ENGAGING EMPLOYERS

Strategies for the Integration of Internationally Trained Workers in Ottawa

ABSTRACT

This article reviews research from the Internationally Trained Workers Partnership and looks at the barriers to employment for foreign-trained workers from both the immigrant and the employer perspective. It presents the Hire Immigrants Ottawa project as a community-based strategy for employer engagement in Ottawa.

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Ottawa is the destination of choice for thousands of immigrants each year. Many of these immigrants are highly skilled. More than half of new immigrants in 2002 held a university degree, while many others held a diploma or trade certificate, and twice as many with a Ph.D. settled in Ottawa than in the rest of Canada (CLBC, World Skills, United Way 2003, 7).

The majority of these immigrants are foreign-trained workers who, upon arrival in Canada, must seek employment within a unique labour market context. Ottawa has strategic challenges not faced by other major metropolitan centres. The city's tradition as a government town has meant limited economic diversification, and despite some recent shifts, employment has been typically concentrated within the public and the information and communication technology sectors. The requirement for fluency in both official languages also poses a challenge in many employment sectors in Ottawa.

Despite a high level of knowledge and experience, more than a quarter of university-educated immigrants find themselves employed in an occupation that does not match their skill level, which is twice as likely as their Canadian-born counterparts (Ibid., 10). Recent immigrants to Ottawa with a university degree are four times more likely than their Canadian-born counterparts to be unemployed (Ibid., 9).

The Internationally Trained Workers Partnership

In its 20/20 plan, the City of Ottawa noted that Canada loses an estimated $5.9 billion annually by under-employing internationally trained workers (City of Ottawa 2003); a significant portion of this loss affects the Ottawa area. The Internationally Trained Workers Partnership (ITWP) was formed in 2002 to respond to this challenge. Six community partners came together to develop a more coordinated approach to facilitate the integration of internationally trained workers into the Ottawa labour market.

One of ITWP's central premises is the reliance on local partnerships and organizations as a means to develop locally relevant approaches that utilize the community's talent and resources. The ITWP's partners include:

- United Way/Centraide Ottawa;
- the Ottawa Chamber of Commerce;
- the Regroupement des gens d'affaires de la Capitale nationale (RGA);
- LASI/World Skills, a coalition of eight Local Agencies Serving Immigrants; and
- the City of Ottawa and OCRI/TalentWorks, ensuring the project builds on and integrates other workforce development initiatives and community planning efforts.

The ITWP, which is governed by a Steering Committee, believes in the power of collaboration and has aligned many of the organizations related to the employment of skilled immigrants in Ottawa. Members of its Advisory Committee represent the three levels of government, policy, labour, educational institutions, and immigrant service delivery organizations.

Through a series of research studies, community consultations, employer interviews and program initiatives, the ITWP has made significant strides toward addressing this issue in Ottawa over the past four years. This article reviews the partnership evolution throughout three primary phases:

- Research and Stakeholder Consultations, which examined the barriers to integration for immigrants;
- Understanding Employer Needs, which elicited workforce requirements and barriers to hiring immigrants from an employer perspective; and
- Hire Immigrants Ottawa, ITWP's nascent employer engagement project.

Phase 1 (2002-2004): Research and Stakeholder Consultations

In 2002, ITWP received approval under the federal Voluntary Sector Initiative for its first research project. The project was designed to develop a community-based strategy to support the integration of internationally trained workers by addressing the barriers that immigrants face in entering the labour market.

The project focused its efforts on individual sectors, ensuring there would be a match between the supply of internationally trained workers on the one hand, and the demand for workers in the occupations for which they were trained, on the other. Five sector-specific roundtables were held with teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses and masons. At each table, there was representation from foreign-trained workers, service agencies, employers, unions, regulating bodies, training or educational institutions and other experts. A forum was held in 2004 with over 120 community representatives who refined and strengthened the findings from the roundtables.

The following summarizes the common barriers and recommended solutions identified in the roundtables. The full results can be found in the report *Moving Forward: A Strategy for the Integration of Internationally Trained Workers in Ottawa* prepared by ITWP in April 2004.

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Immigrant barriers to employment

The range of barriers encountered by immigrants who were trained as teachers, masons, engineers, nurses or doctors is broad. The findings from the roundtables suggested that there was not a single most important barrier that all internationally trained workers from these groups faced, and thus, there was no single solution that could be designed to alleviate the barriers. That said, some common barriers were identified, such as:

- *Lack of Canadian work experience*, leading to a lack of employment opportunity. Also noted was the importance of understanding Canadian workplace culture;
- *Lack of information* about available programs and services;
- *Lack of employer contacts* and networking opportunities was identified as one of the most severe barriers;
- Barriers related to *licensing and accreditation*, particularly the difficulty obtaining documentation from abroad and the heavy bureaucratic requirements;
- Lack of knowledge of *local labour market information* and employment opportunities; and
- Difficult access to language and technical *skills upgrading* programs and the expense associated with bridging and training programs.

The challenge of sustainability was also raised during the roundtable discussions. Funding for immigrant employment programs tends to be project-based, ad hoc, or for piecemeal initiatives with limited time frames. More sustained efforts are required to ensure the continuity and success of programs and enable systemic changes to occur.

Recommended solutions

Time was spent at each of the roundtables to develop specific recommendations for each occupational sector. Some solutions have broad applications, whereas others are occupation-specific. The following solutions were identified by at least four of the five occupational groups:

- Better access to *language training* adapted to the workplace;
- Access to *mentoring* that would be supported by more established professionals; and
- Availability of *financial assistance* programs that are better suited to the particular needs of internationally trained workers.

A significant proportion of recommendations were of relevance to only one or two of the five sectors. Clearly, it would be difficult to suggest a set of universal solutions that would address the needs of all groups, and at the same time, be specific enough to be useful. Instead, recognizing the complexity and fragmented nature of the integration process, the Partnership determined that a community-based strategy would be a more effective way to address barriers to employment.

The Partnership agreed to explore the feasibility of a leadership council, similar to the one that had recently been established in Toronto by The Maytree Foundation and the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), as the cornerstone of a local strategy for integration. However, to effectively engage employers, ITWP first had to understand the barriers from the employers' perspective and thus proceeded to the next research task.

Phase 2 (2004-2005): Understanding Employer Needs

ITWP secured funding from United Way/Centraide Ottawa and from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to undertake the second phase of the project. This would expand the plans for the leadership council by interviewing small- and medium-sized enterprises and large employers from Ottawa's business community.

Large employers workforce needs

ITWP joined forces with the TalentWorks program of the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation (OCRI) to conduct in-person interviews with 25 of the largest employers (more than 1,000 employees) in Ottawa. The full results and analysis of these interviews can be found in *Ottawa@Work: Large Employers Workforce Needs Analysis*, which was prepared by OCRI and ITWP.

Employers interviewed were from five sectors: public administration, information and communication technology (ICT), retail, health care and social sciences, and education services. Employers for this survey represented about 35% of the total number of people employed in Ottawa.

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) workforce needs

The research approach was tailored for SMEs to assess their awareness of the labour market realities and explore their views on how immigrants could participate. Interviews with 12 local SMEs were completed with employers from sectors for which immigrants in Ottawa had the appropriate skills. The findings were reported in *Final Report: Internationally Trained Workers Project – Ottawa*, which was submitted by the ITWP to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, which funded the project.

Employer barriers to hiring immigrants

When asked about hiring immigrants, some employers spoke of their desire to be socially responsible, acknowledged that it makes good business sense, and recognized the potential to grow their businesses. Several interviewees appreciated that immigrant workers could help them understand their increasingly diverse client base and how to enter or increase new markets in the immigrants' countries of origin.

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While most employers interviewed were aware that Ottawa's future workforce will depend, in part, on immigrants, many were not familiar with statistics related to workforce integration. Despite the fact that large employers and SMEs have different perceptions and needs, many of the barriers they identified were similar, and are summarized below:

- *Language*: Language fluency, workplace-specific language, and preferences for fluency in both official languages were raised as critical factors in employers' hiring decisions. SME employers differentiated between proficiency in the language and "clarity," emphasizing that accent is an issue in customer and sales service positions;
- *Networking*: Employers often do not know how to reach qualified immigrant candidates as they are not part of formal and informal networks;
- *Training*: Cross-cultural training is imperative in creating a welcoming environment on the employer side, and language and acculturation training is helpful for immigrants;
- *Social perception*: Employers identified societal perceptions that may be reflected among their employees and clients. The economic benefits of immigrants are often overlooked, and racism and discrimination can be found in the workplace;
- *Strict requirements*: The federal government has strict application criteria, with respect to language, Canadian citizenship and security clearance requirements (which may extend to those who contract with the government, as well);
- *Human resource tools*: Many recruiting and hiring systems, especially those of SMEs, are based on North American culture, which hinders efforts to recruit from other backgrounds; and
- *Pre-screening*: Employers want easy and direct access to job-ready candidates. Ideally candidates should be pre-screened for language, credential evaluation and job readiness. SMEs may not have the capacity for human resources functions or the ability to manage programs such as internships and sometimes feel they cannot risk hiring immigrants as they do not have the luxury of making a "mistake."

Supports and solutions

Employers identified a range of remedies they believe would make a difference in hiring more skilled immigrants into their workforces. These include:

- Successful practices, such as *mentoring programs*, employment equity and diversity initiatives, could be adapted to support an immigrant workforce;
- In-house expertise in *workplace acculturation* could be shared outside the organization;
- Proactively supporting immigrants to attend *networking opportunities* such as association and/or business events;
- Opportunities for *cross-cultural training* and awareness sessions for existing workforce/employers would provide an important opportunity to share information and demystify cultures; and
- Additional supports that required involvement by other stakeholders, such as student visa processes, information portals for hiring immigrants and a pre-security clearance qualification program.

All employers agreed to consider participating in a future leadership council for internationally trained workers. This positive feedback, along with the needs identified in the *Moving Forward report*, prompted ITWP's next phase.

Phase 3 (2006): Hire Immigrants Ottawa

In 2006, ITWP applied for and received funding for three years from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration for an employer engagement strategy called Hire Immigrants Ottawa. This project is designed to fulfill the need for a leadership council in Ottawa, which was identified in the research phases. The focus is on the health care, information technology, finance and the public sectors, all identified in Phase 2 as important to the future economic growth of Ottawa. Hire Immigrants Ottawa is the first project of the ITWP.

Hire Immigrants Ottawa's objectives will be achieved through a multi-pronged approach, implemented over the course of the next three years and will include three key elements. The central project component is to launch the Employer Council of Champions (ECC), featuring approximately 25 top Ottawa employers that will champion the integration of skilled immigrants into the labour force. In addition to acting as local spokespeople on the issue, the members of the ECC will create an environment of cross-sector collaboration, stimulate strategic investments and partnerships and act as catalysts for ideas and innovation.

The second element is to establish Working Groups to include members from business, employers, immigrant agencies, unions, government, and educational institutions that are working on the front lines to tackle barriers in the health care, information technology, finance and public sectors. The Working Groups will recommend and implement solutions to sector-specific barriers. They will share information and identify gaps, and will link qualified immigrants with local employers.

Finally, Hire Immigrants Ottawa will launch a local social marketing campaign to promote greater understanding of the social and economic value immigrants bring to Ottawa.

Recruitment of the ECC and Working Groups is being initiated in early 2007, and the ECC and Working Groups will be launched in 2007 with a summit planned in 2008. The summit will highlight best practices and generate discussion and momentum around the issue in Ottawa. After the summit, the ECC will share results with the broader community and encourage others to adopt best practices in recruiting and hiring skilled immigrants.

The way forward

ITWP's progress is based on an understanding of Ottawa's immigrant population, an intimate connection to local labour market needs and a reliance on local partnerships to deliver the strategy. Research and consultations conducted over the period of 2002-2004 led to a better understanding of sector-specific barriers from both immigrants' and employers' perspectives. Hire Immigrants Ottawa is the culmination of this work; the Employer Council of Champions will give employers a collective voice in championing the importance of local integration.

ITWP has learned that the process of bringing diverse stakeholders together to facilitate the exchange of ideas and strategies is sometimes as fruitful as the results. This was manifested through the creation of new projects, and enhancements to existing partnerships, such as the Teach in Ontario program launched by the Ontario College of Teachers, Skills for Change, LASI World Skills and the Ontario Teacher's Federation. It also contributed to the Career Access for Newcomers program, a partnership between LASI WorldSkills and the City of Ottawa, which was designed to help newcomers to access employment appropriate to their experience and education.

Despite this significant progress, in many ways, the work has just begun. The transition from immigration to finding skills-appropriate employment takes time and, for some of Ottawa's skilled immigrants, it may never happen. Clearly, there is still much more that can, and must, be done to facilitate the integration of immigrants into the labour market. Every skilled immigrant should have an equal opportunity to contribute to the future growth and vibrancy of Ottawa, and the work will continue until this goal is attained.

References

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