

Career Change Now Finds Payne Working with Federal Government in Procurement

Sam Laskaris

CANDO CONTRIBUTOR

Perhaps the person most surprised that Barry Payne is employed by the federal government is Barry Payne himself. Payne, a member of Hiawatha First Nation in Ontario, is currently working with Procurement Assistance Canada (PAC) as an Indigenous procurement specialist. Payne had previously run various successful businesses, including a furniture company and a staffing company. He was also enjoying his share of success with a relatively recent initiative he called his own social enterprise. He was utilizing his numerous connections, offering advice, and helping First Nations people get established in their businesses.

“I started OnNation, which was my giveback to society or to First Nations, trying to leverage my connections for people, helping them get established, and giving them advice,” Payne said. OnNation was thriving. “It was doing great,” Payne said. “The first contract we got was with Metrolinx in Toronto, \$7 million for an email software program, and it looked like we were going like gangbusters.” Agreements with other large firms ensued. “Then the pandemic hit, and like everything else, it went down the toilet,” Payne said.

When his last individual venture went belly-up, Payne, who said he was too young to retire, hopped on LinkedIn to search for any new opportunities. As it happened, he connected with a former colleague on the career platform. “She asked if I had ever considered working for the federal government,” Payne said of his contact. “I said, ‘What? The federal government? I never thought those two trains would meet.’” Payne was told he’d be an ideal candidate to work for the Canadian government. “She said we’d like to have somebody like you because of your background,” Payne said. “I was selling to the federal government for so long. I had probably sold well over \$250 million in various products in my lifetime to the federal government.”

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Plus, Payne had other useful attributes. “She thought having somebody like me in there, somebody people could identify with, since I am Indigenous and have some sales skills, would help,” he said. PAC hired Payne as part of a short pilot project in April 2022. Federal officials were keen to have Payne use his knowledge to help Indigenous people increase their bidding efforts on federal government contracts. The pilot project was deemed so successful that Payne was retained for another year. “It started out as a three-month pilot project for them, with me reaching out to Indigenous companies and people I know to encourage them to bid,” he said. “And the next thing you know, it’s just taking off, just snowballing. They would tell me there’s an organization we’re having problems chatting with, and they won’t return our calls. So, I would reach out to them because I know most of the people, and get them engaged. They just decided to extend that pilot for another year.”

With PAC, Payne was not exclusively assigned to work with Indigenous people. He’s also assisting LGBTQ2S individuals, people with disabilities, those that come from other racialized communities, and women entrepreneurs. His mission is to help increase their bidding efforts on federal government contracts and hopefully assist them in winning bids. “My mission is to share my knowledge and experience with others to increase their business success; as I always say, if I can do it, anyone can. Sometimes they just need some advice on how to do it,” Payne said.

Representatives of the Canadian government are undoubtedly pleased with the work Payne is doing. That’s because the federal government has mandated that at least five per cent of all its procurement opportunities be awarded to Indigenous businesses. “My goal, by getting involved with the procurement side, is that I want the waters to be a little safer for the next generation,” he said. “I met a whole lot of sharks [in] the early days. They were coming out of the woodwork to work with you, to partner with you. They weren’t doing it for good reasons. They were doing it for the money side of it — the access to opportunity.”

In considering a bid, Payne recommends spending time reviewing the statement of work or requirements for a specific bid and asking whether this is something that can be accomplished with confidence. After reviewing the Evaluation Criteria, decide if there is a competitive edge that will set the bid apart. Examine the instructions on how to bid carefully. Reach out to the contracting authority and ask for clarification early on in the process. Wasted energy can be avoided by reading through a specific bid carefully and thoroughly. Do not invest any more time or effort if the mandatory requirements are out of reach.

Payne maintains that while they can’t prepare a specific bid, they are there to offer general assistance and different kinds of help. They can support those who are new to the bidding process in refining the approach, finding new government clients, and, if necessary, helping find the right place to lodge a complaint.

Payne said he believes the federal government is doing its best when it comes to meeting its goal of Indigenous procurement figures. He believes his hiring is just a little proof of that. “If you’re looking at my department, Procurement Assistance Canada, it’s doubled in size in numbers,” he said. “Unlike a typical bureaucracy of the Canadian federal government, it really has reinvented itself. It’s gotten away from that whole concept where you have to have degrees up the yin-yang before they consider you. Now they’re looking at experienced people. They’re bringing this experience into the department to help leverage [it] and to help these Indigenous companies become successful. So yes, the federal government is putting its money where its mouth is.”

Payne believes a five per cent Indigenous procurement goal is realistic. “The business is there,” he said. “It’s a matter of how [badly] you want to work. The government has com-

mitted to five per cent, and they're doing everything they can possibly do to get [that] five per cent. My feeling is [that] if we don't make the five per cent, it won't be on the government this time. It will be on the Indigenous side because there is no capacity. We're trying to build capacity. And the feds are literally going out of their way to try to create capacity. That's where people like me fit in." Payne also said his bosses have set rather simple goals. "For my particular department, Procurement Assistance Canada, our goal is what I call job security," he said. "The more businesses that we have that are going to be successful, the more secure we'll be in our roles as Indigenous procurement specialists. So, the goal for me is to get as many successful Indigenous sources as I can, even if it is one at a time."

Now that he is on the government side of the table, Payne said he has noticed a difference in how things are done. "In the past, my role as an Indigenous business bidding on a contract would be to impress upon the procurement person who is doing the tendering that they mention to the contracting person that we'd like to make sure there's a set-aside component to benefit Indigenous businesses," he said. "A lot of times, I'm guessing 90 per cent of the time, the contracting person forgot. Now, if an opportunity is pursued, the contracting person actually has to fill out a form [explaining] why they didn't include a set-aside component. They're not going to want to fill out a form and say why I didn't do a set-aside. So, they're obviously going to include set-asides."

Payne does not believe that all corporations have a line of thinking like his. His hope? "The corporate world actually 'walks their talk' [and] actually supports what they're saying about truth and reconciliation," he said. "A lot of them spent a lot of money on fancy websites that state that they support truth and reconciliation. But when it comes time to actually support Indigenous businesses, it's meaningless. To me, the biggest hindrance is getting corporate Canada to actually support Indigenous businesses."

Payne, however, is loving his current job. "What gives me satisfaction is I get to use the 20 some odd years of experience of selling to the federal government in all types of capacities at all levels of government," he said. "The satisfaction is sharing [not only] my knowledge and experience of how to win tenders but also the hard lessons I've learned."

When needed, Payne doesn't mind giving his opinion on things that can go wrong. "Hard lessons to me, and this went on and it still goes on to this day, are what I call empty promises," he said. "The hard lesson is knowing when to cut bait. With the corporations, you can pick up the phone; they're all going to see you, [and] they're all going to talk to you. But at the end of the day, nothing happens. You just spent six months spinning your wheels. That was a hard lesson for me."

Since he is Indigenous himself, Payne believes that's important when talking to other Indigenous business owners these days. "Inherently Indigenous businesses come to the table with a totally different view," he said. "One of the things I always tried to impress upon clients was the fact [that] it's like a soup or a stew. Everything we do has many, many ingredients to it. A financial statement for us isn't just a bottom line with a lot of numbers on it. A financial statement for us is social impact as well." Payne believes it's best to simply be himself right off the bat when dealing with others. "When I approach First Nations, I approach them with no ego involved. It's a different philosophy. A lot of [the] ways we encounter people [are] through our teachings and our way of relating. I think that leads to our success and our ability to be effective."

Payne, however, realizes that securing funding is a major stumbling block for many Indigenous business owners. There are countless stories across the country of Indigenous people having horrible relationships with banks and other funding agencies. "I started out in

the late 90s, and I've encountered a lot of racism," Payne said. "In a lot of cases, the bank managers wouldn't talk to me or wouldn't talk to my partners. Racism was evident even in the pandemic funding. From a funding perspective, it's still hard, to this day, to get funding. The banks all profess that they have their Indigenous banking units, but they still don't really help that much. It's still a tough go if you're starting out an Indigenous business." With Payne's guidance, Indigenous entrepreneurs often find themselves approaching things a bit differently. "The ability to adapt is great about Indigenous people," he said. "We've been adapting for hundreds of years."

Payne added some advice he'd share with others looking for success in their fields. "The NIKE philosophy — Just Do It," he said. "And do it. And do it. The opportunity is there. You need two things in order to be successful. You need brains and a heart. And then you just have to show up and work. You really do because I'm not going to say the government is giving you the business, but you have to show up and your business will be there." And it's never too early for youth, who have an entrepreneurial spirit, to start thinking about and planning their futures. Payne also has tips for these individuals. For starters, seek out the numerous resources that are available now — items that were not readily accessible when Payne was younger. "When I was growing up, we didn't have support mechanisms in place," he said. He suggests others listen to as many motivational resources as possible. "It's positive thinking," he said. "You need positive thinking, and birds of a feather flock together. [It] should be easy for a kid to get that. You want to hang around with positive people; that will make you positive."