

The importance of HR for Indigenous communities

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Miranda Kennedy was born and raised in Little Pine, Sask. As vice-president of Human Resource Solutions at [Okimaw](#), she combines her background in social work and commerce to help [First Nations](#) organizations and other Indigenous businesses to build an inclusive and efficient work force by providing effective community and HR solutions.

Tell me about your career path.

When I was young, I was unsure of what I wanted to be. Growing up, the most common field in my community was social work, so I started there and did that for approximately 15 years. I did family intervention and youth counselling most of the time, doing home visits and managing group homes. I also briefly ran a foster-care program, so a lot of hands-on experience working with people in need of community programs and services.

I grew up living and seeing poverty and alcoholism in the community. Today, drug addiction is most common. I went into social work knowing addiction was an issue for many families and myself at one time. Educating myself in social work helped me get past my own issues to help young people and families.

After working in this field for some time, I began to feel like I wasn't helping but enabling. One day, I met up with a human-resource manager who interviewed me for a job. I had never heard of "human-resource management" before, so I began to question her about her field of work.

I wanted to be her – that person on the other side who gives people a chance to work and present opportunities because we don't get very many good offers for employment. I followed her career advice and went back to school. At 35, I enrolled in university, and later completed my commerce degree and majored in human-resource management at the University of Saskatchewan. My experience working with young people and families really helped me get into HR and succeed. Now, I am an expert in the field and help make a difference in other people's lives besides my own.

A little over three years ago, I met Terry Brown at a conference in [Edmonton](#). He was working for a consulting firm and very interested in who I was and what I did. We discovered that we both had a background in commerce and an extensive network in the Indigenous community. We had many conversations and shared common interests, business ideas and work experiences, then decided to create Okimaw together.

What does HR bring to the Indigenous nations that they may have not had before?

In the community, we typically have chief and council and a band manager who run the band administration. The band manager plays dual roles, finance and human-resources manager, but is most often focused primarily on finance and payroll. Rarely is anyone in the band office equip to handle employee grievances, workplace safety or updating policies and procedures. Human-resource managers are key in helping leaders and managers deal with the day-to-day business operations and employee issues.

First Nation communities have come to understand that in order to have thriving businesses, they will need an experienced HR person. Human Resources are instrumental in helping organization achieve their business goals by hiring the right people. HR can streamline the hiring process, get staff trained and implement policies to produce positive results.

The Indigenous population is the fastest growing and youngest population in Canada. Can you tell us about the potential you see in the future recruitment in human resources?

There are many capable young Indigenous people that are educated in different careers and not just social work. Our young people are also getting educated about the world around them through technology and travel is another avenue to explore. Travelling helps you discover your passion and learn about different people, languages and opportunities that exist in the world. Unless you travel, you may not see the big picture.

These millennials are fast learners, and when we hire them, they seem to be very tech savvy unlike me in the past. I learned from the old typewriter, whereas they are learning about computers and various software and apps. For them to be successful they need to be given a chance at a job. It's a tough market when you're looking for work these days because you are competing with other educated candidates.

How does Okimaw find talent?

Sometimes it's advertising and networking, sometimes it's word-of-mouth. However, not everybody fits the job. People must be disciplined and on task, get their projects completed, attend meetings, meet with clients, and be friendly and approachable. You must have expertise in your field, have experience and understand that every nation has different needs. How they lead can be different. Their language is different, and their communities are in different treaty areas.

A person must be able flexible and non-judgmental. We could be going to a Northern community and not have good WiFi, and then to get there, you may have to take a small plane to do business. A person really must be adaptable, have a good work ethic and develop positive relationships with everyone. Those are the qualities I look for.

Is Okimaw largely focused on First Nations communities?

That's who we want to work for. That's who we know well. We know the strengths and weaknesses in our own communities. We have similar needs. We also do cultural awareness training for industry, and most understand truth and reconciliation. We have a partnership with Manitoba Environmental Industries Association and we provide the cultural-awareness training for the industries that belong to this group. They work with engineers who travel and work with the nations and in remote settings for environmental projects and land use. We train management and engineers before they go out to those communities. We equip them with the knowledge they need to form positive relationships for business development in the nations. Each community has protocols and ways of living which must be respected. Everyone needs to work together for everyone to succeed.

How can non-Indigenous people be better allies?

It's one thing to read a book and research online, but taking a program at a university or even a cultural-awareness workshop is going to do much more. I have a relative who teaches non-Indigenous people how to talk Cree at the University of Alberta. She's very interactive with her students and builds this relationship with other educators, too. They really seem to like those courses from which they're able to pass on knowledge. It's a smart move for the university to hire Indigenous knowledge keepers to teach others our ways of being.

What advice would you give to Indigenous youth in figuring out their career?

I would encourage them to visit the HR person in their community if they have one and ask them about career choices. We have the tools and are able to help them form a career path where they can be successful. Some people don't like going to university and may be interested in the trades. In the end, they are the author of their own success story. They need to find their gift.

I've coached and mentored people over the years and like to get to know whose family or community they belong to. When I know their families, I have a better idea of who their support system is and whom they can go to for mentorship or resources in their nation. It's a little more challenging for those living in remote communities as they have to fly out to go to school. You need to encourage and mentor young people to become determined, enthusiastic and successful human beings. They need strong family and community support to reach their goals. It's really about having the right people in your life, the right community resources, the right place and the right mindset.