

Practical And Doable Ideas That Will Make A Difference

Integrating Skilled Immigrants into Ontario's Labour Market

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The Ontario government has a unique opportunity. It is blessed with a yearly infusion of skilled immigrants who choose Ontario as their preferred destination of choice. It has recently signed agreements with the federal government on immigration and on labour market programs – both of which will infuse significant resources and energy into Ontario. In moving forward with new policy and program proposals in light of these new resources, it may be helpful to remember that Ontario has gone through a seismic shift in demographics. The look and feel of Ontario, especially in its urban context is significantly different from even ten years ago.

Any new policy and program proposals must therefore focus *equally* on the needs of the immigrant and of society. It is not only the immigrant who needs help in adjusting to and accessing new opportunities for work. The many institutions that surround the world of work in Ontario also need to change, shift and act differently as well. Otherwise we will have gone only half-way to reach a cup only half full.

WHAT THE IMMIGRANT NEEDS

The first year of arrival in Ontario is the most crucial year for the immigrant. The sooner the skilled immigrant can make progress in attaching himself/herself to the occupation of their training, the better it is for all concerned. During this time a number of interventions can help the immigrant.

1. FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

The notion of small loans to immigrants for the purposes of training, including examination fees, licensing and accreditation exam fees, purchase of tools and bridge training is an interesting policy idea to consider. There is evidence to suggest that this idea has legs.

The Maytree Foundation has been providing such financial assistance for 4 years, and has provided loans to 88 people, including pharmacists, nurses, truck drivers, IT professionals, dietitians, and medical laboratory assistants. The maximum loan is \$5,000. Of those who have completed their training, 61% have found employment in their occupation. Only four loans have defaulted.

The notion of loans becomes particularly important in considering the future of current bridge training programs for nurses, pharmacists and teachers that are being delivered by the province. These are excellent programs with excellent results, however they reach too few people and are limited to too few occupations. And they are expensive. One way of bringing them to more immigrants would be to confer “diploma status” on such bridging programs, thus qualifying them for eligibility for Ontario student loans.

2. DEVELOPING NETWORKS

The GTA is witness to an interesting experiment whose success is worth noting. The Mentoring Partnership operates out of a number of settlement organizations and matches skilled immigrants with their employed colleagues in a mentoring relationship. The matches are created around occupation-specific lines. Since launching in January 2005, the project has recruited 700 plus mentors and created 620 matches.

Mentors guide, coach and advise a mentee. They connect the mentee with useful professional networks. While the mentor is not expected to find their mentee a job, more often than not he or she becomes a personal champion. It costs the pilot program \$1200 to create a match. A number of funders are partnering on this including corporations and foundations.

The results are most exciting for anyone who is looking for good ideas. Let me share a few of these with you by comparing the outcomes of two different groups of immigrants – one with mentors and one without, both groups being comprised of skilled and job ready immigrants.

The control group (i.e. those who were not connected with a mentor) spent a lot less time looking for a job and was a lot less focused. The mentored group spent more time researching companies and landed more interviews. Both groups were getting employed – but immigrants who were working without a mentor secured jobs at \$8 – 22 per hour. Those with mentors secured jobs at an average salary of \$55,000.

Immigrants in the non-mentored group were employed as general labour, assembly, security, data entry telemarketing; the mentored group was employed as analysts, sales managers, project engineers, entitlement accountants and so on. Most encouraging is the fact that 55% of those in a mentoring relationship found jobs in their field of training.

The mentoring idea is ‘low hanging fruit’. It has been tried, it works, it does not cost a lot of money and it produces results. Also, it engages the citizen in solution-driven action, suggesting that not only does government have a role, but so does the individual. It would be relatively easy for you to take the mentoring idea and replicate it and bring it to many, many more immigrants.

3. GAINING THE FIRST CANADIAN WORK EXPERIENCE

Canadian work experience is the most difficult barrier for immigrants. The internship program, Career Bridge, launched by your government is extremely successful – to date 315 internships have been created. A total of 86% of these have resulted in full time permanent jobs, with 55% of the jobs being with the internship employer. However, the pool of employers that sign on for internships is small. There is a huge discrepancy between supply and demand for these internships. For every one internship position, there are at least 15 job-ready individuals ready to compete.

It makes sense to build on success. We need therefore to reach out to more employers and to market the program to them. Further, we need to develop a particular strategy that targets small and medium sized employers to explore the contours of an internship program that would be unique to their needs. Possibly some incentives need to be brought into play, for example, a tax or a training credit for small and medium-sized businesses to hire interns.

Government needs to lead by example. There is no reason why the provincial government, along with its agencies boards and commissions, could not commit to 100 internships.

4. LANGUAGE TRAINING

Language training and more specifically, workplace language training, has been identified repeatedly as a gap. Employers in particular are most concerned by what they loosely term “communications skills”. By this they mean not only the softer side of verbal communication, but also hard communication skills such as presentations, project planning and technical report writing.

A new workplace oriented language training program, designed with the participation of employers and implemented to some extent in the workplace, is a good idea. If it is going to work well, then there also needs to be accountability – i.e. standards that are applied to entry and exit, so that there is a certain level of credibility attached to the program.

SOCIETY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

1. REGULATORY BODIES

The Ontario Government has focused a great deal of attention on regulatory bodies; this is important. Clearly progress has been made. Today there is more information about licensing processes, regulatory bodies have made greater efforts to be responsive to immigrant applications, and have taken an incremental role in designing and participating in bridging programs. However, from the point of view of the immigrant, this progress has been painfully slow and does not seem to have had a major impact on the consciousness of the public.

So the time is right for the next step –going beyond simply working with regulatory bodies to standardizing and then legislating some important aspects of their work, whilst at the same time respecting their jurisdiction to protect public safety. There are huge variances in how each regulatory conducts business. For example some bodies accept certain kinds of documents, others don’t. Some allow registration to begin overseas, others don’t. Some have stand alone appeal processes, others don’t.

The development of common standards for all regulatory bodies in Ontario is a good idea. It needs to be supported by the development of tools and strategies that would enable regulatory bodies to meet the new standards. They should then report on progress on an annual basis through the use of internal audit tools. And then finally, to give all this teeth, there is legislation to ensure follow through.

It is also important to remember that not all regulatory bodies are equally important. From the point of view of access to services, a focus on health care professionals is critical, because it is not simply about access to occupations, but access to much needed services for Ontarians. A cadre of well trained health care professionals who reflect the diversity of the population and are linguistically and culturally equipped to provide services is an important product of these regulatory changes. Here, your marketing strategy is not so much about skilled immigrants, but about Ontarians in need of health care services.

2. EMPLOYERS

Along with occupational regulatory bodies, employers are an important stakeholder community. While a great number of skilled immigrants are doctors and engineers, a large number are in information technology, finance, business services, marketing and communication. The only thing standing between them and a job is the employer.

So it makes great sense to turn your attention now to employers – and I believe employers are in a sense “lower hanging fruit”. Many large employers are already convinced that their market and customer base has changed, and they know they need to do business differently. Your role is to fuel and stoke this perspective - to provide employers with the tools to change, to identify and celebrate champions and to build the slow and relentlessly incremental campaign towards change. Our research at the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) has provided us with some interesting examples.

- Husky Injection Molding Systems is developing a metrics system to determine which overseas institutions are producing the skill sets most valuable to the company, so they can build a relationship with these institutions.
- At RBC Financial Group, candidates in the first round of recruiting, are moved forward based on their experience and education, regardless of where those were obtained. A bias-free interview guide was also developed that acknowledges foreign credentials.

- American Express Canada recruits skilled immigrants through outreach to ethno-specific job fairs and community-based agencies and through an employee referral program.

Based on its research, TRIEC has developed a calendar of speaking engagements – employer to employer – so that employers can learn from each other. In partnership with the Toronto Star and the Royal Bank, we are recognizing the best employers of immigrants in the GTA. The story we want to tell is the story of solutions that work.

This work needs to be amplified.

3. UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

Universities and colleges provide labour market training to Ontarians. They are therefore uniquely positioned to play a very critical role in providing training and academic upgrading to immigrants. However, in order to get this required training, as opposed to degrees and diplomas, these institutions need to be given some incentives that allow them to think and act innovatively. The current system ties college and university funding to students registered in diploma and degree granting programs. Most skilled immigrants do not require additional degrees or diplomas, but may simply require a few courses to fill the gaps necessary to practice their occupation in Canada.

The creation of a sustainable innovation fund or modification to the existing funding formula for colleges and universities to develop new and relevant programs for skilled immigrants may be a timely idea.

4. SETTLEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Settlement organizations are an incredibly important feature in our society. It is encouraging that they will be receiving more support under the new agreements. However, it is important to note that settlement organizations should not be expected to be the only organizations responsible for the integration of immigrants, in the labour market or otherwise. With the change in demographics, this is much more the responsibility of our whole society.

So settlement organizations should be positioned as providers of services, but more importantly, as brokers of new relationships and facilitators for systemic and institutional change. We cannot afford (either financially or from a social cohesion perspective) to have two parallel systems: one for immigrants isolated from the mainstream, and one for all other Ontarians.

5. MEDIA

We need to make media, and especially ethnic media, our friends and partners, because ethnic media is the best delivery route for information to immigrants about programs and services and about the efforts of your government in addressing their issues. Seventy per cent of immigrants receive their information from families and friends, and these networks should become part of the settlement framework. So developing ongoing content for, and advertising in, ethnic media about your approaches is an important strategy for you to consider.

6. GOVERNMENT

Finally, government is of course one of our most important institutions, because of policy and legislative authority, but also because of its role as a leader in setting the tone that others follow. There are a number of areas where you can take leadership.

a) As an employer

It is not clear to me that the provincial government is in fact a model employer and so it stands to reason that you need to act in the same way you are expecting others to follow. People in glass houses should not throw stones. The OPS needs to become a full partner in programs that provide nimble solutions, such as

internships and mentoring. There is no reason why every department in every ministry cannot hire one intern. There is no reason why members of the OPS cannot be leaders in mentoring. At this point this is not happening. I would refer you to the excellent work being undertaken by our cities – the City of Toronto has officially sanctioned a mentoring program; the City of Markham has already hired 13 interns.

b) In your response to new federal proposals

You need to take a stand on the new federal government's proposal to create a national accreditation body. This is an idea which requires more thought; it just adds another layer to an already crowded field. Instead we need to encourage the federal government to strengthen existing provincial initiatives, such as World Education Services (WES), or to develop a colleges and universities innovation fund, or to improve local awareness strategies aimed at employers.

c) As a partner with TRIEC

And finally you can help with the need for a wide spread social marketing campaign that focuses on solutions that everybody can be part of. TRIEC will be launching a GTA campaign along these lines in May this year. Our working tag line is "Make It Right", using visual and print ads to suggest that something is wrong when a professional engineer is working as an ice cream vendor. The tag line suggests that this is wrong, and everyone can be part of the solution. There will be TV and Print ads and the campaign will promote a number of strategies for engagement – as an employer, as an individual, as a voter, or as a member of a professional occupational body.

TRIEC invites you to partner with us on this campaign.

IMMIGRATION AND THE URBAN AGENDA

And finally a note about immigration and the urban agenda; these are tied together inextricably. The vast majority of immigrants settle in a handful of large Canadian cities, and these communities require the three orders of government to work together to plan, manage and coordinate local responses to accelerate integration. Meaningful and planned urban investment in services such as education, health, housing and recreation require leadership that stretches beyond the typical silos of government action. In addition, multi-stakeholder tables comprised of all sectors of society are an enabling mechanism for collaboration and mobilization of local resources and local solutions. TRIEC is one example of this approach.

Mid-sized cities require a different approach - one that provides strategies for attracting and retaining immigrants. This must be a whole community effort because successful immigrant integration in mid-sized cities begins with a welcoming community.

Smaller towns and communities face a special challenge: they have specific labour market needs which require particular responses, one of which could be a Municipal Nominee Program where immigrants are sponsored by these communities.

Regardless of size of community, resources are required at the local level to assist newcomers to integrate into their new lives and homes and to assist communities to create a welcoming environment.

So – a number of ideas that are both practical and doable and combined together, will make a considerable difference to improve the future for immigrants in Ontario and indeed, to ensure the future prosperity of the province of Ontario.