

## Indigenous Youth Inclusion and Empowerment

*Focus: How does NPower Canada partner with Indigenous youth, Elders and service providers in Calgary and the GTA to co-design and deliver meaningful wraparound supports for Indigenous program participants?*

### Introduction

Indigenous peoples are the youngest and fastest growing demographic in Canada, yet they remain highly underrepresented in Canada's rapidly growing tech sector, a labour force amounting to nearly 1.4 million professionals nationally and growing<sup>1</sup>. The Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC) predicts Canada will have an estimated 219,000 ICT jobs available by 2021, most of which will be challenging to fill due to an insufficient volume of skilled ICT talent<sup>2</sup>. In order for Canada to reap the benefits of its new digital economy, it must address its chronic labour shortage and better utilize its local talent pool to ensure the nation is equipped with a strong and reliable supply pipeline going forward.

Canada's Indigenous population is young and currently represents 4% of its total population, yet only a small minority of this fast-growing demographic are accessing or obtaining tech-related employment. As reported by the Brookfield Institute in 2018, only 1.2 per cent of Canada's tech professionals identify as Indigenous<sup>3</sup>. The majority are employed in the trades, transportation, and service industries, all of which are increasingly at risk of automation as the tech revolution continues<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, a sizeable portion of Indigenous youth are not engaged in any type of training, work, or education programs. In 2016, the unemployment rate for Indigenous peoples (off-reserve) was 12.3 per cent, a noticeably higher figure than the national average of 7%<sup>5</sup>. To make the tech industry more inclusive, diverse, and accessible, more focus and supports must be provided to Canada's Indigenous population, to bridge the digital divide and empower them to be key contributors to Canada's digital economy.

The increased engagement of Indigenous youth in Canada's digital economy is critical; not only will it further strengthen the national economy but simultaneously it will generate positive outcomes locally within Indigenous communities, many of which continue to lack the basic infrastructure needed to stimulate and support economic development.

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<sup>1</sup> Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC), *The Next Talent Wave: Navigating the Digital Shift - Outlook 2021* (Ottawa: ICTC, 2017), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC), *Digital Economy Talent Supply: Indigenous Peoples of Canada* (Ottawa: ICTC, 2017), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Brookfield Institute, *Who Are Canada's Tech Workers?* (Toronto: Brookfield Institute, 2019), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Brad Stollery, "Canada's digital divide: Preserving Indigenous communities means bringing them online", *Medium*, May 4, 2018, <https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/canadas-digital-divide-preserving-indigenous-communities-means-bringing-them-online-2294af6a7b84>.

<sup>5</sup> ICTC, *Digital Economy Talent Supply: Indigenous Peoples of Canada* (Ottawa: ICTC, 2017), 9.

## **NPower Canada's Approach to Community Outreach and Engagement**

NPower Canada takes a fundamental, action-focused commitment to achieving equity and strengthening social inclusion through its IT workforce development program by prioritizing the training and inclusion of diverse young adults (ages 18-29) who are systemically underrepresented in the tech sector and face significant barriers to finding meaningful work. This includes women, Black, Indigenous and other racialized youth, LGBTQ+ youth, New Canadians and youth with disabilities whose households are low-income and who are unemployed or underemployed in precarious, minimum-wage jobs, which are also increasingly at risk of elimination by automation.

To date, 87% of NPower Canada's program participants have belonged to racialized communities, 38% have been New Canadians and 39% have been in receipt of government income support prior to enrolling with NPower Canada.

Since its inception in 2014, NPower Canada has made significant progress with cultivating employer and community partnerships, leading to high referral rates of opportunity youth to the program across its five training sites in the GTA and Calgary. Despite the economic impacts arising from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, NPower Canada has continued to experience high enrollment rates and strong demand for its program by both job-seekers as well as employers. Based on its continued success in addition to the heightened need for youth employment solutions as a result of the ongoing pandemic, NPower Canada has committed to further growth, aiming to expand its impact from serving 1,033 youth in 2020 to 1,570 per year beginning in 2021, while continuing to place 80% of its graduates into employment and/or higher education within 12 months post-training.

## **Indigenous Engagement & Partnerships**

NPower Canada traditionally recruits young adults from underrepresented populations by developing mutual referral relationships with diverse community partners including women's centres, Indigenous-led organizations, settlement services and other allied programs. While this approach has garnered many youth referrals to NPower Canada's program, these efforts have not proven effective with Indigenous youth and community organizations.

In recognizing the immense value Canada's Indigenous youth population can bring to the nation's booming tech sector, and wanting to ensure its program promotes and provides inclusive, accessible IT skills training, NPower Canada began seeking other avenues and channels to better engage Indigenous community stakeholders and increase enrollment rates of Indigenous youth to its program.

In early 2019, NPower Canada was presented with an exciting opportunity to participate in the CFT's Youth Employment Lab where staff were able to engage in conversations with Indigenous Elders, community agencies, and youth representatives involved with the initiative. Following a series of informative, in-depth discussions, NPower Canada staff developed a deeper understanding of the central role that Indigenous ways of knowing and collaborative-power sharing relationships must

play in any meaningful employment solutions for Indigenous youth. NPower Canada staff learned that understanding the career needs, challenges and aspirations of Indigenous youth specifically first starts with respectful consultations with Elders, youth, and community partners.

Rather than presenting its program to Indigenous communities as a one-size-fits-all solution, NPower Canada learned it must evolve and adapt its workforce development solutions, particularly with respect to community engagement strategies and wraparound supports, to better engage and serve Indigenous youth, their families and communities.

Following the CFT event, several steps were taken by NPower Canada staff to learn and connect with more Indigenous stakeholders to better understand the barriers Indigenous youth face when accessing employment programs. The outcome of these learnings was the development of an inspiring partnership with the Indigenous organization Miskanawah, an organization that offers supportive programs and services to Indigenous people in Calgary as they strengthen their circles of self, family, community, and culture.

### *Miskanawah partnership*

In January 2020, NPower Canada co-created a program with Miskanawah called Indigenous Youth Tech Pathways (IYTP) where Indigenous youth were engaged in one full week of IT-focused career exploration and experiential learning, combined with ceremony, coaching and team projects led by Miskanawah Elders and staff including an Art Knowledge-Keeper.

This multi-faceted week of wraparound supports and IT career exploration activities provided a culturally relevant and safe transition into NPower Canada's full January-April 2020 skills training program, while ensuring that Indigenous youth, once enrolled in skills training, had ongoing access to Elder-led ceremony and counselling in addition to appointments with a trauma-informed psychologist on the Miskanawah staff team. Moreover, upon completion of training, Indigenous graduates, including those now employed with companies like Shopify, continue to provide peer mentorship to the next cohort of Indigenous program participants.

This full-circle holistic program model, designed in partnership with Indigenous Elders, community organizations and youth themselves, has grown to enroll 14 Indigenous youth in NPower Canada's Calgary 2020 cohorts.

*"Thank you so much for this. I know for sure it's really going to help future indigenous participants." - Youth Participant, Indigenous Youth Tech Pathways Program*

NPower Canada and Miskanawah plan to continue delivering the Indigenous Youth Tech Pathways program into 2021 to support greater numbers of Indigenous youth in Calgary to transition successfully into the NPower Canada program.



*NPower Canada staff, Indigenous youth pilot participants and Miskanawah's Art Knowledge Keeper with the Land Acknowledgement artwork they created through the IYTP program.*

In addition, as of March 2020, NPower Canada has engaged in another partnership with Aboriginal Futures, an Indigenous-focused employment service center that connects youth of Indigenous descent to Calgary employers. Following several presentations and meetings, Aboriginal Futures has begun referring a growing number of Indigenous youth to NPower Canada, of whom 7 have already enrolled in Calgary's current Sept. – Dec. 2020 cohort.

Recognizing the success of the Miskanawah partnership, NPower Canada's Calgary team is aiming to cultivate more Indigenous community partners, including youth, service providers, Elders, and Traditional Knowledge Keepers, to further create culturally relevant and impactful programming and thus, increase Indigenous youth enrollment, participation, and graduation from the NPower Canada program.

*"Not very often we see projects like this honouring Indigenous youth and it makes all of us feel even more proud we're on a successful path." Junior IT Analyst Program Participant, Calgary*

In Toronto, a similar initiative is underway between NPower Canada, Native Child and Family Services and the Indigenous Friends Association, aiming to increase GTA enrollment of Indigenous youth. NPower Canada aims to replicate the partnership model its Calgary program has developed with the Indigenous organization Miskanawah with other Indigenous partners across Canada.

While each regional program will be tailored to the unique needs of local Indigenous youth and partners, the guiding principles of co-creation, power-sharing and holistic care will inform the intended scaling and replication of this model in Halifax and Vancouver, NPower Canada's new regional program sites launching in 2021.

While, as mentioned above, NPower Canada successfully enrolled 1,033 youth participants across its five program sites in the GTA and Alberta, only 17 of these youth identified as Indigenous. In

2021, NPower Canada is aiming to make a more concerted effort to supporting more opportunity youth of Indigenous descent and is aiming to enroll 35-50 youth per site across its GTA, Calgary, Halifax, and Vancouver training sites going forward.

## **Indigenous Peer Mentorship**

In response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, NPower Canada pivoted from its in-person, five-day-per-week delivery model to providing all elements of its holistic program online. Using platforms including Zoom for Education and QwikLabs, NPower Canada staff have facilitated group learning and work-simulated virtual labs and provided individual counselling, tutoring and wraparound supports for participants.

To ensure its youth participants remain socially connected and to support them in building the confidence and essential skills required to navigate the new digital world of work, NPower Canada began prioritizing peer mentorship as part of its virtual program model. In July 2020, NPower Canada implemented a short-term, initial-stage peer mentorship intervention across its training sites, hiring four of its recent graduates as designated peer mentors to engage regularly with its youth participants, serving as a source of information and support for new enrollees and providing academic assistance, on an as-needed basis, to participants throughout the duration of the 15-week training curriculum.

Going forward in 2021, NPower Canada will prioritize Indigenous peer mentorship by further engaging its recent Indigenous alumni to act as dedicated peer mentors. As articulated by Miskanawah Elders and staff, these program graduates are “knowledge keepers for technology”, who can share their newfound technical knowledge and recent learnings from the program with more Indigenous youth, including current participants but also friends and members of their own communities who may not know of NPower Canada’s program or have a limited understanding of the many roles and diverse skillsets encompassed within the tech industry.

For Indigenous youth participants, this peer mentorship program provides them with the opportunity to directly connect with peers who share educational and cultural experiences. By further involving Indigenous alumni in its IT workforce development program, NPower Canada can honour and provide a space for their voices and perspectives in shaping the organization’s priorities and strategic initiatives going forward. Furthermore, the opportunity enables these recent graduates to build and strengthen their confidence and leadership skills and will assist NPower Canada in identifying and continuing to recruit other passionate Indigenous peer mentors going forward.

## **NPower Canada’s National Scaling Plan**

To date NPower Canada has only been able to accommodate and support Indigenous youth residing in the urban cores in which its regional sites are located. NPower Canada acknowledges, however, that a large portion of Canada’s Indigenous population are located outside of cities, many residing in rural and remote locations which lack access to workforce training programs, reliable and high speed internet connectivity, and digital tools needed to acquire digital literacy skills.

Over the past 8 months following its pivot to an online program delivery model in response to the pandemic, NPower Canada has shown to produce skills training, certification, and graduation outcomes equal to, or better than, its previous five-day-per-week, in-person cohorts. These findings have profound implications for the success and impact of its program. Freed from the constraints of its traditional in-person, bricks-and-mortar approach, virtual program delivery enables NPower Canada to potentially offer its program to communities outside of larger urban centres, including, for example, Indigenous and northern communities. The program could continue to be delivered either fully or primarily online, with technical and soft skills training offered virtually by a central team of NPower Canada staff, potentially complimented by online or in-person counselling and wraparound supports provided by a smaller local NPower Canada staff team and/or local community partners such as Indigenous Elders or youth mental health care providers.

Since the nature of work will likely continue to change during and post-pandemic, with many types of IT jobs expected to become and remain virtual, NPower Canada will also have greater ability to bring employment opportunities to communities. For example, NPower Canada could potentially train Indigenous youth in smaller communities like Churchill, Manitoba to be placed into full-time remote technical support roles, delivering IT services to clients across urban and rural regions while empowering these Indigenous youth to remain in their communities. The impacts of this type of programming model could be substantial, stimulating local economies and thereby preventing many of the pressing difficulties so commonly faced in Indigenous communities including 'brain drain' as job-seekers are forced to leave in search of greater opportunities and better lives.

## **Going Forward**

In continuing to work collaboratively with Indigenous Elders, youth and community partners, NPower Canada can better identify the specific needs of Indigenous youth and co-design innovative programs and wraparound supports using promising practices and existing successes to address these needs. NPower Canada can also share its learnings and further engage its 200+ industry partners to further amplify and draw attention to the need for more Indigenous voices and perspectives in the tech industry, working with these organizations to ensure their hiring processes and workplace cultures foster inclusion and respect Indigenous culture and history.

As NPower Canada grows and nationally expands, it will continue to combine relevant best practices from its current IT workforce development program while integrating culturally relevant models of youth engagement, education and empowerment informed by Indigenous expertise to enable more opportunity youth of Indigenous descent to enroll in NPower Canada's IT workforce development program and ultimately, launch more Indigenous youth into meaningful tech careers.



## Reflection Questions

1. What outreach strategies and resources has your organization found successful in engaging Indigenous stakeholders and building strong partnerships?
2. What specific and unique challenges have you found to be common barriers for Indigenous youth/peoples in accessing meaningful and sustainable employment?