



# Career progression factors of Aboriginal executives in the Canada federal public service

Aboriginal  
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**Abstract** *The research examined the career progression factors of Aboriginal executives in Canada's federal public service to determine whether such factors as development opportunities, job assignments, education levels, mentoring, leadership experience, and networking increase the advancement of Aboriginal people to the executive category within the Canadian federal public service.*

## The changing world of work

Over the last quarter century, the role of Canadian Aboriginal people in the world of work has been changing. Like other designated groups under employment equity (women, persons in a visible minority, and persons with disabilities), Aboriginal people are beginning to enter the non-traditional occupation of management and are encountering difficulty moving into executive positions. In many of today's organizations, the majority of senior positions of power and authority continue to be occupied by white males (International Personnel Management Association, 1990; Weschler, 1994), and in few places is this more evident than in the executive category of the Canadian federal public service (CFPS) (Public Service Commission of Canada, 2001; Treasury Board of Canada, 2000). Despite substantial efforts by government departments to eliminate roadblocks to career development and to foster the advancement of Aboriginal people into the CFPS executive category, the share of executive appointments to the public service for Aboriginal people continues to be disproportionate. Among the four designated groups (women, persons in a visible minority, and persons with disabilities, and Aboriginal people) identified under Canadian employment equity provisions, Aboriginal people are, in more than 60 federal departments, agencies, and commissions for which the Treasury Board is the employer, the furthest from reaching proportional executive category representation.

A high turnover rate may be a healthy sign (for example, when moves indicate a promotion outside of the organization) or may indicate frustration with barriers to career development or advancement. In the CFPS, the latter cause is applicable. Various studies (Abella, 1984; Jetté, 1994; Review



Directorate of the Public Service Commission of Canada, 1990) indicate a number of problems, ranging from a lack of commitment by the employing departments to racism rooted in long-standing and deeply ingrained stereotypes, and work environments with cultures that alienate Aboriginal people.

Yet despite these barriers, the cadre of Aboriginal executives within the public service continues to grow. How is it that, within the government's current executives cadre there are Aboriginal executives who have been able to demonstrate their abilities and skills as capable bureaucrats while overcoming discriminatory barriers, and advance within the public service to the executive category?

### **Purpose of the study**

The study of careers and how they develop is one of the most active areas of inquiry in the social sciences. Educators, sociologists, economists, and human resource practitioners are all trying to understand how an individual selects, works within, and makes decisions to change the focus of his or her working life. The literature is replete with numerous theories of career development such as Miles and Snow's (1978) trait and factor theory, Holland's (1993) typology, Roe's (1957) need theory, and Super's (1992) developmental theory. These theories, however, reflect a traditional focus on white college students and middle class professionals (Betz and Fitzgerald, 1993). Although there has been a slow but steady increase in the research pertaining to the career development and advancement patterns of designated group members, Aboriginal people have been much ignored by career development theorists and researchers (Johnson *et al.*, 1996). Research studies conducted by James *et al.* (1995), Johnson *et al.* (1996) and Lenton (1979) represent some of the very few exceptions.

According to Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory, if a person has the necessary ability, then the more effort that the person exerts, the more likely he or she is to attain that goal (that is, to perform well). Hall (1971) postulates in his psychological success cycle that strong performance on a valued, stretching, or difficult goal will produce a feeling of psychological success (pride, intrinsic satisfaction), which enhances an individual's self-esteem and thus may lead the individual to a more competent self-concept. Consequently, Hall (1971) suggests such intrinsic rewards in a career will increase individual involvement and evaluate individual aspirations.

Many current and former Aboriginal employees have frequently commented on the difficulties faced in adapting to the public service. For example, *Report of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples: Restructuring the Relationship Vol. 2* (The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 937) notes many instances of difficulty among Aboriginal peoples attempting to adapt to the public service:

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How was I [an Aboriginal] supposed to deal with a manager and a system that continually sought to treat me as a child? I have both a Bachelor's and Master's degree, and their tactics included requests that I submit all of my calculations for verification by a supervisor, ostensibly because they couldn't be sure my totals were correct. No other person among my forty-three co-workers was required to do this. They told me that my work was being checked because I grew up on a reserve where nobody learned to add properly.

For the most part, despite discriminatory practices, stereotyping, and work environments posing these barriers, employment among protected groups is not in danger. Women, persons in a visible minority, persons with disabilities, and Aboriginal people find themselves favorably situated relative to changing labour market trends. So the more pressing issue is the full use of human capital. It may be that with higher levels of education and experience some individuals are deemed unequal to the job demands of the CFPS executive category because of cultural attributes or factors or culture that should in all fairness limit their progress. To the extent that these groups – and specifically, in this study Aboriginal people – are distinctive ethnically, discrimination remains a possibility.

According to Jetté (1994), the real reason for ineffective career development and limited advancement among Aboriginal people stems from barriers of a character different from those faced by other designated group members.

While most research on career development and advancement patterns in the CFPS has focused on discriminatory practices affecting designated groups (Abella, 1984; Public Service Alliance of Canada, 1996; Samuel, 1991; Samuel and Karam, 1996), there are other possible influences, which are not well understood. Thus, to explore the various multi-dimensional issues of career development and advancement of Aboriginal executives in a public sector milieu, a study was designed to investigate whether or not such career progression factors increased the career development and advancement potential of Aboriginal people to the executive category within the CFPS.

### **Methodology**

The study utilized multiple lines of evidence including a literature review, a biographical analysis based on a mailed survey, in-depth personal interviews, reviews of (CFPS) internal executive recruitment/competition notices; career development and advancement materials; and other reports to gather information from a geographically dispersed population of Aboriginal executives in the CFPS. The research examined whether or not developmental opportunities, job assignments, education levels, training, mentoring, leadership experience, and networking were prominent factors. To control bias, and ensure consistency participants mailed completed questionnaires to an independent consultant who also tabulated the data; interview questions were presented neutrally with the same explanation and in the same order; and interview sessions were tape recorded so that the accuracy of responses could be verified.

### **Sample frame and definition of Aboriginal people**

For employment purposes within the CFPS, Aboriginal peoples are provided with an opportunity to self-identify as status (persons registered under Indian Act), non status (Aboriginal persons not registered under the Indian Act), *métis* (those of mixed Indian and other origin), or Inuit (persons north of sixtieth parallel). The CFPS considers Aboriginal peoples as one group statistically; hence the sample population does not distinguish among those groups, although many other studies do. The sample for the study consisted of 55 individuals, with a response rate of 54 percent.

### **Key findings**

Some common themes emerged regarding the career progression factors Aboriginal executives consider important for career development and executive advancement. The results also add interesting information to the emerging knowledge base on career development and advancement patterns concerning various racial groups.

First, the findings of the study suggest that the specific factors ranked by Aboriginal executives within the CFPS as important for career development and advancement potential were: leadership experience, education and job assignments. They also stressed training as a major factor.

Second, selection criteria used by Public Service Internal Executive recruitment notices required potential candidates to possess an undergraduate degree; sought candidates who could demonstrate networking ability; and sought individuals with extensive leadership experience.

Third, the most prominent factors identified by Duxbury *et al.* (1998) in their landmark study: breadth of knowledge (high mobility, lateral moves and acting/stretch assignments); increased visibility; and mentoring were not perceived by the majority of Aboriginal executives as important or relevant for career development or advancement with the public sector.

Finally, themes, which emerged from the analysis of *La Relève* documentation, revealed that both public sector central agencies and departments have well entrenched initiatives, which recruit and develop individuals with leadership potential (Privy Council Office, 1997). However, the *La Relève* documentation also indicated the specific utilization of developmental assignments and programs, increased networking opportunities, mentoring and coaching initiatives to progressively develop a cadre of individuals with depth, breadth, and scope of leadership experience was well pronounced and utilized throughout the public service.

From an organizational perspective, it appears that successful career advancement strategies in the CFPS include: building depth, breadth, and scope of professional experience; networking with senior management; utilizing development opportunities and job assignments; and acquiring a mentor.

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## Discussion and implications

While the study discovered a variety of perspectives regarding the career progression factors, which have influenced the career development and advancement patterns of Aboriginal executives in Canada's Federal Public Service.

The study also found that Aboriginal executives in the CFPS have different perceptions regarding the value of developmental opportunities, job assignments, mentoring and networking as effective strategies for increasing their career development and advancement potential. From an organizational perspective, successful career advancement strategies which individuals need to adopt in order to advance within the CFPS include: building depth, breadth, and scope of professional experience; networking with senior management; utilizing development opportunities and job assignments; and acquiring a mentor. By comparison, Aboriginal executives perceive and view opportunities that provided leadership experience; training and increased education qualifications accelerate the likelihood of advancement within the CFPS. According to researchers Badwound and Tierney (1988), James *et al.* (1995) and Sanders (1987), educational, economic, and work experience influence socio-cultural values and attitudes and thus may explain why Aboriginal public service executives perceive and view opportunities that provided leadership experience; training and increased education qualifications accelerate the likelihood of advancement within the CFPS.

In fact, there are many studies that show culturally based values and norms can create conflicts for Aboriginal individuals working in organizations where Western values and norms dominate. For example, Wares *et al.* (1992) found that Aboriginal individuals tend to be unwilling to praise their own skills or accomplishments; which in turn, can have negative implications for Aboriginal individuals seeking career advancement in organizations where touting one's own accomplishments is the norm. Researchers Burke and McKeen (1992) and Thomas (1990) have suggested that non-Aboriginal mentors may not provide effective psychological support for Aboriginal individuals due to differences in culturally based values and norms. Research conducted by Tupahache (1986) indicated that differences in "white" and "Aboriginal" leadership styles and norms might also be a cultural source of difficulty. Tupahache (1986, p. 47) points out "aggressive assertion of leadership is not accepted within many Indian tribes". Tupahache (1986, p. 48) also notes that "Aboriginal leaders are expected to serve as examples, to seek not personal power or status but the common good, and to reach decisions by consensus". Thus, Aboriginal peoples working in an environment where individualism, interpersonal competition, and other such embraced norms and values may experience stress and conflict. Consequently, Aboriginal individuals working in mainstream organizations are often caught in a vise of pressures that are incompatible with their own views and values. The claim that Aboriginal people encounter a "glass

ceiling”[1] that stops their career development and advancement is heard with increasing frequency. Indeed, such is the case in the CFPS. A report prepared for the Public Service Commission of Canada (1991), *A Study on the Retention of Aboriginal Peoples in the Federal Public Service*, made the following observations:

Current and former Aboriginal employees frequently comment on the difficulties in adapting to the Public Service. For many, entry involves a culture shock which comes in a variety of guises. The language of the bureaucracy and formalities of government create uneasiness for many Aboriginal peoples. They feel conflicts between their traditional ways and accepted government practices . . . The bureaucratic levels and systems within government are also foreign. The Public Service is perceived to allow minimal room for autonomy or creativity. The environment is perceived to be fiercely competitive, filled with roadblocks to advancement, and with people looking out only for themselves. The individualistic way in which work is done is perceived to be alien and pressure packed (Public Service Commission of Canada, 1991, p. 16).

Similarly, in the USA, the glass ceiling metaphor is used to indicate growing concern that well qualified newcomers in a visible minorities[2], may start out in a favorable position but gradually find themselves on a second-class career track. For example, the 1995 report of the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission described the situation faced by Asian and Pacific Islanders, a heavily foreign-born population, as an “impenetrable glass ceiling” (US Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995, p. 5). A 1992 report by the US Commission on Civil Rights found that:

Overall the perception that there is a “glass ceiling” barring most Asian Americans from attaining top management positions (especially upper level management positions) for which they are qualified was perhaps the concern most frequently voiced by Asian Americans . . . individuals and advocacy groups (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1992, p. 28).

Though resource constraints prevented a full investigation of the issue, the commission was “convinced that the problem [of the glass ceiling] is a serious one and that it pervades both private corporations and government” (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1992, p. 131).

In addition, positive work performance feedback provided by supervisors to Aboriginal peoples may be lacking; and since, positive feedback is a critical factor in building an individual’s personal confidence, the unintentional withholding of such information may undermine their confidence in their ability to perform. As well, since confidence is deemed important to workplace success, especially management and professional success, there may be a further reluctance to give Aboriginal people additional responsibilities normally associated with more senior positions. Intentional or not, such actions have the potential to infer that Aboriginal people can only succeed at lower level positions. Finally, many public sector organizations lack sufficient numbers of Aboriginal executives to fully support mentoring programs, or to identify in-house role models. Support programs such as mentoring, and self-promoting groups have the potential to provide coaching, confidence



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building, and an opportunity to enhance personal performance and career advancement.

As well, similar to private sector organizations, many public service organizations identify key employees for upper echelon positions, often early in their careers, and oversee their career advancement. These individuals are developed through internal opportunities including acting assignments, mentoring, and training programs such as executive development programs. In addition, these employees are assigned to highly visible positions such as special assistants or advisory positions to senior executives, and assignments to task forces and committees. These opportunities serve as a means to give key participants experience to enhance their academic and work related credentials. While viewed as supporting career development and advancement, these programs are rarely, if ever reviewed or audited by either departments, the Public Service Commission or Treasury Board Secretariat to ensure individuals receive equal consideration and opportunity.

However, despite these setbacks, and the negative impact of culturally based values and norms on Aboriginal peoples, the flexibility demonstrated by Aboriginal individuals to adapt to public service organizational culture has led to some positive changes. For example, cultural values concerning education have helped to foster changes in attitudes toward higher education by Aboriginal peoples. According to Sanders (1987) figures from the Educational Testing Service indicates encouraging levels of educational attainment and success among Indians. Sanders (1987, p. 84) denotes that "Indian peoples understand the linkage between improved educational success and opportunity". As well, Canadian federal departments have actively promoted cultural diversity programs and sensitivity training as a means of educating its staff on the diverse and rich culture of Canada's Aboriginal peoples and its cultural orientation toward such values as cooperativeness; group cohesiveness; and consensus-based style of leadership.

## **Conclusion**

There are many challenges and issues facing Aboriginal public sector employees. As well, the role public sector organizations play in tailoring and formulating career advancement policies and programs in the public sector toward Aboriginal people must change if they are to be effective.

Alternative ways to approach career development and advancement for Aboriginal people in a public service environment need to be developed. These new approaches need to be broader in focus, employee-centered, and collaborative. Furthermore, strategies need to take into consideration the socio-cultural values of Aboriginal peoples to maintain the sensitivity, and community responsiveness so that there is advance of the personal development and growth of Aboriginal individuals as opposed to the narrow

focus of the organizational paradigm, which is concerned with very specific pre-determined organizational objectives.

Despite the findings of this study, many questions remain. Would the study of career development and advancement patterns of non-executive Aboriginal peoples within the CFPS produce similar findings? Would the findings for Aboriginal peoples be similar for other executives from different employment equity groups? How successful are Aboriginal female executives as compared to Aboriginal male executives? Why are so many Aboriginal executives in Canada's public service clustered in one federal department? Why is it that the vast majority of federal departments have no Aboriginal executives within their management cadre? Do current federal special initiative programs support or hinder the career development and advancement of Aboriginal peoples? These questions present rich possibilities for ongoing research to increase the public service knowledge base regarding the participation rate of Aboriginal peoples to the executive cadre of the CFPS.

#### Notes

1. Refers to invisible, artificial barriers that prevent qualified individuals from advancing within their organization and achieving full professional potential.
2. In the SA, persons in visible minorities include men and women of historically under represented groups-African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Pacific Americans, Native Americans, individuals with disabilities, white women, and women in low-paying occupations.

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