NEW IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM DEVELOPING CANADA-WIDE SKILLS ASSESSMENT TOOL

ABSTRACT

A new immigrant employment program in British Columbia has taken an unusual approach to foreign credential recognition. The Immigrant Skilled Trades Employment Program (ISTEP) is helping immigrants build careers in the construction industry and helping employers fill their workforce needs. Workers assessed as job-ready are matched to employers and are on-the-job and earning while their foreign credential recognition is in progress.

The Immigrant Skilled Trades Employment Program (ISTEP) is a new pilot project to help landed immigrants build careers in British Columbia's construction industry and provide employers with workers in the skilled trades. While ISTEP was launched in B.C., it has enormous potential for addressing skills shortages across Canada.

The shortage of skilled tradespeople is widespread across the country and presents considerable obstacles for employers in the construction industry. Contractors struggle to meet the demands of substantial sector growth with a limited workforce. They are recruiting from other countries to try and fill their needs, while immigrants – a significant provincial and national resource – face barriers to training and employment.

Through ISTEP, immigrants with experience in the construction industry, as well as those who would like to start a career in the industry, are matched with employers who have job openings. One of ISTEP's founding partners, the British Columbia Construction Association, has access to hundreds of contractors and consequently thousands of jobs across the province, which is important for identifying opportunities for ISTEP participants.

Immigrants are referred through immigrant agencies and other resource centres to Job Coaches, who are qualified tradespeople and understand the needs of industry. They are responsible for assessing skills and job potential and connecting suitable immigrants to employers. Immigrants are required to have a standard of English that ensures they are capable of doing their jobs well and safely. They are paid at industry standards and according to their skill levels.

Only immigrants assessed as job-ready are presented to employers, and if they require further training, they are referred to appropriate programs. In order to do this, a set of career path tools is being developed that will not only initially assess the worker, but track his or her progress on the job and provide an individual on-going record of training and work history. The goal is to create an "at-a-glance" chart with colours indicating strengths and areas for improvement. It will be a starting point for developing a career plan that will remain in the worker's file and be updated on subsequent visits with the Job Coach.

Nationally, the Construction Sector Council has been actively involved in a number of assessment projects and has been supportive in developing the ISTEP models. The assessment and career path tool is two-pronged and is used by the Job Coaches at different points of the intake process:

1. ISTEP Employability Self Assessment Tool[1]

This component contains a series of questions that will assess the employability of the ISTEP applicant. It will indicate whether the person is immediately referable to a job in the construction industry or whether they require further preparation such as improved language skills or technical upgrading. The process involves 26 areas of consideration that are critical to securing employment. An individual will consider each area and select a colour depicting the level they feel they have achieved or which needs attention. This produces a chart with a visual representation of strengths and weaknesses. The charts can be easily updated when further training and skills are acquired.

PAUL MITCHELL

Paul Mitchell is a Project Manager with ISTEP, the Immigrant Skilled Trades Employment Program. ISTEP was developed through a partnership between the BC Construction Association (BCCA) and the Construction Sector Council (CSC) and is funded by the Government of Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program.

2. Technical Tool

This component is again a self-assessment tool that will assess the technical skills acquired through work history, review of qualifications, and the area of preferred work. Through a series of approximately 30 questions that one tradesperson would ask another, the tool will pinpoint the worker's areas of expertise and job satisfaction.

A trades-specific vocabulary will also be developed and provided to immigrants to help them with work site orientation and safety. The vocabulary component will be applied to 10 trades and translated into five languages.

The development of a comprehensive career path tool is critical for Job Coaches and valuable for both employees and employers. It will provide a consistent approach that can be adopted across the country if ISTEP becomes a national program.

In the Canadian construction sector, there is a uniform process for achievement of credentials. However, there are several different paths with respect to the recognition of credentials. The standard path is the apprenticeship process, training and subsequent examination, but an individual can undertake their level exams while still putting in the time-in-trade that is required to receive formal accreditation. Ultimately, employers want an assurance that individuals possess the skills they claim to have and, as such, require some means of verifying these skills. They require that credentials be recognized before workers are given jobs in part because this is critical to the safety of workers and consumers.

ISTEP's approach to foreign credential recognition, however, differs from the usual processes. The program's aim is to first help immigrants get suitable jobs based on their experience and skills, and then to work with employers and immigrants to acquire Canadian recognition.

This does not mean immigrants are put into jobs they are not qualified for, or that national and provincial skill or safety standards are compromised in any way. While recognition of their credentials is pending, immigrants will be carefully supervised and will be placed in jobs that require fewer skills. Once their credentials are recognized, they will work at their appropriate level.

ISTEP was announced in November 2006; 29 people had been placed in just the first 30 days, and there are already success stories. One of the first ISTEP placements was a crane operator from the Philippines who lives in Prince George. Jamil was only able to find a low-paying job in a warehouse. He was referred to ISTEP by the local Immigration and Multicultural Services Society and, following assessment with the Job Coach, was placed with a union contractor working on the University of Northern British Columbia expansion. Jamil now operates the most sophisticated crane on the site and, with help from the Job Coach, has enrolled in the level 3 crane operators training in Vancouver to earn his red seal certification.

Many more success stories are anticipated as ISTEP moves forward in its scheduled three-year run as a pilot project in B.C. After that, an independent consultant will assess the effectiveness of ISTEP and its potential for implementation as a national program that will help our immigrants begin construction careers in Canada.

Note

[1] The employability tool was based on the Unified Employment Theory® developed by Glenn Olien and used with his permission.



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