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### Aboriginals look to partnering, education to build IT infrastructure

By Tom Venetis, posted Nov 23, 2001

Two important challenges facing aboriginal communities today are building the IT infrastructures needed, and keeping those with the necessary technological skills in aboriginal communities. Various proposals were put forward in an effort to tackle these problems at a recent meeting of aboriginal business leaders. Mariette McGregor-Sutherland, a principle with the Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.-based Edgecraft Consulting says that many aboriginal communities have now become aware of those needs and are struggling to find solutions.

"Some of the obvious issues facing aboriginal businesses are decent access to the Internet and human resources," Sutherland adds. "You just don't have a lot of aboriginal IT professionals graduating from college, university or technical institutions. And if they are out there they are being snapped up by other firms."

At a recent meeting of aboriginal business leaders, entrepreneurs and support groups hosted by the Toronto-based Aboriginal Economic Renewal Initiative, various proposals were put forward in an effort to tackle these problems.

Rima Aristocrat, president of the Ottawa-based Willis College outlined the program her institution has put into place to help educate aboriginal IT professionals and to help aboriginal businesses take advantage of the students' skills. The program is a 12-week management and IT program that is part of a long-term partnership with the University of Winnipeg.

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Why a management course in conjunction with IT training and certification?

"Certainly we are not trying to make managers, but what we are trying to do is make future IT professionals understand and appreciate the business infrastructures of businesses," Aristocrat says.

By helping the students understand how businesses operate and the difficulties they face when using technologies like the Internet, the students can better hone their skills to helping the businesses meet their long-term business and technology goals. As part of the program, the students work on a business project with a company or community group. The companies or groups chosen are local and aboriginal-based ones that are looking for IT experts for specific projects they are working on. The students work with the company to understand the specific

business goal, the technologies and solutions needed and the long-term support mechanisms that have to be put into place.

"One such group that we recently helped through this program was the Ottawa School Breakfast program," Aristocrat says. "The group was trying to find ways of increasing their funding and they were looking at using the Web to do so. But they could not afford the expense of Web page designers, developers and the hosting cost. The students in our program helped the program design their site, worked on the back-end and we at Willis helped host the site. This was a \$40,000 project and what came out of it was that the students received their certification in Web design and IT work, Microsoft and Oracle certification, and the most important thing of all, real-world business experience."

Another important outcome of the student's work is building the IT infrastructure that is sorely lacking in many aboriginal communities. By laying this groundwork, the students are not only helping aboriginal businesses take better advantage of technology and the Internet, the students are also laying the groundwork for their future work prospects.

"There certainly has to be some real-live experience built into any training and if you can link it back to the community, then there is a greater likelihood that the graduates will understand the needs of the community and stay in the community," says Edgecraft's Sutherland.

Keeping talented aboriginal IT professionals in aboriginal communities is something that Judy Sander understands. As the business advisor and manager of the Thunder Bay, Ont.-based Northwestern Ontario Technology Centre, she has been working through the centre not only to help aboriginal technology companies grow and prosper in northern Ontario, but to keep talented IT professionals in the community to help them. This is something of a challenge as there are only two post-secondary institutions in Thunder Bay and aboriginals who graduate with technology and business skills often leave the communities to find work.

It was decided that the best way to keep the talent and grow the businesses was to set up a technology business incubator. The Centre is designed to help identify the needs of aboriginal technology businesses, put them in touch with other business leaders to share information and advice, and help them find and keep the talent they need to meet their business goals.

The Centre also provides hands-on management assistance, support services, access to equipment and office space. Another a key feature is helping aboriginal technology businesses get access to the funding they need to grow and hire the aboriginal IT talent they need. The difficulty they face in this area is that most investors in the region are more comfortable putting money in traditional ventures like mining than into technology.

"Access to capital is a big issue and companies in Northwestern Ontario find that there is not a venture capital firm close to them," Sander says. "And our angle investors are familiar with making money in real estate and resource development, but they are not comfortable in investing in high tech companies. So we have a challenge in trying to get that necessary capital into our community."

A tool the Centre is in the process of developing is a virtual incubator that will let aboriginal technology businesses hook up to exchange ideas, offer advice and even seek out talent.

There will even be an online library of business information and contacts and a place where aboriginal IT students can post their resumes so that local firms can have a crack at hiring them.

Both Aristocrat and Sander added that aboriginal businesses, communities and educational institutions should look at partnering with government and private industry as well. These

partnerships can help provide the technical know-how, business expertise and technologies to help aboriginal businesses and aboriginal IT professionals. Recently, the Assembly of First Nations joined with Industry Minister Brian Tobin to come up with a plan to deliver high-speed communication services like Internet access and video conferencing to remote aboriginal communities. In May 2001, the Assembly of First Nations got together with Telesat Canada to develop a plan to use satellites to deliver broadband communications services. By 2004, some 633 remote First Nations communities and their businesses will be able to tap into a hybrid satellite and ground-based broadband infrastructure.

Xerox Canada Ltd. just kicked off its tenth annual Xerox Canada Aboriginal Scholarship program giving eight aboriginal students \$3,000 each year for four years as they work towards becoming information technology experts.