

*Source: Urban Aboriginal Strategy*

## **Human resources entrepreneur builds successful business through listening, holistic approach**

Defining success on her own terms is driving a Winnipeg woman's dreams to build a leading-edge human resource consulting firm.

Brenda Higgins, whose roots are Selkirk Ave. and Andrews St. in the heart of Winnipeg's north end, is transforming her credentials as a certified human resource professional with 16 years business experience into her own made in-Manitoba success story.

As she turned 40, Higgins searched for more fulfillment in her working life. She had built successful professional practices in Regina, Calgary, Ottawa and Toronto. When she, her husband and two boys returned to Winnipeg six years ago, Higgins welcomed the chance to be closer to family.

"I had been successful at whatever I did, but I didn't feel really great," she says. "I kept asking myself, what's missing?"

After much soul searching and research, she challenged herself to be amongst the top human resource consultants, globally. "I talked to over 40 top consultants in Manitoba, Canada and internationally," says Higgins. "Whatever I do, I have to be the best."

For Higgins, that meant striking out on her own. Upon her return to Winnipeg, she worked for a year at the Centre for Aboriginal Human Resource Development, then spent another two years at a Winnipeg human resource consulting firm before deciding to start all over – this time building her own business.

"I needed to have more control – to provide the quality of service I wanted and to work in the Aboriginal community," Higgins explains.

While she started with modest goals, in two and a half years she has grown to five full-time staff and seven other contractors. Throughout that time, Higgins has built an enviable reputation.

"The reason we keep coming back to Brenda is that she takes the time to understand our business," says Carolyn Love, Director of Human Resources with Integrated Logistics, a young innovative company that helps international firms get their product to the Canadian market. "Our company has a unique working culture. While others seek out skill sets, Brenda seeks out the persona and that has made all the difference."

Throughout, Higgins is battling myths about the lack of skills and education in the Aboriginal community and the need to have a large downtown office to be a success.

"People are under the general misconception that there are no highly skilled Aboriginal professionals," says Higgins. "Aboriginal employees are often more qualified in terms of education and training, and this is becoming more true all the time; companies are starting to recognize this."

In her own business, all but two of the staff are Aboriginal and all were hired because of their skills rather than their heritage. She and her staff also have a low profile, grassroots commitment to working with their community and helping students and adults build their own pathways to success.

Higgins is also on the leading edge of the home office trend. She has set up a virtual office – using telecommunications to link her staff (who all have home offices) and her clients, the majority of whom are located outside Manitoba. She rents meeting and interview space when she needs it and hops on a plane when work takes her out of Winnipeg.

“You can do a lot of search work with communications, long distance and the Internet,” she says. “You can do this job from anywhere.”

Higgins is working her way to being the best in her field and has advice for other Aboriginal business people. “It’s only a myth that Aboriginal business can only do business with Aboriginal people – it doesn’t work like that,” she says, noting that only 20% of her clients are Aboriginal.

Higgins is still pursuing her dream of going global. But she and her staff have set more holistic goals – to be balanced, to make their clients happy, and to remain leading edge.

“I didn’t build this business to make a lot of money,” she explains. “We are going to do a good job and be happy.”

It’s an approach of balance and care that she brings to her clients. “What impressed me the most about Brenda is the service she provided,” says Leslie Zegalski, who was recently placed with a major Manitoba corporation. “She provides plenty of personal support during the process and a month later is still calling to see how things are working out.”

In establishing Higgins International Inc., Higgins worked closely with Aboriginal Business Canada – an initiative of Industry Canada and a participant in the federal government’s Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS). The UAS responds to the critical need for confidence and a sense of community for Winnipeg’s Aboriginal people. Its goal is to help the city’s Aboriginal community achieve long-term socio-economic success.