



Capital Regional District Indigenous Employment Project

WISE PRACTICES:
Indigenous Employment and Culturally Safe
and Supportive Workplaces



*Prepared for the Capital Regional District (CRD)
by Arrive Consulting*





Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge that the CRD conducts its business within the traditional territories of many First Nations, including, but not limited to, BOKÉCEN (Pauquachin), MÁLEXEŁ (Malahat), P'a:chi:da?ahť (Pacheedaht), Pune'laxutth' (Penelekut), Sc'ianew (Beecher Bay), Songhees, Sc'ianew (Tsawout), T'Sou-ke, WJOLÉŁP (Tsartlip), WSIKEM (Tseycum) and x^wsepsəm (Esquimalt), all of whom have a long-standing relationship with the land and waters from time immemorial that continues to this day.

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Front cover photo art acknowledgment:

The two pieces of art pictured on the front cover were commissioned as part of the CRD Wastewater Treatment Project.

Pacific Peace House Post: The 10-foot-tall western red cedar house post was commissioned by the Pacific Peoples' Partnership to celebrate their 45th anniversary and honour their historical relations and enduring friendship with the Lekwungen Peoples. Artists Yuxwelupton Qwal'qaxala (Bradley Dick), of the Lekwungen/Da'naxdaxw Nations, and Ake Lianga, of the Solomon Islands (now residing in Victoria), worked together in partnership for two years prior to the house post's installation at Macaulay Point. The house post looks out to the Pacific Ocean where all Pacific Peoples have voyaged to secure resources, share knowledge, and build kinship since time immemorial.

Kinship: Adorned in copper, which was known for its healing properties by many Coast Salish People, this design was created during a time in our world when healing is a priority. Esquimalt Nation is represented by the Wolf. For generations, the Wolf and Raven have worked together to ensure a successful hunt, representing the power of unity—a much needed remedy in times of uncertainty. Darlene Gait created this piece and is a member of Esquimalt Nation and is an active artist.

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Introduction

Background and Purpose

This report presents findings from wise practices research on Indigenous employment and creating culturally safe and supportive workplaces. This research was undertaken as part of the Capital Regional District's Indigenous Employment Project. This standalone report—separate from the project's full report—was created to share the wise practices research findings with other employers, local Indigenous Nations and communities, and research contributors.

The wise practices findings in this report were informed by an environmental scan and by interviews with members and staff from local Indigenous communities and organizations, subject matter experts on Indigenous employment, and CRD managers and staff. While the purpose of this project is to apply these findings to the CRD, the wise practices identified may be relevant and useful to other employers seeking to enhance Indigenous employment and workplace cultural safety.

It is important to note that this wise practices research was informed in part by members and staff from local Indigenous communities and organizations within the CRD's area of operations. The research findings therefore partly reflect local Indigenous perspectives. Because different Indigenous Peoples across British Columbia and Canada have widely diverse histories, worldviews, traditions, cultural practices, and economic practices, this wise practices report should not be read as generally applying to all Indigenous Peoples across BC and Canada.

Project Background

The **Capital Regional District (CRD)** is a regional government delivering over 200 services to residents from three electoral areas and 13 municipal governments on southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

The CRD conducts business within the traditional territories of many First Nations, who have taken care of these lands and waters since time immemorial. In its **Statement of Reconciliation**, the CRD commits to working towards reconciliation with First Nations, informed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and focused on self-determination, shared prosperity, and relationships with the land and water in the CRD region.

In 2020, the CRD undertook a **feasibility study for an Indigenous Economic Partnership Model**. This feasibility study, led by the Indigenomics Institute, involved engagements with CRD staff and the nine First Nations with populated reserve lands in the capital region and included several goals and recommended actions related to CRD Indigenous employment initiatives, including increased opportunities for First Nations employment across the CRD.

In 2021, the CRD sought contractors to work with the CRD to explore and determine a path forward for the development of Indigenous employment programs with local First Nations. Arrive Consulting developed a project approach in response to this request, which included in-depth exploration with local First Nations, as well as urban Indigenous and Métis people living within the capital region, about their employment goals and priorities as related to working with the CRD.

Methodology

This report was developed by Arrive Consulting, a BC-based company that supports cultural competency and Indigenous-focused learning, reconciliation planning, and Indigenous self-determination and cultural resurgence.

This report was developed as part of the CRD's Indigenous Employment Project, which aimed to better understand how First Nations and Indigenous organizations would like to engage on employment initiatives with the CRD and determine their initial interests and capacity to co-develop Indigenous employment programs.

To gather information for this report, Arrive Consulting and CRD First Nations Relations Division staff conducted interviews from June to October 2022. The interview process involved territorial acknowledgments, personal introductions, and informed consent. All interviewees external to the CRD were offered an honoraria or gift for their participation, although not all were able to or wanted to accept. Interview data was then analyzed for key themes.

This project involved interviews with members of the following groups:

Group	Number of Departments/ Organizations	Number of Individuals
First Nations, Métis and urban Indigenous communities	10	13
CRD divisions and union representatives	9	15
Subject matter experts in Indigenous employment and cultural safety	9	15
Total	28	43

In addition to these interviews, Arrive Consulting conducted an environmental scan to identify wise practices for Indigenous employment and workplace cultural safety, focusing mainly on BC but also including other jurisdictions in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Limitations

It is important to note the following limitations and choices of the methodology:

Many local Indigenous community members who contributed to this research stressed that they could speak only for themselves, not for their entire community. Therefore, the information gathered on wise practices represents only their individual perspectives and is not informed by wider community input or engagement.

Interviewees were asked to provide wise practices guidance for the CRD, a large public service provider—not for all employers in general. Thus, while some of the wise practices in this report may be broadly applicable, the wise practices outlined may not apply as described to different kinds of employers or organizations.

All quotations in this report are paraphrased and anonymized to keep identities confidential.

Current State of Labour Market and Employment Needs within Indigenous Communities in the Capital Region

The wise practices in this report were influenced in part by the local labour market context in 2022. Below are several key labour market factors that came up in the research conducted for this report. These factors impact the employment goals and needs of local Indigenous communities and may also be relevant to employers and Indigenous communities in other regions.

Tight labour market in which most people are already employed: Many Indigenous community participants mentioned that most of their members who want to be employed already are and that other employers are also coming to them with efforts to recruit Indigenous people. Indigenous community members who are looking to change jobs are thinking about how they can attain higher pay or more meaningful work.

Competitive labour market with high demand for staff: Many interviewees, both from Indigenous communities and CRD divisions, mentioned challenges with a competitive labour market. Many Indigenous communities are struggling to recruit and retain their own staff. In addition, many non-Indigenous employers are looking to increase diversity and contribute to reconciliation by recruiting Indigenous staff, so Indigenous people are in high demand. It's a challenging time for employers seeking Indigenous employees, who have many options to work elsewhere.

It is important that employers' efforts to attract Indigenous employees don't compete with Indigenous communities' hiring efforts and instead are mutually beneficial. One way to address the impacts of the current labour market shortage in a mutually beneficial manner would be for employers to provide employment alongside training opportunities that boost Indigenous community capacity.

Youth a priority: There are a range of people in Indigenous communities looking for employment, but youth are a main priority for employment. Because many older adults are already employed, youth are the ones still looking for work and trying to find the right fit. In some cases, youth who want to participate in postsecondary education have to wait for funding or program space, so they need short-term work while they are waiting. Several community members mentioned that there is also a need for employment amongst middle-aged and older adults, as well as people with physical or mental health challenges.

Diversity of communities: There is a great diversity of Indigenous communities: some are small and some large, some remote from population centres and some not. Each has different employment needs related to their demographics and location.

Job term: Indigenous community members are looking for all kinds of work, from short-term seasonal employment to full-time ongoing employment. Some people are looking for seasonal (especially summer) work that fits around cultural obligations such as Big House season (generally late fall through early spring).

The employment landscape has changed dramatically. There is no shortage of jobs. People aren't coming to us because they need work, they're coming because they want more certifications, better job titles, or work gear.

– Indigenous community employment and training staff person

Wise Practices for Indigenous Employment and Culturally Safe and Supportive Workplaces

The sections below include wise practices related to the following areas and topics related to Indigenous employment and creating culturally safe and supportive workplaces. Findings are divided into the following general topics:

- Organizational approaches
- Working in collaboration with Indigenous communities
- Recruitment and hiring processes
- Supporting and retaining Indigenous employees
- Culturally safe and supportive workplaces
- Indigenous employment programming and types of programs

Organizational Approaches

Organizational values and approach

Strengths-based approach: Creating culturally safe and supportive workplaces and increasing Indigenous employment should be pursued with a strengths-based approach that emphasizes the benefits for everyone—rather than offering “help” or “support” for Indigenous community members.

Systemic approach: For Indigenous employment initiatives to be successful, they need to be part of wider systemic supports for Indigenous employees that increase cultural safety and better align with Indigenous ways of being.

Senior leadership buy-in: Genuine buy-in and commitment from senior leadership are essential for the success of workplace cultural safety and Indigenous employment programs. Senior leaders must lead by example; codify commitments in plans with performance measures and evaluation processes; and allocate the time, financial investments, and human resources (HR) needed to achieve meaningful results.

Follow through: Indigenous employment programs should have a strong foundation of support and a solid plan for execution, follow through, and accountability. Employers should start with the end goals in mind and then work backwards so they know their plans are solid.

Communicate the “why”: Leaders must effectively and routinely communicate the “why” behind Indigenous employment and workplace cultural safety initiatives to ensure their success. Supervisors and staff should clearly understand why their participation in such initiatives is important and beneficial to the organization, to staff, and to the communities and people they serve.

Healthy, partnership-based collaboration with unions: In unionized workplaces, collaborative and productive working relationships between executive leadership, managers, and union representatives are essential for the success of Indigenous employment initiatives. This involves recognizing unions as partners working towards common goals of reconciliation, cultural safety, and increasing Indigenous employment—and engaging with them proactively and collaboratively.

Non-Indigenous people taking responsibility: Creating safe and supportive work environments for Indigenous people is the duty and responsibility of non-Indigenous people. Indigenous people should not be relied upon to have all the answers or to provide advice and guidance beyond the scope of their job descriptions. Adequate financial and human resources must be dedicated to educating and training non-Indigenous leaders, managers, and staff.

Avoid tokenism: Tokenistic practices can make Indigenous employees feel uncomfortable and embarrassed and make them more likely to leave the organization. Nearly all wise practices interviewees noted that tokenism in various forms must be avoided.

Tokenism includes making commitments and claims without taking meaningful action or investing adequate financial resources and staff capacity; relying on Indigenous employees to be the poster people for progress; citing numbers of Indigenous representation without having done the important work on cultural safety and staff supports; cherry picking actions to make the organization look good, while not taking adequate action in the areas that matter most to Indigenous employees and communities; hiring Indigenous employees but not really wanting to acknowledge, respect, and uplift the unique voices, perspectives, and insights they bring.

We are willing to build relationships, and we recognize it takes time. We work in a fast-paced environment. We need to slow down and build relationships, get out of the office and into the community. We need to build relationships before coming with any agenda or expectations.

– CRD employee

Clear organizational commitments supported by strategies and action plans

To create culturally safe and supportive workplaces and implement Indigenous employment initiatives, it is essential to have clear strategic leadership and organizational commitments, backed up by strategies and action plans with clear goals, supporting actions, performance measures, and processes for monitoring, evaluation, and accountability. Such plans can include:

Reconciliation action plan: Initiatives to increase Indigenous employment should be part of an organizational reconciliation action plan.

It is helpful to link initiatives to frameworks such as the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples \(UNDRIP\)](#), the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\) Calls to Action](#) and the [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls \(MMIWG\) Calls for Justice](#).

Reconciliation Plans in Practice

The following cities have reconciliation plans that were developed in collaboration with local Indigenous communities and contain clear guiding principles, strategic objectives, and supporting actions:

The City of Montreal’s [Strategy for Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples](#)

The City of Ottawa’s [Reconciliation Action Plan](#)

The City of Toronto’s [Reconciliation Action Plan](#)

The City of Edmonton’s [Indigenous Framework](#)

The City of Vancouver’s [UNDRIP Strategy](#)

TRC Calls to Action

Call to Action 43: We call upon federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments to fully adopt and implement UNDRIP as the framework for Reconciliation.

Call to Action 57: We call upon federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, UNDRIP, treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights and anti-racism.

Call to Action 92(ii): Ensure that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects.

UNDRIP

UNDRIP Article 21: Indigenous peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security.

The BC government's **Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act Action Plan** sets clear goals with supporting actions to support implementation of UNDRIP, including Action (3.2): "to set and achieve targets for equitable recruitment and retention of Indigenous Peoples across the public sector, including at senior levels" [our emphasis].

Indigenous Employment Strategies and Plans in Practice

The City of Toronto's **Aboriginal Employment Strategy** supports its commitment to "implementing employment practices that ensure that opportunities for employment are accessible to Aboriginal people and increase the number of Aboriginal employees at all occupational levels."

The New South Wales Public Service Commission's **Aboriginal Employment Strategy** includes clear goals, areas of strategic focus, and initiatives for results.

The Government of Nunavut's **Inuit Employment Plan** supports its commitment "increasing the number of Inuit employees in the territorial public service to be representative of the people we serve."

Indigenous employment strategy and action plan: This is a strategy or plan that includes clear commitments, goals, and targets for increasing Indigenous employment and that outlines approaches to increasing Indigenous employment through tangible, appropriately resourced initiatives and actions.

Representative Workforce Strategies and Plans in Practice

The Saskatchewan Health Authority has committed to be a "diverse, culturally competent organization with a workforce that is representative of the community we serve" and has undertaken a highly successful **representative workforce initiative**. This includes an **organizational strategic plan** as well as an operational **strategic action plan**.

The Yukon Government is committed to having "a representative public service" and has a supporting **strategic plan** with clear objectives.

Representative workforce strategy and action plan: This is a strategy or plan to achieve a representative workforce, with clear employment goals for equity-seeking groups such as Indigenous people, targeted at all levels of the organization including leadership positions.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion: Many employers have strong commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion, often supported by strategies, frameworks, and action plans. These plans often include goals related to Indigenous employment and culturally safe workplaces.

Anti-Racism in Practice

The City of Calgary has made a **Commitment to Anti-Racism** and has a number of supporting initiatives underway.

Alberta Health Services' **Anti-Racism Position Statement** includes clear commitments and supporting actions to achieve them.

The City of Vancouver is committed to **anti-racism and cultural redress** and has a number of supporting initiatives underway.

Anti-racism commitments or policies: These are organizational commitments, practices, and policies to prevent and effectively address racism in the workplace and in service delivery.

Cultural Safety Plans in Practice

The Government of Northwest Territories' **Cultural Safety Action Plan** has clear goals, objectives, and supporting actions.

The Victoria State Government Department of Land, Water and Planning's **Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework** includes clearly defined principles, goals, and indicators for monitoring and evaluation.

Cultural safety plans and policies: These are specific plans, frameworks, and policies developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities and unions representing workers to create culturally safe and supportive work environments. Plans should include clear goals, objectives, and supporting actions.

Codes of conduct: Codes of conduct should include clear guidelines for cultural safety and anti-racism/anti-discrimination.

Workforce engagement and demographic data collection

Collect workforce demographic data, including on Indigenous employees: In order to monitor the impacts of Indigenous employment programming, it is important to collect and report publicly on workforce demographic data, including data on the number of Indigenous employees. Data should be collected and safeguarded using First Nations principles for data management, known as **OCAP** (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) principles, which assert that First Nations have control over data collection processes and that they own and control how this information can be used. It is important to not use workforce data in a tokenistic way (e.g., claiming success by citing numbers, without having done meaningful work to improve workplace cultural safety or engaging with and supporting Indigenous employees).

Workforce Demographic Data Collection and Reporting in Practice

BC Hydro **collects and reports on workforce demographic data** related to its workforce diversity goals.

Aotearoa (New Zealand) Te Kawa Mataaho (Public Service Commission) **collects and reports on workforce demographic data** related to diversity and inclusion.

Hydro One also **collects and reports on workforce demographic data** related to its diversity goals.

Greater Victoria Harbour Authority has an employment target that **at least 5% of its workforce be Indigenous** and aims to meet standards for **certification by the Progressive Aboriginal Relations Program**, a benchmarking tool that helps businesses measure their work in Indigenous relations.

Engage with and gather feedback from employees: Ongoing employee engagement is valuable to gather qualitative feedback from staff. Methods can include talking circles, surveys, focus groups, and other tools. Feedback should be gathered and shared transparently and acted upon meaningfully.

Working in Collaboration with Indigenous Communities

Co-development of programs with Indigenous communities: Local Indigenous communities, leaders and staff should be included from the outset of program development and involved in every step, following the principle of "Nothing about us without us." Developing letters of understanding with Indigenous communities can be helpful.

Relationship-based collaboration: The foundation and starting point for developing Indigenous employment initiatives should be engagement and collaboration with local Indigenous communities and strong, trusting, personal relationships with leaders and officials in those communities, as well as with their employment and training staff.

Realistic, appropriate timelines: Community engagement, program development, and program implementation must move on timelines that are established collaboratively with Indigenous communities, responsive to the needs of Indigenous communities, and not just based on the timelines of the employer.

Long-term commitment: Building productive, personal working relationships with Indigenous communities is a long-term endeavour requiring a commitment of time, resources, and dedicated staff capacity.

Values-based: Employers should lead with their organizational values when communicating with Indigenous communities and people about employment programs.

Anybody who is able to work is currently working given the labour market situation right now. There are not very many people looking for work. Almost everybody is employed but would take a better position if one was available. Being an attractive employer would help.

– Indigenous community respondent

Recruitment and Hiring Processes

Recruitment

Indigenous community members and wise practices interviewees offered the following suggestions for recruitment of Indigenous employees:

Collaborative recruitment with Indigenous communities: Employers should connect with the right people in each community, understand the needs of the community, and draw attention to postings that are relevant to community needs. Having strong personal relationships with key staff in Indigenous communities significantly improves recruitment of Indigenous people.

Improve information sharing and education about career opportunities: Employers should create a variety of clear communications (e.g., webpages, info sessions, pamphlets, social media, emails to Nations' employment staff) that outline what they do, the various career opportunities available, and certification requirements for those opportunities, so that people are better able to interact with them on employment opportunities and initiatives. Some job seekers also want to know more about employers' values and vision.

Host career fairs in community: Employers can host career fairs in Indigenous communities. These can be opportunities to build relationships and meet directly with potential applicants so they can learn about the different opportunities and requirements.

Engage with Indigenous youth: Many Indigenous community members stressed the importance of engaging with Indigenous youth (starting early, as young as 9 or 10 years old) in order to "plant the seeds" about potential career paths. Employers should provide experiential and participatory learning opportunities for youth, such as work site visits, field trips, land- and nature-based education, job shadowing, and youth summer camps.

Offer low-barrier options: Ensure there are entry-level positions, so people feel more comfortable applying, and then give individuals an opportunity to grow within the organization. Also offer seasonal positions that don't require specialized qualifications.

Targeted outreach: Develop a distribution list for Indigenous communities. Attend community events and career fairs to promote and share employment opportunities.

Indigenous recruitment webpages and communications tools: Webpages and communications specifically targeting Indigenous job seekers are an effective way to support Indigenous recruitment. Among the most common communications tools are dedicated webpages with information about supports for Indigenous applicants and videos of current Indigenous employees sharing stories about their careers within the organization.

Application and hiring processes

Provide supports to Indigenous job seekers: Support Indigenous applicants in navigating job application and hiring processes (e.g., provide guidance on resume writing, cover letters, and preparing for interviews; support candidates in getting the relevant certifications). Having a dedicated Indigenous HR specialist in your organization is a highly effective way to provide such supports.

Job descriptions: Many employers' job descriptions need to increase accessibility to Indigenous job seekers. Job descriptions should:

- Be clearly written in plain language, without too much technical jargon or acronyms.
- Adopt a friendlier and less formal tone.
- Provide a description that allows people to picture the job and work environment.
- Identify where Indigenous cultural knowledge is an asset.
- Allow/welcome applicants to self-identify as Indigenous.
- Include language about equity, diversity, and inclusion; Indigenous cultural safety; and, if relevant, preferential hiring policies.
- Include territorial acknowledgements.
- Acknowledge reconciliation, UNDRIP, and anti-racism values and policies.

Some Indigenous people don't have the education required for a position, but they have the experience. For example, they've worked out on the land but don't have a bachelor's degree in science. Employers should take that into consideration. I know there are policies in place, but policies can be changed.

– Indigenous community respondent

Self-declaration option for Indigenous job seekers and staff: Offering Indigenous job seekers—and current Indigenous employees—an option to self-declare their Indigenous identity is an important way to connect them to supports and to enhance equitable participation in hiring processes and career advancement.

Self-Declaration of Indigenous Identity in Practice

Manitoba Hydro encourages Indigenous job seekers and other members of equity-seeking groups to self-declare when creating their job application profile online.

The Government of Canada encourages job seekers who are members of equity-seeking groups to self-declare.

Application processes: Application processes should:

- Offer flexibility in terms of method of application submission. For example, some Indigenous people prefer hardcopy submissions in person to online processes.
- Offer flexibility in how people show their qualifications (e.g., a CRD division found that doing short phone calls with shortlisted applicants allowed them to get a better sense of the applicants' qualifications than a written submission).
- Not rely as heavily on written components.
- Share resources about how to apply.
- Connect Indigenous applicants to an Indigenous HR hiring liaison who can help them with the process.

Culturally Competent Hiring in Practice

The BC government's Indigenous relations behavioural competencies interpretive guides for hiring provide excellent teachings and tools for interviewing and evaluating Indigenous candidates in a culturally safe and appropriate way and for valuing cultural competency skills for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous candidates.

Interview and evaluation processes: Many employers' interview and candidate evaluation processes are neither culturally appropriate nor conducive to attracting and hiring Indigenous employees. Interview processes should:

- Not be too formal.
- Include Indigenous people on hiring committees.
- Offer an online meeting option to reduce barriers such as childcare and transportation.
- Be flexible and allow hiring committees to add their own questions or adjust the process and flow.
- Have an evaluation process that values non-institutional qualifications such as experiential and cultural learning, Indigenous knowledge of the land, and local community connections and relationships.

- When possible, avoid points-based interviews and evaluative approaches altogether.
- Share the interview questions in advance so applicants can prepare.
- Communicate in advance what to expect for the interview.
- Check in with candidates before the interview to ensure they are comfortable with the interview format and the nature of the questions.
- Provide hiring teams with training that addresses cultural safety and unconscious bias in hiring processes.
- Use story/experience-based questions rather than "sell yourself" questions.
- Allow Indigenous applicants to bring an Elder, family member, or friend with them to the interview.

Sometimes when you're hiring an Indigenous person, their strengths don't come out clearly on paper, but when you meet them, you'll be able to understand them better.

– Indigenous community respondent

Preferential hiring: There was widespread support among interviewees for preferential hiring. Several Indigenous community members stated that this is especially relevant for land-based work and that there should be a specific number of positions for Indigenous people whose territories these land-based work sites reside on. They don't see this as "preferential hiring" but rather as Indigenous people continuing their role of stewardship of their lands. Many employers' current hiring systems are already preferential towards internal candidates from their current workforces, which are often mostly non-Indigenous—and are therefore biased against Indigenous people.

Preferential hiring initiatives must be thoughtfully planned and the reasons and benefits clearly communicated to all staff so as not to cause resentment, perceptions of favouritism, or anti-Indigenous racism. Managers must have clear direction, messaging, and support to effectively communicate why a preferential hiring approach has been taken.

In unionized workplaces, successfully implementing preferential hiring requires close and respectful collaboration with unions.

Onboarding

Employee onboarding: As part of the onboarding process, new employees should:

- Be supported to create personal connections with other staff as soon as possible.
- Be given an orientation tour that is focused on welcoming them, establishing relationships, and creating a sense of belonging.

- Take an onboarding survey, with an option for Indigenous self-identification.
- Be made aware of how to address and report instances of racism and discrimination in a safe and culturally appropriate way.
- For new employees who self-identify as Indigenous:
- Make them aware of and offer to connect them to all available Indigenous employee supports, including mentors, staff networks, and Indigenous HR specialists.
- If possible, invite another Indigenous employee to support or lead the orientation tour.
- Follow up at 4, 8, and 12 weeks of employment to share feedback or identify supports needed.

Managers and supervisors should be provided with training, tools, and checklists for onboarding Indigenous employees and ensuring they are connected to all supports. Onboarding processes for Indigenous employees should be reviewed by Indigenous people with HR expertise.

Connecting Indigenous Employees to Supports

The University of Victoria's [A Guide for Indigenous Employees](#) provides a succinct, user-friendly overview of all Indigenous employee supports.

Indigenous HR specialists

Indigenous HR Specialists in Practice

Island Health's [Indigenous Recruitment & Retention Program](#) has a dedicated team of [Indigenous employment advisors](#).

The City of Edmonton has a dedicated [talent diversity consultant for Indigenous people](#).

The BC government's [Indigenous Applicant Advisory Service](#) has a dedicated [Indigenous applicant advisor](#).

Indigenous HR specialists: Many subject matter experts and Indigenous community members highly recommended that large employers have dedicated Indigenous HR specialists. Indigenous HR specialists should preferably be Indigenous people who have existing relationships with local Indigenous communities. Indigenous HR specialists help organizations build a representative workforce by supporting Indigenous people in successfully navigating recruitment, application, and onboarding processes, and by building and maintaining key relationships in Indigenous communities. They also help improve organizational cultural safety by providing feedback and support to managers and non-Indigenous employees based on learnings from engagement with Indigenous communities, organizations, job seekers, applicants, and staff.

Procurement and contracting

Procurement and contracting processes and supports: Large organizations and service providers should undertake initiatives that support Indigenous businesses in better accessing and navigating procurement opportunities and processes. This supports Indigenous communities who want to work "with" rather than "for" organizations and service providers.

Supporting and Retaining Indigenous Employees

Anti-racism and workplace cultural safety

Culturally appropriate, restorative, collaborative approaches to anti-racism and addressing racist behaviour: Addressing racist behaviour with a compliance-based, punitive approach and harsh penalties can actually be counterproductive and lead to increased racism, resentment, and ostracization of Indigenous employees. Therefore, racist and discriminatory behaviour should be addressed through restorative, culturally appropriate policies and practices.

It is helpful to have options for Indigenous employees to report racism confidentially as well as through a more senior Indigenous employee who is not their direct supervisor.

Policies and practices to address racism and discrimination restoratively should be developed and implemented collaboratively by management, Indigenous people, and union representatives.

Supports for Indigenous employees

Indigenous mentors and confidants: New Indigenous trainees and staff should be connected to an Indigenous mentor/confidant in the organization at the start of their employment. This mentor should be an experienced, senior person in the organization and not be a direct supervisor. When necessary, Indigenous mentors can act as intermediaries between Indigenous employees and managers to address concerns in a culturally appropriate way. Indigenous mentors must be allocated adequate work time for their mentorship duties.

Indigenous Mentors in Practice

The BC government's [Indigenous Youth Internship Program](#) connects all participants to a mentor who provides support, encouragement, and advice. Participants can speak with mentors confidentially regarding any concerns they have, including culturally unsafe work environments or instances of racism or discrimination.

Elders in Residence: Having Indigenous Elders in Residence positions within an organization serves as a valuable support for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and can also support the Indigenous mentor/confidant role.

Elders in Residence in Practice

The Cowichan Valley School District and Vancouver Island University both employ Elders in Residence to work with staff and students.

Indigenous employee networks and groups: Some Indigenous people are concerned about being the “only one” or feeling like an “outsider” in their workplace. Indigenous employee networks and groups should be established for Indigenous employees across the organization to gather, create connections, support each other, share experiences, and celebrate their identities and cultures. Managers should encourage participation in Indigenous employee groups and allocate adequate work time for employees to take part.

Indigenous Employee Networks in Practice

- The Government of Yukon’s **Indigenous Employees’ Forum** “provides members the opportunity to network, learn and grow personally and professionally, access a cultural support system and build relationships with Indigenous role models.”
- SaskPower’s **Indigenous Employees Network** provides “a collective voice and a supportive environment for Indigenous employees.”

Culturally appropriate employment assistance benefits: Employee assistance benefits should include coverage to access culturally appropriate supports for physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, including coverage for accessing Indigenous counsellors and Indigenous Elders.

People-first approach: Employers must recognize that Indigenous employees are people first. They may have things going on at home that require empathy, flexibility, and support. Retention comes down to understanding, listening between the lines, and being as flexible as possible to meet people where they are at.

Culturally appropriate dispute resolution and grievance processes for Indigenous employees: General dispute/conflict resolution and grievance processes for Indigenous employees should be culturally appropriate and restorative and developed with guidance from Indigenous people. It can be helpful to allow Indigenous employees to bring an Elder, family member, or friend with them to dispute resolution circles or meetings.

Paid cultural, ceremonial, and bereavement leave and statutory holidays

Recognize, value, and enable cultural practices for all employees: The importance of having policies that support and enable participation in cultural and ceremonial practices was stressed by many Indigenous community members and subject matter experts.

For many Indigenous people, participating in cultural and ceremonial practices is not a choice—it is an obligation to their family and community and a basic need. Policies that support participation in cultural and ceremonial practices are also vital in supporting reconciliation, as they help enable Indigenous cultural resurgence.

The following policies should be available to all employees, both to reduce perceptions of favouritism and because, in a diverse workforce, many non-Indigenous employees also have cultural obligations or holidays that don’t align with Euro-Christian calendars and expectations.

Paid cultural and ceremonial leave: All employees should receive paid leave for cultural and ceremonial practices. Many Indigenous community members and subject matter experts cited the vital importance of paid cultural and ceremonial leave. Leaders should create an understanding among colleagues and managers about why this is important.

For many Indigenous people on southern Vancouver Island, participating in cultural and ceremonial practices during Big House season (late fall to early spring) is an obligation and top priority, and these obligations may impact their attendance at work if they cannot get time off.

Several First Nations in the CRD’s area of operations provide their employees with paid cultural and ceremonial leave—from 5 up to 15 days. Based on the environmental scan and interviews with Indigenous community members and subject matter experts, wise practices indicate that employers should give all staff at least 5 days of paid leave for cultural and ceremonial practices.

Paid Cultural and Ceremonial Leave in Practice

Cowichan Tribes—the largest First Nation in BC with over 400 staff—provides staff **5 to 15 days of paid cultural and ceremonial leave** per year for Big House obligations and/or Syuwun leave.

Pauquachin First Nation provides staff with 5 days of cultural leave per year.

The Government of Western Australia’s Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety provides staff who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders **5 days of paid ceremonial and cultural leave per year**.

Paid bereavement leave: Employers should provide all employees with adequate paid leave for bereavement practices. In many Indigenous cultures, there are obligations around death that require significant time and energy over several days or weeks. Indigenous people are often forced to use their “sick days” to attend to deaths in community. Bereavement leave policies must include a broad definition of “family” that includes all extended family, Elders, close friends, community members, and community leaders.

Paid Bereavement Leave in Practice

Huu-ay-aht First Nations provides staff up to **5 paid days of bereavement leave per year, and up to 3 additional paid days for travel** to ceremonies and/or estate administration.

Cowichan Tribes provides staff **5 paid days of bereavement leave per year and up to 2 additional paid days for travelling time**. Employees may also request an additional 10 paid days from accruals or an additional 10 unpaid days off for bereavement leave.

The Government of Canada grants employees **up to 10 days of bereavement leave per year, 3 of which are paid**.

Other leaves of absence for Indigenous employees: Employers should have policies that grant leaves of absence for Indigenous employees to:

- Vote in Indigenous elections.
- Run for positions in Indigenous governance.
- Participate in additional cultural, ceremonial, and community events.

Remote work/on-reserve work opportunities: Providing Indigenous employees opportunities to work on-reserve can be beneficial from a taxation perspective and can support retention by providing work opportunities within Indigenous communities.

Culturally Safe and Supportive Workplaces

Workplace cultural safety

Implementing initiatives to meaningfully improve workplace cultural safety is an essential first step in the journey to supporting Indigenous employment. Culturally safe workplaces are workplaces where:

- Indigenous people can come as their whole selves and feel fully comfortable being who they are.
- Indigenous people feel safe speaking up and speaking out, free from judgement or repercussions.
- Indigenous voices and perspectives are sought out, respected, valued, and meaningfully included and acted on.
- Indigenous people are free from experiencing racism and discrimination.
- Indigenous identities and cultural practices are supported, enabled, and celebrated.
- There is a sense of community and opportunities for people to connect socially, with food and celebration.

The following suggestions were identified by Indigenous community members, subject matter experts, and the environmental scan as important aspects of creating a workplace culture that is culturally safe and supportive:

Don't treat Indigenous employees as “Indigenous experts”: Indigenous employees are often wrongly expected to be “experts” and provide guidance on Indigenous culture and protocol issues. They may not have this knowledge (sometimes because of colonial impacts that can be traumatic), or they may not be permitted to share it. Unless sharing Indigenous cultural knowledge is clearly within their job description, asking Indigenous employees for advice on all matters Indigenous is asking them to offer additional and often demanding labour and expertise that they are not compensated for, and can be exploitative and/or triggering. Cultural competency training should address this issue and train non-Indigenous employees and managers about the risks of this problematic approach.

When you bring one Indigenous person onto your team, there have to be supports in place. You can't put all the Indigenous and reconciliation-related asks on that one person. The role of the manager is to create clear boundaries and clear work roles of what is in the scope of the job.

– CRD employee

Physical spaces and building design: Architecture, interior design, office layouts, and physical workspaces impact workplace cultural safety. Design elements to support cultural safety can include territorial recognitions, Indigenous art, spaces for cultural and ceremonial practices, and other design elements to make the space welcoming and supportive for Indigenous people.

Indigenous Design and Art in Practice

The Regional District of Nanaimo **has added Indigenous art to its lobby and boardroom.**

The City of Victoria has commissioned local Indigenous artists for **Indigenous art installations throughout City Hall.**

Dedicated staff for Indigenous awareness and cultural safety: Large organizations can benefit from having dedicated staff to coordinate and implement cultural safety and Indigenous awareness initiatives.

Recognize, honour, and encourage participation in important days: It is important for employers to formally recognize, honour, and encourage participation in the following days and to grant paid time off for staff to participate in community events:

- National Day for Truth and Reconciliation/Orange Shirt Day (September 30)
- National Indigenous Peoples Day (June 21)
- Louis Riel Day (third Monday of February)

Our people are not willing to work in culturally unsafe environments. The tolerance for racism and culturally unsafe workplaces is vanishing.

– Indigenous community respondent

Education and training for Indigenous awareness and cultural competency

The following wise practices in education and training for Indigenous awareness and cultural competency are based on findings from the environmental scan, engagement with Indigenous community members, and wise practices interviews with subject matter experts:

Framework for ongoing cultural awareness learning: Employers should have learning frameworks for in-depth and ongoing learning, and not treat cultural awareness training as a one-off, box-ticking exercise. It should be offered at the employee onboarding stage and continued throughout employment. It should be required for all non-Indigenous employees, but especially supervisors of Indigenous employees.

Variety of learning methods: Learning about Indigenous awareness and cultural competency should be undertaken using a variety of methods, including courses and classes, land-based and nature-based education, talks and visits from local Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, Lunch and Learns, attending community events, volunteering within Indigenous communities, book/movie discussion groups, and more. Employees should be supported to take time for informal and relational learning, not just formal training workshops.

Provide cultural education informed by local knowledge: It is important for leaders, managers, and staff to learn from local Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and youth about the lands and cultures they operate in.

If we are hiring Indigenous employees to provide input into our programs from an Indigenous perspective, there has to be support and awareness that we have to be all in. We have to listen to their ideas and be willing to unlearn and change the way we currently work.

– CRD employee

Prepare supervisors to support cultural safety: Nearly all wise practices interviewees emphasized the vital role that supervisors play in creating culturally safe and supportive work environments for Indigenous people. It is important that all supervisors understand that Indigenous people are more likely to experience harm in the workplace, including various forms of anti-Indigenous racism, unconscious bias, microaggressions, and discrimination. Supervisors should have appropriate and ongoing training in Indigenous awareness and cultural competency, as well as training and tools to address instances of racism and discrimination in a culturally appropriate and restorative way. Leaders should also understand the needs and priorities of the communities that team members come from.

Systemic integration: Systemic integration should be encouraged by including small education and training segments in all leadership, management, and staff meetings—much like health and safety information is shared at the start of projects. For example, routine meetings could include five minutes of learning/sharing on aspects of Indigenous awareness and culture.

Make learning resources and tools available to staff: Learning resources, materials, tools, and checklists should be made available to all supervisors and staff.

Indigenous Employment Learning Resources

The [Indigenous Work-Integrated Learning Resource Hub](#) provides an excellent suite of learning resources and tools to support attracting and retaining Indigenous students and staff.

The BC Assembly of First Nations' [interactive map](#) is a great resource to learn more about Indigenous Nations and territories in BC.

Indigenous Corporate Training's [Indigenous cultural competency self-assessment checklist](#) is a great tool for managers and staff in public service organizations.

Be prepared for resistance and pushback: Resistance to and pushback against training and education on Indigenous awareness and cultural competency are common and to be expected. It is important that managers and supervisors know to expect pushback and are given tools to address it in a supportive and restorative way.

Address discomfort and call people in: Non-Indigenous people often fear saying the wrong thing and causing offense or feel discomfort confronting difficult facts and emotions or their own levels of awareness. Learning should be guided by calling people in—not calling them out. This includes facilitated conversations that allow people to show up as they are and freely express themselves. One subject matter expert uses [The Circle Way](#), an approach that “affirms the essential practice of turning to one another to uphold racial, ethnic, gender, disability, economic, and environmental justice.”

Offer emotional supports: Conversations on reconciliation and workplace cultural safety can be emotionally challenging, and supports such as cultural and counselling services for both participants and facilitators should be built into learning initiatives.

Consider learning needs of Indigenous employees: Any learning program should be developed with the assumption that there may be Indigenous learners participating. It is important to consider that cultural competency training can be triggering or cause further harm to Indigenous people, or cause discomfort when non-Indigenous participants expect Indigenous people to be “Indigenous experts” or share their experiences. Learning programs should consider how to create safety for Indigenous learners in cultural awareness training and, where appropriate, provide an option to opt-out.

Communications

Communications that reflect Indigenous culture: Communications should use Indigenous languages, include Indigenous place names, and include territorial acknowledgements (e.g., on websites, in email signatures, in the acknowledgement section of documents). Managers and staff should be trained in how to access First Nations keyboard characters.

Communications that Reflect Indigenous Culture

The City of Vancouver's [website](#) includes an Indigenous territorial acknowledgement and [a link to more information about the unceded territories on which the city is located](#).

The City of Winnipeg's [website](#) includes an Indigenous territorial acknowledgement.

The New Zealand Government [includes Māori place names and language](#) in many of its public-facing communications.

Websites that reflect Indigenous employment: Internal- and external-facing websites should feature Indigenous employees and provide links to Indigenous employment resources and supports, including Indigenous HR specialists.

Indigenous Employment Programming

Indigenous community members and staff, and subject matter experts shared the following wise practices related to the development and implementation of Indigenous employment programs by employers. Indigenous employment programming can include initiatives and programs related to training, recruitment, hiring, retention, HR policies and practices, and organizational supports related to Indigenous staff.

Inclusive: Employers should cast a wide net with Indigenous employment initiatives and make them accessible to all Indigenous people (not just those on-reserve or from local Nations).

Focus on departments with higher readiness first: Employers should start programs in departments that are already better equipped to provide a culturally safe environment, with an awareness that varying levels of readiness and cultural safety across departments will impact Indigenous employees and trainees.

Internal preparation: Before launching a program, employers should provide cultural competency training to employees and have and communicate clear messaging on why the program is important.

Mutually beneficial for employers and Indigenous communities: Programs should be developed in a way that is mutually beneficial and supports the employment and capacity-building goals of Indigenous communities. Some programs—such as the BC government’s Indigenous Youth Internship Program—support building community capacity by placing interns for a work term in Indigenous governments and service providers. Other employers allow Indigenous employees leaves of absence to work for a term in Indigenous communities.

Cohorts: Having cohorts helps Indigenous trainees create connections and feel supported, which increases their success.

Partnerships: It is helpful to partner with other organizations to develop Indigenous training and employment initiatives, including postsecondary institutions, Indigenous training organizations, Indigenous governments and services providers, other non-Indigenous service providers and, especially, employment and training staff in Indigenous communities and organizations. Examples of potential partners suggested in BC include Vancouver Island University, Thompson Rivers University, Camosun College, University of Victoria Indigenous Co-op Program (including career fair and mock interview programs), and the Coast Salish Employment and Training Society. When possible, consider hosting training and education sessions within Indigenous communities and organizations rather than in the employer’s office or building.

Opportunities for Collaboration and Partnerships with Educational and Training Institutions

University of Victoria’s **Indigenous Co-op Program** connects Indigenous students and employers to meaningful and relevant employment opportunities.

Camosun College’s **Indigenous Peoples in Trades Training** is open to eligible Indigenous people of all ages, backgrounds, and skill levels. It provides participants with foundation skills in trades or entry into one of Camosun’s Trades Foundations programs.

Vancouver Island University has an **Indigenous Intern Leadership Program** in which Indigenous postsecondary graduates apply for intern positions in prominent BC companies for a two-year period at the employers’ expense.

Thompson Rivers University has one of the largest Indigenous student populations in BC, with over 2,000 Indigenous students. Its **Trades and Technology Program** has many Indigenous graduates, presenting a good opportunity to recruit qualified Indigenous employees.

Coast Salish Employment Training Society develops programs and supports to meet the training and employment needs of local Indigenous communities.

Types of Indigenous employment programming

Wise practices interviews with Indigenous community members and staff, subject matter experts, and CRD divisions, as well as the environmental scan, suggested the following wise practices on types of Indigenous employment programming:

Provide training and education for Indigenous people to get certifications: Employers should provide Indigenous employment seekers and staff with training and education supports to earn the certifications needed for careers in the organization and for career advancement within the organization.

Training, Education, and Certification Supports in Practice

BC Hydro provides scholarships, **bursaries, skills training, and apprenticeships** to Indigenous youth and job seekers.

The Greater Victoria Harbour Authority was lauded by several local Nations for their Indigenous training and employment supports, including providing supports for local Indigenous people to achieve the training and certification needed for employment.

The x̣ʷm̄əθk̄w̄əȳəm (Musqueam) Indian Band and Vancouver International Airport (YVR) have established an education and employment agreement. The agreement includes **an education-to-employment pathway that includes education scholarships and an apprenticeship program**, leading to long-term employment for x̣ʷm̄əθk̄w̄əȳəm members at YVR.

Programs that provide training to achieve qualifications and certifications: By far the most common suggestion for Indigenous employment programming—from Indigenous community members and staff and from CRD divisions—was for employers to offer programs that provide on-the-job training and supports for Indigenous people to achieve the qualifications or certifications needed for careers in the organization.

Programs could also partner with universities, provide bursaries to Indigenous trainees, have job shadowing, and provide on-the-job mentorship. This approach can have many advantages, including:

- Addressing the barrier that many positions require specific qualifications and certifications.
- Promoting Indigenous community capacity building by increasing the number of community members with valuable qualifications.
- Making the organization stand out as an attractive employer for Indigenous people in a competitive labour market.
- Supporting Indigenous people to attain their goals for more advanced positions and fulfilling work.

The primary question is how interested is the CRD in engaging with youth? For youth, a personal connection is important. They must see the heart to which they can affix a drumbeat.

– Indigenous community member

Youth experiential and participatory learning programs: Employers should create youth programming that provides experiential and participatory learning opportunities to expose Indigenous youth to a variety of potential professions and careers. Programs should be offered to youth as young as 10-years-old in order to “plant the seeds early” and help youth envision and plan their next steps after graduation, so they will have a clearer path towards a fulfilling career. Youth programming can include:

- Field trips and work site visits
- Land- and nature-based programming
- Youth summer camps

Short-term exploratory programming: Employers should offer opportunities for potential employees to “dip their toes” into different areas of the organization. People are often unfamiliar with what exactly large employers, large organizations, and large service providers do, and the wide variety of careers available. Also, many people—particularly youth—are undecided on what they would like to do as a career. Employers should therefore consider the following types of exploratory education and employment training programs:

- Job shadowing
- Practicum placements
- Co-op placements with short terms in different departments
- Summer student positions

The biggest risk to implementing an Indigenous employment program is not doing it. That's the biggest risk: not actioning it in a meaningful way.

– Wise practices interviewee

Conclusion

We would again like to express our gratitude to all who generously shared their wisdom, teachings, knowledge, and time to contribute to this research. We are grateful to members and staff from local Indigenous Nations, communities, and organizations, staff from Indigenous and non-Indigenous services providers and public sector organizations, subject matter experts, and CRD managers and staff. Thank you.

We hope the wise practices in this report will serve employers on their journey to create culturally safe and supportive workplaces.

