

IMPROVING IMMIGRANT INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE



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About the Centre for Research on Inclusion at Work (CRIW)

The Centre for Research on Inclusion at Work (CRIW) is a research centre at the [Spratt School of Business, Carleton University](#), focused on conducting and sharing research that advances diversity, equity and inclusion at work. By making research findings available to the public and connecting academia with the broader community, CRIW aims to advance knowledge and drive change towards more inclusive workplaces that welcome and support greater participation of all peoples. For more information, visit carleton.ca/criw

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Background

Immigrants are critical to sustain Canadian economic growth by mitigating labor shortages associated to population aging and low birth rate. In the global war for talent, organizations able to leverage multiple sources of talent are better positioned to succeed in a global economic environment. Despite the critical role of immigrants for Canadian economic growth and organizational success, low levels of labor market integration of immigrants persist.

This report provides a summary of findings from a study on immigrant inclusion conducted collaboratively by researchers at the Centre for Research on Inclusion at Work (CRIW) at Sprott School of Business, Carleton University, Hire Immigrants Ottawa, and World Skills Employment Centre. The study was undertaken to better understand immigrants' experience of inclusion in Canadian organizations. In particular, this project aimed to uncover organizational practices and strategies to facilitate immigrant attraction, inclusion and retention.

Methodology

CRIW researchers conducted five focus groups with former participants of the World Skills Employment Centre's Ottawa Job Match Network, a program that facilitates employment for highly skilled immigrants. The total number of participants in the study was 24. A description of the participants can be found in *Appendix B*. The participants included employees of government agencies, non-profit and business sectors, as well as self-employed individuals. Most participants had an excellent command of the English and/or French languages, had graduate degrees, and were experienced professionals. The sample had a balanced representation of male and female participants. During the focus groups, participants were asked to discuss their experience searching for jobs in Canada, their experiences after being hired, as well as their views about the ways the process of integration can be facilitated by immigrant-serving organizations and hiring employers.

Definitions

A list of definitions can be found in *Appendix A*.

Findings

Participants in this study were appreciative of the support received by immigrant-serving organizations in general, and World Skills in particular. They reported receiving useful advice and assistance, and suggested that the Ottawa Job Match Network played a key role in providing them with employment opportunities. Through participation in the Ottawa Job Match Network, participants felt better informed about the Canadian job market, improved their job search strategies, and learned about employers' expectations, and hiring norms. They also reported feeling better prepared and able to adjust to the new organization once they found employment. They highlighted the role of the program in supporting them to build and leverage professional networks which were instrumental in their careers. Many of the World Skills' clients interviewed had relatively well-paid jobs aligning with their expectations and qualifications. In contrast, those who used the services of immigrant-serving organizations less frequently, reported greater difficulty maintaining permanent employment.



Job-matching programs play key role in helping immigrants connect to well-paying jobs aligning with their skills.

1. More support wanted for long-term employment and educational options

Despite the general satisfaction with the services of the immigrant-serving organizations, participants mentioned several areas where they could benefit from additional support, including more exposure to Canadian postsecondary education options, and longer-term employment support to facilitate moving from precarious first jobs to more stable employment.

2. Positive views on inclusion within Canadian workplaces

Employed immigrants in the sample of this study found Canadian organizations to be highly inclusive and tolerant of diversity. They appreciated the openness of their colleagues to individual and cultural differences and felt that immigrants were treated as equals regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, country of origin, and linguistic

abilities. They also valued the assistance and support received from non-immigrant colleagues.

3. *Communication nuances and informal networks pose a challenge*

Participants reported issues with organizational socialization, including communication challenges, decoding unwritten and informal rules in a new organizational context, and a perceived impermeability of organizations' informal networks. These issues were aggravated by part-time and short-term work contracts, which are common entry points for immigrants and further constrain immigrant integration in the organization and in society in general.



Immigrant challenges in understanding communication nuances and becoming part of informal networks within the workplace, are exacerbated in part-time and short-term contracts.

Specific suggestions to attract and retain talent based on the findings of this study are discussed in the recommendations section of this report.

Recommendations for Employers

Employed immigrants in the sample of this study appreciated the openness of their colleagues to individual and cultural differences and, for the most part, felt treated as equals regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, country of origin, and linguistic abilities. They also appreciated the assistance and support received from Canadian colleagues. Specific recommendations to better attract and retain immigrant talent are discussed below.

1. Tap into immigrant networks

One of the main difficulties immigrants face in finding jobs matching their qualifications is limited knowledge of opportunities due to no access to local professional networks. For hiring organizations, this means qualified individuals may not be applying for jobs to which they are qualified. While many newcomers manage to cultivate networks with other immigrants and their ethnic community, they report challenges connecting to Canadian-born individuals and local professional networks that are critical for occupational integration.

Hiring employers may increase their talent pool by playing an active role connecting immigrants to local professional networks. Successful initiatives include developing stronger partnerships with immigrant-serving organizations, and incentivizing employees to engage in mentorship and volunteering activities with immigrant-serving organizations. These activities can broaden the organizations networks and access to highly qualified international talent.



By building stronger partnerships with immigrant-serving organizations, employers can broaden their network and access to highly qualified international talent.

2. *Mentor newcomers*

Participants in this study reported difficulties decoding unwritten organizational rules and policies, as well as subtle cultural norms. They also reported feeling vulnerable and desiring to prove themselves professionally, which inhibited their willingness to ask for help or communicate their challenges.

Employers can prevent productivity loss and facilitate integration by formalizing the socialization process through mentorship programs. Immigrants reported finding it helpful to rely on established employees with immigrant backgrounds, as these individuals understand the socialization challenges and can provide most emotional and informational support. At the same time, Canadian-born mentors provide important local insight and help connect immigrants to the local professional and social community. A combination of mentors would be optimal when possible.

3. *Foster cultural exchanges*

Immigrants in this study reported feeling isolated and having limited opportunities to engage in informal communications with local colleagues. Immigrants' limited familiarity with the Canadian culture hindered their ability to develop relationships and engage in communication beyond work tasks. This was particularly acute for individuals with part-time or short-term employment, who felt pressure to take on additional work and spent limited time with Canadian colleagues. This social isolation negatively affected their ability to integrate in the organization, identify opportunities, and build relationships.

Employers can increase immigrants' commitment to the organization by facilitating informal events promoting intercultural exchange, such as celebrations of ethnic holidays, multicultural potlucks, as well as events fostering understanding Canadian culture such as attending hockey games. Such events allow Canadian colleagues to better appreciate immigrant colleagues, as well as allow immigrant employees to learn more about the Canadian culture.

4. *Communicate clear performance expectations and work norms*

Some immigrants expressed feeling overworked, which when combined with their immigrant status resulted in a perception of exploitation. These feelings stem from a

lack of understanding of work expectations. Some newcomers, based on their culture of origin, assumed they were expected to work late to show commitment and felt that they were not allowed to say “no” to work requests. As a result, honest inquiries such as “would it be possible to complete this by tomorrow,” were perceived by immigrants as an unreasonable request.

Employers can increase productivity and employees’ well-being by clearly communicating workload and performance expectations, as well as providing a clear description of employee responsibilities, including communicating challenges and work demand conflicts.

5. Recognize abilities and experience



By dedicating time to explore immigrant employees’ experience, employers can better understand their potential and prevent immigrants working below their professional level.

Many skilled immigrants, participating in this study, were highly educated and enjoyed high levels of success and recognition in their countries of origin. They often expected to achieve the same or higher level of professional success, recognition, and quality of life in Canada. They wanted to be part of an inclusive organization, which appreciates their skills and abilities, provides a good salary and benefits package, appreciates work-life balance, and can offer professional development and promotion opportunities.

In reality, they were often required to “start over” and felt invisible and underappreciated in Canadian organizations. Some were working below the level of their professional abilities and had few opportunities to show their full potential. As a result, participants felt unchallenged, bored and unappreciated by their employers, and were continually looking for better jobs.

To better leverage newcomer talent, employers can better tap into immigrants’ skills and prior experiences. In addition to the initial evaluation during the recruitment process, employers are encouraged to continue exploring what the new hire has done in the past

and what she/he is capable of doing in the new organization. Moreover, organizations can celebrate professional successes of immigrant employees and recognize their achievements on regular basis, especially at the beginning of their employment.

Recommendations for Immigrant-serving Organizations

Immigrant-serving organizations play an important role facilitating transition to employment, which is essential for immigrants' financial independence, self-reliance, and social integration. This study suggests that these services are essential for immigrant integration and recommends the following areas of expansion.

1. Cultivate immigrant professional networks

Participants in this study reported having difficulty developing social and professional networks with Canadian-born individuals. Rather, they attributed their professional success on their ability to build and leverage connections with other immigrants with similar professional interests. Immigrants in the same profession were instrumental in sharing information about job opportunities as well in facilitating the adjustment process once employed.



Immigrant-serving organizations can play a greater role, helping skilled immigrants connect to other immigrants and Canadian-born individuals employed within the same sector.

Participants in this study thought immigrant-serving organizations could play a greater role in cultivating and supporting immigrant professional networks and facilitating connections with individuals in the same sectors of employment. While they reported networking opportunities during training sessions, participants suggested that more opportunities to network with others in the same occupation would be welcome.

2. Expand networking opportunities within occupational groups

Many participants of the Ottawa Job Match Network were highly satisfied with the outcomes of the program. The program connected them with organizations and job opportunities which were well aligned with their previous occupation. The program also allowed participating immigrants to expand their professional network. While not every

participant was employed by the end of the program, making relevant connections with professionals in their field of specialization helped them to subsequently find a job elsewhere.

Expansion of professional networks was a key benefit that focus group participants would like to see replicated in more sectors. Their recommendation was to create networking opportunities with a greater variety of occupational groups, especially those were Canadian employees experience labor shortages. The expansion may require an extra effort from World Skills Employment Centre in further expanding its relations with employers and other organizations.

3. Provide additional training on network building and cross-cultural communication skills

Immigrants had a harder time connecting to local professional networks due to lack of networking skills. World Skills informs their clients about many networking events, but during the events not every immigrant knew how to approach a company representative, what to say about themselves, and what questions to ask. In addition, immigrants had a harder time relating to Canadian-born co-workers during the initial period of employment. They often found themselves somewhat excluded from informal conversations. This occurred because they did not understand some cultural references and jokes, did not have skills to engage in small talk, and did not understand some subtle rules of Canadian informal communication.



Mock networking where immigrants can practice new communication skills, could help them reap more benefits from networking opportunities.

Participants mentioned that the training, which was offered by the World Skills on cross-cultural communication and networking was very useful, but they could benefit from additional training. Mock networking similar to mock interviews, where immigrants can practice their new communication skills with trained professionals and among one another could be useful.

4. Inform immigrants about educational options

Some immigrants mentioned that pursuing additional education in Canada had significantly improved their employability and facilitated their transition to permanent employment. They often started to consider additional education only after an extended period of unsuccessful job search and they rarely received advice about educational options from immigrant-serving organizations. The participants encouraged immigrant-serving organizations to offer their clients information sessions and counseling on education options and education funding in Canada. Alternatively, service providers could invite representatives of postsecondary institutions to conduct information sessions targeted to immigrants.

5. Expand targeted programming for specific occupations/professions

Many participants expressed a concern that most of the advice offered by World Skills was somewhat general, targeting a variety of specialists in different professions and occupations. Due to its generality, the advice was perceived as insufficient to support the immigrant seeking opportunities in highly specialized sectors. Some participants were particularly appreciative of the opportunities to participate in programs targeting specific sectors and occupations. It seemed that an expansion in specialized programs, targeting specific professions would be in high demand.

Recommendations for Newcomers

The decision to immigrate is multifaceted and includes many aspects such as quality of life, family considerations, as well as career aspirations. Highly skilled immigrants are often surprised and disappointed with their professional opportunities in Canada, despite the general understanding that immigrants are critical for the Canadian economy. The following are some suggestions to accelerate the path towards professional integration.

1. Diversify networking strategies to secure better employment



Immigrants making an active effort to cultivate networks with Canadian-born individuals and immigrants in positions of power within the desired employment sector are often successful in gaining permanent skill-appropriate employment.

This study suggests that expanding and leveraging professional networks is critical for professional success in Canada. Immigrants who managed to quickly find jobs, transition to permanent employment, and achieve their desired professional level, were very strategic about their networking behavior. These individuals cultivated networks with Canadian-born as well as immigrants in positions of power to gain access to information and mutual support. They were also proactive in seeking individuals in their field of work to develop career relevant networks. In support of developing such networks, individuals invested time learning about Canadian culture and following current sports, cultural and political events.

2. Maintain systematic engagement with immigrant-supporting organizations

This study clearly demonstrates that specialized employment support was extremely beneficial for immigrants. However, to fully benefit from the services of the specialized immigrant-serving organizations, it was important to maintain continuous engagement with a mentor in the organization and to follow the various programs and services offered. There is often a logic in the sequence and content of the activities offered by the organizations for support in employment transition. While the services offered at the earlier stages may not be relevant to some clients, the later services may turn highly beneficial.

Immigrants are advised to keep in touch with the immigrant-serving organization until they find a permanent job aligned with their professional expertise. When changing jobs, it may be beneficial to go back to the counselor, who can suggest new strategies to secure a new type of employment.

3. Reach out to long-term employees in the organization

Once employed, immigrants identified effective and open communication with colleagues as key to successful organizational integration. While successful performance on the assigned tasks was important to sustain employment, engagement with others in the organization was essential for securing permanent employment and for subsequent promotion within the organization.



Building relationship with colleagues is essential for securing permanent employment and advancing within the organization.

As an immigrant, one can feel vulnerable, unqualified, and pressured to perform and may attempt to hide one's challenges. Immigrants are encouraged to seek help and to ask clarifying questions. Open communication for setting expectations and understanding the task is considered a norm in Canadian organizations and, in fact, is expected from employees. In addition, despite the perceived cultural difference, immigrants are encouraged to reach out to existing employees in the organization in order to better integrate in the professional networks.

Linking to native Canadians may require some learning about the local culture and additional training in cross-cultural communication. The best way to expand one's cultural understanding and the repertoire of cross-cultural communication skills, is to read more about the local culture, history, and mentality, to try to interact with native Canadians and to straightforwardly ask them for clarification about cultural practices.

4. Seek mentors

When transitioning to a new place of employment in Canada, immigrants participating in this study frequently experienced challenges with understanding business processes, expectations, and norms. Canadian-born and immigrant mentors may help to overcome the challenges by providing interpretation of the business practices and culture in the organizations and giving behavioral advice. When organizations do not provide access to mentors formally, immigrants should try to identify and connect to an individual, who

may serve as an informal mentor. Canadian-born mentors can facilitate understanding of Canadian practices and expectations in the workplace. Immigrant mentors, who had similar experiences, may help translate the expectations with some adjustment for cultural differences.

5. *Mentor newcomers*

Feedback from participants in this study illustrate the important role immigrant mentors play in employment transition of recent newcomers. Immigrants' participation in immigrant-serving organizations after graduation from the programs is highly important for the operation of the organizations and the success of individual immigrant peers in employment transition.

Immigrants are encouraged to respond to immigrant-serving organizations, as well as to reach out to them to express interest in mentoring newcomers. A more inclusive society requires the participation of everyone.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

This study provides recommendations for employers and immigrant-serving organizations. These initiatives can be supported and encouraged through policies to facilitate immigrant inclusion, as described below.

1. *Provide specialized incentives for employers hiring immigrants*

Despite the deficit in qualified workforce experienced by Canadian businesses and non-profit organizations, many of them exercise extra caution when considering immigrants for employment. Many participants in this study spoke about companies requiring from immigrant candidates the somewhat ambiguous "Canadian experience." Meanwhile, immigrant job seekers had trouble demonstrating that they have such experience because they were not hired by Canadian companies in the first place.

To compensate companies for the risk they take when hiring newcomer professionals with foreign educational and professional credentials, policy makers may consider an incentive program, which would encourage companies in certain sectors to hire immigrant professionals.

2. Streamline the process of credentials verification



Centralizing the process of credentials recognition for immigrants would greatly increase the employment success rate of highly qualified international talent.

Many participants expressed concerns with the amount of time and effort required for recognition of foreign credentials in Canada. The process was the main impediment to successful transition of qualified professionals to employment in priority sectors, such as medicine, veterinary science/practice, and engineering. A significant cause of frustration was the lack of inter-provincial coordination of the process. Immigrants had to go through the process of official recognition each time they moved from one province to another. Streamlining and harmonizing the process of credentials recognition across provinces would greatly increase the success rate of highly qualified international talent.

3. Support long-term professional success

Many immigrants in this study remained unsatisfied with their long-term career development. When immigrating an individual normally expects to return to the same level of employment, professional recognition, and relative income in Canada that they had in their country of origin. However, very few newcomers managed to achieve this goal. Some immigrants remained stuck in precarious employment, moving from one part-time to another part-time contract for most of their professional life in Canada.



Policy makers should consider expanding the period of eligibility for employment support beyond the time of receiving citizenship to assist immigrants who fail to secure skill-appropriate employment in the first years of arrival.

Given the precarious nature of employment and the rapidly changing nature of the labor market, it may be beneficial for newcomers to periodically consult with the service providers to update their job search skills and to get ideas about trends in the employment sectors.

However newcomers are eligible for immigrant employment services for a limited period of time. Some immigrants who failed to secure skill-appropriate employment in the first years of arrival, lost eligibility for support before transitioning to stable employment. This makes it vital for policy makers to carefully consider eligibility criteria and, possibly, to expand the period of eligibility beyond the time of receiving citizenship. Obtaining the status of a citizen does not make a person equal to Canadian-born citizens in terms of their employability due to the differences in their backgrounds.

4. Provide funding to immigrant-serving organizations for new types of programs

The results of this study allowed CRIW researchers to formulate several recommendations for service providers, which they can use to improve the quality of assistance offered to immigrants. These recommendations involve increase their service offerings, which require additional resources. Funding mechanisms emphasizing long-term integration are necessary.

Conclusion

Immigrant employees have a lot to offer to Canadian companies, but their potential is still underutilized. CRIW researchers identified a few actions policy makers, immigrant-serving organizations, employers, and immigrants can take to improve newcomers' employability and transition to employment. The key recommendations to policy makers are to modify the existing incentives structures and to provide supplementary funding for new programs to be offered by immigrant-serving organizations.

The main recommendation to immigrant-serving organizations is to assume a more active role in facilitating the development of immigrant professional networks and to more actively connect with successful alumni. In addition, they could offer advice on pursuing additional education and could offer more targeted programs intended for specific professions and occupations.

This study encourages employers to tap more into immigrant networks and to communicate with immigrant-serving organizations to a greater extent to identify employable newcomers. This study also suggests some recommendations to ensure greater integration of immigrants into their workplace. In particular, this study

encourages employers to promote mentorship of newcomer employees, and to foster cross-cultural communication in their organizations. Additionally, this study encourages employers to set clear performance and work standards and to take a greater effort to assess, interpret and utilize the skills and experiences of immigrant employees beyond the selection process.

To assist immigrants in transitioning to employment in Canadian companies, this study suggests several strategies, which can help immigrants connect to professional networks, improve communications with co-workers and better understand organizational contexts. One of the most important recommendations is for newcomers to continue interaction with immigrant-serving organizations even after they found their initial employment. This study also encourages immigrants to seek out mentors, especially among other immigrants and long-term employees, and to diversify their networking strategies. Finally, this study urges long-term immigrants, who have already become established in Canada, to reach out and assist other newcomers in their search for employment and integration into Canadian workplaces.

Appendix A

Definitions

Inclusion: The ongoing exercise of ensuring the organization values and proactively cultivates difference so that each individual can achieve their full potential and bring their whole selves in service of commonly articulated goals. A key piece of inclusion is allowing room for people to be authentically themselves (e.g. expression of religion, sexual orientation, national origin) without fear of negative consequences.

Belonging: The outcome of inclusion, specifically the feeling of being respected and valued by the organization, driving organizational attachment and commitment.

Appendix B

Participants

Participants	Country of origin	Gender	Time in Canada	Profession in COO	Current employment status	Language ability
Participant 1	Venezuela	Male	7	University Lecturer	Undisclosed	Fluent
Participant 2	India	Female	2	HR Officer	Technical Advisor	Fluent
Participant 3	Brazil	Male	6	System Analyst	Warehouse Specialist	Limited
Participant 4	Suriname	Female	11	System Support Manager	Staffing Advisor	Fluent
Participant 5	Dominica	Male	6	Project Manager	Project Manager	Fluent
Participant 6	Colombia	Female	8	HR Coordinator	Policy Analyst	Fluent
Participant 7	Bosnia	Female	4	Librarian	Owner/General Manager	Fluent
Participant 8	Russia	Male	7	Electrical Engineer	Digital Hardware Developer	Fluent
Participant 9	Czech Republic	Female	7	Manager	Senior Advisors	Fluent
Participant 10	Kazakhstan	Male	2	Program Manager	Programme Manager	Fluent
Participant 11	Iran	Male	7	Financial Manager	Accounting Clerk	Fluent
Participant 12	India	Male	11	Principal Engineer	Technical Director	Fluent
Participant 13	Nigeria	Male	4	General Manager	Insurance/Investment Agent	Fluent
Participant 14	Lebanon	Female	6	Nurse	Settlement Counsellor	Fluent
Participant 15	India	Male	10	Lawyer	Lawyer	Fluent
Participant 16	Iran	Female	N/A	PhD Candidate	Undisclosed	Fluent
Participant 17	Cuba	Male	6	Translator	Community Support	Fluent
Participant 18	Curacao	Female	12	Technology	Program Evaluator	Fluent
Participant 19	Lebanon	Female	23	N/A	Settlement Counsellor	Fluent
Participant 20	Colombia	Female	6	Marketing Manager	Policy Analyst	Fluent
Participant 21	UK	Female	10	Assistant Vice President, Bank	Senior Advisor	Fluent
Participant 22	Qatar	Female	6	Legal Assistant	Finance Officer	Fluent
Participant 23	Rwanda	Male	11	N/A	Research Assistant	Fluent
Participant 24	Middle East	Female	6	University Professor	Language Instructor	Fluent