

## **LABOUR MARKET DIALOGUES: IMMIGRATION & EMPLOYMENT**

Labour Market Dialogues is a project of the Community Council designed to explore how employers in BC's Capital Region may be better supported to hire and retain people experiencing barriers to employment. This is one of nine discussion papers that share information on each barrier, with recommendations that could strengthen employers' success in recruiting and retaining staff.

Using background research, a teleconference about professional immigrants, interviews with five local employers, and consultation with three local agencies providing supports to immigrants and refugees, the project identified what gaps exist to support employers hiring immigrants, particularly supports in the interview and first-day(s)-of-work orientation processes.

### **Immigrants: a critical part of the labour force**

The BC Chamber of Commerce estimates 100% of our labour growth will be coming from immigration by 2011<sup>1</sup>.

Local service providers estimate that 1,200 to 3,000 permanent immigrants arrive in our region each year. The most common industries now employing immigrants through immigrant-serving agencies are the hospitality industry, retail, construction, healthcare, and janitorial services.

A number of employers in the region are also applying to the federal government for temporary foreign workers to fill unskilled jobs.

### **Skilled labour, unskilled jobs**

Agencies report that they are seeing more immigrants defined by Immigration Canada as "skilled immigrant class" coming to this region. However, many of them take entry-level jobs initially as part of their transition to sustainable work. Some can spend a number of years in lower skilled work, which can have negative effects on income levels, skills retention, attitude and confidence. The *Skills Connect/Career Solutions* program is meant to address this problem.

### **English language skills**

Employers find that English language skills are the key challenge in recruiting immigrants, affecting transactions with the public and coworkers, as well as between employer and employee during the introduction of job terms and policies and procedures. Computer-based training, Food Safe and customer service training are all additionally challenging with a language barrier.

Some employers have difficulty hiring someone with an accent for a front-line service position, regardless of their fluency with English.

### **Recruitment practices**

Employers interviewed did not identify challenges in *interviewing* immigrant job applicants, focusing instead on *training*. This suggests that employers may be unaware of barriers in the interviewing process and in several other pre-hiring stages including sourcing candidates and screening and assessing resumes. For example, standard expectations of work experience and credentials can filter immigrants out of the pool of prospective employees.

### **Orientation practices**

Local employers report successfully using the following strategies:

- Mentoring: using a buddy system to explain job duties, (matching employees who speak the same language where possible) or having the employer work side by side with the new employee
- Reviewing correspondence before it is sent out
- Starting an employee on basic tasks and working them up to more challenging tasks as their skills and aptitudes are revealed.

### **Cultural competency**

Employers interviewed did not identify cultural differences as a challenge in hiring or training immigrants, which could suggest a gap in employers' understanding of cross-cultural issues. Misunderstandings and conflicts can occur during job interviews and on the job, for example, when someone from a more competitive culture tries to fit into a

workplace where more value is placed on teamwork.

### **Who pays? Who adapts?**

Employers are challenged by the extra cost, effort and time required to integrate an employee whose first language is not English. One employer stated, "It is time consuming and frustrating to have to show a new employee with limited English how to do the job rather than tell them."

A number of employer suggestions for programs were directed at immigrants rather than employers, which suggests that employers see the integration of immigrants into the workforce as mainly the responsibility of others including immigrants themselves, and the government and service agencies that fund and provide these programs.

However, immigrant serving organizations see a need for Victoria to work on becoming a "welcoming community." The community needs to learn to listen through an accent and different ways to express information, which might mean shifting focus from immigrants to employers.

### **Awareness of existing services**

Employers reported needing several services that already exist to help with hiring and first-days-of-work orientation such as a recruiting service that matches immigrants' skills with jobs and a job coach. Additional requests included interpretation supports, ESL training available to people who are working, a training subsidy to offset the cost of using other employees to help in the training process, and information about cultural differences to help new immigrants be more comfortable in the workplace.

Many of these services are already available in our community for free and as paid

services. A multicultural Human Resources Solutions Project for employers is currently underway.

### **HR Solutions Project**

The Victoria Immigrant & Refugee Centre Society has received funding to address the issue of workplace cultural awareness and increase competency skills for employers. Their *HR Solutions Project* will also develop strategies to break through barriers related to the recruitment process, such as sourcing jobs, reviewing resumes, and interviewing candidates.

### **Recommendations**

Employers may benefit from a service which assesses how a job is structured and how that job might better accommodate someone from another culture and language.

Celebrating stories of inclusive employers could address issues of discrimination while at the same time increase the capacity of businesses to hire and retain immigrants successfully in their workplace with inclusive HR practices. Several examples of these practices can be found at [www.hireimmigrants.ca](http://www.hireimmigrants.ca).

As the number of temporary foreign workers increases in this region, there may need to be a future assessment of supports and community impacts for this group.

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<sup>1</sup>Overhaul of the Canadian Immigration System" (2006), [http://www.bcchamber.org/Policy\\_and\\_Positions/National\\_Policy\\_Statements/Citizenship\\_and\\_Immigration/Overhaul\\_of\\_the\\_Canadian\\_Immigration\\_System.aspx](http://www.bcchamber.org/Policy_and_Positions/National_Policy_Statements/Citizenship_and_Immigration/Overhaul_of_the_Canadian_Immigration_System.aspx) <accessed August 23, 2007>

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