

The woman leading Deloitte Canada's Reconciliation Action Plan shares insights and tools from her work.

Interview by Karen Christensen

Since 2020, Deloitte Canada has been working to rebuild relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Why is this issue so important to your company?

We believe that every organization in this country has a responsibility to advance reconciliation. In June 2020, we released a Reconciliation Action Plan in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action Number 92. It called on the corporate sector to do more, specifically around hiring of Indigenous Peoples, education of our shared history and meaningful consultation. We believe this is not only the right thing to do in terms of corporate citizenship, but that there is also a huge business case for it.

Describe the origins of Deloitte Indigenous.

We formed an Indigenous Leadership Committee at the firm in 2018-2019, where non-Indigenous and Indigenous leaders came together to advise on our reconciliation strategy. This resulted in our inaugural Indigenous Impact Report being released to highlight our impact with Indigenous communities. From there, we reflected upon the opportunity that Deloitte had to do more towards reconciliation. We did research globally, and we learned a lot from **Deloitte Australia** because at the time, Reconciliation Action Plans were not a common term in corporate Canada.

Ultimately, we created our Reconciliation Action Plan under four pillars: Education, Employment, Inclusion and Economic Empowerment. The Education pillar has two parts to it. In addition to investing in the education of Indigenous youth outside of our firm, it entails educating our 14,000+ employees across Canada around our shared history and the current realities of Indigenous Peoples and communities.

Our Employment pillar is about ensuring that our firm mirrors contemporary Canada—which means our workforce must consist of at least five per cent First Nations, Métis

Indigenous youth are the fastest-growing population in Canada.

and Inuit employees. The Inclusion pillar is about providing the space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to contribute to our reconciliation journey, whether that be through employee resource groups, events or meaningful actions around corporate responsibility.

The final pillar, Economic Empowerment, is about recognizing the diversity of companies in our supply chain and providing meaningful opportunities for Indigenous businesses to partake in it. We have made a bold goal to ensure that at least five per cent of our overall procurement spend is spent on Indigenous businesses.

The Education pillar is foundational. Some readers might not be aware that one-third of Indigenous Peoples have not completed high school. Can you describe your efforts to make change on this front?

There is a huge gap in education amongst Indigenous Peoples across the country, and helping to close it is front and center in our plan. We have formed a multi-year commitment of \$175,000 per year with **Indspire**, a national Indigenous registered charity that invests in education for First Nation, Inuit and Métis students. This is not only for the long-term benefit of those individuals or families, but also, for Canada at large. We work with students in high school, providing workshops and programming, and we provide scholarships and bursaries to students attending post-secondary institutions. Since 2017, we have enabled more than 100 First Nations, Métis and Inuit students to pursue post-secondary education.

In addition, we are providing scholarships through Deloitte's Bloom Scholarship Program. We recognize that post-secondary education for Indigenous students often entails additional expenses. Some of them may have to travel to and from remote communities, for instance. This program provides funding for any school-related costs, as well as opportunities to pursue co-op positions at Deloitte Canada across the country.

Talk a bit more about your Indigenous Talent Strategy.

We're working closely with individual candidates to find meaningful opportunities that reflect their interests and passions. If they'd like to work with our Indigenous Client Services teams, they can absolutely do that and will get to see the impact of their communities thriving. There are also opportunities to work across the country on pro-bono projects as part of our corporate responsibility efforts. That

might involve, for instance, developing strategies for Indigenous organizations or working with youth through mentorship programs.

We are also looking at our working environment. As Indigenous Peoples continue to join our firm, we need to ensure that the job environment is suitable for them. For instance, the ability to work remotely is important. We have 27 offices across Canada, but many of our people aren't in the office every single day. It depends on the role, but there are opportunities to work from anywhere within Canada. We also provide opportunities for 'flex time,' working with the individual to create their ideal schedule.

Our HR policies and procedures are being updated to ensure that there is Indigenous representation within them. For example, we've just rolled out cultural days for Indigenous employees, above and beyond vacation days, personal days and Deloitte days. These are designated days when Indigenous professionals can get paid time off to attend cultural events in their communities or across Canada as they see fit. And recently, we've made adjustments to our personal spending account program, which is a benefit that folks can use around health and wellness. We've updated the requirements so that Indigenous candidates can use this bucket of funding to pay for things like sacred ceremony items, working with elders, traditional medicines and the like.

You touched on the business case earlier. For resource companies, ignoring Indigenous consultation is a question of survival. But you believe that all companies can benefit from better relationships with Indigenous communities. How so?

There are so many reasons, but I'll start with a hard fact: Indigenous youth are the fastest-growing population in Canada. So this is a key opportunity for employers to ensure their workforces are inclusive of Indigenous candidates. Research has found that if the gap in opportunity for Indigenous communities was closed, it would result in a boost of more than \$30 billion to Canada's GDP. This is all outlined in the National Indigenous Economic Strategy that was released in 2022. It has 107 calls to economic prosperity, highlighting that reducing poverty among Indigenous Peoples would save the federal and provincial governments more than \$8 billion per year. This is really about the prosperity of our country. All companies need to have reconciliation top of mind internally, but also, ensure that they are taking steps to eliminate socio-economic barriers.

For Indigenous youth to aspire to white-collar careers in, say, accounting or consumer products, they need to know that these jobs exist. How are you getting such messages to young people?

The corporate sector has historically been seen as colonial institutions that many Indigenous Peoples are not interested in working for. That's one reason why we see such low representation throughout. I encourage leaders across industries to develop a talent strategy and Reconciliation Action Plan to ensure Indigenous Peoples are represented in their organization, at all levels. At Deloitte, for example, we have two Indigenous women on our Board of Directors who are helping to set the tone from the top.

In terms of recruiting, for us it's about changing our strategy by not going to all the same universities and colleges that we have historically gone to every year and using different recruitment tactics—like developing relationships with Indigenous student centres, creating co-op positions and internships.

Word of mouth remains a very powerful tool in Indigenous communities. So, even reaching the community through social media can work. For corporate Canada, it's about being able to walk the talk, because Indigenous candidates are going to be asking, 'What is your organization doing around reconciliation? How are you enabling our youth to thrive? How are you giving back to our community?' These are questions that we continue to hear from candidates in interviews.

Deloitte has some powerful tools in its tool kit, including an Indigenous Supplier Portal and a Diversity Dashboard. Please describe how they work.

As I indicated earlier, we have committed to spending at least five per cent of our procurement spend on Indigenous businesses. The reality is, there are more than 65,000 Indigenous businesses in Canada, but there was a disconnect because many of our people were not aware of that. So, we built a platform that any Deloitte professional can access whenever they need to use a third-party vendor, whether it's for an internal request or a client project. Already, we've onboarded over 60 certified Indigenous businesses to the platform, and we offer training to help foster relationships. These vendors have all been certified by the **Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business**.

The Diversity Dashboard is another tool we've created to create transparency around the hiring and retention of

diverse candidates. The dashboard allows you to sort by region or job level, and highlights all the equity-deserving groups: Indigenous, Black, 2SLGBTQ+, women and people with disabilities. This is a tool that leaders can access at any point to track new hires and find retention and promotion information. It's been important for us to be able to hold leaders accountable and to have the data to back up our progress—as well as our pitfalls.

Since you launched your Reconciliation Action Plan, other organizations have stepped up to the plate. Are you seeing enough attention to Indigenous reconciliation from the corporate community?

When we released our Reconciliation Action Plan, we were the first company in corporate Canada to do so. But that isn't because we were experts in this space. From the beginning, we have wanted to empower others to join the journey and take accountability. Since we released ours, more than 60 organizations have released Reconciliation Action Plans, many modelled upon our framework.

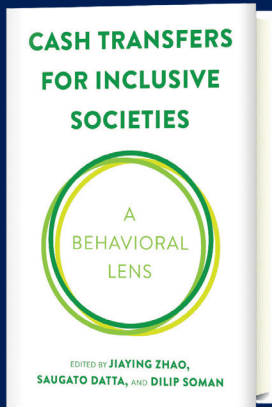
From a corporate standpoint, a good indicator of companies that are doing well in this area is referencing the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business's Progressive Aboriginal Relations Program. This is the only organization in Canada that is truly holding organizations accountable to their reconciliation journey by rating their progress as committed or certified under bronze-, silver- and gold-level status. Those that have reached gold and silver status have been operating in this space for quite some time, but they continue to have Indigenous-led solutions within their organizations to address some of the barriers within corporate Canada.

You have described your mission as "Indigenizing the way people think, speak and act at Deloitte Canada." For readers who want to bring this mindset to their organizations, what is the first step?

There is not one model that will fit all situations, but three things come to mind. First, ensure that you have Indigenous representation within your organization. Start by identifying the Indigenous individuals who already work there, take steps to hire more and ensure that you have Board representation.

Second, every reconciliation journey must be Indigenous-led. Corporate leaders need to put ample time aside to listen to Indigenous Peoples in the communities that

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they operate in, to hear what they think is important. It's not about what the organization thinks is important. What would Indigenous Peoples and communities value and like to see from the corporate perspective?

Third, as I've indicated, education is a critical part of this. We rolled out mandatory learning for all Deloitte professionals to complete. The program was called 4 Seasons of Reconciliation, and it was created in collaboration with the First Nations University of Canada. This really helped to accelerate our 'reconciliACTION,' as some folks call it. Many of our employees, whether they grew up in Canada or were new immigrants, were unaware of our shared history. Many were hearing about residential schools for the first time.

We will continue to put education first, providing ongoing opportunities to bring in Indigenous leaders, Chiefs, youth and Elders to share learnings and embed culture and ceremony in all that we are doing at the firm. Embracing these three principles is a great starting point for any organization beginning its own journey. **RM**

Alexandra Biron is a Senior Manager of Deloitte Indigenous, where she is leading the execution of Deloitte Canada's Reconciliation Action Plan. She holds a BBA from Wilfrid Laurier University and a Graduate Diploma in Social Responsibility and Sustainability from the University of Toronto, where she was awarded the President's Award for her capstone project: Deloitte's Indigenous Impact Report (available online). Alexandra is proud of her Anishinaabe/Ojibway identity and is committed to furthering both reconciliation and innovation in support of making an impact in Canada for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples.