



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

INFRASTRUCTURE

SOFTWARE

Canada should look towards Indigenous population for its tech talent needs, leaders say

BUCKLEY SMITH

SEPTEMBER 16, 2019



Chief Clarence Louie says the indigenous population just needs to be given a chance for it to flourish in the tech world. Credit: Russell Zubeck

While many organizations look overseas for talent to bridge the skills gap in the Canadian tech industry, Indigenous leaders are calling on businesses to invest in the country's growing Indigenous population.

Chief Clarence Louie of the [Osoyoos Indian Band in British Columbia's Okanagan](#) said the Indigenous population is **growing at a faster rate than any population in Canada**, and within that population could be the next wave of tech workers.



Chief Clarence Louie says Canada must look towards the growing Indigenous problem as an integral part of the future workforce. Credit: Synergy CMC

“It still upsets me when I hear all this talk about importing workers from other countries when the youngest and fastest-growing population has been proven is the native people,” Chief Louie told *IT World Canada*. “So get the native people off the welfare, get the native people involved in technology and part of the future workforce.”

A BlackBerry-led initiative, in partnership with Forrest Green and Microsoft Corp., aims to do just that. Announced late June at the Indigenous Technology Summit in Montreal, the three companies are planning to provide a mix of next-generation secure communication, cybersecurity, cloud, IoT, AI and machine learning technologies to Chiefs and Grand Chiefs across Canada to help support local service organizations and strengthen their privacy infrastructure.

“This is nation-building in action,” said Joseph Norton, Grand Chief, Mohawk Council of Kahnawá:ke, in a press release. “BlackBerry has the most secure CPaaS communications infrastructure in the world and, when coupled with Microsoft’s world-class cloud and analytics solutions and Forrest Green’s critical systems integrations efforts, First Nations will have the technological tools necessary to manage their communities and ensure the well-being of their people – a significant step towards self-governance. First Nations need to own, control, and possess their own data and communications systems in order to create vibrant, self-sustaining communities.”

Self-sustainability in under-served communities is something that many in the tech field have been turning their attention to in recent years, according to Charles Eagan, the chief technology officer and senior vice-president of mobility software solutions at BlackBerry. The company’s Spark Communications Platform is part of the initiative with Microsoft and Forrest Green.

“I think there’s a bar of capability that’s needed to allow independence,” said Eagan in an interview.

Chief Louie agreed, adding that many major issues like education, economic development, and healthcare, simply cannot be properly tackled in the modern world without technology.

“You can’t run proper health programs without the technology needed. All doctors use technology. You can’t have a health clinic without technology. You can’t have proper schools. . . without technology. You can’t run a business without technology,” explained Chief Louie.



Osoyoos Indian Band in British Columbia has established itself as one of the more prosperous and technically equipped indigenous communities in Canada. Credit: Oliver Daily News

Healthcare is a large component of this initiative and it’s why **Mustimuhw Information Solutions**, the largest Indigenous-owned software company in Canada, was brought into the partnership.

MIS specializes in healthcare and social services software, and Karl Mallory, the jurisdictional lead for MIS, said that their digital tools are “designed by First Nations for First Nations”. The organization’s community electronic medical record software will be implemented across Indigenous communities to bring their healthcare into the modern age. Mallory indicated many communities still operate their health clinics with procedures based around a paper system.

Chief Louie said it’s important to have an organization like MIS, which has an awareness of the cultural and social needs of these communities, involved in the initiative with the other tech giants. But what excites him the most, he added, is the inspiration MIS ultimately delivers to other Indigenous communities. All they need is the support to give them a chance.

“We are quick learners. We’re quick at adapting. We can get involved in any sort of business or any sort of ventures,” he said.

While attending an Indigenous youth **AI** training course hosted by **Microsoft** in April, Murray Rowe, the president of **Forrest Green**, said children very quickly grasped concepts involving AI. Greater efforts should be made to get younger children interested in science, technology, engineering and math, he stressed.

“These kids were remarkable. And I think that if we’re going to increase capacity to participate in information technology or the knowledge economy, we need to start with kids at the age of 11 and encourage them to embrace programming and the development of things like artificial intelligence... and encourage them to go into the STEM programs to become the next generation of technologists.”