CAREER BRIDGE COMES OF AGE

ABSTRACT

As Canadian companies struggle to attract talent from our shrinking pool of skilled workers, some are turning to international graduates and experienced workers seeking employment in Canada. Leading organizations like CIBC, General Motors, FedEx and Scotiabank are doing so successfully with the help of *Career Bridge*, an innovative internship program.

As Canada's demand for skilled labour increases, organizations must become increasingly forward-looking in their approach to human resource needs. Well-documented labour shortages are hitting companies hard and creating unexpected new pressures along the way.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, the rapidly emerging "war for talent" is expected to create a shortage of up to one million qualified workers. Significant skills shortages are hurting many industries already, and this trend will only intensify and spread over the next decade, says the Board's 10th annual *Performance and Potential* report for 2005-06. Indeed, the head of Canada's largest bank has warned that Canada must find the right solutions to the "global war for talent" or face an uphill battle just to maintain our current quality of life.

Moreover, the Vancouver-based Urban Futures Institute Society says Canada is facing a "perfect storm" of demographic labour force pressures based on a declining birthrate, an aging and retiring population and fewer Canadians entering the workforce as they reach working age. The reality today is that businesses of every type and size are facing serious new challenges in attracting and retaining skilled talent.

While part of the challenge for organizations is to retain homegrown talent, companies are also recognizing the need to attract top people from other markets, whether they are international graduates or experienced workers willing to relocate to Canada.

Some Canadian companies are tapping into a new talent base provided by *Career Bridge*, an innovative internship program designed to address the dilemma of "no Canadian experience, no job; no job, no Canadian experience," which prevents many skilled immigrants from contributing to Canada's economy.

Career Bridge is part of Career Edge Organization, a social enterprise that has been providing career-launching paid internships across Canada since 1996. It places highly qualified professionals new to Canada as well as recent graduates into skilled jobs at some of Canada's most-recognized and respected corporations.

By prescreening all *Career Bridge* candidates and administering the payroll of all placed interns, Career Edge Organization removes the risks associated with hiring people who are new to the workforce or to Canada. At the same time, Career Edge Organization lets companies tap into an entirely new pool of talented and motivated job candidates.

Career Edge Organization offers three programs: *Career Edge* for recent Canadian graduates; *Ability Edge* for recent Canadian graduates with self-declared disabilities; and its newest program, *Career Bridge*, for experienced and internationally qualified workers who are new to Canada.

Career Bridge was launched in 2003 with government support from the Province of Ontario. Today it is self-sustaining. The program allows employers to build their organizations by adding international skills and perspectives to their workforce, while giving trained professionals Canadian work experience in their chosen careers.

All *Career Bridge* candidates are screened to confirm that each has business-level English language skills, suitable academic qualifications and at least three years of international work experience. These steps help eliminate the misgivings many organizations have about hiring foreign professionals and placing them in positions of responsibility. To further reduce recruitment risk, employers can choose from paid internships lasting four, six, nine or 12 months - with no commitment to hire.

About half of all *Career Bridge* registrants have a Master's or Ph.D. degree; 33% have a degree in business; another third have engineering degrees, while much of the remainder come from the IT or health care disciplines.

CAREER EDGE ORGANIZATION

Career Edge Organization is a national, not-for-profit, social enterprise that has been in operation for 10 years administering paid internship programs across a variety of industries. There are three programs: *Career Edge* is designed for recent graduates, *Ability Edge* is for recent graduates with disabilities and *Career Bridge* is for foreign-trained professionals.

Since 2003, *Career Bridge* has placed more than 500 interns and has signed more than 160 organizations onto the program. More than 80 percent of *Career Bridge* interns have been hired for full-time positions within their chosen careers.

Organizations that have partnered with *Career Bridge* to date include: Bell Canada, CIBC, City of Hamilton, City of Toronto, FedEx, Government of Ontario, General Motors of Canada, Humber Institute of Technology, Hudson's Bay Company, Manulife Financial, Scotiabank and York University.

Career Bridge currently operates in cities across Ontario and will be launching its program in Vancouver in the spring of 2007.

Leading Canadian organizations are turning to *Career Bridge*

Consider the job market in British Columbia, which provides an example of how Canada's labour supply is tightening up dramatically. Programs like *Career Bridge* will no doubt alleviate some of the hiring pressures hitting B.C., says Vancouver Board of Trade chief economist Dave Park. "*Career Bridge* will certainly help employers as they look for solutions to the growing labour shortage," says Park. "*Career Bridge* can only be good for business, giving organizations access to the experienced and reliable people they are looking for today."

As skill shortages grow, employers are facing significant new challenges – and risks – in their efforts to screen inexperienced interns and recent immigrants, shortlist the best job applicants and fit the right person into the right job. For some employers in need of help, *Career Bridge* is delivering innovative ways to make recruiting less risky and more rewarding.

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RBC Financial Group is one recent convert to *Career Bridge*'s offerings. "We are looking forward to the opportunities that *Career Bridge* will bring us in this intense and competitive hiring market," says Kim Kavanagh, manager, recruitment and training, RBC Financial Group in Vancouver. "We expect *Career Bridge* to help us reach candidates from other countries who will bring valuable skills and experience to our organization."

In Toronto, Dominion of Canada General Insurance Co. recruited three interns through *Career Bridge* for its IT department in 2005. It has since hired two of the candidates onto its full-time staff and the third will also be retained full-time after completion of the internship. Dominion of Canada recruiter Shelley Wan-Zehr cites several advantages that *Career Bridge* has brought to Dominion as it faces, like so many organizations, a much tighter job market.

"Hiring good candidates in the IT field has become much more difficult in the last few years, with the competition for good candidates getting more fierce," she says. "Using *Career Bridge* has helped us to connect more quickly with the highly skilled people that we need. We see this as a best practice in terms of recruiting – as long as *Career Bridge* is there, we will be utilizing them as a recruitment resource." Wan-Zehr praises the quality of candidates *Career Bridge* provides, noting that she is impressed with all of the interns she has met and hired.

"It has been good for our business to tap into *Career Bridge* as a resource. The people we have hired bring a fresh perspective into the organization, they show a high level of drive and enthusiasm. They are very driven to succeed. They want to fit in and be successful and that very positive attitude is what seals the deal."

Daniel Salazar, 42, a senior IT programmer analyst hired by Dominion in 2005 as a permanent employee following a five-month internship, notes that *Career Bridge* opened doors for him to professional opportunities he might not have otherwise had. "*Career Bridge* gave me the opportunity to put my training and my skills to work in the right job setting," he comments. "It opened doors to employers who might not have recognized or believed in my abilities otherwise."

The City of Mississauga hired *Career Bridge* intern Paul Liu, a 34-year-old computer sciences degree graduate from China, in December, 2006 following an internship lasting one year. Marlene Knight, Manager of Mississauga's Materiel Management department, admits that she was not entirely sold on the idea of hiring a foreign-trained intern who did not even speak fluent English. But with her busy department desperate for help on a big one-year project, she agreed to take on Liu. "At the time, we were very short-staffed and we accepted whatever help we could get, but we came into it with a lot of skepticism, even though we knew this guy was a smart cookie," says Knight.

Any doubts she and her team had quickly vanished as Liu demonstrated solid skills, an aptitude for the work assignment and an enthusiastic work ethic that impressed everyone. "He turned out to be absolute dynamite. This was, in fact, one of the best experiences of my career," says Knight. "Beyond the skills and intelligence he demonstrated, Paul brought a work ethic, a positive attitude and a level of respect for others that was very impressive. He worked out wonderfully and really showed his stuff so well that he won the full-time job in an open competition for the position. It has been a great experience and I hope that we can carry on with *Career Bridge*."

Liu adds that *Career Bridge* was instrumental in giving him a chance to hit the ground running when he entered the Canadian job market, allowing him to put his skills to full use and to maximize his potential in the workforce. "I had completed many interviews with potential employers who did not want to take a chance by hiring me

- *Career Bridge* opened the door for me," says Liu. "*Career Bridge* provided me with the best opportunity to put my experience to work right away. With this kind of program, there are none of the typical barriers to work that can exist between new immigrants and the Canadian workplace."

City of Mississauga Staffing and Development Consultant Antonietta DiSalvo, who acts as coordinator for the city's activities with the *Career Bridge* program, says the city has employed five interns to date and she expects to continue the relationship. "The experience has been very successful. We've had nothing but positive feedback on all of our *Career Bridge* interns," says DiSalvo. "The City of Mississauga's strategic focus is to build a talent-ready city for the future by putting the best people on the job, so our emphasis on hiring will be greater than ever, as will our focus on diversity in the workplace. *Career Bridge* is helping us to attract new talent and really great people who are motivated to do the work. It's a win-win situation for the city and for the interns."

Since the pilot launch of the *Career Bridge* program, TD Bank Financial Group has been an active supporter of the program, placing 30 *Career Bridge* interns in positions such as Business Analyst, Communications Coordinator and Branch Manager. Of the 30 interns recruited, TD has hired 17 to its full-time staff. For a leading financial services company like TD, having a team in place that reflects the communities it serves is important and *Career Bridge* has played a key role in connecting TD with the right people for the right job. "At TD Bank Financial Group, we want our employees to be representative of the communities in which we do business," says Ken Pustai, Senior VP Human Resources for TD Bank Financial Group. "We are also interested in attracting the best and brightest talent. Programs like *Career Bridge* – and the experience and talent their interns bring to our organization – benefit everyone."

Consumer products giant Procter & Gamble Inc. is yet another leading company that has been involved with *Career Bridge* from the outset, hiring 12 interns to date from the program. Positions filled include Assistant Brand Manager, Market Planning Manager and Public Relations intern. Of the 12 interns recruited, P&G has hired seven onto its full-time staff. For P&G, a key advantage is *Career Bridge*'s ability to deliver a diverse selection of candidates who broaden both the organization's expertise and its world view. "Diversity in the workplace is key for organizations seeking long-term success," says P&G President Tim Penner, a past honorary chairman of the *Career Bridge* program. "At P&G, I've seen how *Career Bridge* interns bring international perspectives and leading practices into our operations. Companies that are serious about building their business and strengthening their communities should recruit talented professionals through *Career Bridge*."

Beyond the labour shortage: Why businesses turn to *Career Bridge*

It is forecast that Canada will require one million or more skilled workers to fill gaps in the workforce, and *Career Bridge* is an obvious way for companies to tap into a new pool of skilled talent. But there are other reasons being cited by companies turning to *Career Bridge*, says Colleen Fleming, Career Edge Organization's President & CEO.

"You could say the big five reasons for companies tapping into *Career Bridge* today are the unique new talent pool that we provide to employers who are facing new hiring pressures, the quality of our candidates, the low risk of hiring, the low cost, and the overall 'HR support' function we provide in terms of connecting companies quickly and reliably with skilled help." Companies consistently have high praise for the quality of candidates that *Career Bridge* is providing, she adds. "Our interns are highly educated, with more than half now holding advanced degrees at the Master's or Ph.D. level verified to Canadian standards. And nearly half of the candidates also possess eight or more years of international experience in a professional setting," Fleming says.

For interns, meanwhile, *Career Bridge* is offering an exceptional opportunity to maximize their potential by moving quickly into jobs that can take advantage of their particular skills and training, she adds. "We see it as a win-win scenario, with employers obviously gaining an edge, while interns gain the chance to become highly productive members of the Canadian workforce. They are making the most of their abilities by pursuing the career they've trained for, instead of simply coming to Canada in search of a 'paycheque' that will makes ends meet."

Career Bridge – in addition to helping individual immigrants and employers – is contributing to Canada's stature as a country in which immigrants can thrive professionally, economically and socially.