CAREER ESSENTIALS: "A LIGHTHOUSE IN AN OCEAN FULL OF INFORMATION AND OPTIONS"

ABSTRACT

AXIS Career Services is a division of the Association for New Canadians in Newfoundland and Labrador. AXIS offers a suite of employment assistance programs and services to internationally educated professionals and trades persons. The Career Essentials program is one of AXIS' core employment programs which assists internationally educated workers in obtaining recognition for their skill sets and experience, clarifying their individual goals and marketing themselves to potential employers. The ultimate goal of the program is to assist newcomers in gaining the skills necessary for successful career transitions in order to find satisfying and sustainable employment in their fields of expertise. Through the various components of the Career Essentials program, the ANC has developed inclusive, practical, client-centred programs and services designed to address the full continuum of challenges and barriers facing internationally educated professionals and tradespersons.

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Newcomers arrive in Canada with unique combinations of internationally obtained education, experience, perspective and ambition. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Association for New Canadians (ANC) is the first point of contact for newcomers, providing settlement and career services for people to whom everything in Canada is new and different. Newcomers face barriers in accessing the labour market that native-born Canadians do not experience. Three of the most common of these barriers are 1) language and cultural differences, 2) lack of Canadian work experience, and 3) cumbersome credential assessment procedures. Through a joint Federal and Provincial partnership, the ANC has developed and adapted a unique and broadly based AXIS Career Centre (Acquiring Experience; Integrating Skills) that helps newcomers overcome these barriers and guides them through the daunting task of finding employment in their new home. The Centre offers an array of customized, client-driven programs that bridge the gap between immigrants and local employers in ways that help newcomers use their skills and abilities and also help employers meet their employment needs. These services have proven so useful to newcomers over the years that the AXIS Career Centre has been described by clients as "a lighthouse in an ocean full of information and options" (Reza).

The AXIS Career Centre delivers targeted employment programs to support newcomer integration into the local job market. As part of the services offered by AXIS, the Career Essentials program provides internationally educated professionals and trades persons with comprehensive employment assistance services and current information on Canadian labour market conditions. It helps highly skilled newcomers match with employers in all sectors to fill a wide range of positions. Through the Career Essentials program, newcomers learn to recognize the value of their skills and experiences, clarify their individual goals and market themselves to potential employers. With particular emphasis on "essential" skills, Career Essentials enables new clients to evolve within their jobs and adapt to workplace change. The program is based on the nine essential skills recognized by the Government of Canada as being fundamental to learning all other workplace skills, and includes: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, thinking skills, computer use and continuous learning.[1] The ultimate goal of the program is that clients find satisfying employment in their fields of expertise and also gain the skills necessary for a successful career in their chosen fields. In this way, Career Essentials takes a holistic approach to helping newcomers integrate into the local workforce, emphasizing client skills, developing labour market strategies and providing direct linkages between newcomers and local employers.

Skills-focused approach

The nine essential skills form the foundation of the skills-focused approach of Career Essentials by encouraging clients to recognize their own abilities and supplement their academic credentials

with workplace communication skills. With particular focus on the clients themselves and their individual skill sets, the Career Connections component of the Career Essentials program offers a series of workshops that provide clients with detailed information and practical tools to help them make informed career decisions and to assist them in their job search. In addition to assisting newcomers with job search techniques and communication skills for integration into the Canadian workplace, Career Connections directs newcomers in assessing and identifying their own skills and abilities and communicating those skills to potential employers. Clients learn about résumé preparation, career action plans, labour market research, internet job search, how to access the "hidden job" market, networking with employers and key industry contacts, job interview skills, employer expectations, and job maintenance skills. The ultimate goal of Career Connections is to assist clients in acquiring the knowledge and skills essential for success and sustainability in their chosen careers.

Language and cultural differences present a significant barrier to many newcomers in their search for employment in Canada. Through the Career Essentials program, clients develop occupation-specific language competencies, particularly through the Enhanced Language Training (ELT) component, which is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. ELT prepares newcomers for the Canadian workplace by helping them develop more precise communication skills and build a glossary of technical terms and acronyms relevant to their profession.[2] Clients engage in strategic, hands-on activities directed towards identifying the meaning of key terms and acronyms in context. They prepare for success in the local labour market by improving their clarity, accuracy and comprehensibility in the English language and they connect what they learn to their careers, field opportunities and work environments. Whether developing a portfolio, preparing for an interview or engaging in a work placement, ELT ensures that clients have a solid understanding of their profession or trade in its Canadian context.

Building on the language and communication skills development of ELT, Portfolio Development Seminars help clients showcase their strengths and abilities, demonstrate the transferability of their skills, build self-confidence and self-marketing strategies, and participate in self-reflection. Portfolios are an effective way for newcomers to trace their career history and provide supportive evidence of prior learning to earn credit for training and professional development. Through the Portfolio Development Seminars, clients create a profile of prior learning, explore their own knowledge, skills and personal attributes, develop goal-directed career action plans and generate job-specific knowledge and skills.[3] They also learn self-marketing strategies and effective ways to present themselves and their skills to potential employers. The portfolio has proven to be a useful way for newcomers to demonstrate continuous learning in their chosen profession.

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Labour market strategies

The Career Essentials program also helps newcomers develop labour market strategies, including self-marketing and networking skills that prepare participants for the world of work. A variety of bridge-to-work options guide clients through the job search process, provide them with current Canadian labour market information and help them integrate into the labour market in a sustainable manner. Relevant marketing strategies help clients identify their own specific skills sets that they have to offer potential employers and ideas for targeting their skills, talents and abilities. The Career Information Resource Centre (CIRC) provides clients with information on the job search process, current labour market trends, college and university programs, and licensure and accreditation processes. The Centre is equipped with an automated bibliographic database and circulation of over 1500 books, journals and periodicals covering a variety of academic disciplines. Clients can access the Centre five days a week and are also assisted by an employment counsellor who helps them determine their career paths. The Mentoring component provides clients with industry-specific advice by matching them with a professional employed in their field of expertise, which helps clients gain a better understanding of their occupational area in its Canadian context. Together, the CIRC and the Mentoring component help clients make informed decisions regarding their future career paths in Canada. By providing clients with local perspectives on employment, wage standards, qualifications, working conditions and labour market trends, the Career Essentials program helps newcomers find suitable pathways through the maze of the Canadian job search process.

The lack of Canadian work experience presents additional challenges for many internationally trained workers in accessing the local job market. The Career Essentials program helps newcomers overcome this barrier by providing direct linkages between newcomers and employers, especially in terms of work placements in the client's field of expertise. In particular, the Strategic Transitions & Employment Partnerships (STEP) program brings clients and employers together in a direct way. STEP is a collaborative opportunity where businesses host a skilled worker in an unpaid career placement for a five- to ten-week period. Employers gain access to skilled and motivated individuals who can address skill shortages while newcomers gain valuable work experience in a Canadian career setting. Gaining Canadian work experience is especially important for internationally trained workers because many local employers require Canadian experience from potential employees and they hesitate to consider

newcomers who have only worked in an international context. AXIS addresses this issue by emphasizing to employers the importance of "relevant" work experience rather than specifically "Canadian" work experience. Through work placements and through liaising with potential employers regarding clients' relevant work experience, AXIS provides a critical link between internationally trained individuals and local employers. Further linkages and opportunities for networking will be created in March of 2007, when the ANC hosts its first Immigrant Job Fair. The Fair will serve to encourage and support newcomers with their future career plans. Seminars and information sessions will focus specifically on careers in demand, such as the skilled trades and those in the oil and gas industry. In addition, the Job Fair will highlight the training requirements and long-term forecasts for various careers, enabling newcomers to make more informed decisions about their future career paths.

Strategic alliances

One of the greatest strengths of a small centre is the ability to build strategic alliances. The ANC has invested tremendous time and energy in fostering partnerships with all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, community agencies, educational institutions and the business community. The Coordinating Committee on Newcomer Integration (CCNI), for example, is a collaborative partnership with key departments at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, as well as with educational and other stakeholders. Through the CCNI, these stakeholders work to establish policies, supportive and inclusive programs, and services to promote Newfoundland and Labrador as a desirable settlement destination for immigrants. Strategic partnerships have also proven valuable for the ANC in helping newcomers overcome employment barriers related to foreign credential recognition (FCR). In this area, the ANC has made significant inroads with various regulatory bodies and sector councils to assist trained professional and skilled workers in receiving Canadian licensure or designation. Much of the success gleaned in this area is due largely to the Association's capacity-building efforts. The ANC is a small centre with a proven track record of 25 years building partnerships with local government and industry representatives. Clients of AXIS truly benefit from these extensive strategic alliances as ANC employees use these partnerships to link newcomers directly with networking and employment opportunities.

AXIS has also built strong strategic alliances with the local business community. The Centre markets its services and clients through regular presentations to groups and organizations and is constantly seeking out new partners as the clients skill base is constantly changing. The ANC maintains close ties with professional organizations, such as the Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Newfoundland and Labrador and the College of Physicians and Surgeons, to assist clients in need of credential recognition and licensure. The approach is integrative and coordinated as no one body or organization can dismantle the daunting barriers. As the provincial economy continues to improve and skills shortages are increasingly becoming an issue, employers are reaching out to the ANC to create new partnerships to assist with recruiting and training newcomers. The Centre also maintains a database of employers willing to provide newcomers with a mentor or a work placement, as part of the Association's important STEP program. As the ANC develops new programs, it relies on existing partnerships and continues to build new ones. A recent research initiative concerning foreign credential recognition in Newfoundland and Labrador brought together representatives from regulatory bodies, government, health and education sectors and employers to discuss the issues facing skilled newcomers on finding work in the province. All of these partnerships involve individuals who are concerned about the gap between local shortages in the trades and professions and the reserve of qualified newcomers who face barriers to filling those areas of skills shortages.

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The Career Essentials program places a high priority on the client's individual abilities and on helping newcomers develop strategies conducive to workplace success and sustainability. Accordingly, it is not enough for newcomers to find a job – the ANC aims to equip newcomers with the skills to succeed in the workforce and maintain their initial success. Under the holistic approach of the Career Essentials program, internationally trained workers recognize their own abilities and fine-tune their essential skills, learn employment strategies for success in the Canadian labour market and benefit from access to career mentors, networking opportunities, and work placements. By engaging clients in self-assessment activities, helping them match their essential skills to the Canadian workplace and coaching them to present themselves and their qualifications to potential employers, Career Essentials empowers newcomers with the confidence and the tools to maintain success in their chosen careers.

Notes

[1] http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/hrp/essential_skills/essential_skills_index.shtml (retrieved 29 December 2006).

[2] The AXIS Career Centre has developed specific language modules in four key sectors: business, engineering, education and medicine.

[3] A profile of prior learning includes previous work experience, volunteer work, formal education and training, travel and life experience, home-based activities, and hobbies.