

# *The Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce: Business Community Spirit*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

North America's first chamber was founded in 1750 in Halifax. Today, in about 600 communities across Canada, there are 500 regional chambers of commerce with about 170,000 individual and corporate memberships. The Greater Toronto Board of Trade, with nearly 10,000 members, is the largest in Canada (Crane, 2013).

A chamber of commerce is an organization dedicated to protecting the local business sector and supporting it. Their main goal is to help business owners network and grow (Moore, 2014). Chambers of commerce do not limit their activities to a particular industry or trade alone. A chamber of commerce fosters varied business interests in a particular region, nation, or globally ("Chambers of Commerce", n.d.). A chamber of commerce is a non-profit organization which helps business people and corporations in establishing and promoting economic development and collectively represent their public policy concerns to government (Crane, 2013). Some suggest the chambers of commerce provide input on members' opinions of government policies to the government ("Chambers of Commerce", n.d.). This gives the government recommendations for encouraging and safeguarding business community interests. It offers policy feedback to develop effective economic policies. There are chambers of commerce specifically to support industrial development or other economic activities, such as tourism or production of energy. The larger chambers also administer their members' incomes and other economic surveys (Crane, 2013).

Moore (2014) says there are local and national chambers of commerce that work on the community, provincial, and national level. These organizations are well known for hosting networking events, fundraisers, workshops, and other activities, all in order to connect local business owners. They are also known for organizing industrial fairs and trade exhibitions to create awareness among buyers and promote members businesses ("Chambers of Commerce", n.d.). Most chambers of commerce provide member discounts on a myriad of

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resources, ranging from office supplies to courses and training sessions. Signing up for their e-mail list can offer more benefits, including first claim at trade shows and other activity at booths (Moore, 2014).

Local members of a chamber of commerce are typically regional companies that want to invest in local demographics (Moore, 2014). The Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2014) claimed that a membership investment in a chamber of commerce opens the door to a wealth of information about federal legislation and business initiatives through its numerous communications platforms and direct access to its policy experts. Members of a chamber of commerce can share with their respective members in a value-added program.

At any given time, a chamber of commerce has several competing priorities. A chamber of commerce is basically a living organism that needs a clear focus on what is most important to ensure its existence. It all boils down to financial stability (Foley, 2019).

The main way that a chamber of commerce makes money is through dues-based revenue. The chamber, as a member-based organization, is powered by membership dues and relies on them. With that said, it can reflect an uncertain revenue base through history and current market conditions. They must be able to measure their member metrics from a reality-based perspective (Foley, 2019).

Another source of income for a chamber of commerce is from non-dues revenue. This financial category is now a driving force for economic prosperity. The need for non-dues revenue has moved from supplementary income to a necessity for survival. Partnerships, sponsorships, and large events are key to financial stability. Chambers of commerce need non-dues revenue for their growth strategy (Foley, 2019). Of course, every chamber of commerce needs to think about profitability. All of their decisions lead to the bottom line, as with any other company. Their effectiveness is largely determined by their ability to manage and achieve positive results, even as a non-profit entity.

As noted in its website, the Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce (ACC) is a non-profit organization representing Manitoba businesses on national and international issues. They serve as a unified voice for Manitoba and Indigenous businesses and advocate for public policies that foster a strong, competitive economic environment that benefits businesses, communities, and families across the province.

By mobilizing a vast and diverse network to influence the policies, regulations, and decisions that are critical to creating a competitive business environment, their goal is to create optimal conditions for all Indigenous businesses to thrive. Whether a potential member represents a board of trade, an association, or a business, they can help maximize opportunities for success (Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce [ACC], n.d.a). Their membership is open to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous business communities. They believe their chamber can create the partnerships and synergies that are essential to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous business growth and development (ACC, n.d.a).

## **HISTORY OF THE ORGANIZATION**

The ACC started with a meeting over coffee with a small group of business owners to discuss shared areas of concern. In 2004 they were a sub-section of the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce. There were 35 Indigenous business owners that decided it was time to have their own chamber (ACC, 2018c). The ACC was established at the Premier's Economic Advisory Council Summit in 2004 by bringing together northern- and southern-based companies that understood the importance of working together. The momentum continues to build as more

qualified Indigenous business leaders begin efforts to build a sustainable Indigenous business community (ACC, n.d.d). The ACC today focuses on the Indigenous business community throughout Manitoba. The ACC has over 200 members currently (ACC, 2018a).

The ACC, The Manitoba Chambers of Commerce, and the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce co-signed a landmark Model Aboriginal Procurement Policy Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) at the sold-out Annual Gala Dinner on November 16, 2011. The MOU, believed to be the first of its kind in North America, seeks to support and enable more Indigenous companies to engage in Manitoba's mainstream economy (ACC, n.d.e).

Through the MOU, the three chambers will use their resources to strengthen procurement opportunities in both the public and private sectors, as well as improve relationship building and opportunities for collaborations between Indigenous and mainstream businesses (ACC, n.d.e).

Currently the ACC has an executive committee of four people and six members on the board of directors (ACC, n.d.b). Fabian Sanderson, a member of the executive committee said, he and fellow members joined to give to the Indigenous community. They wanted to use their expertise to help the Indigenous community. They believe their members' strengths give them an advantage due to greater Indigenous community involvement. Today their focus is getting Indigenous business into the Winnipeg community and overcoming barriers with urban reserves (F. Sanderson, interview by the author, October 16, 2019). Personal joy comes from bridging gaps in Manitoba's business world. Sanderson recalls how eye opening the beginning of his term was, with huge transitions in the chamber. The ACC lacked communication and organization. They had become too familiar and let things get stale (F. Sanderson, interview by the author, October 16, 2019). Financial and organizational issues were priority. Challenges included removing the General Manager and switching from a governing board to an operating board. As volunteers, new challenging duties included all event planning and restructuring financial systems. Sanderson stepped into the treasurer position. This period was the opportunity to build a dedicated group of board members, which continues today (F. Sanderson, interview by the author, October 16, 2019). It took them a long time and a lot of work to get back on track with all of the memberships and paperwork.

Today, the ACC has one employee, who is the Administration Manager. Plans are to hire more staff, with a General Manager as priority. The board of directors want to move back to a governing board and help the organization in other ways, like recruitment and networking (F. Sanderson, interview by the author, October 16, 2019).

The current services of the ACC are networking events, galas, lunches, and other events that promote economic activity as well as minor lobbying to government officials (F. Sanderson, interview by the author, October 16, 2019). The ACC recently finished a series of Indigenous leadership events where keynote speakers addressed audiences of members and non-members. According to the Aboriginal Chamber of Commerce (2018c), the series was a great success. The ACC is currently engaged in the Circles for Reconciliation, which is extremely important as the purpose of this endeavour is to build trusting, meaningful relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls for Action (ACC, n.d.c).

## **ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS**

The ACC defines success as advancing its members' interests. According to Sanderson, the ACC measures success by taking issues to the various levels of government and being

strongly involved in the community. It raises brand awareness and generates exposure for its members. The ACC's other important goal is integration of Indigenous businesses into the mainstream economy.

Since they are a non-profit, they work a lot with other organizations to share resources and work together to achieve complementary goals. One that they frequently collaborate on is to promote economic diversity in Manitoba in partnership with Western Economic Diversification Canada. A recent ACC project — Business Procurement Workshop — received funding of \$15,500 from Western Economic Diversification Canada (Western Economic Diversification Canada, 2019). This project engages Indigenous business community members with industry and government officials to learn more about federal government procurement activities and ensures that tools and services to compete in the competitive procurement market are accessible to Indigenous entrepreneurs in Manitoba. Through the workshop, they want to help create opportunities for the growth and development of Indigenous businesses (Western Economic Diversification Canada, 2019).

The belief in investing in new activities to generate Indigenous business capacity has been recognized by governments and by other chambers of commerce. The Canadian Federal Government's Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business had awarded over \$3.3 billion worth of contracts to qualified Indigenous businesses by 2014. The success has been attributed to several features, including monitoring the compliance with and attainment of the performance objectives by government departments and agencies in terms of the total value, number of contracts awarded, and other relevant characteristics, and reporting annually to the responsible minister (ACC, 2018a).

Partnerships like this are very important as they come together to plan the future through roundtable participation and explore needs and set specific goals. Together they come up with benchmarks and goals to measure economic development and are able to learn about how success is communicated within the participating organizations (ACC, 2018b).

Indigenous youth are the fastest growing population, with 400,000 youth expected to join the workforce over the next 10 years. If the unemployment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people were bridged, there would be an additional \$6.9 billion in employment income annually in Canada, and \$957 million in Manitoba (National Aboriginal Economic Development Board, 2016). The challenge for the ACC is not only how to help bridge this gap to make this economic prosperity happen but also how to get the youth involved in their communities to help grow the Indigenous economy.

The effects of capitalism on Indigenous people and traditional values is acknowledged in many Indigenous communities, including the negative impact on Indigenous ways of life and health. It was stated that "capitalism is the dominant economic system and possibly the number one threat to Indigenous community health" (Atleo, 2015).

Systemic racism and colonialism are still woven into the Canadian way of life, with unequal power relations and the exploitation of land dramatically impairing the relationships. New and long-standing Canadians need to understand, include, and reflect Indigenous perspectives in society and law in order to respectfully restore the relationship with Indigenous people. This is why the ACC is so purposeful, as they foster the merging of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous business landscape. In addition to that, they also have the challenge of dealing with businesses who have been directly affected by colonialism and the intergenerational effects that are still prevalent.

Unfortunately, most Canadians are not aware of the discriminatory practices that have restricted Indigenous business and economic activity. *The Indian Act* prohibited Indigenous

people from using labour saving devices in business, specifically banning farm implements like horse drawn cultivators. The Canadian government appointed Indian agents to control many aspects of each reserve, including preventing individuals from leaving to sell garden products in nearby towns. Some bands which had excellent economic development were pushed into poverty (ACC, 2018a).

Non-Indigenous people sometimes still have this preconceived notion that Indigenous people lack ambition or are incompetent and don't know that spending by Indigenous people, businesses, and governments totalled \$9.3 billion in 2016 (Ashton et al., 2019). Ashton and colleagues, in the 2019 *Indigenous Contributions to the Manitoba Economy* report, stated that Indigenous people contributed \$32 billion to Canada's economy in 2016, and more than \$12 billion was from Indigenous businesses. The Canadian Council of Aboriginal Business states that there are over 60,000 entrepreneurs from Indigenous communities and that their organization has more than 700 members (InFocus, 2019).

Another challenge for the ACC is the competing chambers of commerce. While they do work together with the Winnipeg and Manitoba Chamber of Commerce, they are still competitors. This can ultimately reduce their fees they collect and awareness that they might receive. Also, since both chambers are bigger, it might be hard for some businesses to join a small organization. There are also other national chambers, like the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, which boasts that it is the only national organization representing more than 200,000 businesses on national and international issues (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2014).

Other challenges include the fact that there are approximately 19,000 companies that were based in Indigenous communities in 2017. Combined, these companies generated just over \$10 billion in total sales and \$400 million in profits (Jafri & Alasia, 2019). This means that Indigenous businesses are growing, but they are also very spread out across the country. This can make it harder to make them see the benefit of joining a chamber that is in a large city.

About 80% of businesses in Indigenous communities do not have employees, while 20% are employer businesses with one or more employees. Nonetheless, employer companies produce 85% of company sales in Indigenous communities. The overwhelming majority (over 83%) of Indigenous employer companies have less than 10 workers (Jafri & Alasia, 2019).

Another challenge that was brought up was the discussion of inclusion. Indigenous people do not always feel welcome in non-Indigenous business. Since many Indigenous people are in northern communities, there is a need for enhanced broadband infrastructure and a focus on affordable housing. There is also a need for increased access to capital and a streamlined procurement process which will help small businesses grow. Venture capital is almost non-existent for Indigenous businesses, particularly outside of urban areas, and lenders are too risk-averse in Manitoba (ACC, 2018b).

## COMMUNITY GUIDANCE

The community of the ACC is very diverse. The ACC currently works with different departments in the Manitoba government and businesses across the province. Ultimately, the Indigenous business community is what the ACC is all about. They are there to help them to succeed, so they will do whatever it takes to help them. So, a lot of what they do is listening



to the Indigenous community and finding out what they need. They also advocate to the government on their behalf (F. Sanderson, interview by the author, October 16, 2019).

Defining success for Indigenous organizations is challenging because well-designed evaluations to determine the effectiveness of organizations like the ACC don't exist. The ACC and its board members have the community's best interests in mind, especially since it benefits everyone in the end. It was discussed in *Factors Influencing the Economic and Social Prosperity of Aboriginal Peoples* (Rose & Rose, 2012) that economic and social components of underdevelopment experienced by communities are linked; and without proper funding for building economic prosperity, the programs that are required to meet social needs lack the resources to be effective. This is why we need more Indigenous economic development. One successful Indigenous community from Cape Breton developed the Membertou business model, and their four pillars of "conservation, sustainability, innovation and success" (Brown et al., 2012) fit the Indigenous perspective — that success will benefit the whole community.

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