

Workforce Diversity: First Nations Forum Summary

Meeting Date and Location:

January 17, 2019

Songhees Wellness Centre, Esquimalt, BC

In attendance:

Lynn Brown - Schneider Electric, Victoria

Ruth Eden – Destination Greater Victoria

Denny Warner – Saanich Peninsula Chamber of Commerce

Kyle Preston – ITA, Apprenticeship Advisor, Victoria

Shelly Carlson – Seastar Chemicals, Sidney

Michelle Fea – Engaged HR

Vivian Leik – Business Co-op Coordinator, UVic

Renee Livernoche – UVic First Peoples House

Julie Adams, Slegg Building Materials

Randy Rohrick – Slegg Building Materials

Lauren Beasley – Viking Air

Meaghan Moore – Ralmax Group

Curtis Harold – Ralmax Group

Lyle Henry – Songhees Nation

Danny Henry – Songhees Nation

Christina Clark – Songhees Nation

John Juricic – Harbour Digital Media, Facilitator

Barry Carbol – Schmidt & Carbol Consulting, Facilitator

Welcome

Lyle Henry of the Songhees First Nation provided a welcome to the Songhees territory. Forum participants and organizers appreciated the opportunity to meet at the Songhees Wellness Centre.

Discussion Summary:

1. Forum Goals

The forum on immigration issues impacting the development of the workforce in lower Vancouver Island communities was established to a mechanism to:

- ▶ Address critical labour market and HR planning issues affecting Vancouver island industries and communities; and

- ▶ Provide a process through which HR planning approaches and best practices can be shared among Vancouver Island company, organization, and community representatives

2. Participant Introductions

Forum participants were asked to provide a brief introduction for their company/organization and to outline a key workforce development/employment issue that they are facing. Issues raised by participants included:

- ▶ High turnover rate in the building products industry;
- ▶ Difficulty in finding skilled workers;
- ▶ Importance of diversifying the workforce;
- ▶ The need to promote diversity and inclusion;
- ▶ Recruitment, retention, and succession planning;
- ▶ Importance of attracting and retaining skilled and qualified workers;
- ▶ Difficulty in finding individuals in local bands to work with businesses and industry;
- ▶ Local employers having difficulty filling jobs;
- ▶ It is a struggle to find even unskilled labour – very high turnover;
- ▶ There was a common need among those present to find ways to diversify local workforces.

3. Presentation #1 – Christina Clark, Songhees Nation

During her presentation, Christina Clark provided an overview of the history of the Songhees First Nation, its governance, strategic priorities, and current economic development activities.

Highlights of her presentation included reference to the following:

- ▶ Not all First Nations have chosen to approach economic development in the same way;
- ▶ There is a deep respect for the right to self-determination among First Nations communities;
- ▶ The primary relationship of First Nations communities is with the federal government (not the provincial or municipal governments);
- ▶ Historically, there are a number of issues that have impacted the development of First Nations communities. These include impacts related to the residential school system, the degree to which First Nations communities were caught in a 'welfare trap', and systems which did not allow First Nations individuals to contribute to a pension system if they were employed. As a result of the latter, First Nations did not develop a culture of saving for retirement;
- ▶ The Songhees Nation governance structure was described (elected Chief and Counsellors). The Nation has had very stable leadership over the past 60 years. This is a contributing factor to its current level of success;
- ▶ Key aspects of the Songhees strategic plan and direction are:
 - Language and culture
 - Land, property, and housing
 - Health and social development
 - Education, skills, and employment

- ▶ A copy of the plan can be found at: <http://songheesnation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Strategic-Plan-Objectives-and-Strategies-Aug-2017.pdf>
- ▶ Some of the lessons that have been learned by the Songhees Nation in relation to employment of First Nations individuals are:
 - Job sharing and flexible work hours help to promote work-life balance;
 - It is important to focus on young people and help them to become familiar with career opportunities that are available locally;
 - Building on-going and long-term relationships with industry is critical (in practical terms it means that industry must be prepared to meet First Nations at their location; meetings need to be between co-equals; use of titles such as Chief is important);
 - Providing cultural leave opportunities is important (Songhees provides paid leave up to 10 days a year in its HR policies);
- ▶ Songhees is working on the development of skills profiles of the available workforce. There are 146 people between the ages of 16 and 30 who could be employed;
- ▶ A number of current successful economic development initiatives were also described including:
 - Salish Sea Industrial Services;
 - Development of the Westshore RV Park and facilities;
 - Tourism and hospitality;
 - Songhees Innovation Centre; and
 - Work with the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority.
- ▶ Forum participants raised a number of questions. The resulting discussion related to the following:
 - Diversity policies and self-identification on employment applications;
 - The importance of companies knowing the cultural background of their workforce;
 - Inter-generational issues in the workplace related to work ethics;
 - Looking to First Nations communities to expand the inventory of people who are available to work;
 - Enabling flexibility in hourly work environments through initiatives such as cross training and other accommodations;
 - The importance of having HR policies that allow the organization to deal with employees on a case by case basis;
 - Industry needs to be engaged in speaking in First Nations communities;
 - Job support for young workers often relies on using social media;
 - Life coaches (other possible names for this role are mentor, advocate) can be an important bridge for employees;
 - The interview process can be a barrier to employment for FN individuals;

Christina's PowerPoint presentation will be provided to forum participants.

4. Presentation #2: Curtis Harold – Ralmax Group

Rather than a formal presentation, Curtis was asked by the event organizers to provide his perspectives on the partnership that the Ralmax Group (see <http://ralmax.com/>) has established with the Songhees First Nation. Forum participants were invited to raise questions throughout the presentation. The following is a brief summary of the resulting conversation:

- ▶ It is important to establish credibility with the community (in this case with the Songhees FN community) in order to move forward;
- ▶ Employer buy-in is essential. In the case of Ralmax, the interest, involvement, and support of the company owner was critical;
- ▶ Doing what you say you will do is important – your word needs to be respected;
- ▶ Meet with communities and be prepared to do that in a number of ways and at various times;
- ▶ Create employment opportunities and provide the necessary support infrastructure so that employees can succeed on the job. In the case of the Songhees partnership that means providing a mentor/job coach and an on-boarding experience that leads to success;
- ▶ Expect personal accountability from employees;
- ▶ Provide a welcoming workplace. That implies that companies need to address cultural change in the workplace.

5. Next Steps

Discussions throughout the day suggested a number of possible courses of action that could be taken in relation to greater inclusion of First Nations people in the VI workforce. These included:

- ▶ Support for the development of a database which would help to connect employable FN people with local industry job vacancies/opportunities (this could be a similar to what is currently happening with the immigrant community and could build on work that has already been done);
- ▶ Industry tours for local First Nations leaders (this would help to familiarize these leaders with the types of companies and job opportunities available and help them to work with youth in their communities to promote employment growth);
- ▶ Build case studies of local island companies and organizations (this would help to support information sharing through FN newsletters and other communications vehicles);
- ▶ Establish a mechanism for on-going dialogue between the local industry HR community and the Songhees Nation.