EMPLOYER-FOCUSED STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT NEWCOMER EMPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) described Canada as having "the most elaborate and longest-standing skilled labour migration system" (OECD, 2019). Canada is well known for its efforts to attract highly skilled immigrants. Unfortunately, however, this ambition is not being matched by success in leveraging the skills possessed by these immigrants after arrival. Compared to Canadian-born counterparts, university-educated immigrants are twice as likely to have employment that requires no more than a high school diploma and nearly three times more likely to experience persistent over-qualification over time (Statistics Canada, 2020). And despite Canada's welcoming immigration policy, underemployment is more pervasive among recent immigrants in this country than among their US peers (42% vs. 29%) (Lu & Hou, 2019).

At the same time, Canadian businesses report that an inability to find and retain the right talent represents one of the greatest impediments to their growth (KPMG, 2020). The mismatch between educational attainment and employment outcomes suggests that much more should be done in the settlement process to ensure that all stakeholders benefit from immigration.

The underemployment and "de-skilling" of immigrants is not a new problem. A host of barriers prevent immigrants from obtaining meaningful employment, including lack of recognition of international education and experience as well as overt discrimination (Feenan & Madhany, 2021; Desjardins & Cornelson, 2011). While employers continue to complain about labour and skills shortages, they are often reluctant to hire newcomers (Fang et al., 2021). As one study showed, job applicants with "foreign sounding" last names were 30% less likely to get called back for interviews in large organizations and even less frequently by small and medium enterprises (SMEs), where the majority of private sector jobs exist (Banerjee et al., 2017). Systemic barriers also include the fact that most newcomers lack the social and professional networks (or "weak ties") that help facilitate employment opportunities (Ryan, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2011). Research shows that one of the most important factors that improves labour market outcomes for newcomers is having Canadian work experience (Statistics Canada, 2019a). Yet it is notoriously difficult to obtain this initial experience, as the requirement of Canadian work experience often serves as a prerequisite for eligibility thereby screening out many immigrant applications (Rudenko, 2021; Sakamoto et al., 2010).

The interplay of these obstacles results in poor labour market outcomes for immigrants (Ng & Gagnon, 2020). The situation is particularly pronounced for immigrant women and racialized groups. Of all immigrant groups, African-born immigrants have the lowest employment rate, while those from the Philippines and Europe experience the highest levels of employment (Yssaad & Fields, 2018). Immigrant women fare worse than immigrant men and are more likely to be employed in involuntary part-time work relative to their Canadian-born counterparts (Ng & Gagnon, 2020; Hira-Friesen, 2017). The pandemic has exacerbated existing problems and risks, widening disparities in the long-term (Feenan & Madhany, 2021). Now is the time to take stock of current policies and

practices and consider implementing alternative approaches that may be more effective in supporting newcomers' transition into the workforce. At the same time, there is evidence that once employers have experience with hiring immigrants, they are highly likely to continue to hire them (Fang et al., 2021).

EMPLOYMENT SERVICES SUPPORTING NEWCOMERS

Multiple studies show that employment is generally the top-rated priority for newcomers (Murphy, 2010). Not only does it provide a pathway to economic independence, but employment is tied to sense of self-worth and belonging. Unemployment and underemployment as well as discrimination have been shown to undermine mental and physical health among immigrants (Dean & Wilson, 2009; Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019;). According to an evaluation of settlement services, employment-related programs have the most widespread positive impact on newcomers, contributing to several outcomes that extend beyond gaining knowledge of the Canadian work environment such as increased acquisition and utilization of language skills as well as supporting overall integration into Canadian society through improved understanding of Canadian life and culture (IRCC, 2017).

As government priority and funding have shifted, settlement agencies and community organizations have evolved their services to support career counselling, training, and employment-related programming. However, the impact of these services is uneven. Not only is there evidence that many newcomers are not availing themselves of these services (IRCC, 2017), but research further suggests that the more educated the newcomers are, the less satisfied they are with the services provided. For example, a study exploring the experiences of immigrants in Peel Region found that only 25% of highly educated immigrants were satisfied with employment-related government services compared to 34% of immigrants with a high school degree or less (Diversity Institute & Region of Peel, 2009). Educated newcomers find curricula to be outdated and not relevant to their occupation and, as such, not equipped to meet their specialized needs. Postsecondary institutions, especially colleges also provide many programs targeting newcomers, including bridging programs for regulated and unregulated professions but the results of these programs are also uneven (Sattler et al., 2015; Hathiyani, 2017).

Employers' perspectives of the services available are also mixed. A study, for example, by the Immigrant Employer Council of BC (IECBC) (2012) found that while employers understood the value of hiring immigrants, they were frustrated by the processes and fragmentation of services and service providers, reporting confusion and a low level of awareness. SMEs in particular have limited resources and patience to navigate the system for relevant information and services as well as work with multiple service providers (IECBC, 2012). More recent research has also suggested that many are frustrated with processes for securing the talent they need as a result of immigration priorities and policies. For example, while skilled trades are in short supply, the point system does not prioritize them (RBC, 2021).

At the same time, some programs have produced encouraging results. Many stakeholders across Canada see bridging programs as highly effective in facilitating the workforce integration of immigrants (Government of Canada, 2015; Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2017). A report by then Ontario Auditor General (2017) identified bridge training programs as one of the most successful services for newcomers, noting that 71% of participants that completed these programs obtained employment in their field or in a related field. Several bridging programs are available across Canada spanning a range of professional occupations such as Qualification En Pharmacie offered by Université de Montréal, the Bridging Program for Internationally Trained Accounting Professionals offered through a partnership between CPAC, Ryerson University, and Seneca College, and Chartered Professional Accounts Ontario, the Engineering and Technology Upgrading Program offered by Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, and many others.

PROMISING PRACTICES

New employer-focused intermediaries and platforms have emerged to create meaningful employment pathways for newcomers. Individual large private sector companies have invested in targeted programs to recruit, integrate, and retain immigrant talent (Kukushkin & Watt, 2009). There are organizations such as Magnet that offer technological solutions to support diversity in hiring through partnering with immigrant-serving organizations and employers. And many agencies such as Regional Immigrant Employment Councils (IECs), among others, have been formed in the past two decades to support newcomers through an employer-centred approach.

The first IEC (the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council or TRIEC) was founded in 2003 as a regional and multi-sectoral initiative tasked with addressing the problem of immigrant underemployment. Due to its impressive results, similar initiatives have since been established across the country in Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary, London, Niagara, Edmonton and Halifax. Working together, these councils offer a range of services including pre-arrival assessments, employment-focused training, career fairs, hackathons and placement services. Each Immigrant Employment Council (IEC) is unique from the other and has the autonomy to determine the right model for the city it serves. As such, employers occupy different roles depending on the IEC. Some IECs treat employers as clients, others engage employers as partners in

programmatic design and delivery, while others involve them as active participants (for e.g., serving as mentors).

In the following, we will review several promising practices that engage employers to varying degrees. In particular, we explore how employers have been leveraged to create more effective skills development resources, their engagement in work-integrated learning and mentorship programs, as well as the role of innovative employer-facing job matching platforms in facilitating newcomer employment.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Skills training programs in the settlement sector have traditionally been supply-oriented (serving jobseekers) and preoccupied with building newcomer capacity to re-enter the Canadian labour market with limited engagement from industry experts. As a result, there are many programs which have limited value in preparing newcomers for the needs of the labour market and many programs lack the rigorous evaluation needed to understand what works for whom. As mentioned earlier, more educated newcomers experience lower levels of satisfaction with the support they receive. In recent years there has been a growing understanding that programming aimed at supporting transitions to employment should begin with a focus on what employers need. This includes understanding demand and skills-specific occupations or sectors, cultivating relationships with employers and human resource experts, and designing and delivering a curriculum that addresses the expressed needs. At the same time, however, there is recognition that employers need to address the bias that is often embedded into the ways in which they define needs and, in particular, qualifications and experience required.

There are many examples of innovative programs that have an employer focus. Here are but a few:

APPLIED SKILLS CURRICULUM TO EMPLOYER NEWCOMER DEVELOPMENT (ASCEND) PROGRAM

Developed by the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia (IECBC) in collaboration with Canadian employers, the ASCEND program is a demand-focused employment-readiness program that provides essential soft-skills training through interactive online modules as well as virtual and in-person workshops. Since it first launched, ASCEND has already been delivered to 155 skilled newcomers across 17 cohorts in the provinces of British Columbia and Ontario and expected to soon expand to Alberta and Saskatchewan with promising outcomes.

> "ASCEND's interactive learning has given me immense knowledge, especially about the expectations from hiring managers. It has also helped me refine the way I portray myself in a new country and understand the corporate culture. The program has given me confidence" – ASCEND Program Participant (ASCEND, 2020)

FACILITATING ACCESS TO SKILLS (FAST) PROGRAM.

The FAST program is a dual-client approach to skills development with the goal of better preparing immigrants to enter the labour market while simultaneously helping Canadian employers find skilled talent. FAST provides occupation-specific competency assessment and gap training to equip incoming and landed immigrants with industry standard cultural and technical skills. Key to the program's success was the sectoral insights provided by industry partners such as BioTalent Canada and the Information and Communications Technology Council (ICTC).

The program has expanded since launching in early 2019 due to impressive early results: two thirds of clients found employment in their field within the first month of arriving in Canada, and the program received a 90% satisfaction rate from participants (Future Skills Centre, 2021). Initially, FAST served clients in 68 occupations in skilled trades, biotechnology, life sciences, and information technology but has since grown to include accounting, tourism, hospitality, and healthcare sectors. While FAST is led by IECBC, program offerings span beyond the borders of British Columbia due to partnerships with other immigrant-serving organizations such as Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), ACCES Employment Ontario, Success Skills Centre Manitoba, and the Toronto Regional Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC).

WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING PROGRAMS

Work-integrated learning is increasingly being recognized as a key pedagogical practice for enhancing learning outcomes and employability of university students and graduates. By merging academic studies with real workplace experience, WIL provides opportunities to combine theory and practice, further deepening learners' knowledge and developing their work-related skills. WIL also has numerous benefits for employers, as it provides them with enthusiastic employees that bring fresh perspectives to the workplace, while providing existing employees the opportunity to develop critical and management skills. A move toward WIL and away from traditional classroom-based training can provide immigrants with the Canadian work experience that often serves as a prerequisite to employment. Expanding WIL models for newcomers (including those that have already obtained international degrees) have produced encouraging results.

FEDERAL INTERNSHIP FOR NEWCOMERS (FIN) PROGRAM

The FIN program was launched by IRCC in 2010 to provide WIL opportunities for newcomers. It offers eligible newcomers a chance to gain valuable temporary work experience and training opportunities with Canadian federal, provincial and municipal organizations. Delivered in partnership with immigrant-serving organizations, FIN covers a range of disciplines and fields, including administration, project support and management, policy and research, and computer science. It is designed to improve newcomers' understanding of hiring processes and Canadian workplace culture, as well as provide them with the opportunity to expand their professional networks (Government of Canada, 2021).

The program has grown from 71 interns to 830 interns across 50 government departments. The majority of hiring managers (89%) had a positive experience with the program and were supportive of rehiring participants. Many managers (65%) saw that newcomer interns enhanced productivity and creativity in the workplace (Hire Immigrants Ottawa, n.d.). While there are other barriers to non-citizens in joining the federal public service, this program has provided them with experience that allows some to transition into jobs in the public sector and others to obtain employment elsewhere having acquired Canadian experience.

ADVANCED DIGITAL AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING (ADAPT) – PEGASYSTEMS CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

The Advanced Digital and Professional Training (ADaPT) program aims to bridge the employment gap for recent graduates. The program was developed by Ryerson University's Diversity Institute in 2014 and is being delivered in partnership with TECHNATION with support from the Future Skills Centre. ADaPT provides participants with more than 70 hours of intensive training on the most in-demand skills as well as work placements to connect learners to paid employment opportunities. Approximately 80% of participants belong to one or more equity-seeking groups. Since 2014, ADaPT has helped transition more than 900 postsecondary graduates into meaningful careers while providing employers with talent to fill the acute skills demand. The success of the model is evident in ADaPT's average job placement rate: over 90% of participants received placements throughout the program's existence (Diversity Institute, 2021)

Building on ADaPT's model, the Pegasystems Certification Program was created to prepare internationally trained workers to become Pega Certified Systems Architects, equipping new immigrants with a recognized Canadian certification and marketable skills that are sought by employers. Initial discussions focused on the possibility of embedding Pega training into Ryerson University's formal computer science curriculum but many impediments prevented this from being done in the short term – curriculum revisions have long approval times. In collaboration with Pegasystems Inc. and Cognizant, a major IT systems integrator, Diversity Institute facilitated a no-cost, four-week intensive program to a cohort of 16 newcomers with technology qualifications who faced difficulties transferring their skills to the Canadian labour market. Those who passed the certification exam were connected directly to potential hiring partners. Out of the 14 participants that passed the exam, 12 received offers of employment (2 returned to school) (Diversity Institute, 2021). Critical to the success of the program was the early engagement of employers – participants were screened and approved by potential hiring partners in order to be admitted to the program.

MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

Mentoring is a low-cost intervention that works. Research shows that mentorship programs can increase minority representation at the management level by 9-24% (compared to -2% to 18% with other diversity interventions) and improve promotion and retention rates of marginalized groups by 15–38% (compared to non-mentored employees) (Conby & Kelly, 2016). Integrating newcomers into a community and organization requires investment of time, encouragement, assistance, guidance, and feedback – all which can be provided by a well-designed mentorship program. By working with employers, immigrant-serving organizations can leverage the right expertise to serve as mentors. Mentors are also provided with the opportunity to enhance leadership and coaching skills, develop cross-cultural communication skills, and gain a better understanding of the skills and experience of immigrants.

TORONTO REGION IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT COUNCIL (TRIEC) MENTORSHIP PARTNERSHIP

The Mentorship Partnership program is one of the oldest and most established TRIEC programs that match recent immigrants with established professionals who work in their field in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Since it first launched in 2004, the program has facilitated over 22,000 mentoring matches and built partnerships with over 40 community organizations and employers such as Accenture, Bank of Montreal, Starbucks, TELUS, Manulife, and many others spanning different sectors. A recent evaluation of the program (TRIEC, 2020) shows impressive results newcomers:

- Program participants are 2.45 times more likely to find good quality employment;
- 85% of those employed after the program are in permanent and full-time jobs;

- Program participants are 4 times more likely to expand their networks; and

- Over 80% of participants reported to have developed stronger preparedness for application and interviewing processes.

Employers also benefited from the program. Over 80% of mentors improved their ability to communicate with colleagues from different cultures and nearly 70% had higher confidence in their ability to coach and mentor others. In addition to helping them fulfill their social responsibility objectives, mentorship programs are seen by employers as an opportunity to attract diverse talent.

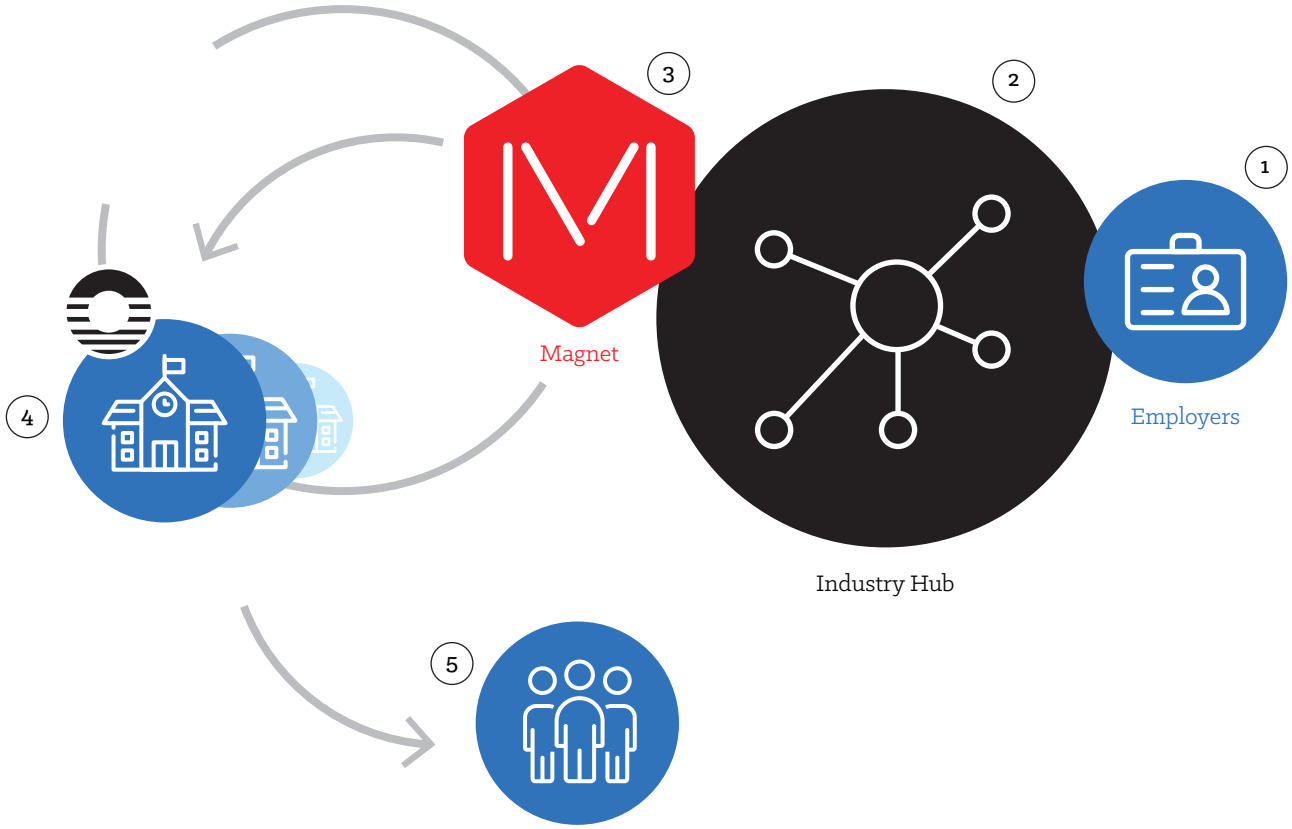
JOB MATCHING PLATFORMS

In recent years there have emerged a number of platforms aimed at matching jobseekers to employers – Glassdoor, LinkedIn, and Switch are examples of such applications. While these platforms may alert jobseekers to opportunities that match their skills and experience, jobseekers must still go through generally traditional recruitment processes where they will be subject to implicit biases which disadvantage marginalized and underrepresented groups. Fortunately, there have been new platforms created that harness intelligent matching technology, data and analytics to support bias-free recruitment strategies.

MAGNET

Magnet was cofounded in 2014 by Ryerson University and the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. It provides matching capacity to 383 partner organizations, including 57 Chambers of Commerce as well as 32,000 other employers, 170,000 jobseekers and over 1 million postsecondary students. Fuelled by artificial intelligence, Magnet allows precise targeting based on skills and its diversity tracking features enable employers to target specific underrepresented groups – a growing priority for many. In addition, Magnet can be "white labelled" for local providers providing both the advantages of scale and as well as decentralized and local control. A new platform, for instance, is being created specifically to facilitate the employment of 40,000 Afghan refugees expected to arrive in the next few years. Magnet is the host of HireImmigrants.ca, developed in collaboration with the Global Diversity Exchange in 2016 as a program of the Diversity Institute offering a series of tools to support improving opportunities for newcomers, many of whom are racialized.

FIGURE 1.



CONCLUSION

Providing more effective pathways for immigrant workforce integration is essential for the country's economic success. The question is how to design and implement more demand-informed and employer-facing programs that maximize benefits for all stakeholders.

Unfortunately, the efficacy of settlement programs is hindered by the lack of industry ownership and employer engagement. While it is laudable that IECs have set up employer advisory bodies to inform program design and delivery, in many cases employer engagement does not go far enough. For many programs, employers are visibly absent when it comes to program co-certification, co-delivery, and in making tangible and concrete commitments to drive results (such as agreeing to hire a certain percentage of cohort graduates).

More active engagement of employers in the integration process is not only beneficial for newcomers, but employers have a substantial stake in hiring and optimizing immigrant workers. By highlighting some innovative examples that already exist, we hope to inspire further adaptation of these impactful practices.

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