IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE INTEGRATION

The Hamilton Experience

ABSTRACT

This article describes the current labour market and immigration trends in Hamilton and sets the stage for the development of the Hamilton Immigrant Workforce Integration Network. It provides the structure, goals and activities for year one. Community initiatives in the area of credential recognition and immigrant workforce integration are highlighted.

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Immigration and labour market trends in Hamilton

Situated in the western half of Ontario's Golden Horseshoe region, the City of Hamilton is located in the manufacturing heartland of Canada. Hamilton is an industrial city with a total population of 490,268 (Statistics Canada 2001). By population, Hamilton is the fourth largest city in Ontario and is in ninth place across Canada. However, Hamilton's population grew at a rate of only 4.8% during the 1996-2001 period, which is less than the provincial growth rate of 6.1% (Statistics Canada 2001). A recent study of the Hamilton labour market found the following:

- Hamilton's population growth is declining and its population is becoming much older;
- By 2013, the number of adults of pre-retirement age (55-64) in the labour force will exceed the number of youths of pre-entry age (15-24), and the gap will widen in future years;
- Shortly after 2016, Hamilton's labour force growth will cease altogether and the absolute size of the workforce will actually begin to decline; and
- Various sectors of the Hamilton economy are already beginning to experience skill shortage (eConomics Consulting 2002).

Declining population is not unique to Hamilton; it is a national trend affecting many small- to medium-sized cities. It is estimated that by 2011 immigration will account for all of Canada's labour market growth and for all of Canada's population growth by 2026. Nearly half of recent immigrants are in the prime working age group of 25-44 years, in contrast to only 29.8% of the total of Hamilton's Canadian-born population (eConomics Consulting 2002).

A comparative analysis of Hamilton's and Ontario's labour force population reveals that educational levels are lower in Hamilton than in Ontario, on average, especially when we look at the higher levels of educational attainment (eConomics Consulting 2002). The report *Towards Prosperity: Researching Immigrant Skills in Hamilton* (Lomotey, Janzen and McKay 2005) notes that various sectors of the local economy are beginning to experience skill shortages, including: processing and manufacturing, retail trade, health care (physicians, nurses, pharmacists) and social services, education, trades and skilled labour (contractors, carpenters, electricians), elementary sales and service (security guards, nannies, cashiers), intermediate sales and service (sales representatives, hotel clerks, bartenders) and utilities. Immigrants already comprise 82% of the labour force growth in the city. The skills shortages identified in these different sectors could be bridged to some extent by skilled immigrants in Hamilton (eConomics Consulting 2002).

Hamilton has an employer base of approximately 16,000 employers with the top three employment sectors being manufacturing (20.4%), retail trade (12.4%) and social services (11.9%) (Statistics Canada 2004). According to the *HR Matters* report (eConomics Consulting 2002), manufacturing suffered a drop of almost 40% in employment between 1989 and 1993, and recovery has been very slow since then. Currently, Hamilton Health Sciences is the largest employer in the community. Over the past 10 years, labour market trends have resulted in the creation of a greater proportion of low-waged, part-time, temporary, or contract positions with few or no benefits (Fraser 2004).

Historically, Hamilton has been a destination of choice for many immigrants to Canada. Similar to the rest of the country, early immigrants to Hamilton were traditionally from Western European countries, primarily Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany and Poland. However, immigration patterns nationally have changed over the last two decades and this has influenced immigration into Hamilton. More than half of newcomers to Hamilton are from Asia with increased immigration from Africa, Central and South America and the Caribbean. Visible minorities comprise 11% of Hamilton's population.

Immigrants now constitute almost one-quarter of the total population, which is slightly less than the proportion of immigrants in Ontario, but slightly higher than the national level. Hamilton also receives secondary migrants from other cities. During the 1960s, 8% of Ontario's immigrants and 4% of Canada's immigrants chose Hamilton as a port of destination. Today, however, Hamilton shares only 3.5% of recent immigrants to Ontario and 1.9% of the total recent immigrants to Canada (CIC and Informetrica 2005). Hamilton, nonetheless, continues to have one of the highest retention rates for immigrants in Canada because of the low cost of living and its proximity to Toronto, although its attraction as a destination point is declining with many skilled immigrants and investors choosing other destinations (Mukkath and Jaffray 2006).

Access to the labour market remains a crucial integration aspect for these newcomers. Although recent immigrants have higher educational levels than the Canadian-born, they are often unable to transfer these skills at appropriate levels in the local labour market. According to the 2001 Census, 31% of recent immigrants in Hamilton had university degrees compared to only 18% for the Canadian-born in the city. Given this, it is somewhat surprising that the unemployment rate among recent immigrants in Hamilton is higher than the national average. Moreover, a staggering 52% of recent immigrants are living in poverty (Fraser 2004). Among employed immigrants, many work in jobs that do not recognize the levels of education or work experience that they bring with them.

In 2005, the Hamilton Training Advisory Board (HTAB) conducted a survey of 200 small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The results revealed low employment rates for immigrants in the city. Data from the 50 respondents showed that among new employees hired in the previous 12 months, only 5% were recent immigrants. Over that 12 month period, the public sector was the major employer in the city, yet recent immigrants comprised less than 1% of the total number of persons hired.

Immigrants planning to pursue further education, to apply for professional licensing and certification or to seek employment in professional fields must have their international credentials assessed. Although there are no credential assessment services in Hamilton, the two major immigrant serving organizations assist clients with credential assessment through the International Credential Assessment Service or World Education Services at a cost borne by the immigrant. For clients of Ontario Works (a provincial program that provides income and employment assistance to those in temporary financial need), a subsidy program in Hamilton can assist with the fees associated with licensing and accreditation.

[The] report found that foreign degrees, diplomas and other certificates were not adequately recognized and other training, skills and experience were often undervalued by employers. As a consequence, immigrants in Hamilton experienced unemployment, underemployment and poverty.

The creation of the Hamilton Immigrant Workforce Integration Network

In 2004, the Immigrant and Refugee Employment Services Committee (IRESC), a sub-committee of the HTAB, developed a focused strategy to address the issues outlined above. This multi-phase initiative sought to mobilize the community to make better use of immigrant skills. The release of *Towards Prosperity: A National and Provincial Perspective on the Need to Utilize Immigrant Skills* (Janzen, Hogarth and Hatzipantelis 2004) was the culmination of Phase I. This background paper provided an overview of the national and provincial literature on the importance that immigrants and their skills hold for communities in Canada. Phase II was marked by the release of the report *Towards Prosperity: Researching Immigrant Skills in Hamilton* (2005), which found that foreign degrees, diplomas and other certificates were not adequately recognized and other training, skills and experience were often undervalued by employers. As a consequence, immigrants in Hamilton experienced unemployment, underemployment and poverty.

This report provided several recommendations for integrating immigrants into the labour force, including increased funding for immigrant employment support programs and the strengthening of language training programs in the community. It also called for the establishment of effective processes for assessing international credentials and for stakeholder groups, especially employers, to work collaboratively to find solutions to address the issue of immigrant workforce integration.

In June 2005, HTAB hosted an Immigration Summit to discuss the challenges and issues facing immigrants in Hamilton and to provide recommendations for action. At this summit, HTAB took the lead in highlighting existing

services for immigrants and to brainstorm ideas for improving and augmenting these services. The Summit attracted 135 participants from business, labour, government, education and immigrant service providers. Participants offered input into an immigration strategy for Hamilton, which would address issues such as accreditation and licensing, skills and language training, and accessing employment and workplace integration.

Participants noted the inadequacy of funding for additional training to adapt immigrant skills to the Canadian system and the lack of information provided to immigrants at the point of arrival in Canada regarding licensing and requirements of regulatory bodies to practice their professions in Canada. They discussed the closed-door policies of some professional associations and labour unions that deny immigrants fair access to those professions and trades, and the lack of a uniform prior learning assessment and recognition system across all educational institutions and employer and professional bodies. They noted as well the inadequate resources to help immigrants access upgrading and recertification training. However, some new initiatives to facilitate the accreditation of foreign-trained professionals were noted, such as the Care Centre for Internationally Trained Nurses program. Participants discussed barriers facing immigrant job seekers such as the requirement of Canadian experience, the lack of opportunities for immigrants to acquire such experience, the lack of workplace specific language programs, and inadequate funding for immigrant employment support programs.

Following the Summit, a community consultation was held on December 14, 2005, with stakeholders from the federal, provincial and the municipal governments, as well as employers, business organizations, educational institutions, immigrant service providers, community organizations, funders, labour union representatives, local politicians, immigrants, and representatives from the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) and Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network (WRIEN) and Career Bridge. This community consultation provided information around the issues of poverty, unemployment and under-utilization of immigrant skills in Hamilton. Following presentations from TRIEC and WRIEN about the solutions developed by their respective communities to address immigrant integration, participants provided input into a community plan for Hamilton.

Building on the Immigration Summit and community consultation, the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton then produced the *Report on the Immigrant Skills Workforce Integration Project: A Plan for Hamilton* (Mukkath and Jaffray 2006). This report recommended that an immigrant employment network be formed to bring together all relevant stakeholders to promote the integration of immigrants into Hamilton's workforce. It identified the need for the commitment of high-level leaders from the business sector, government and other stakeholder groups engaged as champions to lead the network, and the need for outreach and engagement with employers in Hamilton.

Research indicates that Hamilton employers generally have a poor understanding of the nature and magnitude of the employee shortages that will threaten their very existence in the near future.

HIWIN's structure and objectives

Working from the recommendations in this report, the Immigrant and Refugee Employment Services Committee implemented the community plan, including the mandate for the Hamilton Immigrant Workforce Integration Network (HIWIN). Key objectives for this initiative include the following:

- To develop partnerships and support employers in their efforts to hire immigrants and to integrate them into their workforce;
- To advocate for the recognition of immigrant credentials;
- To help create conditions in the labour market that will attract new immigrants to settle in Hamilton;
- To mobilize resources, both financial and human, from stakeholders in order to develop and implement the network's activities;
- To create awareness on immigrant issues and to engage stakeholders in the activities of the network; and
- To collaborate, network and integrate the work of HIWIN with community organizations and groups that have objectives related to those of HIWIN.

The membership of HIWIN includes all relevant stakeholders in the community, including educational institutions, immigrant service providers, community organizations, employers, business organizations, labour unions, funders, occupational regulatory bodies, immigrant groups, and all levels of government.

HTAB agreed to act as host to HIWIN and to provide the accountability framework for the initiative. The Hamilton Community Foundation and HTAB provided financial support, and a coordinator was hired in September 2006. IRESC continued to provide input to HIWIN until a Steering Committee was formed in November 2006. IRESC developed the framework for the delivery of the initiative, including structuring the steering committee and working groups to facilitate the process of moving the initiative forward. Four working groups were established to provide input and support for the key objectives during the first operational year. These are Stakeholder Outreach, Communications, Research, and Diversity Conference Planning.

A strategic communications strategy is in the developmental stages, along with a broad-based strategy for engaging the key community stakeholders. One of the major challenges in this community has been the engagement of business champions to market the initiative as a key strategy for effective business management.

Contacts have been made with some critical organizations, such as the Immigrant Advisory Committee to the City of Hamilton, the Hamilton Poverty Roundtable and the Hamilton Civic Coalition, a community think-tank comprised of business and community leaders. HIWIN is well-positioned to address the business community, as HTAB has established respect and recognition of its labour market research in the broader business sector.

HIWIN has two major initiatives underway. First, it is sponsoring a diversity conference for local employers to be held on March 21, 2007. This event is being co-sponsored by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, HTAB, the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion, and the City of Hamilton. The conference will promote the benefits of cultural diversity and will educate employers, particularly those from SMEs, about the critical implications of the aging workforce. SMEs are the main focus of the conference as these smaller employers often lack the resources for critical workforce planning and development. Research indicates that Hamilton employers generally have a poor understanding of the nature and magnitude of the employee shortages that will threaten their very existence in the near future (eConomics Consulting 2002). HIWIN will utilize this conference to engage local employers in investing in immigrants, promoting the practices of local employers who are already successfully engaging in diversity efforts, and link employers with community resources and tools to support them with the challenges that diversity in the workplace presents. This conference will also constitute the community launch for HIWIN.

Second, HIWIN has hired a researcher, Sarah Wayland, to review and evaluate the continuum of employment-related services to newcomers that exist in Hamilton and to make recommendations for improving this process. The research aims to develop a systems model that "connects the dots" between various aspects of settlement that relate to employment. An important component consists of interviews with Hamilton-area employers who have "success stories" of hiring immigrants and promoting workplace diversity. It is hoped that they can share their learning paths and help identify next steps for championing employment integration for newcomers. The report will be completed by February 2007.

HIWIN is not alone in promoting immigrant workforce integration in Hamilton. The Settlement and Integration Services Organization, Hamilton's settlement agency, the newly-formed Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion and the Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre all participated in the public hearings held in Hamilton on December 6, 2006, and presented official submissions to the Standing Committee reviewing Ontario's Bill 124, the *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act* (2006). Efforts such as these continue to ensure that immigrants have a fair chance to access skills-specific jobs through a fair and open process.

HIWIN awaits the release of an economic development strategy for 2007 from Hamilton City Council. HIWIN plans to address this strategy by emphasizing the need for the inclusion of a community-wide strategic focus on immigrant attraction and retention with a particular emphasis on immigrant employment issues.

A major challenge is getting Hamilton employers to recognize the need for immigrant workforce integration and to see that it is inextricably linked to the future prosperity of this community. If employers do not start to work quickly to address their future labour force needs, including specific strategies to incorporate skilled immigrants, we will lose out in the competition to attract skilled and talented immigrants to the local labour market. If Hamilton is to survive and thrive in the coming decades, stakeholders must focus on attracting and retaining well-trained and educated immigrants to this city.

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