



THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY

MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY CAPSTONE PROJECT

Aboriginal Employment in the Alberta Oil Sands:
Success and Barriers to Success

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Capstone Executive Summary

As the baby boomer generation retires from the workforce, the current shortage of skilled workers is expected to increase dramatically. Alberta's oil sands will experience those shortages intensely, especially as the Temporary Foreign Workers program, responsible for a significant amount of oil sands labour, reduces the number of available workers further still. As investment in oil sands development increases, so do the number of jobs, in contrast to a decreasing labour pool. Yet the Aboriginal population is both growing and younger than the non-Aboriginal population, and the time is right to increase Aboriginal representation in the workforce, for everyone's benefit. The purpose of this paper is to identify differences in employment practices between successful Aboriginal employers and non-Aboriginal employers, and determine if those differences support successful employment or not.

The methodology used was qualitative analysis based on a case study of Cold Lake First Nations. Although a small convenience sample, the data gathered provided a personal and honest, first-hand view, through an Aboriginal perspective. Data was gathered from various stakeholders, including energy companies, successful First Nations employers, First Nations workers and a First Nations employment and training agency. Analysis considered Aboriginal education and funding, Budget 2013 financial allocations to Aboriginal communities, employment sustainability within communities, and First Nations consultation and

collaboration. Results found three significant differences in hiring practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employers which currently favor Aboriginal employers for the Aboriginal worker. Should energy companies wish to increase Aboriginal representation in their workforce, recognition of these differences is critical.



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Introduction

This paper examines Aboriginal employment in the Alberta oil sands, in particular the successes and barriers to success. Success for the purpose of this paper is defined as economic participation in the oil sands through employment, for through economic independence lies freedom from dependence. Currently, as the need for trained workers in the oil sands dramatically increases, energy companies are looking to expand their Aboriginal workforce - workers already living in that geographical region – for both economic and political reasons. So what challenges does industry face in this task? The core question this research proposes to ask is, “Are there differences in employment practices between Aboriginal employers and non-Aboriginal employers, and do those differences facilitate or hinder employment success?”

There are several reasons that this topic is relevant in terms of public policy:

- increasing shortages of skilled workers,
- recent changes to immigration policies previously used to fill the labour gaps,
- a growing Aboriginal population in contrast to an overall aging population,
- the recent focus on Aboriginal issues catapulted into the spotlight through the “Idle No More” movement,
- energy company consultations with First Nations over proposed pipelines,
- recent allocation of federal funding to Aboriginal communities,¹
- recent Federal Court decision granting Indian status to Metis and non-status Aboriginal peoples.²

¹ Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, "Budget 2013 Highlights – Aboriginal and Northern Investments," Government of Canada, <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1363964630328/1363964850834> (accessed July 18, 2013).

These economic and political factors, as well as consideration of social justice, support action towards increasing Aboriginal economic participation in Canada's energy sector.

Literature Review

Current shortage of skilled workers

The 2013 report produced by the Petroleum Human Resource Council of Canada shows the following statistics for the oil sands:

- In 2012, oil sands operations employed approximately 22,340 workers. The oil sands operations sector must add another 16,000 direct new jobs between 2013 and 2022 to meet growing oil sands production targets. By 2022, employment is projected to reach 38,300 jobs, with in situ employing half of the workforce.
- Aside from job growth, age-related attrition (retirements and deaths) could create an additional 6,500 job vacancies. When combined with 16,000 new jobs, this results in a hiring requirement of 22,500 jobs over the next decade. Additionally, if three per cent of the oil sands workforce changes companies and/or leaves the sector during each year of the outlook period, hiring activity increases by another 9,350 positions, bringing total hiring requirements to about 31,850 over the next decade.
- The investment in oil sands development and operations over the next decade is estimated to sustain more than half a million jobs across Canada (direct, indirect and induced). Although the majority of jobs are expected to be in Alberta, more than 20 per

² Nikita Rathwell, "Clarifying Jurisdiction Over Metis and Non-Status Indians in Canada: The Federal Court in Daniels V the Queen," Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, <http://www.thecourt.ca/2013/01/29/clarifying-jurisdiction-over-metis-and-non-status-indians-in-canada-the-federal-court-in-daniels-v-the-queen/> (accessed July 23, 2013).

cent, or 112,000 will be in other Canadian provinces - such as Ontario, British Columbia, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Atlantic Canada.³

With an estimated demand for between 22,500 and 31,850 new workers over the next decade, Canada must expedite the hiring process in the energy sector. The *Canada Labour Market Outlook to 2022* reports the aging baby boomer population represents a further loss to the industry workforce of 23%, between 44,200 and 45,300 workers, to retirement over the next decade.⁴

Immigration policies being used to fill the labour gaps

Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) have provided a much needed source of labour for Alberta's oil sands. Between 2006 and 2010 the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo experienced an influx of over 6100 foreign workers in oil sands construction alone,⁵ with mobile workers representing 26% of the local population for 2007.⁶ Yet recent changes to the temporary foreign workers program now make it more onerous to hire foreign workers into vacant positions.⁷ Although the focus of these new changes places an emphasis on hiring Canadians first, Teresa Woo-Paw's report suggests current "overall demand outpacing supply by

³ *Oil Sands Labour Demand Outlook to 2022* (Calgary, AB: Petroleum Human Resources of Canada,[2013]).

⁴ Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada, *The Decade Ahead: Labour Market Outlook to 2022 for Canada's Oil and Gas Industry* (Calgary, AB: Enform: Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada,[2013]).

⁵ Alison Taylor, Jason Foster and Carolina Cambre, *Temporary Foreign Workers in Trades in Alberta* (Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta,[2012]).

⁶ Athabasca Regional Issues Working Group, *Mobile Workers in the Wood Buffalo Region* (Edmonton, AB: Nichols Applied Management,[2007]).

⁷ Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, "Harper Government Announces Reforms to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program - Ensuring Canadians have First Chance at Available Jobs," Government of Canada, <http://news.gc.ca/web/article-eng.do;jsessionid=ac1b105330d768b4a451c6bc4d4a947de674d8e95e77.e38RbhaLb3qNe34Lb3n0?crtr.sj1D=&crtr.mnthndVI=1&mthd=advSrch&crtr.dpt1D=420&nid=736729&crtr.lc1D=&crtr.tp1D=1&crtr.yrStrtVI=2008&crtr.kw=&crtr.dyStrtVI=26&crtr.aud1D=&crtr.mnthStrtVI=2&crtr.page=1&crtr.yrndVI=2015&crtr.dyndVI=4> (accessed July 15, 2013, 2013).

2015.”⁸ A growing energy sector, with Alberta representing 80% of new jobs and 65% of the total workforce by 2022,⁹ in conjunction with a decreasing national labour force, suggests that we should look within our own borders first to relieve the looming labour shortage crisis.

Growing Aboriginal population and aging non-Aboriginal population

In contrast to Canada’s aging non-Aboriginal population, the Aboriginal population is younger and growing. During only five years, between 2006 and 2011, the Aboriginal population of Canada increased by 232,385 people, or 20.1%, compared with 5.2% for the non-Aboriginal population. The median age also differs between the two populations; 28 for Aboriginals, 41 for non-Aboriginals. A further breakdown by generations highlights the contrast of the populations: “Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 comprised 18.2% of the Aboriginal population, compared with 12.9% of the non-Aboriginal population,” while “seniors aged 65 and over represented about 6% of the Aboriginal population, less than half of the proportion of 14.2% in the non-Aboriginal population.”¹⁰ Any relief from the impact of baby boomer retirements on the labour force is not expected to materialize for close to five decades and “is not expected to return to 2009 levels until 2061,”¹¹ thereby seriously impacting Canada’s future growth.

We know that Canada already has a labour shortage in terms of skilled workers and the future presents a grimmer picture still. Woo-Paw provides a 2011 snapshot of what the labour

⁸ Teresa Woo-Paw, *Impact of the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) Program on the Labour Market in Alberta* (Edmonton, AB, CAN: Alberta Employment and Immigration,[2011]).

<http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/lib/calgarypubpolicy/docDetail.action?docID=10534779&ppg=1>.

⁹ Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada, *The Decade Ahead: Labour Market Outlook to 2022 for Canada's Oil and Gas Industry*.

¹⁰ Government of Canada, "National Household Survey: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit," (accessed June 26, 2013).

¹¹ Sandra Elgersma et al., *Canada's Aging Population and Public Policy: 5. the Effects on Employers and Employees* (Ottawa, Canada: Library of Parliament,[2012]).

picture will look like: "It is projected that by 2016, just five years away, annual growth of the labour force in Canada will be near zero. That within the next decade, for every two people who retire in Canada there may be less than one person to fill their jobs. Competition for future workers will be intense provincially, nationally and internationally."¹²

Recent focus on Aboriginal issues

Recent social movements such as Idle No More have catapulted Aboriginal issues into the spotlight. The federal government was forced to respond to the various forms of activism as political pressure increased due to Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike and various civic disruptions across the nation. On January 11, 2013, Prime Minister Stephen Harper met with National Chief Shawn Atleo and several First Nations leaders to discuss a way forward to achieve better outcomes in Aboriginal communities throughout Canada. The follow-up June 20, 2013, meeting between Prime Minister Harper and National Chief Atleo was held quietly and away from the media gaze, with both sides differing in perceptions of success but in agreement about continued dialogue.¹³ In addition, the duty to consult First Nations, brought to the forefront with the 2004 Supreme Court Haida decision,¹⁴ has never been more prevalent than it is today as industry giants such as Enbridge, attempting to market Alberta's oil to Asia via British Columbia, enter into consultation processes involving First Nations communities lasting years and consuming considerable amounts of resources. Finally, Budget 2013 announced the allocation of \$872 million, spread over several years, to Aboriginal and Northern

¹² Woo-Paw, *Impact of the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) Program on the Labour Market in Alberta*. (Edmonton, AB, CAN: Alberta Employment and Immigration, [2011]).

<http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/lib/calgarypubpolicy/docDetail.action?docID=10534779&ppg=1>

¹³ Michael Woods, "National Chief Shawn Atleo, Prime Minister Stephen Harper Meet Quietly, Away from Spotlight," *Canada.Com*, June 24, 2013.

¹⁴ *Haida Nation V. British Columbia (Minister of Forests)*, 2004, Public Law SCC 73, [2004] 3 SCR 511, (2004).

communities to “allow them to participate more fully in Canada's economy and benefit from its growth.”¹⁵ How and where the funding will be targeted will determine not only the success of the programs but public appetite for further financial resource allocation.

Preparedness for entry into workforce

The 2010 Report of the MLA Committee on the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Workforce Planning Initiative, a result of engaging with First Nations, Métis and Inuit community members throughout Alberta versus merely consultation, provides a view of workforce issues through the Aboriginal voice. Members acknowledge that while First Nations Colleges offer a variety of programs to their students, they are limited in scope because they cannot access “provincial (public) funding because most of them are considered not public institutions.”¹⁶ In addition to the limitations derived from the funding source, these colleges are currently “seeing a real demand from Aboriginal people who require academic upgrading, workplace literacy and basic pre-trades training.”¹⁷ These demands for workplace readiness can only be expected to increase as the demand for skilled workers continues to increase over the next decade.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to gain perspectives from various stakeholders connected with Aboriginal employment in the Alberta Oil Sands. The rationale behind seeking differing perspectives was the desire for a more balanced approach. Often when an issue is viewed through one lens only, significant information remains undiscovered.

¹⁵ Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, *Budget 2013 Highlights – Aboriginal and Northern Investments*.

¹⁶ Government of Alberta, *Government of Alberta Response - Connecting the Dots: Aboriginal Workforce and Economic Development in Alberta* (Edmonton, AB, CAN: Alberta Employment and Immigration,[2011]).
<http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/lib/calgarypubpolicy/docDetail.action?docID=10534850&ppg=1>.p.2

1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The research method is qualitative analysis based on a convenience sample of personal interviews. The number of interviews is minimal due to time constraints and as such the data is not intended to be representative of large populations, but rather a glimpse through the Aboriginal lens on employment in one select area. Data collection involved interviews with 9 participants, including energy companies, First Nations employers, and employees. Interviews explored how the various stakeholders perceived success, as well as barriers to success, for Aboriginal workers in the oil sands. First Nations interviews were respectful of Aboriginal epistemology and as such were primarily open-ended, allowing the interviewee to tell their story narrative style, thereby reducing any power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee. Industry interviews were in a more formal, fact-finding style whereby data was gathered on employment policies in place to attract, hire and retain Aboriginal workers. Interviews were conducted April through July 2013 and lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. First Nations employers were invited to participate in the research and to extend the invitation to any of their employees. Ethics approval was obtained and followed as per the University of Calgary guidelines (consent forms, data storage, etc.). Names of employees have been changed and findings summarized to protect identities.

The shortcoming of this approach and methodology is that the size and choice of the population interviewed are so limited that the findings cannot be considered representative of the oil sands and Aboriginal population as a whole. The “one size fits all” conclusion should not be applied or argued globally; the findings are specific to the interviewed population and provide opportunities for further exploration only. Employees’ names were provided by the

employer as examples of successful achievers and while not diminishing their success, their personal views to barriers may differ substantially from their less successful counterparts.

Findings

Although there is much written about barriers to entering the employment arena for Aboriginals, such as educational requirements, transportation – particularly in rural and remote communities – and social issues, discrimination and stereotyping, there is little data available on what employment success looks like from an Aboriginal perspective. By looking at successes from a very personal perspective, one can perhaps identify barriers not spoken of because they are either not politically correct, politically popular or culturally appropriate. For example, are Aboriginal workplaces succeeding in recruiting and retaining Aboriginal workers, and if so, are there differences between their recruitment and retention practices and those of non-Aboriginal workplaces? Can both a decreasing Canadian labour pool and a growing Aboriginal population benefit from the growing need for workers in the Alberta oil sands today or must we wait until all education barriers have been overcome?

Cold Lake First Nations – A success story

Cold Lake First Nations, located approximately 300 kilometers northeast of Edmonton, Alberta, is a Denesuline (Chipewyan) Tribe and part of the Dene Nation. Approximately 1500 members live in or close to the three reserves of LeGoff (#149), Cold Lake (#149A) and English Bay (#149B), although total band membership is estimated at over 2400.¹⁸ Primco Dene is a group of companies owned 100% by Cold Lake First Nations. They were the winner of the

¹⁸ Cold Lake First Nations, "Cold Lake First Nations," <http://www.clfns.com/community/> (accessed July 2, 2013).

prestigious Alberta Business Awards – Eagle Feather Award of Distinction in 2008¹⁹ - and have been nominated for the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.²⁰ The organization began fourteen years ago with only 50 employees and peaked at approximately 750 workers, 650 of whom were Aboriginal. The current total is approximately 650, 500 being Aboriginal. James Blackman, President and CEO of Primco Dene, expects those numbers to increase to over 1000 workers this coming winter with approximately 800 of them being Aboriginal, recruited from approximately 50 different Aboriginal communities in Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. He states that “there is no other company in Canada or North America that is doing that, we’re a band owned company that’s achieving what industry keeps talking about wanting to achieve; we’re doing it, right here in Cold Lake.”²¹

Primco Dene’s companies include:

- *Primco Dene Catering* – offering camp and catering services which include food services, janitorial and maintenance. In addition, in partnership with Royal Camp Services, it offers 600 man and drill camps, camp rental and leasing;
- *Primco Dene (EMS) LP* – beginning with only one Mobile Treatment Centre (MTC) unit and one paramedic, this company has now grown to two fully equipped 4x4 ambulances, fifteen MTC’s and 30 paramedics, providing on-site emergency medical services to companies such as Cenovus, CNRL, Husky, etc;

¹⁹ Alberta Chambers of Commerce, "2008 Finalists Announced," <http://abbusinessawards.com/171/2008-finalists-announced-2> (accessed July 10, 2013).

²⁰ E&Y, "EY Celebrates Prairies Finalists for *Entrepreneur of the Year 2010*," E&Y, <http://www.ey.com/CA/en/Newsroom/News-releases/2010-EOY-finalists-Prairies> (accessed July 10, 2013).

²¹ James Blackman, Personal interview, June 10, 2013.

- *Primco Commercial LP* – providing commercial retail space for development and promoting local small businesses, Jiffy Lube and Wok Box franchises, River Ridge Café in Casino Dene;
- *Primco Security Services LP* – providing security services, some of which include mobile patrols, pipeline security, emergency response, stationary gate, alarm responders and loss prevention. Clients include Imperial Oil, Husky, Shell, Enbridge Canada and Willbros Canada;
- *7 Lakes Oilfield Services* – established in 2002 as a joint venture between Primco Dene Catering Corporation and Pimee Well Services Ltd to expand in the areas of oil well servicing, waste management, scaffolding services, insulating, vegetation control and labour crews.²²

In addition to their wholly-owned companies, Cold Lake First Nations also enjoys successful partnerships with Canada North Camps Inc., Northgate Industries Ltd, Bee-Clean and the previously mentioned Royal Camp Services. The goals of Primco Dene are two-fold; to provide value and ensure sustained profitability for their shareholders through the provision of premium services optimizing industry standards and best practices, and to develop long-term, sustainable employment for their employees.²³

In order to understand the magnitude of the Cold Lake First Nations success in the Alberta oil sands, one needs to compare their picture today to that of seventeen years ago. Twenty-two years old at the time, James Blackman became the youngest elected councillor on the board of Cold Lake First Nations. He describes the turning point for his band:

²² Primco Dene, "Welcome to Primco Dene," <http://primcodene.com/> (accessed July 3, 2013).

²³ Ibid.

I decided to run for politics in my band, there was not a lot happening. We had approximately 80-85% unemployment rate. We started very modestly with work opportunity programs (WOP) between the band and social welfare to create jobs. We were in the midst of signing a land claim with the government for the Cold Lake Air Weapons range. We hired lawyers to renegotiate our land claim that was to have been renegotiated over 20 years ago. Ended up getting it registered as a comprehensive land claim; a unique land claim. But after several years of negotiating we were feeling the pressure to sign off internally.....so...at the age of 26 and now into my second term we signed the land claim. We pushed for access to the entire weapons range for traditional uses; we are the only nation that has that access. The result of the deal is that we became first class stakeholders for anything that happens in that area; 5000 acres of land plus \$25 million plus access.²⁴

Before negotiations were concluded the Band had attempted to engage some of the oil companies through memorandums of understanding, although nothing to the magnitude of today's contracts. Over the next few years the duty to consult First Nations on matters concerning their lands became more prevalent and Blackman credits the fact that they "were first class stakeholders, had good lawyers and were willing to invest in long term negotiations"²⁵ as early contributors to their success. Furthermore, Blackman emphasises the importance of actions following promises in order to create a win-win situation not only for Cold Lake First Nations but also for industry:

²⁴ This source advises settlement of land and cash, but not confirmed.

²⁵ James Blackman, Personal interview, June 10, 2013.

The proof is in the pudding, the secret to our success is simple, we bark about jobs, we bark about profits so we can use it towards our community, but the difference is that Cold Lake and industry see the changes in the last 10 years in forms of infrastructure, housing and social programs; but we've walked the walk when it comes to the jobs. And when you have a success story with the amount of jobs that you're able to create, year in, year out, for Aboriginal workers, industry becomes a partner with you. If they're a partner with you they want to become part of that good story and if they're a part of that good story and see the results they feel empowered and they want to continue to enhance. So all we have to do is maintain our end of the bargain, ensure that our services are sound and that they get the value added services they are requesting. We make sure that we provide long-term, meaningful employment to Aboriginal communities all around.²⁶

Building upon a solid financial foundation, Blackman credits expansion and diversity in services offered as a further strength of their companies – and a draw for new workers – providing both employer and employee with opportunities for growth. Blackman recognizes that the variety of services offered through Primco Dene and its sister company 7 Lakes, in addition to Jiffy Lube and Wok-Box franchises, provide a diversity of positions required to attract and retain employees:

Not everybody wants to work in a camp business, not everybody wants to run a cat or be a slasher, and not everybody wants to be a medic. So Primco Dene group of companies has a number of services. 7 Lakes is a sister company, I started that company,

²⁶ Ibid.

Primco is a general partner with Pimee Well Services for 7 Lakes – owned half by Cold Lake with Primco as the general partner – they do garbage, waste management, scaffolding trade, some carpentry and electrical trades as well as well-head clean up, general labour oilfield. Primco also offers security, catering, camp maintenance, culinary. Basically what I’m saying is that the diversity and range of services allows for movement of Aboriginal workers. It allows you to retain, or move people over and find their niche, what they’re good at and what they like, what would be good for them for long-term employment. This also allows us to attract a range of Aboriginal workers and then you find your stars and you move them up. So diversity has been our other strength.²⁷

The proximity of band political culture to everyday life requires support and commitment in order for any project to succeed. Blackman cannot underscore enough the importance of having everyone onboard:

Political support is huge. If your community and your politicians and your board of directors don’t support you it’s going to be hard to grow and maintain the level of business and retain the type of people that you need, that want to get up and go and feel like they’re getting that pat on the back for success, that always can’t come in dollars, you’ve got to have a good working environment. You get that support by walking the walk, not only for industry but for your own community. You keep hiring more and more members.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Blackman addresses some of the stereotypes and myths surrounding Aboriginal employment and why a First Nations working environment succeeds, touching on the issue of attendance, a subject usually too politically sensitive for non-Aboriginals to publicly address:

People don't believe, across Canada, that you can get an Aboriginal workforce to obtain capacity. I'm making people believers every time they come and ask or see what we're doing. Aboriginal workers are out there, they want to work but they want to feel comfortable working. When people come to work for us they know they're coming to work for an Aboriginal company that shows no boundaries when it comes to growth, new ideas or the line or type of business we're in. But they also know what our priorities are and one of those priorities is to hire Aboriginal workers. We're an equal opportunity employer; we have a lot of our senior management staff that are non-Aboriginal. But all of our recruitment officers are Aboriginal, it's important because they have that vested interest and they want to hire.²⁹

Innovative practices such as utilizing their partners' offices in Edmonton for recruitment in order to provide an Aboriginal employment face in an urban centre have paid off in reaching new Aboriginal workers. Blackman recognizes the challenges that non-Aboriginal workplaces often present to Aboriginal workers, "We know it will be more appealing for an Aboriginal worker in Edmonton to walk into a Primco Dene's office than to walk into a mainstream office and avoid that intimidation, or insecurity that are put in the forefront. There's a welcoming sense that at times they wouldn't necessarily get."³⁰

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

Further innovative thinking and understanding are required to address some of the social issues resulting from the past. “It takes a type of people, a level of tolerance, a level of dedication because there are factors, social barriers that still come to us that we still have to adapt to.”³¹ One of those adaptations is the workplace policy around bereavement time. Most workplaces provide a prescribed number of days for bereavement purposes, yet the Aboriginal population experiences a significantly higher number of deaths per year than the non-Aboriginal population. In addition, particularly on reserve, most community members are from larger families than the non-Aboriginal population and know each other; when someone dies most of the community grieves. Blackman knows and understands the need for a different bereavement workplace policy, “I’ll give you 10 days bereavement if that’s needed because it’s a reality, you just make exceptions and you understand it. You don’t say no and then stress the person out even more during this time.”³² In addressing the politically sensitive issue of attendance Blackman points out that understanding the issue does not equal blind acceptance:

There’s a lot of different things that you gotta do a little different. There’s a huge negative thing when it comes to tardiness and attendance for First Nations employees, well it’s a reality; we work around it. I’m not saying that we tolerate it and just let a person take advantage, but you figure out innovative ways to assist that individual to get them to maximize the amount of work that you can get. You have to think outside of the box when it comes to things like that.³³

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

There are many success stories within his community and Blackman is quick to point out that the success of Primco Dene is not the only success of Cold Lake First Nations; others share the in the honor of turning what was once a First Nations Band with high unemployment into a thriving community with a choice of opportunities resulting from diversification:

Denchen – one of our companies, our sawmill as well as mulching division and pole-making division are going to employ as much as 50 or 60 people this winter. 7 Lakes has 150 employees and they run about 80-90% Aboriginal also, so there's another hundred or so. The casino runs a bunch of Aboriginal workers. In addition there's Aboriginal workers that work directly for the oilfield companies and then those who work part-time, seasonal and offer other services such as child care.³⁴

Blackman estimates that the unemployment level in Cold Lake First Nations has dropped from an original 80% to 15% today. Yet when including community members who work part-time, are in between jobs, on maternity leave or choosing to stay home with their children, he estimates that number to be closer to 5% - a dramatic difference from only seventeen years ago. Such a significant decrease in unemployment levels for Cold Lake First Nations has allowed Primco Dene the opportunity to focus on expansion into other areas, knowing that the majority of their community members are now employed:

We used to.... In our partnership with Royal for instance, have probably about 350 employees working with them, maybe 400. At one time in our partnership we used to carry the burden of about 80% of the employees, then we had four or five camps, but this winter we ran as many as 20 camps with them and we were only supporting them

³⁴ Ibid.

to the tune of 40-45% of their workers. So if we were more aggressive in finding and recruiting we probably would have had another 100 or 200 more workers, just by choice and effort, not by can and can't, but by choice and effort. I say choice because it's not like I'm saying that we chose not to, but we chose to work on our other divisions also, janitorial, catering, commercial ventures and everything else.³⁵

When asked what the future holds for Primco Dene and Cold Lake First Nations, Blackman speaks of further expansion, including increased First Nations employment in Saskatchewan:

My next step is to open either in Meadow Lake, I'm still debating whether Meadow Lake, Saskatoon or PA, and open up a sub-office there and transport people out of there, because there's a huge market of First Nations people there. But we need chefs from over there too and they may not be Aboriginal, they may be, you know, minority groups or white or German or whatever they may be from there. The city centres are where the most restaurants are, the most banquets, the most things, so you've got to have that accessibility for those workers to come in and I'm thinking outside the box by being that hub and bringing them to us. Most of the companies are based out of the cities and they truck the workers to the camps, we're out in the middle, attached to the Saskatchewan/Alberta border and we're not going anywhere because we have to be based on First Nations soil, for obvious reasons.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Primco Dene and other Cold Lake First Nations businesses debunk the myth that Aboriginal businesses are “simply riding the coattails of the resource sector.”³⁷ Not only are they “filling niches in the marketplace which were victims to gaps or previously viewed as uncompetitive,”³⁸ but have done so with tremendous success, from both an economic and social perspective:

I can easily see this company getting to \$250 to \$500 million in business, in the next five to seven years, and getting upwards of 1500 – 2000 employees. The only barriers I see in front of that is the economy, I don’t see any reason why not with the exception of another recession, but the kind of industries that we’re in, which is the service industry, when you’re talking fast oil change and janitorial services and medical services and camp security services, those things never stop during recessions, the net profit just slows a bit, the amount of work slows a bit, but they don’t stop. So those are the type of services and diversity that Primco’s obtaining so they can weather the storm when the economy shifts. I do believe we’re in a good location and we’ve been very fortunate that we’re starting to get recognized more and more.³⁹

Winner of the 2010 Alberta Business Awards of Distinction – Eagle Feather Award, 7 Lakes Oilfield Services, a subsidiary of Primco Dene Ltd. / Pimee Well Servicing Ltd., is owned by seven First Nations organizations in north eastern Alberta. The company opened for business with a single front-load garbage truck in 2002 and is now recognized as a “major provider to

³⁷ Derek Burleton and Sonya Gulati, *Debunking Myths Surrounding Canada's Aboriginal Population* (Toronto, ON, CAN: TD Economics,[2012]).

<http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/lib/calgarypubpolicy/docDetail.action?docID=10633443&ppg=1.5>

³⁸ Ibid.5.

³⁹ James Blackman, Personal interview, June 10, 2013.

Northeast Alberta's bustling oil and gas sector,"⁴⁰ employing over 120 full time workers including general labourers, carpenters, plumbers, welders, scaffolders, heavy equipment operators and class 1 drivers. The business works towards its vision of becoming "the most valued oilfield service company in the oil and gas sectors and the number one employer of choice"⁴¹ through exemplary safety standards, quality services and long-term, meaningful employment for its valued employees. John Darr, Business Manager of 7 Lakes Oilfield Services, provides one innovative example of sustainability in the transition of snow plows during the winter to dust control during the spring, summer and fall months, thereby creating year round employment. Darr states that "7 Lakes is about creating sustainable, meaningful employment for employees within a culture of safety".⁴² Echoing Blackman's words around diversity, Darr states that having employment options within the company allows the employee to find what he/she likes and what he/she excels at rather than simply being pigeonholed into one specific area with no room for advancement. Several successful employees of 7 Lakes and members of Cold Lake First Nations shared their advancement journeys:

Kelly, a journeyman scaffolder, started with the organization as a general labourer and then left for a year before returning to begin her scaffolding apprenticeship. She has been with the company now for four and a half years. Jo-Jo started with 7 Lakes as an administrative assistant and only two years later has advanced to the position of wellhead administrator. Matt started with 7 Lakes in November 2007 as a general labourer and was moved into a scaffolding apprenticeship position by February 2008. After completing his apprenticeship he was

⁴⁰ "7 Lakes Oilfield Services," <http://www.sevenlakesoilfield.com/about.html> (accessed July 4, 2013).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Personal interview, June 10, 2013.

promoted to back-up lead hand and is now supervising a total crew of 12 scaffolders in four different sites and also in the process of building his second house. Summarizing the three employees' perceptions of aids to success finds the following:

- Ability to change roles and advance within the company;
- Incentive safety bonus;
- Transportation provided;
- Limitless paid training opportunities;
- Tolerance and understanding of diversity in educational levels, willingness to work with the employee and accommodate different learning styles;
- Community/team/family style environment;
- Strong, clear and consistent communication style from instructors;
- In-house, approved certifier allows employee to achieve certification without having to leave the workplace;
- Training for employees to learn communication skills;
- Strong focus on hands-on learning;
- Importance of good supervisors who are able to act as mentors to employees as they change roles from crew member to lead hand;
- Positive reinforcement to build confidence.

Summarizing perceptions of barriers to success finds the following:

- Possession of a valid drivers' license is an increasing requirement;

- Some employees are travelling up to two hours one-way for work, adding an extra four hours of travel to a nine hour shift. Some companies pay for that travel time at a flat rate; some do not.
- In-house trade certification is restricted to the Cold Lake region and while this enables the employee to receive certification without leaving the workplace, it does restrict employment mobility outside of the region.
- Recognition of addiction issues as a barrier to passing drug and alcohol testing.

Pimee Well Servicing Ltd has been operating in northeastern Alberta since 1984. Owned and operated by six First Nations Bands in the Cold Lake area, the company was originally looking at the drilling rig side of Alberta's oil sands business but shifted to the less risky and more sustainable side of the service rig industry with assistance from one of energy's major oil producers.⁴³ Starting with one rig in 1984 and expanding to four by 1997, Pimee has since diversified to include:

Tar Sands Steam Cleaning Ltd. A company specializing in steam cleaning services, with a shop and office in Elk Point, Alberta, operating six high pressure steam trucks, two oilfield anchor trucks, two man-basket trucks, two light picker trucks and three one ton maintenance trucks, sandblaster trailer and polyurethane insulation truck. This purchase has increased our diversity in carrying out general oilfield services and we continually are looking at opportunities for expansion. In addition, we operate an environmentally friendly industrial wash bay specializing in washing oily pipe, large trucks and service

⁴³ "Pimee Well Servicing Ltd." <http://www.pimee.com/about.php> (accessed July 28, 2013).

rigs. We have grown from a company of seven employees to our current level of 45-60 employees. Over 90% of all our employees are aboriginal peoples.⁴⁴

As a testament to its safety standards for excellence, Pimee has been recognized and awarded by industry and their peers alike:

- Canadian Association of Oilwell Drilling Contractors (CAODC)

Won awards in 1988, 1989, 1991, 1994, 1996, 2001

- Imperial Oil Resources Cold Lake (without incident awards)

Won awards in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002

- Occupational Health and Safety Awards

Won awards in 1988, 1989, 1994

- Eagle Feather Award of Distinction for Alberta

Won award in 2001⁴⁵

Just as Primco Dene and 7 Lakes Oilfield Services focus on both economic and employment sustainability for their companies, so does Pimee Well Servicing Ltd. In addition, Pimee recognizes the importance of having industry understanding and the willingness to work through unique barriers to employment for Aboriginal workers:

Our success is also due in part to the initial commitment of a major oil producer, who recognized the rather significant barriers to employment and advancement opportunities for aboriginal peoples. We work hard to ensure a win/win relationship exists with all our clients. There is no sacrifice in quality, safety, performance or cost of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

service. Our employees are well trained and proud of our accomplishments and our company.

A work ethic, necessary to be successful, is not only obvious in our employees, but has extended to other companies within the Band communities as well. The carry over effect is even seen in our children modeling their parents.

PIMEE'S WELL SERVICING LTD. Model for success does not require handouts, rather, a simple recognition of the barriers to success as well as a fair and honest commitment to work these barriers. We are experienced at managing multiple owners, developing skilled employees and instilling pride and work ethic amongst them. The result is a very competitive oilfield service company.⁴⁶

Industry Initiatives

Imperial Oil offers a 24-month Cold Lake Operations Native Internship Program to Aboriginal members in the Cold Lake area. As a result of this initiative Aboriginal employment has increased, from 1.9% in 1992 when the program started, to a current 15% on-site. Interns are assigned Aboriginal mentors through the Imperial Native Network, a group started in 1991 "to help break down workplace barriers for Aboriginals" and with focus areas of "mentorship, outreach, recruitment and training."⁴⁷ Eligibility requirements into the program are Grade 12 graduation, clean driver's abstract and criminal record check.

Focusing on pre-employment readiness, Suncor Energy collaborates with Indspire (previously the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation), to promote education among

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Imperial Oil, "Native Network," Imperial Oil, http://www.imperialoil.ca/Canada-English/operations_community_cl_news.aspx (accessed July 10, 2013).

Aboriginal students through a program informally referred to as *Suncor's Indspire Awards Youth Program*. Although not formalized nor anywhere to be found on Suncor's website, this program originally began in 2003 and is held annually to coincide with the Indspire Awards typically hosted in February/March. Suncor acts as host to a group of 20-30 youth and transports their VIP charges to whatever location the Indspire Awards are being held. Previous locations have included Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Ottawa. The event has evolved over the past ten years but always includes a Youth Luncheon, "where our youth share stories with past and current Indspire Award winners."⁴⁸ In collaboration with local schools' Native Resource Centres, Suncor has added Education Day to the program, allowing Aboriginal youth the opportunity to visit a local university and connect with Aboriginal university students.

Connecting Industry to the Aboriginal Workforce

The Northeastern Alberta Apprenticeship Initiative (NEAAI) was created from a proposal by Edmonton-based Tribal Chiefs Employment and Training Services Association (TCETSA) to "promote the trades to Albertans and address the barriers that are preventing them from entering and succeeding in the trades."⁴⁹ Although designed to target and create opportunities for all Albertans, there is a "special focus on attracting First Nations, Metis and Inuit people, the fastest growing segment of the population, but also the segment that has the highest rates of unemployment."⁵⁰ It is a full-service, wrap-around program, designed by local Aboriginal people for Aboriginal workers. NEAAI Project Manager Eva John-Gladue describes the program as

⁴⁸ Greg Hundseth, Personal Communication, July 12, 2013 .

⁴⁹ John Copley, "New Opportunities for Work Force in Northeast Regions of Alberta," *Alberta Native News*, June 2013. 32.

⁵⁰ Ibid.32.

“designed to be a constant support system for the apprentices that are offered employment, both before and after they’ve secured a job.”⁵¹ The program’s partners include the four main colleges of the regions, industry and three levels of government. By pre-screening potential workers and matching them to available employers, providing basic workplace training and ongoing support through Apprenticeship Coaches, workers are supported in entering and becoming successful in their new careers. Follow-ups between coaches and employees, employers and colleges ensure that any work-related issues can be addressed expediently before communication breakdown occurs.

Policy implications

The primary question this research proposed to answer is, “Are there differences in employment practices between Aboriginal employers and non-Aboriginal employers and do those differences facilitate or hinder employment success?” Through searching for the answer to this question, based on a case study of Cold Lake First Nations, a second question arises: “Can both a decreasing Canadian labour pool and a growing Aboriginal population benefit from the growing need for workers in the Alberta oil sands today or must we wait until all education barriers have been overcome?” The answer to the first question is yes, there are differences in employment practices between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employers. The answer to whether those differences facilitate or hinder employment success though is fluid, depending on whose perspective is being used. Three significant differences were found between employment practices of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employers: the requirements of Grade 12 education, possession of a drivers’ license and a criminal record check. Although there are

⁵¹ Ibid.32.

undoubtedly many other less significant differences from company to company, these three remain the most challenging and determine employment outcome.

Education

Supporting improved education levels for Aboriginal people is a goal that all Canadians should be, and in many areas are, striving for. Stay in school programs can be found across the country, encouraging students to finish high school, Aboriginal students included. Although the benefits of continued education are worthy indeed, it does not change today's situation where there is a desperate shortage of skilled workers for Alberta's oil sands and many unemployed Aboriginal people without high school graduation. Nor will it change tomorrow's picture that not everyone, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, will wish to enter or complete post-secondary education – which is just as well because there aren't enough post-secondary jobs for every Canadian.

Not requiring the completion of Grade 12 education by the First Nations employers interviewed is not a recommendation that the bar be set lower for Aboriginal workers, it is merely an alternative for those not wishing to choose the traditional academic route as their career path, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal alike, and an alternative that Cold Lake First Nations are capitalizing on. While successful completion of Grade 12 education certainly opens college and university doors, the possession of a high school diploma in itself is no guarantee for success, just as the lack of a diploma is no guarantee for failure; each case must be determined on its own merit. Traditional industry workplaces may hinder Aboriginal employment with the requirement of Grade 12 completion; non-traditional workplaces, required to develop

innovative practices on a daily basis, such as those First Nations employers interviewed, facilitate success by the removal of that barrier.

In addition, a more hands-on learning style produced better results for Aboriginal apprentices and yet “the education system does not adequately recognize that Aboriginal learning styles and needs are different.”⁵² Providing an on-reserve Aboriginal student with the same education as an urban non-Aboriginal student requires not only the same funding in terms of teaching salaries, but incentives to attract new graduate teachers from their urban universities to rural and remote schools. The policy implications of the education piece alone are vast and complex and raise the question of whether Canadians wish to provide small, rural and remote reserve schools with the same education levels as their urban counterparts when both systems are funded differently. The economies of scale discussion will likely arise as urban populations argue the merits of spending more on fewer students while the on-reserve students and families do not want to leave their home communities.⁵³

From unemployment to employment

Although Budget 2013 announced the introduction of \$240 million to Aboriginal communities to assist First Nations youth with “skills and training they need to secure employment,”⁵⁴ the funding can only be accessed by “those reserve communities that choose to implement mandatory participation in training for young income assistance recipients.”⁵⁵ With half of the funding going to program start-up, the other half will only be accessible to those who agree to participate. Several policy questions arise from this mandate: first, are

⁵² Government of Alberta, *Government of Alberta Response - Connecting the Dots: Aboriginal Workforce and Economic Development in Alberta*.19.

⁵³ Ibid.20.

⁵⁴ David McRobert, "The 2013 Federal Budget Sends Mixed Messages on Aboriginal Issues," May 2013.3.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

there jobs available in the commutable area; if so, are those jobs sustainable; third but equally as important as the first two questions, is the rate of employment compensation equal to or more than income assistance – if not then the substitution effect will likely cause the program to be a disincentive for seeking employment. Many First Nations leaders have opposed this new initiative as not only paternalistic and targeting only First Nations youth, but for lack of consultation also, another topical issue of the day.⁵⁶

It is unclear from the scope of this paper if the funding provided to the Northeastern Alberta Apprenticeship Initiative (NAAI) stems from the \$240 million allocated through Budget 2013, but funding has been provided for this pilot initiative for three years; most apprenticeships take four years to complete.

Criminal Records

As this paper sought to determine the barriers to successful employment within the Alberta oil sands, the pre-employment requirement by traditional industry of a clean criminal record mirrored against a population overrepresented in the criminal justice system⁵⁷ indicated a barrier. While the lack of a criminal record check requirement for employment may be suitable within a community where most members know of or know each other, it is doubtful this employment requirement could be applied laterally to non-community based employers, such as large urban centres, where the potential employee is a stranger. However this area presents opportunities for examining hiring practices established within the 20th century that may not serve the 21st century demands as well. After all, this requirement is not a barrier for

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Michelle M. Mann, *Good Intentions, Disappointing Results: A Progress Report on Federal Aboriginal Corrections* (Ottawa, ON, Canada: Office of the Correctional Investigator of Canada,[2009]).
<http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/lib/ucalgary/docDetail.action?docID=10350442&ppg=1>.

some First Nations employers and although beyond the parameters of this paper, one might ask whether the temporary foreign workers program encountered this barrier.

Driver's license

Most energy companies operating in the Alberta oil sands require a clean driver's license for employment due to the vast geographical area. Yet although transportation is provided in many cases, employers, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, viewed the lack of license as a barrier to employment in areas where public transportation is non-existent. An area of further research would be to determine the barriers to obtaining a driver's license in Alberta and how this compares to other provinces.⁵⁸ Increased education at the junior high level around the demand for clean driver's licenses would be a further tool for advancing this issue. John Darr, Business Manager for 7 Lakes Oilfield Services, is already doing this by presenting driver's license awareness sessions at Goodfish Lake and Cold Lake First Nations schools. Bringing Aboriginal workers into the schools to speak to the students on the value of a clean driving license would further enhance this educational tool.

Consultation, communication and implementation

Successful change requires a collaborative approach, involving Aboriginal people at the very start of any discussion. Aboriginal people experience significantly different barriers to employment than non-Aboriginal and were found through this research to be, in the words of Pimee Oilfield Services, not looking for handouts, "simply recognition of the barriers to success as well as a fair and honest commitment to work these barriers."⁵⁹ A collaborative approach distributes responsibility for success, and barriers to success, among all parties and strengthens

⁵⁸ "Alberta Leads Driver's Test Flunk Rate," *CBC News*, October 6, 2010.

⁵⁹ "Pimee Well Servicing Ltd."

the process. Consulting after decisions have been made results in a lack of engagement, in any environment, and is not specific to Aboriginal people. In the Seventh Report of the Prime Minister's Advisory Committee on the Public Service, employees were found to be "motivated to contribute to the process of transformation only if they are engaged in the process. The more they know about where they are headed and why, the less threatening the future will be, and the more they will be able to help achieve the desired goals."⁶⁰

Aboriginal communities contain a source of innovation, they know their communities and people better than others and are best situated to provide suggestions on what works and what does not work. Agencies such as Tribal Chiefs Employment and Training Services Association⁶¹ and Cree-Ative Workforce Solutions⁶² not only possess first-hand knowledge of barriers facing their people, but offer innovative solutions to overcoming those barriers. Oilfield service companies in the Cold Lake First Nations area are already benefitting from their own innovative hiring practices and passing those benefits along to their respective communities. The Government of Alberta 2010 Report of the MLA Committee on the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Workforce Planning Initiative collaborated with Aboriginal communities to determine barriers to successful economic development, from an Aboriginal perspective. The Fraser Institute has recently opened the Centre for Aboriginal Policy Studies to "document and disseminate Aboriginal success stories that can be replicated in other parts of the country" and

⁶⁰ Wayne G. Wouters, *Twentieth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada* (Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada, [2013]).14.

⁶¹ "Tribal Chiefs Employment and Training Services Association (TCETSA)," <http://tcetsa.ca/what.html> (accessed July 29, 2013).

⁶² "Cree-Ative Workforce Solutions Inc." <http://www.cree-ativeworkforcesolutions.com/index.html> (accessed July 29, 2013).

offer policy solutions “that will increase the prosperity and self-sufficiency of Aboriginal communities without further encumbering non-Aboriginal taxpayers.”⁶³

Implementation of any course of action must be collaborative and a several-pronged approach involving Aboriginal Community Leaders, Industry and Government. Involvement of all parties from the beginning mitigates the risk of stand-alone decisions being rejected and unsuccessful. Implementation must recognize that just as no two non-Aboriginal communities are alike, neither are two Aboriginal communities, and a cookie-cutter, one size fits all approach is doomed for failure. What works for one area may not work for another. If the end goal is for energy companies to increase their number of Aboriginal workers in both the immediate and long term, the achievement of that goal will require a different way of thinking if they are to remove current barriers.

⁶³ Ravina Bains, “Q&A with Ravina Bains, Associate Director for the Centre for Aboriginal Policy Studies.” *Fraser Forum*, July/August 2013.36.

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