SKILLS INTERNATIONAL

Linking Internationally Educated and Trained Professionals with Employers in Canada

ABSTRACT

Canada is increasingly dependent on immigrants for population growth, as well as for bringing skills to strengthen communities and fuel our economy. Yet we know that immigrant skills – the very skills we need – are not being used to their full potential. This means we all lose. Immigrants lose the opportunity to contribute productively to the economy, as well as to provide for themselves and their families. As a country, we lose the competitive edge immigrants provide in a global marketplace. Central to this issue is the difficulty that employers face in finding work-ready, skilled immigrants. Skills International bridges this gap. The first of its kind in Canada, this tool unites pre-screened, internationally trained individuals with employers who need their skills. It is cost-effective, efficient and easy to use.

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The issue

For almost a decade, between 1992 and 2001, Canada was ranked as one of "the best places in the world to live in." This ranking was published in the *United Nations' Human Development Report* and is based on a measurement of several quality of life factors. Our economic indicators are also considered one of the best in the world. Canada's gross domestic product per capita was US$29,480 in 2002, compared to US$26,050 in Sweden and US$28,260 in Australia. As a result of these factors, Canada continues to successfully attract educated and trained immigrant professionals, many of whom come to Canada through the skilled worker class.

This is important, given demographic trends. For example, many developed countries are experiencing low birth rates that will result in a decrease in overall population if they do not compensate for this with a population increase through immigration. Canada's current fertility rate of 1.5 children per woman means parents are not even "replacing" themselves. This will mean a continuing aging of the population to the point where deaths will outpace births within the next 20 years. As a result, Canada's population will likely decline.

A recent editorial in the *Toronto Star* noted that "when the median age in Canada hits 42.5 years in 2020, in Europe it will be 52 years, which will mean the competition for capable immigrants is going to be fierce." Canada will be competing with these other countries to attract the best and brightest from a global talent pool, and this will have implications for labour force growth. In Ontario alone, immigration currently accounts for an estimated 70% of the province's net labour force growth, and it will account for all of the net labour force growth within the next 6 years (Ontario, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration 2005).

To maintain and grow our economic base and standard of living, Canada needs an effective immigration policy to attract immigrants who can contribute to our economy. There is a clear need for immigration in Canada to address these issues, and Canada is generally able to attract immigrants. Indeed, a study by Statistics Canada found that the country "ranked first among G8 nations with a net international migration rate of 0.61% between 1994 and 2004." Net international migration rate "is the change in population when the number of people who leave the country are subtracted from the number of immigrants" (Weber 2005).

Two pieces of the puzzle must be put together. We have the need and the resources for immigrants, but we are missing tools to effectively use these resources. We know, for example, that the talent and resources of internationally educated and trained professionals who have chosen Canada as their new home are not being fully utilized. The Conference Board of Canada conducted a study in 2001 assessing the impact of unrecognized education, noting that "eliminating the current learning recognition gap would enable Canadians to earn an additional $4.1 billion to $5.9 billion in income annually." (Bloom and Grant 2001, 1-2). In another article, Jeffrey Reitz indicates "skill under-utilization amounts to $2.4 billion annually." (Reitz 2001, 26)

Employers have identified several key factors contributing to the under-utilization of the skills of internationally educated and trained professionals. These factors range from certification to educational equivalence, language, and Canadian work experience. Skills International was developed to

assist in addressing these issues, as well as other barriers that internationally education and trained professionals face in obtaining relevant employment.

The project

Skills International is a project sponsored by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and is currently funded by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration. It is an Internet-based initiative that highlights the talent and skills of pre-screened internationally educated and trained professionals already residing in Canada and already deemed qualified as "job ready."

Skills International is a collaborative project led by WIL Employment Connections in London, Ontario; COSTI Immigrant Services in Toronto; and the New Canadians Program operated by the Waterloo Region District School Board. It was launched in March 2006.

Skills International collaborates with community-based agencies that prepare newcomers to meet the needs and expectations of employers in Canada. Skills International's role is to connect and market "job-ready" internationally educated and trained professionals with employers who need their skills. Employers register with Skills International and search the database for prospective employees with the relevant skills they seek by using an easy to use "e-matching" tool.

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The Skills International solution

The application allows employers to quickly search numerous criteria, including required skills and competencies, certification, work experience and past employers. Employers post opportunities, which remain active in the system, and candidates who best fit the job requirements are automatically sought. This allows employers to continually search for specific sets of skills and competencies. In addition, Human Resources professionals can create a "hiring community" within a posting, send login information to members of the hiring committee, view prospective candidates, and share recommendations and comments with the hiring committee members.

Skills International is unique in that employers control the process and review and initiate contact with prospective candidates whom they identify. Employers also have access to more detailed candidate information than that which is available in a standard résumé. Electronic copies of educational degrees and certifications, letters of recommendation and references, information pertaining to regulatory and licensure status for regulated professions, and an optional video introduction are all available to registered employers through Skills International.

It is our goal to provide proper and accurate information about candidates, who are vetted and then directed to the hiring manager within an organization by their individual employment advisor at the community-based agency assisting them.

Currently, there appears to be a disconnect between the information that internationally educated and trained professionals have on their skills, education and previous work experience, and how this information is actually presented and communicated to employers in Canada. To make this process more effective, it must be standardized, so that the information model is trusted, effectively communicated, and understood by all stakeholders. A survey by the Public Policy Forum found that "collecting information on these skills and communicating them to employees will help employers to better understand how they can more strategically and effectively access the skills they need from immigrants in their communities" (Lopes and Poisson 2004, 26).

Employers have identified the need to trust information that is provided by internationally educated and trained professionals and to better understand how their credentials and experience compare to those of Canadians. In an Environics survey, 72% of employers indicated that it would be useful to have access to a résumé validation and reference checking service when considering the hiring of internationally trained and educated professionals (Leebosh 2004, 92).

Skills International is geared toward meeting the needs of employers who want to access high-level skills, but may experience difficulties in finding candidates possessing the required skills. Currently, a reference and employment verification process is being implemented for internationally educated and trained professionals listed with Skills International. This will allow employers the ability to evaluate and assess candidates who have already been verified by a third-party organization in terms of previous verifications of employment history and references. This is a unique feature that helps to mitigate delays that typically occur during the process of verifying employment history and references, delays that can sometimes last several weeks to months. This feature is an added attraction for small- and medium-sized organizations that provide over 50% of the job opportunities to internationally educated and trained professionals. These organizations typically do not have the time and resources to perform certain verifications, so this feature is an added value for them.

In addition, Skills International provides valuable employer feedback to agencies, which helps them adapt and direct the various training and preparation programs offered to newcomers. This employer feedback has also been used to update and improve the functionality of the application and to help streamline employers' hiring processes.

Employers have indicated that internationally educated and trained professionals must also take responsibility and

better prepare for the Canadian job market by improving their marketing and interviewing skills. This issue was also identified in research performed by the Public Policy Forum where employers indicated, "In the focus groups, survey findings were reinforced by employers who complained that even when immigrants present excellent résumés and qualifications they cannot hire them because immigrants are often unable to describe their skills and experience in an interview" (Leebosh 2004, 24).

In collaboration with the community-based agencies with which it works, Skills International is implementing Internet technology that will allow candidates to independently hone their interview skills. The technology will allow them to perform an unlimited number of practice interviews and share the results with their counsellors so that comments and feedback can be provided. As the technology is enhanced, it will allow employers to post questions and view interviews of the candidates they are evaluating.

Candidates listed on Skills International are able to create their profile and update it with all content being filtered and approved by either their individual counsellor or by Skills International. Their counsellors have also viewed all additional documents, which are scanned and attached to the candidate's profile. This approval process provides an additional check on the data that is being published about and by the candidate.

Regional approach – national objective

Presently, Skills International is an Ontario-based project funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration. Skills International currently has participation agreements with community-based agencies and employers across Ontario. Our long-term goal is to turn Skills International into a national project, with working relationships with community-based agencies and employers throughout Canada.

This is, in part, because our candidate population is one that tends to be mobile, particularly when they are seeking employment opportunities in their respective fields of expertise. The majority of internationally educated and trained professionals settle in a particular city based on the presence of family and the community support network in that area, but over 65% of the candidates listed on Skills International have said they would be willing to move within their province or within Canada for the right job opportunity.

This represents a major recruiting opportunity for employers in other cities and in smaller communities that are not primary landing destinations for newcomers to Canada. They will gain access to a pool of internationally educated and trained professionals who have been prescreened as "job-ready" and are willing to relocate to find relevant employment in their field.

Skills International value proposition

There are numerous Internet-based job boards that provide access to a wide range of candidate groups. Skills International is the only application that provides exclusive access to the internationally educated and trained professional pool already pre-screened and assessed as "job ready" by community-based agencies that support newcomers to Canada. Each of these candidates has completed an assessment program and has worked both in a one-on-one and a group environment with an individual counselor in preparation for employment in the Canadian workplace. Skills International has established partnerships with third-party vendors and developed processes to ensure that the information an employer receives on a candidate is accurate, complete and trustworthy.

Skills International is committed to establishing partnerships with stakeholders to facilitate ITS expansion and integration within other regional and national projects. If you require further information on Skills International please visit the Website at www.skillsinternational.ca or forward an email to info@skillsinternational.ca.

References

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