

Members Quarterly

Fall 2015 Edition

Ask the Expert

Leverage Skills to the Max!

Integrating immigrants into the workplace

Q: I'm concerned about potential skills gaps in my sector. What can I do to help to prepare my organization to access and retain the talent it needs?

A: You're not alone! We are hearing a lot about skills gaps, skills mismatches and concerns about finding the right skills for organizations. The Conference Board of Canada released the report *The Need to Make Skills Work: The Cost of Ontario's Skills Gap*, in which they note that skills "gaps cost the Ontario economy up to \$24.3 billion in forgone GDP." The story is similar across the country.

One way to address current and looming skills gaps is to ensure the skills of all potential and actual labour market participants are being leveraged to maximize their contribution to the workforce. We know that employers face challenges in fully realizing the potential of several populations of workers – youth, seniors, people with disabilities and others. Enhancing our capacity to better integrate these workers into our economy will require a variety of approaches.

Internationally educated professionals living in Canada have consistently been found to be working in occupations that do not fully utilize their potential given their levels of education and experience, especially in the first ten years after their arrival.

Given what we know – that immigrants coming to Canada are in fact often highly skilled, that this group makes up a growing percentage of our workforce and that their skills are consistently underutilized, any plans to address skills gaps in our workplaces should clearly include initiatives to increase the recruitment, integration and retention of immigrants. In an era where concerns about skills gaps are growing, recognizing the opportunities related to integrating immigrants into the workplace is imperative for organizational renewal and innovation. Doing so can help you to address skill shortages or fill vacant positions and also better prepare for demographic trends (e.g. retiring workers).

Having said that, other arguments for striving for a workplace that is not only culturally diverse but also inclusive can be both more nuanced and equally compelling. These may have to do with a well-thought out business or organizational strategy or may be in response to immediate barriers or challenges the organization faces.

Beyond addressing immediate and projected skills gaps, leading organizations seek to more effectively integrate immigrants into their workplaces for any number of the following reasons:

- To reflect the personal values of senior leadership within the organization
- To demonstrate corporate / social responsibility
- To better serve a diverse client base, either locally or nationally
- To leverage connections with and knowledge of new or emerging markets
- To contribute to enhanced workplace performance (harness diversity of thought and avoid



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“group think”)

- To increase employee engagement

So, clearly one way workplaces can mitigate some of the challenges related to skills gaps and the search for talent is to fully leverage the skills of immigrants living in Canada. But do you know how to go about it? Do you know where to source this talent or how to ensure your hiring processes are not creating unintentional barriers? Do your people managers sometimes confuse “fit” with “a lot like me”? If you have diversity policies in place, is anyone accountable for measuring their impact? Have you recognized the challenge of managing performance well across cultures? Are your skilled immigrants getting stuck at certain levels or are they well-represented throughout the organization including the executive suite?

These can be difficult questions. But leaders in today’s organizations have an opportunity to establish a legacy of transformation. Our workforce is changing dramatically and the leader that meets this challenge with vision and commitment may reap many rewards. There is no need to undertake this journey alone. In cities and regions across the country, leaders are convening in immigrant employment councils. They are accessing the resources of immigrant serving organizations. They are also becoming mentors and champions for the integration of immigrants into our workplaces. They are taking a hard look at the skills gap and they are acting on the opportunity to leverage all available skills to the maximum.

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