



PATHWAYS TO INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP IN EXECUTIVE AND GOVERNANCE ROLES



CANADIAN COUNCIL FOR
INDIGENOUS
BUSINESS



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EXECUTIVE SEARCH

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Sun Life



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Executive Summary

About the Research

This report presents the findings from a survey conducted among board members and human resources (HR) professionals, including active members of CCIB's Partnership Accreditation in Indigenous Relations (PAIR) program¹ and clients of Pathways Executive Search (PES).

The key audiences for this report are corporate Canada; resource sectors (oil, gas, mining); government bodies such as municipalities; public sectors (healthcare, transportation, education); unions; and nonprofits, including CCIB leadership.

As an Indigenous-owned executive recruitment firm and a national Indigenous-led business association, PES and CCIB partnered to understand the realities of Indigenous leadership across industries and to recommend adjustments in corporate environments. These efforts aim to create fulfilling, sustainable careers for Indigenous Peoples and better recognize their contributions to organizational success.

Why This Research is Needed

Indigenous leadership representation is not only important for advancing reconciliation and inclusion, but is also associated with positive organizational outcomes. The demonstrated link between Indigenous engagement and organizational performance creates a practical imperative to measure Indigenous leadership representation: **what gets measured gets done**. Organizations cannot effectively advance reconciliation or realize the benefits of inclusive leadership without understanding the current state and tracking progress over time.

TSX data² show that companies in the PAIR program, recognized for their commitment to building strong relationships with Indigenous communities, have outperformed comparable market indexes over the long term. Through April 2025, PAIR companies delivered higher annualized returns over three-, five-, and ten-year periods, exceeding comparable indexes by more than a full percentage point over ten years and by even larger margins over shorter periods. These findings suggest that Indigenous engagement is consistent with strong governance, long-term planning, and sound management practices.

¹ CCIB's Partnership Accreditation in Indigenous Relations (PAIR) program is a certification framework that helps organizations strengthen and measure their relationships with Indigenous communities through an independent, third-party assessment and continuous improvement in areas such as leadership actions, employment, business development, and community relationships.

² Analysis conducted by the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX) and shared with CCIB.

Greater Indigenous participation in Canada's economy also needs to be encouraged. Indigenous Peoples are younger and growing more rapidly than the broader workforce, hold important economic rights related to major projects on their Traditional Territories, and are essential to the development of rural and remote communities. Increasing Indigenous representation in leadership can help ensure that these opportunities are reflected in organizational decision-making and economic development.

Despite progress in responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Call to Action 92³ through stronger relationships with Indigenous communities and increased workplace education and training, change has been slower at the highest levels of decision-making.

In 2024, the Department of Innovation, Science and Economic Development (ISED) found that only two percent of federally incorporated, publicly traded companies had Indigenous Peoples on their boards, down from three percent in 2023.⁴ Indigenous Peoples held less than one percent of board seats and senior roles,⁵ and only three percent of companies had established Indigenous representation targets. Representation has changed little since disclosure reporting began.⁶

More Indigenous leaders in boardrooms and executive roles is essential to grounding reconciliation in organizational practice, creating equitable employment and economic opportunities, and moving beyond token representation towards meaningful inclusion. Indigenous Peoples seek a voice at decision-making tables, and leadership representation is one important measure of that influence. For many, pursuing leadership roles is not only about representation but also about advancing Indigenous community priorities by influencing organizations whose decisions can significantly affect them.



Instead of trying to get just a few people working in their workforce at the entry-level positions, opportunities need to exist at the boardroom table because that's where we can be most effective for solutions. Corporate Canada needs to not only partner with Indigenous communities but create within their own structures opportunities for Indigenous people to be able to succeed there.”⁷

- Dr. Bob Kayseas, Professor, School of Business
& Public Administration, First Nations University

3 National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, <https://nctr.ca/records/reports/>.

4 Measured as a share of companies.

5 Measured as a share of total positions.

6 Government of Canada, *Diversity of Boards of Directors and Senior Management of Federal Distributing Corporations: 2024 Annual Report*,

2025. <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/corporations-canada/en/data-services/diversity-boards-directors-and-senior-management-federal-distributing-corporations-2024-annual>.

7 Boyer, Roger (dir.), *Economic Reconciliation*, Productions Cazabon, 2021. <https://vimeo.com/565348151>.

Inspired by the principles of TRC Call to Action 92, the National Indigenous Economic Strategy (NIES), developed by Indigenous leaders and organizations including CCIB, recognizes leadership and governance as foundational to Indigenous economic prosperity. Among its 103 Calls to Economic Prosperity, the strategy calls for developing a new generation of Indigenous leaders and increasing representation on corporate, nonprofit, and other governing boards.⁸

Measuring Progress

These key performance indicators can be tracked over time to assess whether meaningful progress is being made towards Indigenous inclusion in the workplace and advancement into leadership roles. By establishing a baseline, the survey helps identify what has been done and what still needs to be done.

The survey is guided by three core questions: How many Indigenous Peoples are represented on boards and leadership teams across Canadian organizations? How are opportunities being created for Indigenous Peoples at all levels? And to what extent are Indigenous perspectives recognized, valued, and reflected in decision-making?

This research is intended as a foundational study. As a first step, it looks at current organizational practices and perspectives rather than measuring change over time. While the indicators used in this report provide a useful starting point, they may evolve as understanding of Indigenous inclusion and leadership develops. Establishing this baseline is an important first step towards measuring progress over time.

Our Vision for Success

A successful project would look like this: In 10 years, Indigenous Peoples will have fulsome participation and influence across Canadian workplaces and leadership structures, reducing the need for projects like this. **Indigenous perspectives, leadership, and decision-making influence will be visible at all levels of society.**

8 National Indigenous Economic Strategy for Canada, *National Indigenous Economic Strategy: Summary Report*, 2022. https://niestrategy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/NIES_English_Summary.pdf.

Lessons from Previous Research

This work builds on CCIB's collaborations with the Diversity Institute, the Future Skills Centre,⁹ and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.¹⁰ Together, we have explored the journeys of Indigenous leaders, highlighted the challenges they face, and identified key supports and skills for emerging leaders. These efforts also highlight how employers can create more inclusive pathways to leadership, fostering a more welcoming and supportive environment for Indigenous Peoples.

Prior research provided key insights for this project:

- **Indigenous leadership emphasizes** community success, storytelling, collaboration, and stewardship, often at odds with corporate norms.
- **Indigenous women face unique** and layered barriers on their path to leadership.
- **Visible Indigenous leadership** helps build confidence, aspiration, and organizational change.
- **Education, infrastructure, and opportunity** gaps remain persistent structural barriers to advancement, not merely issues of the past.
- **Indigenous-specific policies are** often more effective than generic DEI approaches because they recognize the distinct rights of Indigenous Peoples and the ongoing effects of discriminatory legislation such as the Indian Act.
- **Flexible work arrangements** that accommodate traditional ceremonies, cultural activities, and family responsibilities such as childcare and eldercare can help attract and enable Indigenous participation in leadership roles.
- **Indigenous representation in governance** and decision-making strengthens organizational outcomes.
- **Leadership pathways are restricted** by both limited access to opportunities and organizational structures and practices that create barriers to advancement.
- **Lived experience and community** leadership are valuable forms of leadership experience.
- **Real change happens when** employers, government, educators, and Indigenous communities work together towards common goals, with each organization contributing to progress rather than leaving the work to others.

These considerations helped shape the initial assumptions that guided the development of our research methodology.

⁹ CCIB & The Diversity Institute, *Advancing Indigenous Leadership and Inclusive Workplaces*, 2024. https://www.ccib.ca/main/archive_publication/skills-for-inclusive-workplaces-and-the-advancement-of-indigenous-peoples/.

¹⁰ CCIB & OCC, *Economic Reconciliation in Employment & Education: A Way Forward, Part I*, 2023.

Methodology

This project was designed in two phases, with quantitative and qualitative components. Phase 1 included the planning, developing, executing, and analyzing of a national online survey during 2025-26. In 2026-27, Phase 2 involves conducting up to 30 interviews with executives across relevant sectors. The second phase takes a closer look at the organizational practices, perceptions, barriers, and supports that were reported and prioritized in the first phase, providing a more detailed narrative.

The project's objective is to *"inform strategies that advance inclusive Indigenous leadership across corporate and not-for-profit boards by analyzing barriers, representation, and culturally grounded leadership attributes based on insights from board members and HR professionals."*

Because most leadership selection decisions are made within mainstream organizations, these organizations were the primary participant group, as their perspectives help identify opportunities and barriers within the systems and processes of large employers.

The survey was distributed through an e-newsletter, website, social media, and targeted outreach to board members and HR professionals across the corporate and nonprofit sectors. Government and educational institutions were also invited to participate, providing insights on Indigenous leadership and representation within governance structures comparable to corporate boards.

The survey link was shared directly with CCIB's PAIR-certified companies and PES clients, given their strong engagement in Indigenous relations. Project sponsors also received the survey link to distribute among their partners and members. In addition, the Ontario Human Resources Professional Association (OHRPA) generously shared the survey with its extensive regional membership. Together, these distribution channels could reach more than 25,000 respondents.

The survey was open from October 31, 2025, to February 2, 2026. Participation was self-selected, and the total number of responses was 103. The questionnaire contained 31 questions, including two open-ended questions. The average survey took 11 minutes to complete.

Limitation: While the survey reached a broad audience, participation was voluntary, and respondents could skip questions. As a result, the results may not fully represent the views of all HR professionals and board members in Canada.

Subgroup Analysis

A surprising finding was that many more Indigenous organizations, including Indigenous-owned SMEs and Indigenous governments, responded to the survey than anticipated. This was unexpected given that the survey was primarily intended for mainstream (typically non-Indigenous) employers and partners.

Because the survey did not directly question whether an organization was Indigenous-owned or led, we identified a proxy measure during the analysis phase. Organizations were grouped by the proportion of board members who identified as Indigenous, based on responses to the question about Indigenous representation on boards of directors.

For analysis purposes, organizations with majority Indigenous governance (51 percent or more Indigenous board representation; n = 28) were compared with those with Non-Majority Indigenous Governance (less than 51 percent Indigenous board representation; n = 50). These groupings were then used to examine differences across 10 survey questions related to inclusive workplace practices and Indigenous leadership advancement.

Survey Highlights

Commitment is evident.

More than half of respondents (55 percent) reported that Indigenous leadership representation is already a strategic priority, while an additional 23 percent are considering formal goals.

Outcomes have not yet caught up to commitments.

Nearly half of respondents (49 percent) rated Indigenous representation on their boards and executive teams as low or very low, indicating a gap between intention and representation.

Recruitment challenges go beyond the talent pipeline.

While a limited applicant pool (24 percent) and geographic barriers (11 percent) were commonly cited, organizations also identified credential requirements (13 percent), leadership definitions (14 percent), and recruitment practices (9 percent) as barriers.

Organizations are strengthening systems and supports.

Many respondents reported progress in areas such as workforce data collection (55 percent), retention and promotion goals (49 percent), strategic integration (37 percent), and executive sponsorship (50 percent).

Organizations are in a period of transition.

Momentum is building around Indigenous leadership advancement, but implementation and representation outcomes have not yet fully matched organizational commitments. Ongoing tracking of these KPIs will be essential to understanding whether progress is accelerating, stalling, or shifting over time.

Respondent And Organizational Context

HR Respondents by Role

Twenty-eight percent of respondents served in governance roles, including board members and representatives of First Nations governments. HR leaders at the executive level accounted for 24 percent of respondents, followed by executive leaders outside of HR at 19 percent. HR operations and talent professionals below the executive level represented 18 percent of respondents. A smaller share (10 percent) worked in Indigenous relations or other corporate roles.

Organization Sector

Over half of respondents (55 percent) came from the corporate sector, including private and publicly traded companies. Approximately a quarter (24 percent) were from nonprofits and associations, such as labour unions. The public sector, including government and Crown corporations, accounted for 14 percent of the sample, while educational institutions and other organizations represented the remaining 7 percent.

Two-Digit NAICS Sector

Over half of respondents (54 percent) work in professional, scientific, technical, business, education, and health services. The next-largest sector is financial activities (14 percent), followed by primary industries, including oil and gas, mining, forestry, and agriculture (6 percent). Other sectors, including arts and entertainment, accommodation and food services, construction, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, wholesale, and retail, each account for 5 percent or less, and collectively represent 16 percent of respondents. The remaining 11 percent fall into the “other” category.

Involvement in Indigenous Programs and Initiatives

A large majority of respondents (87 percent) support Indigenous programs or teams as a dedicated part of their roles. Twelve percent do not, while 1 percent indicated they were unsure.

Location of Main Office

The survey received responses from nearly all provinces and territories, with no responses from Nunavut, PEI, or Yukon. Most respondents (53 percent) have their main offices in Central Canada, including 45 percent in Ontario. British Columbia was the second-most-represented region, accounting for 21 percent of respondents. The Prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba) followed at 17 percent, while Atlantic Canada and the Northwest Territories were the least-represented regions, accounting for 7 percent and 2 percent of respondents, respectively.

Key Context Insights

The respondent profile suggests that the survey findings are strongest among organizations already engaged in Indigenous inclusion efforts. More than half of respondents (55 percent) came from the corporate sector; most were based in Ontario (45 percent); and a large majority (87 percent) reported supporting Indigenous programs or initiatives as part of their role.

This profile indicates that the sample is highly engaged with Indigenous workforce and leadership issues but may not represent all Canadian employers. Organizations that chose to participate may be further along in their Indigenous inclusion and reconciliation journeys.

As a result, the findings may reflect the experiences and practices of more mature organizations. They could present a more positive picture of progress than exists across the broader Canadian economy. At the same time, these respondents are often the individuals most directly responsible for Indigenous workforce initiatives, making their perspective particularly valuable for understanding current practices, challenges, and opportunities in advancing Indigenous leadership.

Governance And Leadership Representation

Presence of a Board of Directors or Other Governing Body

Most respondents (84 percent) reported having a board of directors or other governing body, while 16 percent did not. Among those with a governing body (n = 82), nearly half (49 percent) reported having a medium-sized board of 9 to 16 members, while 46 percent had a small board of one to eight members. Only 5 percent reported having a larger governing body of 17 to 25 members.

Percentage of Indigenous Board Members

Thirty-four per cent of respondents reported that none of their board members identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis). Another 30 percent reported that between 1 percent and 50 percent of their board members were Indigenous. Nine percent reported that between 51 percent and 99 percent of their board members were Indigenous. Finally, 27 percent reported that all board members (100 percent) identified as Indigenous.

This question served as the basis for dividing respondents into the Majority Indigenous Governance (51 percent or more Indigenous board representation) and Non-Majority Indigenous Governance (less than 51 percent Indigenous board representation) subgroups used throughout the analysis.

Percentage of Indigenous Women on Boards

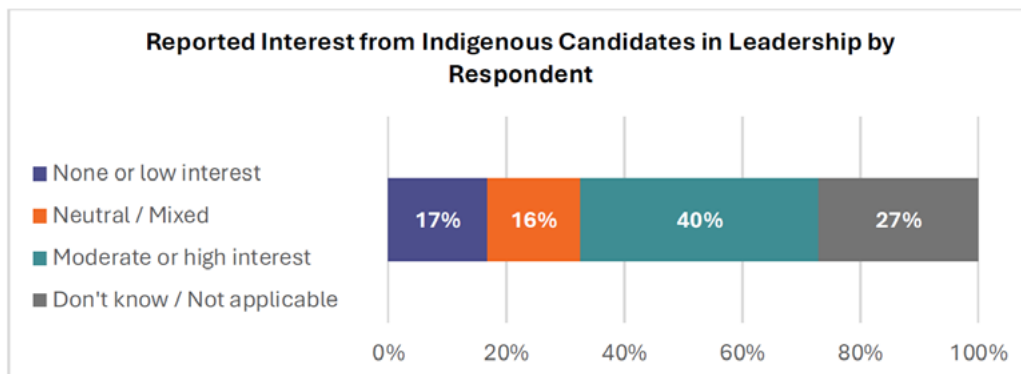
Forty-six per cent of respondents reported that none of their board members identified as Indigenous women. Just over one-third (35 percent) reported that Indigenous women represented between 1 percent and 50 percent of their board members. Nine percent indicated that Indigenous women comprised between 51 percent and 99 percent of their boards, while 10 percent reported that all board members (100 percent) identified as Indigenous women.

Percentage of Indigenous Executives

Forty-one percent of respondents reported that none of their senior executives identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis). Twenty percent reported that between 1 percent and 50 percent of their executive team identified as Indigenous, while 12 percent reported Indigenous representation between 51 percent and 99 percent. Just over one-quarter of respondents (27 percent) indicated that all senior executives (100 percent) identified as Indigenous.

Reported Interest from Indigenous Candidates in Leadership Roles

Seventeen percent of respondents perceived little to no interest from Indigenous candidates in leadership roles, based on their observations of recruitment and hiring activities. Sixteen percent reported mixed or neutral views, while 40 percent perceived moderate to high levels of interest. More than one-quarter (27 percent) were unsure.



* Base: n = 89 respondents

* Q13. How would you describe the level of interest from Indigenous candidates in board or executive roles at your organization?
[Single-select multiple choice]

The average rating was 2.57 on a 5-point scale, indicating that respondents generally perceived Indigenous candidate interest in leadership roles as moderate overall, rather than low.

The relatively high level of uncertainty (27 percent) suggests that many organizations may not have enough information to confidently assess interest in leadership opportunities among Indigenous candidates.

Subgroup Analysis: Organizations with majority Indigenous governance were more likely to report that Indigenous candidates expressed moderate or high interest in leadership roles (54 percent) than organizations with non-majority Indigenous governance, a 15-percentage-point difference.



Expanding structured development pathways for Indigenous employees—such as targeted leadership programs, mentorship, and career sponsorship—would meaningfully advance Indigenous leadership within our organization. Strengthening these supports, alongside increased access to culturally informed training, community-based learning, and visible senior leadership commitment, would help create clearer progression opportunities and ensure Indigenous voices and perspectives are represented at all levels of leadership.”

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

Key Representation Insights

A gap appears to exist between aspiration, perception, and representation. Many organizations report commitments to Indigenous inclusion and leadership advancement, and respondents perceive Indigenous representation as modest (mean = 2.60). However, actual representation on boards and executive teams remains limited, suggesting that organizational commitments and intentions are advancing faster than measurable gains in Indigenous leadership representation.

Indigenous candidates' interest in leadership roles was also modest (mean = 2.57). However, this perception may not fully reflect actual demand, which is often demonstrated through engagement in leadership development, executive recruitment, professional networking, and governance opportunities, as observed by CCIB and PES.

As a result, low candidate interest may be a less significant barrier than is often assumed, and organizational factors may warrant greater attention. The finding that 65 percent of organizations reported no Indigenous women on their boards points to a deeper structural challenge that goes beyond recruitment.

Indigenous board representation is highly polarized. Many organizations reported either no Indigenous board members or entirely Indigenous boards. This pattern suggests that organizations with fully Indigenous boards are often Indigenous-owned, Indigenous-led, or Indigenous-governed.

The challenge does not appear to be solely about strengthening the Indigenous talent pool. Access to leadership opportunities, governance roles, professional networks, and decision-making tables within mainstream organizations also plays an important role. One possible explanation is values misalignment, where leadership opportunities exist but are not always experienced as culturally safe, meaningful, or aligned with Indigenous approaches to leadership.

These findings suggest that organizations may need to move beyond commitments and focus on how leadership opportunities are created, accessed, and experienced in practice. Advancing Indigenous leadership may require organizations to look inward and examine whether their hiring practices, leadership expectations, and workplace cultures create conditions in which Indigenous Peoples can succeed as their authentic selves, rather than feeling pressured to conform to existing norms.

Strategic Commitment And Organizational Goals

Indigenous Representation as a Senior Leadership Priority

More than half of respondents (55 percent) reported that Indigenous leadership representation is already a strategic goal within their organization, and an additional 23 percent indicated it is under consideration, underscoring its importance in corporate planning.

At 13 percent, a relatively small proportion of organizations reported that Indigenous leadership representation is not currently a priority. Nine percent were unsure or found the question inapplicable.

If organizations currently considering formal goals receive the support, tools, and guidance needed to move from intentions to action, as many as 78 percent could ultimately establish Indigenous leadership representation as a strategic priority.

Motivations for Increasing Indigenous Leadership Representation

Respondents identified various motivations for increasing Indigenous leadership, reflecting both value-based commitments and external influences.

Organizational values and commitments to reconciliation were the most frequently cited motivation, accounting for 59 percent of responses. References to the TRC Call to Action 92 and to community partnerships each accounted for an additional 12 percent of responses. A smaller share of responses, at 6 percent, represented generic DEI goals.

All other categories received just 2 percent of the responses.

The finding that only 2 percent of respondents viewed Indigenous leadership representation as a strategic business decision suggests that it is still seen primarily as a reconciliation issue rather than a business opportunity. However, evidence shows that organizations that prioritize Indigenous inclusion achieve stronger long-term outcomes, including outperforming comparable TSX market indexes.

Organizations should view Indigenous inclusion as both the right thing to do and an opportunity to enhance performance and decision-making.

Integration into Organizational Strategy

The findings show varying levels of integration of Indigenous workforce goals into broader organizational strategies. Over one-third (37 percent) of respondents reported full integration, 25 percent reported partial integration, and 17 percent reported that these goals are regularly referenced in planning. Only 15 percent indicated that Indigenous workforce goals are mentioned but not prioritized. Seven percent were unsure.



* Base: n = 89 responses

* Q16. How embedded are Indigenous workforce goals in your organization's overall strategy? [Single-select multiple choice]

Overall, 79 percent of respondents reported some level of integration. This matters because workforce goals embedded throughout strategic planning are more likely to receive dedicated resources, leadership attention, and accountability.

Similarly, more comprehensive integration is observed as organizations progress through the PAIR certification levels, as Indigenous relations evolve from a stand-alone program or line of business into an organization-wide priority shared across teams.

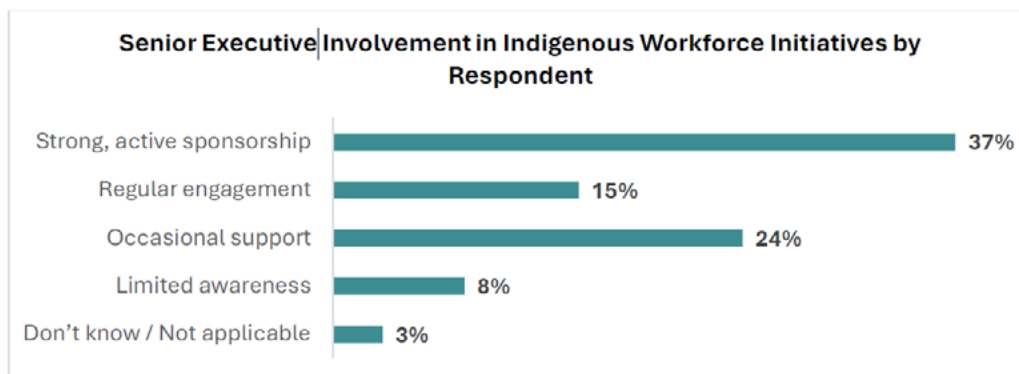


Workplace training is important, and ties to business development and strategy are helpful.”

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

Senior Involvement in Indigenous Workforce Initiatives

Senior executive engagement emerged as a strength across many organizations. More than one-third (37 percent) of respondents reported strong, active sponsorship of Indigenous workforce initiatives from senior executives. An additional 24 percent indicated occasional support, while 15 percent reported regular leadership engagement. Eight percent reported limited awareness of these initiatives among senior leaders, and 3 percent were unsure.



* Base: n = 89 responses

* Q17. How involved is senior executive leadership in supporting Indigenous workforce initiatives? [Single-select multiple choice]

While engagement levels vary, the results indicate that many senior leaders recognize their role in supporting Indigenous inclusion and workforce development initiatives. This includes influencing organizational culture, clearly communicating policy commitments, and establishing the structures needed to sustain those commitments.

Subgroup Analysis: Organizations with majority Indigenous governance were more likely to report strong or active executive support for Indigenous workforce initiatives (75 percent) than organizations with non-majority Indigenous governance (48 percent), a difference of 27 percentage points.



I would encourage leaders and boards to make Indigenous leadership development a strategic priority... creating space for Indigenous voices at decision-making tables, valuing Indigenous Knowledge and lived experience as leadership assets, and establishing measurable commitments to representation. When leadership accountability is paired with meaningful development opportunities, Indigenous leaders are better supported to grow, contribute, and influence outcomes across corporate Canada.”

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

Key Commitment Insights

The findings suggest that more organizations are formally embracing Indigenous leadership representation. Many respondents indicated that Indigenous representation in senior leadership is already a key objective, while others are working to formalize their commitments. This reflects recognition of the value of Indigenous leadership for organizational success, reconciliation, and inclusive governance.

These commitments stem from a range of factors, but most often from organizational values and reconciliation goals. Although legislative frameworks, policy instruments, and external expectations also influence action, the findings suggest that organizations are primarily guided by internal commitments, the TRC, and a desire to strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities and partners (84 percent).

Interestingly, far fewer respondents (2 percent) viewed Indigenous leadership as a strategic business priority, potentially limiting organizational commitment and overlooking its benefits to governance, decision-making, and long-term performance.

The next phase of interviews will explore sector-specific motivations for strengthening Indigenous relationships beyond organizational values and reconciliation. It will examine the benefits of Indigenous engagement for both organizations and communities.

Integrating Indigenous workforce initiatives into broader organizational strategy further reinforces these commitments. Most organizations reported some level of strategic integration, indicating that Indigenous workforce development is moving beyond stand-alone initiatives and being woven into organizational planning and decision-making.

Finally, the high level of executive support reported by many respondents underscores the important role of leadership actions in translating commitments into sustained organizational action. However, the findings throughout this report suggest that many organizations are still working to bridge the gap between these commitments and measurable leadership outcomes.

Recruitment And Hiring Practices

Formal Policies or Strategies Supporting Indigenous Recruitment

Fifty-one percent of organizations reported having a formal policy or strategy to support Indigenous recruitment, while 24 percent indicated that one is currently in development. Twenty-one percent reported not having a supportive policy or strategy in place, and 4 percent were unsure.

Types of Indigenous Recruitment Programs

Organizations reported a broad range of recruitment initiatives, with no one strategy being clearly dominant.

The most cited approaches included partnerships with Indigenous communities and educational institutions (14 percent); targeted job postings (13 percent); outreach through Indigenous employment networks and job boards (13 percent); cultural competency training (11 percent); experiential pathways such as internships and mentorship programs (11 percent); and networking events such as career fairs (11 percent).

Experiential pathways, including Indigenous youth employment programs such as the Outland Youth Employment Program (OYEP), can serve as early tributaries in the leadership pipeline, flowing into internships, mentorship, and other work-based learning opportunities that connect education to employment and leadership.



Increase programs to help prepare Indigenous people for leadership and board roles.”

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

Tailored Recruitment Efforts for Indigenous Candidates

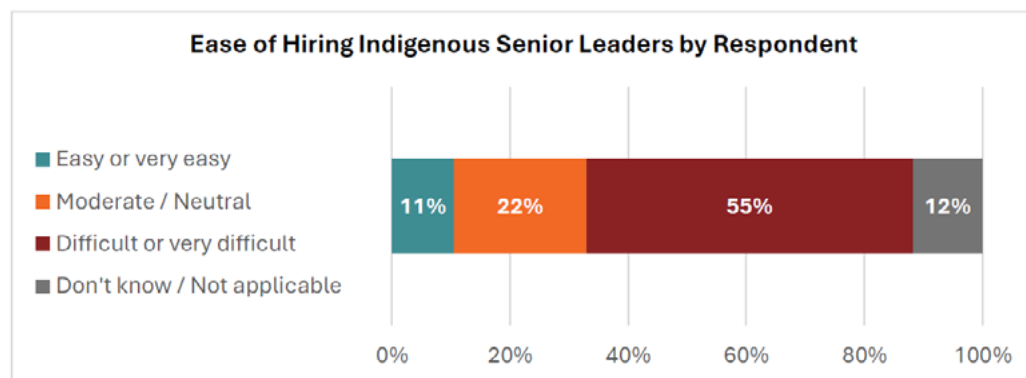
Responses were distributed relatively evenly across organizations with established efforts (34 percent), those currently in development (27 percent), and those with no current initiatives (29 percent). Ten percent were unsure about their recruitment efforts, or the question was not relevant to them.

Subgroup Analysis: Organizations with majority Indigenous governance were more than twice as likely to have tailored recruitment strategies for Indigenous senior leadership (58 percent) as organizations with non-majority Indigenous governance (26 percent), a 32-percentage-point gap.

Ease of Hiring Indigenous Senior Leaders

Respondents rated the difficulty of hiring Indigenous senior leaders slightly above moderate, with an average rating of 3.22 on a 5-point scale, where 1 is very easy and 5 is very difficult. A combined 55 percent characterized the process as difficult (36 percent) or very difficult (19 percent), while 22 percent described it as moderately difficult. In contrast, only 11 percent found it easy or very easy, and 12 percent were unsure.

Subgroup Analysis: Organizations with majority Indigenous governance were significantly more likely to report that hiring Indigenous leaders is easy or very easy (26 percent) compared to organizations with non-majority governance (2 percent), a gap of 24 percentage points.



* Base: n = 85 responses

* Q21. How easy or difficult is it for your organization to hire Indigenous employees for senior leadership roles? [Single-select multiple choice]



Obstacles to Indigenous Leadership

The most frequently cited obstacle to increasing Indigenous hiring in leadership roles was a limited applicant pool (24 percent). Respondents also identified definitions of leadership (14 percent), credential requirements (13 percent), geographic and infrastructure barriers such as limited internet and year-round road access (11 percent), limited cultural awareness (9 percent), and a lack of relevant recruitment approaches (9 percent).

Obstacles to Increasing Indigenous Hiring in Senior Leadership by Respondent

Category	Number	Percent
Limited pool of applicants (e.g., often due to location)	53	24%
Organizational reliance on Western definitions of success and leadership	30	14%
Rigid credential requirements ignore Indigenous knowledge or experience	29	13%
Geographic or community access challenges	24	11%
Lack of culturally relevant recruitment strategies	19	9%
Limited cultural awareness and unconscious bias among decision-makers	20	9%
Limited engagement/collaboration with Indigenous communities or organizations	16	7%
Qualification constraints (e.g., language requirements, engineering, or international experience)	3	1%
Compensation and competitiveness	2	1%
Organizational readiness	3	1%
Don't know / Not applicable	6	3%

* Base: n = 122 responses

* Q22. What are the main obstacles to increasing Indigenous hiring, especially in senior leadership roles? [Multi-select multiple choice]

Subgroup Analysis: Findings differed between Indigenous-majority and non-majority governance subgroups, as illustrated in the chart below, highlighting how governance context colours perceptions of barriers to leadership. While both groups reported a limited pool of applicants as the most common challenge, non-majority organizations appear to place greater emphasis on institutional barriers within their own organizations.

Obstacles to Increasing Indigenous Hiring in Senior Leadership by Subgroup

Rank	Majority Governance (≥51%)	Percent	Non-Majority (<51%)	Percent
1	Limited pool of applicants	23%	Limited pool of applicants	23%
2	Western definitions of success	17%	Rigid credential requirements	14%
3	Geographic/community access	17%	Western definitions of success	13%
4	Rigid credential requirements	14%	Unconscious bias among decision-makers	11%
5	Lack of culturally relevant recruitment	9%	Lack of culturally relevant recruitment	10%
6	Unconscious bias	8%	Limited internal support/resources	8%

* Base: Majority Governance Subgroup (n = 66); Non-Majority Governance Subgroup (n = 122)

* Q22. What are the main obstacles to increasing Indigenous hiring, especially in senior leadership roles? [Multi-select multiple choice]



We exist; make the effort to find us.”

- Anonymous Survey Respondent



Key Recruitment Insights

The findings indicate a continued shift towards more structured and intentional Indigenous recruitment and hiring practices, with organizations increasingly formalizing their approaches and adopting a diverse range of recruitment strategies. In contrast, tailored recruitment efforts for Indigenous leadership roles remain an area of active development.

Many respondents reported difficulty hiring Indigenous senior leaders, although experience varied considerably. The variation suggests that organizational practices, professional networks, and recruitment approaches may influence hiring outcomes and provide opportunities for further learning. Future interviews could provide greater insight into the factors contributing to these outcomes.

Across all respondents, the findings suggest that barriers to Indigenous leadership extend beyond candidate availability. While a limited applicant pool was the most frequently cited obstacle, respondents also identified credential requirements, Western definitions of success, cultural awareness, and recruitment practices as barriers. Taken together, these institutional barriers were cited more frequently than applicant availability alone, suggesting that increasing Indigenous leadership representation requires attention to both strengthening the talent pipeline and examining the structures, processes, and assumptions that shape recruitment and advancement.

The subgroup analysis of Indigenous-majority and non-majority organizations further reinforces this finding. While both groups identified a limited applicant pool as the most common challenge, non-majority organizations were more likely to identify credential requirements, Western definitions of success, and organizational bias as barriers.

The findings suggest the conversation should shift from asking “Where do we find Indigenous leaders?” to also asking “How do our systems recognize, support, and advance Indigenous leadership?”

Redefining Leadership

Skills Prioritized in Organizational Hiring

Survey results indicate that Western qualifications continue to be prioritized over Indigenous Knowledge and experience. Formal education (2.41) and equivalent work experience (2.33) received the highest average ratings, while lived experience (2.13), community endorsements (2.03), Indigenous Knowledge Systems (1.96), volunteer service (1.81), and Indigenous language skills (1.64) received lower average ratings on a 4-point scale ranging from not a priority to high priority.

Prioritization of Skills and Qualifications by Respondent

Category	Mean Score	Top 2 Box (T2B)	N
Formal Western education (e.g., college or university degrees)	2.41	87%	74
Equivalent work experience (instead of formal education)	2.33	86%	73
Lived experience (personal and Indigenous community-based knowledge)	2.13	71%	69
References/endorsements from Indigenous community leaders or mentors	2.03	66%	73
Indigenous Knowledge Systems or cultural expertise)	1.96	64%	70
Community service or volunteer work	1.81	57%	73
Language skills (e.g., Indigenous languages, multilingualism)	1.64	47%	73

* Base: n varies by question

* Q23. How much are the following skills prioritized in your organization's hiring process? [Single-select multiple choice].

* T2B represents the percentage of respondents who selected moderate or high priority for each item.

Subgroup Analysis: These findings differ by governance context. Indigenous-majority organizations placed greater value on lived experience, Indigenous Knowledge, community service, and references to Indigenous leadership, whereas non-majority organizations were more likely to prioritize formal Western education.

Prioritization of Skills and Qualifications by Subgroup

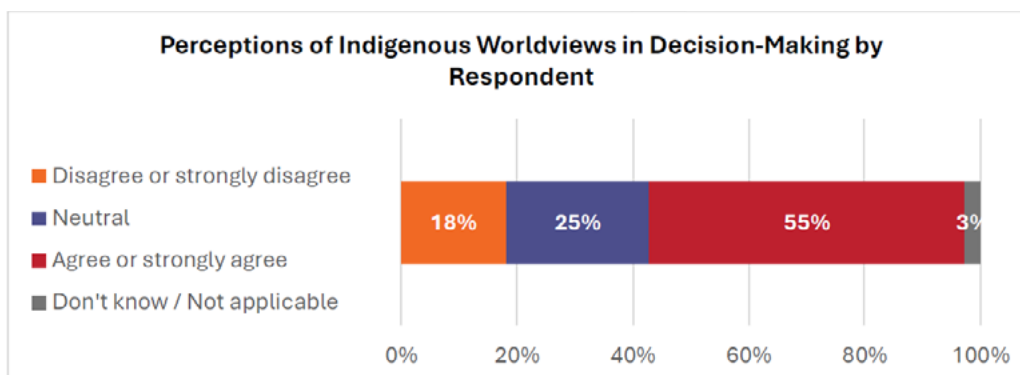
Skill/Qualification	Majority Gov. (≥51%) High Priority	Non-Majority (<51%) High Priority	Gap
Lived Experience (Indigenous community-based knowledge)	58%	19%	+39 pts
Equivalent work experience (vs formal education)	47%	44%	+3 pts
Community Service/Volunteer Work	42%	10%	+32 pts
Indigenous Knowledge Systems	42%	18%	+24 pts
References from Indigenous Leaders	42%	29%	+13 pts
Formal Western education	37%	66%	-29 pts
Language Skills (Indigenous/multilingual)	21%	18%	+3 pts

* Base: Majority Governance Subgroup (n = 19); Non-Majority Governance Subgroup (n = 41)

* Q23. How much are the following skills prioritized in your organization's hiring process? [Single-select multiple choice]

Perceptions of Respect for Indigenous Worldviews in Decision-Making

Respondents generally reported positive perceptions of how Indigenous worldviews are treated in organizational decision-making. The average rating was 3.60 out of 5, with 55 percent agreeing that Indigenous perspectives are encouraged and respected, 25 percent remaining neutral, and 18 percent disagreeing. 25 percent remaining neutral, and 18 percent disagreeing.



* Base: n = 77 respondents

* Q24. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Indigenous worldviews are encouraged and respected in organizational decision-making." [Single-select multiple choice]



Ensure Indigenous leadership is not simply a token position."

- Anonymous Survey Respondent

Key Leadership Insights

The findings highlight a gap between recognizing Indigenous perspectives and fully valuing Indigenous leadership. While respondents generally reported that Indigenous worldviews are encouraged and respected in decision-making, hiring, and leadership assessment, organizational processes continue to place greater emphasis on formal education and conventional work experience than on Indigenous Knowledge, lived experience, community leadership, and cultural expertise.

This suggests that many organizations may be making progress in cultural inclusion while still largely relying on Western definitions of leadership and leadership readiness.

The subgroup findings further illustrate how organizations may define and evaluate leadership differently depending on their governance model and relationship with Indigenous communities.

Ultimately, the findings point to an opportunity to broaden how organizations define and assess leadership potential. Recognizing and valuing Indigenous Knowledge Systems, lived experience, cultural expertise, and community leadership alongside conventional qualifications may help create more inclusive pathways to senior leadership and governance roles. In doing so, organizations can strengthen leadership and governance by drawing on diverse perspectives, experiences, and decision-making approaches.

Investments in mentorship, sponsorship, leadership development, and succession planning may further support the advancement of Indigenous leadership.

Retention, Advancement, And Support

Indigenous Employee Retention and Promotion

Survey results indicate that many organizations are taking steps to support Indigenous employee retention and advancement. Nearly half of respondents (49 percent) reported having established goals, while 27 percent are currently developing them, meaning 76 percent have either implemented or are pursuing retention and promotion strategies. About one-quarter (23 percent) reported having no goals in place or were unsure whether such goals existed.

Data Collection on Indigenous Employees

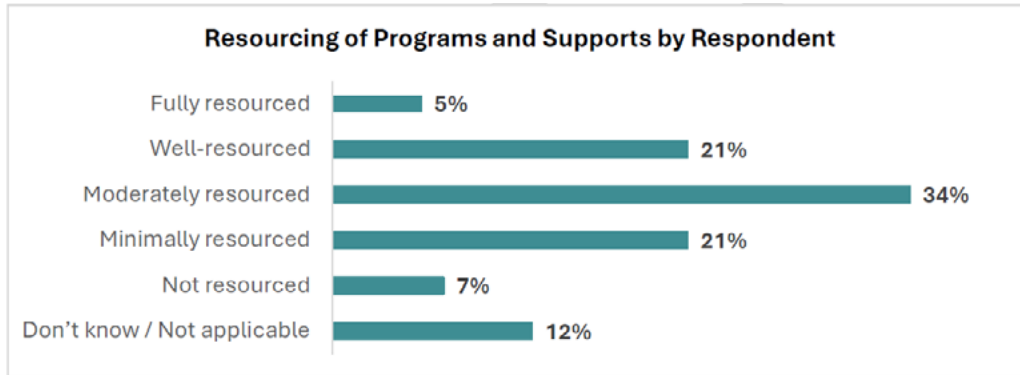
More than half of respondents (55 percent) reported that their organization collects workforce data on Indigenous employees to support recruitment, retention, and leadership objectives. A further 16 percent are developing data collection processes, meaning more than 70 percent of organizations have established or emerging data collection practices. Eighteen percent indicated that their organization does not collect workforce data on Indigenous employees, while 12 percent were unsure.

Programs and Supports for Indigenous Employees

The survey identified a range of supports available to Indigenous employees. The most commonly reported supports were for participation in Indigenous community events and ceremonies (13 percent), professional development opportunities (12 percent), wellness and mental health (12 percent), anti-racism and cultural safety training (12 percent), and cultural leave or flexible work arrangements (11 percent). Other frequently cited supports included mentorship opportunities (9 percent), Indigenous employee networks (8 percent), leadership development initiatives (8 percent), access to Elders or cultural advisors (7 percent), and dedicated safe or affinity spaces (6 percent).

Resourcing of Programs and Supports

Respondents most often described Indigenous employee supports and programs as moderately resourced (34 percent). Twenty-one percent reported that programs were well-resourced, while another 21 percent described them as minimally resourced. Only 5 percent indicated programs were fully resourced, compared with 7 percent who reported no resourcing. Twelve percent were unsure.



* Base: n = 76 respondents

* Q28. How well-resourced are these programs or supports? [Single-select multiple choice]

Subgroup Analysis: Organizations with non-majority Indigenous governance reported higher levels of resourcing for Indigenous workforce programs and supports, with 35 percent indicating their programs were fully or well resourced, compared with 21 percent of organizations with majority Indigenous governance, a gap of 14 percentage points.

Executive Sponsor for Indigenous Workforce Initiatives

Executive leadership remains an important part of the bedrock supporting Indigenous workforce initiatives, with half of respondents reporting that their organization has an executive sponsor or champion for Indigenous workforce priorities. Another 30 percent indicated that no executive sponsor exists, while 20 percent were unsure.

Subgroup Analysis: Organizations with non-majority Indigenous governance were more likely to report having an executive sponsor or champion for Indigenous workforce initiatives (63 percent) than organizations with majority Indigenous governance (47 percent), a 16-percentage-point difference. However, a substantially higher proportion of majority Indigenous governance organizations selected “Don’t know/Not applicable” (37 percent vs. 8 percent), which may reflect different organizational structures where responsibility for Indigenous workforce priorities is shared across leadership rather than assigned to a designated champion.

Actions to Advance Indigenous Leadership

Two open-ended questions were analyzed to identify actions that could advance Indigenous leadership: one focused on what individual organizations can do within their own workplaces, while the other explored actions across the broader corporate sector. Responses were coded and grouped into common themes, incorporating selected anonymous quotes throughout the report to illustrate key findings.

Respondents identified several ways organizations could increase Indigenous leadership. The most common recommendations focused on leadership and governance commitment (23 percent), followed by culture, policy, and accountability (19 percent), resourcing and funding (18 percent), recruitment and representation (16 percent), and development and mentorship (16 percent). Nine percent of responses could not be categorized.

Sector-Wide Actions to Increase Indigenous Leadership

Respondents identified culture, inclusion, and anti-bias initiatives (30 percent) as the most important actions for increasing Indigenous leadership across corporate Canada, followed by development and mentorship (23 percent), recruitment and representation (21 percent), and leadership and governance structures (18 percent). Seven percent of responses mentioned resources and compensation support, while two percent were classified as other or uncategorized.

Key Support Insights

The findings demonstrate organizational commitment to Indigenous retention, advancement, and leadership development. Most organizations reported established initiatives or efforts underway, particularly in goal setting, workforce data collection, employee supports, and executive sponsorship. This suggests effective Indigenous inclusion requires more than recruitment alone and must also support career development, advancement opportunities, and pathways to leadership.

Organizations reported a broad range of supports, with particular emphasis on cultural connection, personal development, wellness, and workplace inclusion. This suggests a holistic approach to retention that considers cultural, personal, and professional factors. Future research could explore how these initiatives are implemented and whether their accessibility and effectiveness vary across organizational contexts.

Organizations could also extend opportunities for non-Indigenous employees to attend cultural events, as noted above, to build awareness and support a more inclusive workplace.

While many organizations have invested in Indigenous workforce initiatives, resourcing remains uneven. The relatively low proportion of fully resourced programs suggests many organizations still struggle to expand initiatives, build internal capacity, and sustain long-term impact.

Executive sponsorship emerged as an important foundation for progress. Leadership support can help secure resources, maintain organizational priorities, and strengthen accountability for Indigenous workforce initiatives.

Respondents also emphasized strong governance commitment, inclusive workplace cultures, mentorship, recruitment, accountability, and sustained investment as conditions that help Indigenous leadership take root and grow.

Conclusion

Across nearly every area examined, the findings point to the same pattern: Organizational commitments, policies, and intentions are advancing more quickly than measurable improvements in Indigenous leadership representation.

Overall, findings suggest that Indigenous leadership advancement in Canada is at an important transition point. Across many organizations, efforts to advance Indigenous inclusion are reflected in goal setting, workforce data collection, strategic integration, executive sponsorship, and investment in recruitment and retention initiatives. However, this momentum has not yet carried through into equivalent gains in Indigenous representation on boards, executive teams, and other leadership positions.

The Diversity of Boards of Directors and Senior Management of Federal Distributing Corporations report likely presents a more representative benchmark for the Canadian economy, where Indigenous representation is considerably lower than among PAIR companies and other organizations that have been early movers in Indigenous relations.

A common explanation for limited representation is the perceived shortage of Indigenous candidates and the geographic realities many organizations face. While these challenges are real, the findings suggest they are only part of the picture. Respondents also identified credential requirements, definitions of leadership, recruitment practices, cultural awareness, and other institutional factors as significant barriers. Collectively, respondents cited these barriers as frequently as, or more frequently than, talent availability alone. This suggests that organizations should look not only at expanding talent pipelines, but also at how their own structures, expectations, and workplace culture influence who is recruited, retained, supported, and advanced.

Finally, the data point to organizations in transition: Indigenous leadership is increasingly recognized as a strategic priority, and many organizations are actively developing the policies, practices, and supports needed to advance it. Yet a gap remains between commitment and outcomes. Closing that gap will require organizations to double down on their commitments and focus on implementation by creating workplaces where Indigenous Peoples can see themselves reflected, feel valued and supported, and thrive as leaders without conforming to existing norms.

Four key takeaways emerge from this research:



1. Commitment is outpacing outcomes.

Organizations are making progress in areas such as goal setting, workforce data collection, strategic planning, and executive sponsorship, but Indigenous representation in leadership remains limited.



2. Institutional barriers matter as much as access barriers.

Concerns about candidate availability and geography are important, but organizational practices, leadership expectations, credential requirements, and workplace culture appear to be equally significant influences on leadership advancement.



3. Indigenous inclusion remains largely framed as a reconciliation issue.

Recognizing Indigenous leadership as both a reconciliation imperative and a driver of organizational success can sustain commitments and encourage meaningful inclusion rather than symbolic representation.



4. Organizational activities are evolving.

Many organizations have committed to advancing Indigenous leadership, but efforts often remain in the early stages of implementation. The next stage will be turning those commitments into tangible changes in recruitment, retention, advancement, governance, and organizational culture. Meaningful progress should be reflected in stronger organizational outcomes, including governance, decision-making, economic performance, and Indigenous relations.

Future Research Directions

This report represents the first phase of a two-phase research project. While the survey provides a national snapshot of Indigenous leadership representation, organizational commitments, perceived barriers, and emerging practices, it cannot fully explain why certain approaches succeed, where obstacles are most pronounced, or how Indigenous leaders experience organizational systems in practice.

Phase 2 will address these questions through 25 to 30 in-depth interviews with Indigenous and non-Indigenous executives across a range of sectors. The interviews will explore the barriers, opportunities, and support systems that shape Indigenous leadership pathways, with particular attention to recruitment, retention, advancement, governance, workplace culture, leadership development, and organizational accountability.

Another area for exploration is how organizations recognize and support learning about Indigenous cultures, values, languages, and leadership perspectives, and how integrating these elements contributes to more inclusive workplaces, talent attraction, and stronger relationships with Indigenous communities. For example, using Indigenous languages and culturally relevant communications to help create a more welcoming environment and strengthen engagement with applicants, clients, partners, and communities.

Interview participants will be selected from five key groups identified through the survey findings and broader Indigenous economic participation:

- **Professional services**, due to their strong representation in the survey and influence on leadership development, talent pipelines, and advisory practices across industries.
- **Union leadership**, given unions' role in shaping workplace conditions, training opportunities, and career progression for many workers.
- **Indigenous board leaders**, to better understand governance models and leadership approaches within Indigenous-governed and non-Indigenous-governed organizations.
- **Resource sectors**, including oil and gas, mining, forestry, and related industries, because of their significant economic relations with Indigenous communities and their ongoing focus on Indigenous employment and reconciliation commitments.
- **Financial services**, due to the sector's influence on corporate governance, investment decisions, economic development, and leadership representation across the broader economy.

By combining survey findings with executive interviews, the second phase will provide a deeper understanding of the factors that enable Indigenous leadership success, the organizational changes needed to address persistent barriers, and promising practices that can be adapted across sectors.

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Appendix: Survey Instrument (Condensed)

Section 1. Respondent Profile And Organizational Context

Q1. Current role/title

HR Manager; HR Business Partner; Director HR/People & Culture; Director Talent/DEI/L&D; VP/SVP HR; CHRO/CPO; Board Member (HR Committee); Other.

Q2. Indigenous identity

First Nations; Métis; Inuit; Non-Indigenous; Other; Prefer not to say.

Q3. Organization type

Private company; Publicly traded company; Government department/ministry; Crown corporation/agency; Nonprofit/charity; Labour union/professional association; K-12 education; Postsecondary institution; Other; Don't know.

Q4. Primary organizational function (open-ended)

Q5. Team/department focused on Indigenous initiatives?

Yes; No; Don't know.

Q6. Location of head office

Province/Territory.

Section 2. Governance And Leadership Representation

Q7. Organization has a board of directors?

Yes; No; Don't know.

Q8. Number of board members (numeric)

First Nations; Métis; Inuit; Non-Indigenous; Other; Prefer not to say.

Q9. Number of board members identifying as:

- *Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis)*
- *Indigenous women*

Q10. Number of senior executives (numeric)

Q11. Number of senior executives identifying as:

- *Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis)*
- *Indigenous women*

Q12. Indigenous representation on board/executive team

Very low; Low; Moderate; High; Very high; None; Don't know.

Q13. Interest from Indigenous candidates in board/executive roles

No interest; Low; Neutral; Moderate; High; Don't know.

Section 3. Strategic Commitment

Q14. Indigenous leadership representation is a strategic goal

Yes; No; Under consideration; Don't know.

Q15. Primary driver of this goal

Legislation/DRIPA; UNDRIP; TRC Call to Action 92; Duty to Consult; IBAs; Organizational values/reconciliation; Community expectations; EDI goals; Other; Don't know.

Q16. Indigenous workforce goals are:

Mentioned but not prioritized; Partially integrated; Regularly referenced; Fully integrated; Don't know.

Q17. Executive involvement in Indigenous workforce initiatives:

Limited awareness; Occasional support; Regular engagement; Active sponsorship; Don't know.

Section 4. Recruitment And Hiring

Q18. Formal Indigenous recruitment policy/strategy

Yes; No; In progress; Don't know.

Q19. Tailored recruitment practices (select all that apply):

Targeted postings; Identity verification; Resume support; Indigenous employment networks; Internships/co-ops/mentorship; Cultural competency training; Indigenous partnerships; Recruitment events; Dedicated Indigenous recruiters; Other; None; Don't know.

Q20. Specific recruitment efforts for Indigenous leadership positions

Yes; No; In progress; Don't know.

Q21. Ease of recruiting Indigenous leaders

Very difficult; Difficult; Neutral; Easy; Very easy; Don't know.

Q22. Key hiring barriers (select all that apply):

Limited applicant pool; Western leadership definitions; Lack of culturally relevant recruitment; Credential requirements; Bias/cultural awareness gaps; Resource limitations; Geographic barriers; Limited Indigenous engagement; Other; Don't know.

Q23. Priority assigned to the following hiring considerations (1 = Not a priority, 4 = High priority):

- *Lived experience*
- *Community service*
- *Equivalent experience*
- *Formal education*
- *Indigenous knowledge systems*
- *Language skills*
- *Community references*

Q24. Indigenous worldviews are encouraged and respected in organizational decision-making.

Strongly agree; Agree; Neutral; Disagree; Strongly disagree; Don't know.

Section 5. Retention, Advancement And Support

Q25. Retention and promotion goals for Indigenous employees

Yes; No; In progress; Don't know.

Q26. Indigenous workforce data collected for recruitment/retention planning

Yes; No; In progress; Don't know.

Q27. Supports available to Indigenous employees (select all that apply):

Mentorship; ERGs/networks; Professional development; Wellness supports; Leadership development; Cultural leave/flexible work; Elders/cultural advisors; Safe spaces; Community participation support; Anti-racism training; Other; Don't know.

Q28. Level of resourcing for these supports

Not resourced; Minimally resourced; Moderately resourced; Well-resourced; Fully resourced; Don't know.

Q29. Executive sponsor/champion for Indigenous workforce initiatives

Yes; No; Don't know.

Q30. One support or change that would advance Indigenous leadership in your organization (open-ended)

Q31. One recommendation for business leaders or boards to increase Indigenous leadership across corporate Canada (open-ended)

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