

Future Skills Centre Podcast

Season 3: Episode 5

Indigenous Youth Entering the Labour Market

350,000 Indigenous youth are set to come of age by 2026, offering unique contributions as they enter the workforce. Discover the multifaceted impacts of Indigenous youth on the labour market as two distinguished experts delve into this topic. In this episode, they explore the challenges, opportunities, and incredible value that Indigenous youth bring to the modern job market and how companies can advance inclusive environments that honor and integrate Indigenous traditions, thereby empowering young Indigenous employees to bring their authentic selves to work. We also learn some more about some of the collaborative approaches between employers, educational institutions, and Indigenous communities to bridge the gap and foster increased opportunities for Indigenous youth.

Guests

Michael DeGagné, President & CEO, Indspire

Kory Wilson, Executive Director Indigenous Initiatives and Partnerships, BCIT

Host

Julie Cafley, Executive Director, Catalyst Canada

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Indspire Research Knowledge Nest, Indspire:

<https://indspire.ca/programs/research-and-impact/research-knowledge-nest/>

Indigenous Resources Library Guide, Indigenous Initiatives and Partnerships BCIT:

<https://www.bcit.ca/indigenous-initiatives/resources/>

Indigenous Finance and Management Professionals: Critical for Reconciliation and Indigenous Self-Determination, Conference Board:
<https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/indigenous-finance-and-management-professionals/>

Readiness and Resilience: Mapping the Contours of the Indigenous Skills and Employment Ecosystem in Canada, Future Skills Centre:
<https://fsc-ccf.ca/research/readiness-and-resilience-mapping-the-contours-of-the-indigenous-skills-and-employment-ecosystem-in-canada/>

Transcript

Julie Cafley:

You are listening to the Future Skills Centre podcast, which brings together experts from across Canada, from coast to coast to coast, to discuss the most important challenges facing the future of work. I'm your host, Julie Cafley, the executive director of Catalyst Canada. This morning, I'm calling in from the Unceded territory of the Algonquin people, and I welcome each of you to reflect on the lands where you're listening from this podcast today.

This podcast is brought to you by the Future Skills Center in the Conference Board of Canada. As the fastest growing population in Canada, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, and their participation in the workforce has a positive influence on the future of work.

As 350,000 indigenous youth will come of age by 2026, now is the time to make impacts, to build essential skills through access to quality, targeted, and culturally appropriate education skills and training. Employers are searching for skilled workers due to labor shortages and expanding the talent pipeline, and helping First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth enter the labor market is crucial to maximize workforce participation and the future of work.

I have with me today two incredible experts and advocates for indigenous youth entering the labor market to discuss these questions. Please join me in welcoming Mike DeGagné, president and CEO of Indspire, and Kory Wilson, executive director of Indigenous Initiatives and Partnerships at BCIT. Thank you so much to both of you for joining us today. In terms of the larger question around indigenous youth and their place in the workforce, I'd like to start off with a really broad question, and I'll start with you, Kory. Can you talk to me a bit about the benefits that there are for making our workforce more inclusive?

Kory Wilson:

First, I'd like to acknowledge that I'm coming today from Musqueam territory out at, but near UBC, if anybody knows where that is. I'm grateful to be here to live, work, and play on this land for the past 20-odd years. There's no question. Diversity in and of itself leads to innovation, leads to creativity, leads to a better workforce, all in all. When it comes to adding indigenous youth, it's an absolutely vital, it's absolutely a must.

As you said, indigenous youth, we're the fastest-growing population, over 55% of our population's under the age of 25. Canada is a country that prides itself on diversity, prides itself on inclusion. It's unacceptable that indigenous youth are not included in the workforce, but those companies that do include this fastest-growing population will find themselves in a situation, in a workforce or in an environment that is much more innovative, much more creative, much more inclusive, and better for everyone.

Julie:

Fantastic. Thank you, Kory. Mike, do you want to add to that question?

Mike DeGagné:

It's an interesting question, isn't it? I think one of the things that anybody who has ever attended in the last five years, a graduation ceremony at a university or college only needs to look at the graduates to say, "My God, this is such a diverse pool of people." The notion that our workforce wouldn't also be diverse with all of this talent entering society, it's an odd notion.

As I've said before, this diversity is not a nice to have or something we should strive for. It's absolutely essential that every sector of our society be a part of the labor market and have an opportunity to contribute what their talents are. With indigenous people, for us, it is playing

catch up, as Kory said, a very large percentage of the population is especially underrepresented in decision-making roles. I think there's a lot of work that we can do to make things better in the labor market.

Julie:

I'd like to follow up with each of you by just talking a bit about, at a very concrete level in terms of your day-to-day, both of you are really helping to enable this through the work that you're doing. Kory, maybe I'll start with you, and if you could just talk a bit about how you're living this reality and action in terms of the work that you lead at BCIT. Then I'll ask the same question to Mike in terms of his work at Indspire.

Kory:

Sure. Thank you, so, at BCIT, British Columbia Institute of Technology, we have a indigenous vision that we launched about three or four years ago. We have a significant indigenous population, 1700 students who are indigenous. We work in a way that, first off, is grounded in truth, grounded in the authentic truth about Canada's history and contemporary reality. We work really hard to ensure that everybody at BCIT understands and also working towards inclusion of indigenous learners.

Whether that's in the youth events that we do with the high school students all the way up to helping transition into the workforce, and whether those are specifically targeted cohort models or whether it's an enhanced indigenous classes. The keys to it are that it is authentic, it leads to a job, and we make sure that it is student-centered and provides holistic wraparound supports for students, and that we really, truly meet the students where they are.

The reality as well is that it's not everybody should have to come to Vancouver to go to school. How do we deliver courses and programs and opportunities in ways that meet students where they are, whether they're just graduating from high school or whether they've just been laid off from the mill, as was the case of several people in Prince George? How do we help them re-skill and find a job? It's being student-centered providing wraparound supports, and ensuring that we're constantly working with partners and collaborating with partners in a true, authentic way that will lead to sustainable systemic difference.

Julie:

Amazing. That's fantastic. Of course, Mike, you've worn many different hats throughout your career and of course, really excited about the way that Indspire is enabling so much of this success for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students from coast to coast to coast. Talk a bit about the work that you're leading at Indspire, Mike.

Mike:

We started about 15 or 16 years ago at Indspire. We were mostly, at the time, looking to identify indigenous people in Canada who were doing excellent work through a series of awards, now called the Indspire Awards. We decided that we would launch some scholarships, bursaries work with sponsors and governments to see if we could raise money to support indigenous post-secondary students, colleges, universities, even trade schools.

We started relatively small, but now what we've grown to is, in the last year, we've given out about \$28 million to about 7,500 individuals across Canada who are attending post-secondary. It's grown to a huge number, and we can't meet the demand that we have to support indigenous students who want to go back to college and universities and start new careers.

The concerns we have, of course, are looking at the professions and the training that a lot of these students are getting. We still feel that there's a fairly narrow range of pursuits that indigenous young people have, and we really have to expose them more to the opportunities that lie outside a fairly narrow range of occupations. Wouldn't it be great if we could encourage more indigenous people to get involved with artificial intelligence or engineering or computer sciences and these kinds of things, not just the stem but broaden out their career horizons? We've had some great successes in the last 15 years and some challenges remain.

Julie:

That's fantastic, Mike, and thanks for raising those particularly underrepresented areas. Along the same lines, Kory, can you talk a bit about the perspectives that those indigenous youth will bring to the workforce and how that'll enhance those workforces?

Kory:

Again, there's no question that diversity is a reality. Inclusion is a choice, and time and time again, research has demonstrated and proven that the more diverse workforce is or a group, the better and the more innovative and creative that group actually is. Just on that alone is enough reason, but let alone indigenous knowledge and indigenous ways of knowing and being do bring a perspective that in non-indigenous companies and organizations and groups do not have.

It's simple things like, for example, language. There's fundamental concepts in the way of seeing the world as fundamentally different than it is for non-indigenous people. Again, innovation comes from creativity, comes from different ways of thinking. Including indigenous people and indigenous learners within your workforce will bring that there. It's also the right thing to do. Canada was built on indigenous land, so we need to provide opportunities for indigenous young people to find their place in the workforce.

It should be easier, it should be more encouraged for Indigenous people to get a job than to go to jail because we're grossly overrepresented in the criminal justice system as well. I think this is an opportunity for all of Canada and for all Canadians to play a role in true reconciliation to ensure that they see the fastest growing population in Canada. I've seen estimates that we're going to make up 7% of the population by 2030. The opportunity is there and the choice is there. I think one of the main requirements to ensure is that Indigenous people feel safe and feel secure and feel welcomed in our workplaces.

That really truly requires the work of those employers. Those employers need to understand the true history of Canada, the authentic history of Canada, do what they can to ensure that the workplace is a safe place, is a welcoming place, and that they've done their own homework and their own soul searching, if you will, to understand that indigenous people have a right to be there, must be there, and we all will win if they are included.

Julie:

That's excellent, Kory. Thank you for raising that. Mike, if I could turn to you to talk a bit more about the challenges facing indigenous youth when entering the workforce?

Mike:

We've got all sorts of industries and organizations that are looking for indigenous people, are looking for indigenous staff. The preparation, however, is not matching up to the demand. You're seeing some of the major industries in Canada scooping up as many indigenous staff as they can, and oil and gas banking universities, for sure. There's a real demand for indigenous academics. Yet, the preparation hasn't been planned well enough for indigenous young people to match that, to match the demand in those industries.

We're seeing lots of indigenous people in post-secondary education, but I think there has to be maybe a bit more planning to say, "Well, what's going in one end of the pipe," rather than just waiting for something to come out the other end. There is that challenge. I think the other challenge is that a lot of industries see new indigenous staff as only being able to serve those industries in their indigenous roles.

Indigenous liaisons, indigenous planners working with the indigenous community, I think that's fantastic. I think we need those liaisons between industries and communities. At the same time, I think we need to think about indigenous people as part of the broad spectrum of the labor market, not just in indigenous roles. I think we need to think about diversity in that way a little bit. We also have to think about exposing young people to a broader range of possibilities in the workforce.

Julie:

That's amazing. Kory, do you see that in terms of your young graduates in terms of the organizations that they're attracted to seeking out organizations that, frankly, are authentic in their commitment and not as much more performative work that might be done within organizations?

Kory:

Well, there's no question that young people have different requirements than when I was looking for a job. I mean, they're asking about, "Do you have an equity and diversity policy? Do you have a reconciliation plan? What do you do for LGBTQ+ people?" Young people are— I shouldn't just say young people, I said, I think all people are really starting to ask those types of questions.

Workplaces have to be aware of that and have to be prepared to answer those questions. If people talk a lot about the cost or the business imperative, the reality is if you do not do this, you will not be successful because eventually, people will start seeing your company or your organization as being one that isn't leading edge, that isn't cutting edge, that isn't

responsive to what the society has valued and what society has put forward. One of the things that we're working on in BCIT actually is developing metrics to measure reconciliation in post-secondaries.

To ensure that we help. It's not about, because in many ways I see performative actions as unlocking the deadbolt to a door. It starts the process. How do we help organizations and companies and post-secondaries move beyond the performative actions? As you said, many people hire indigenous, as Mike said, many people hire indigenous people to lead their indigenous initiatives. The reality is, is every company needs accountants, every company needs HR.

We need to start thinking beyond that and looking for real true inclusion of indigenous people across the entire workforce, and not just for that performative one-off box-checking. We know for a fact, and Mike must see it every day when he looks at the scholarship applications, Indigenous people are just as talented and creative and amazing as everyone else. Just often we're not given the same opportunities. Every employer needs to ask themselves, "Why am I not seeing indigenous people apply for these jobs? Why am I not hiring indigenous people and why aren't they on my board? Why aren't they in my senior leadership team?"

They need to ask themselves those questions because it's not a question on talent or lack of talent on the part of indigenous people. We all need to do that self-reflection and that intentional work to figure out why it is you don't have indigenous people and why you're not seeing us applying to your companies.

Julie:

Great, thank you, Kory. Mike mentioned the urgent need for indigenous youth in key sectors. At BCIT, are you seeing that as well or are you seeing that there's a little bit more hope in terms of the types of programs that students are choosing?

Kory:

I think there's still a tendency for students to choose more arts-based programs, social work, teaching law. We still are behind in the stem, in the technology, but we've got a lot of great initiatives happening at BCIT many of which we're doing in partnership, in collaboration with other organizations to get indigenous people into the underrepresented fields. We are launching what we are calling a Thrive program, working in collaboration and partnership with a variety of organizations and companies and people and First Nations to ensure that we meet the learners where they are, we partner with them, whether it's from Grade 8 to a job or whether that's from being laid off to a new job.

Looking at how do we provide that complete pathway and that holistic wraparound support to let the indigenous person be self-determining. What we need is, why don't you come and help us with these Grade 8 kids, Grade 9 kids who are choosing whether they should take this math or that math. Let's inspire them and let's build a relationship with them. You could essentially have a 5 to 10-year relationship with a student before they actually walk through the door as an employee in your company. I think that's what we need to do, and that's the network we need to create that's supportive.

Let's face it, a lot of those kids make a choice in Grade 8, Grade 9, Grade 10, or in some cases that choice is made for them without their knowledge that they won't qualify to go into STEM or go into technology. We have to look at the systems and the barriers and structures that are in place that continue to ensure that indigenous students will not achieve at the same rate as non-indigenous students. We've got to break down those barriers and work together to provide equal opportunity for all indigenous learners.

Julie:

Mike, Kory was just talking about the financial barriers and how that might create a barrier, frankly, when you're in Grade 7 or Grade 8 and X-ing off the opportunity to go on to university or college because of limitations that might exist on the financial side. Does Indspire consider that in terms of its scholarship programming in terms of the commitment to students to support with their post-secondary? Is there potential for an earlier commitment, or is it really happening when they're applying to post-secondary?

Mike:

With Indspire, it's the application to post-secondary. I think with colleges and universities, what you're seeing is not so much a direct monetary contribution or some funding support at a really early age, but what you are seeing is programs and services that are extending really early in a young person's education to try and get them into the mindset that university and college is for them.

These institutions should be for them, they belong there, just as everybody else does. You'll see a lot of colleges and universities, and I'm sure BCIT, reaching back Grade 7, Grade 8, bringing parents in for summer programming and saying, "Bring the kids along and we'll put them in summer camps." There's all sorts of college and university programs of that sort. I think when it comes to the direct financial support, it is still listed the financial barrier, as the biggest hurdle to getting into a college and university and following the programs that they'd like to pursue. We're doing work at that level.

I think the other thing is the excellence model, Kory, which you were referring to a couple of minutes ago. For years when we started to think about bringing more indigenous people into post-secondary, we thought about remediation. Maybe we can have a transition year because we knew that a lot of indigenous young people in their K to 12 preparation just weren't getting the kinds of help and being brought up to a level that they needed to be,

to tackle post-secondary studies. There's lots of remediation, there was lots of catch-up programs, there was lots of tutoring.

In many cases, indigenous students are coming into the university sector and they are excellent. They are going to be not just leaders in our community, but leaders in Canada broadly. At Indspire, we're broadening our programming into some fellowships and other opportunities. Everybody needs a little bit of encouragement. From the person who has no money, is facing lots of barriers, and very poor preparation, all the way up to those people who are arriving at university already excellent, but at the same time, need some sort of a specialized program to help them along as well also. I think there's a lot of areas that we can help.

Julie:

I love that and I love the discussion around mindset. I don't think we talk about that enough in terms of the expectations that we set forward and the way that we approach discussions like this. Kory, how can other stakeholders more broadly in the skills ecosystem such as skills practitioners, training centers, higher ed, of course, help and guide indigenous youth in the workforce? What can they do?

Kory:

I think they've got to be collaborators. I think the word collaborator is more indicative of what actually needs to happen. It means both sides listen to each other. Both sides authentically listen to each other and come up with a plan and decide to work together towards goals or deliverables. Also, I think we need to move from allies to accomplices. We need people to actually do the work with us, not just stand beside us or behind us. We need collaborators and accomplices.

I think the number one thing I'm asked as often that needs to happen is that every single individual needs to reflect on their privilege, their bias, and the difference between equity and equality. The more self-aware someone is about how and why they make the decisions that they make or think the way they think, the more likely

they are to be truly aware and reflective of their behaviors or lack of behaviors and how they deal with other people. We really have to look at that and then take that to the next level, to your workplace, to your team that you work with, to the company that you work for, the organization that you work for.

What are the barriers? Look around the room, and if everybody looks like you, then you have a problem. You need to authentically engage in figuring out why and removing the barriers that are there. A lot of this stuff, and part of it starts with and have people's backs always get up when I say this, but the reality is there is systemic racism and discrimination built in all of the institutions that we have in Canada. Unless you're willing to recognize that and be consciously aware of that as you go forward and make decisions and make strategic plans and do hiring and develop new policies and procedures, then it's going to continue.

Systemic change takes incredibly hard work. It can be painful work. Most people know that indigenous people are incredibly talented, have skills and abilities and knowledge systems and ways of knowing and being that can only enhance any workforce at any place that they find themselves. We need to ensure that that can shine through and it's not buried under policies because we've always done it this way. We're going to continue to do it this way because somebody is not willing to face their own biases or accept their own privilege and have what we need.

Move beyond safe spaces to bold and courageous spaces where we're actually trying to systemically change the organization, the company, the institution. The reality, the result is that everybody will do better and be better when that happens.

Julie:

Yes, that's amazing. We're having all sorts of debates right now about mentorship and sponsorship. The data shows quite clearly that people do mentor and sponsor people who look like them as well. Perhaps, Mike, if I could turn to you and talk a bit about the role that everyone listening to the podcast today can play in terms of not only mentoring, but frankly, sponsoring and committing to action or in terms of supporting indigenous youth. Could I ask you a bit about that?

Mike:

When you're immersed in this world of indigenous education, indigenous history, you think everybody's just as equally immersed, and they're not. In many cases, indigenous issues are something very, very peripheral to their world. We're trying to get them to think about it. I didn't have a great answer for it before I came to Indspire, was, how can I help? In my sense of, certainly these people, the people that I speak to is that they are anxious to help. They're willing to help, they're very keen to be involved and to help in some way. I sometimes think that we have to have better answers for them.

We have had thousands and thousands of people contribute to Indspire. We're looking at when you set aside governments and corporations, 95% of the people that contribute to Indspire are non-indigenous people, and they're contributing to indigenous education. I think that's tremendous. I think we've got to refine our answer a little bit better. We say do a land acknowledgement at work, and they will, but they won't go further. If we want more, I think we have to ask more, and I think we have to help people get their minds around what more can be done.

Julie:

That's great, thanks, Mike. Kory, do you have anything to add to that?

Kory:

Well, I think what more can be done is that every Canadian leads to actually understand the true history and contemporary reality of Indigenous Canada. Do that work. It can't be up to us to keep continuously educating. We've been telling our stories since first contact. Every Canadian has a responsibility to figure out what their role is in reconciliation. Everybody has skills and abilities. How can you best apply your skills and abilities in your role that you will play in reconciliation?

I appreciate that many people will say, "Well I don't want to make a mistake I'm afraid," but you've got to put that aside. We need to be bold and courageous. Everybody needs to figure out their skills and abilities and start contributing to making this a better country, and one that is inclusive of indigenous people. Again what talents do you have? Maybe even somebody is a retired teacher. Maybe there's a way they can volunteer at the school. Sometimes people just need steel-toed boots.

Post-secondary schools a student can't go because somebody maybe stole their steel-toed boots. You can't go into the shop without steel-toed boots. Somebody wants to be in culinary arts. It's \$800 for a set of culinary arts knives. There are ways that we can contribute, but we need to truly be bold and courageous. Do yourself work, self-awareness of your privilege, your bias, and then ask yourself, "What are the talents and skills that I have and how can I extend that to others?"

We have to do it in collaboration and work together, and recognize that you will make a mistake, but it's how you approach it and if you do make a mistake how you resolve that. We need to be bold and courageous and just figure out how we can contribute.

Julie:

That's amazing. Thank you, Kory, and thank you, Mike. I can't think of two more inspiring advocates and experts on this discussion. Frankly, we could go on for much longer. Unfortunately, our times come to an end, but thank you so much for helping us to explore the opportunities and the challenges. In many cases, much of this discussion is really focused on the opportunities for indigenous youth entering the labor market. It brings into perspective the skills and benefits of having an indigenous youth succeed in the workforce, the programs initiatives, and supports that exist, and need to exist.

The standard practices around recruitment, retention, promotion, are not enough to make an organization a potential employer for indigenous youth entering the workforce. There needs to be an effort to make organizational goals and indigenous inclusion goals align. There's frankly so much to be done and and you've outlined so many examples of what you're already doing and what more needs to be done, in terms of removing barriers for indigenous youth entering the workforce.

Some recommendations for helping indigenous youth journey through their transition to the labor market include enhancing and creating access to student supports, fostering indigenous-friendly workplaces and supporting indigenous-focused career readiness. Thank you so much to Mike DeGagné and Kory Wilson. We're delighted to benefit from your experience, and these insights will certainly benefit many employers in Canada as they listen in today. Thanks to our listeners for tuning in, and please continue to follow us and share these episodes. I'm your host, Julie Cafley, and have a wonderful day.

Mike:

Thanks very much.

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