship program wherein new Aboriginal employees are provided with a (usually Aboriginal) “on-call buddy”
- the contracting of an Aboriginal consultant to ensure that policies are “culturally sensitive and free of barriers to employment”
- the participation of all employees in diversity, cross-cultural awareness, and anti-racism workshops
- the creation of an Aboriginal employee support group

The Assiniboine Credit Union Aboriginal Employment Strategy is admirable for its wide network of contacts in the Aboriginal community. The company perceives the

creation of partnerships with the Aboriginal community to be a two-way process, and actively seeks connections with potential Aboriginal employees. Assiniboine deliberately approaches those organizations whose graduates have overcome troubled past lives and are attempting to make positive life changes, seeking out individuals whose educational and employment backgrounds might not make them ideal candidates.

The sincerity of this approach is clearly the product of a strong interest among company executives and board members in the improvement of socio-economic circumstances in the Aboriginal community. These Aboriginal hiring strategies are for the most part a function of the attitudes of those in the upper echelons of financial institutions. One can hope that efforts to increase awareness among banking sector executives of the socio-economic conditions within Aboriginal communities and also of the availability of a skilled Aboriginal labour pool will foster the creation of Aboriginal employment strategies as genuine as that of Assiniboine Credit Union.

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