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A Professional Immigrant's Story on Settling in Canada

By Sue Chan

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As I was preparing speaking notes for a community-based session to share my immigrant story, I reflected on my five years here – the good and not-so-good experiences. After much reflection, I'm glad I made the decision to immigrate. Canada is a beautiful country. Canadians are tolerant of immigrants and refugees, and together we are working toward an inclusive and equitable future. I'm hopeful of a better future for myself, my family and for those who come here in the future as immigrants.



I arrived in Canada about five years ago. I was 30 years old with a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science and a certificate in Project and Program Management. In addition to my five years of professional work experience, I had friends and family in Toronto. I was able to settle in quickly, renting an apartment and acquiring a daily routine. I was grateful I had people I could ask who knew the ins and outs of the city.

I was aware of the shortage of skilled labour in the technology domain, so I didn't expect too many challenges in getting a job. Based on my education and work experience, I set a target of three to four months. I'd worked for an international company and knew my communication skills and familiarity with the North American business world would help. During my time with my previous employer, I'd also been steadily assigned larger and more complex tasks. I'd been recognized and rewarded with a team lead role.

The reality was a rude awakening. For the first three months I was selective in submitting applications. I focused on the roles I wanted and believed were a good fit for my skills and experience. There were some responses but very few ended with an interview, and I began to realize that I'd misread the situation. In the next three months, I applied for numerous roles, as many as I could think of, but if anything the responses dwindled. Considering how many applications I'd sent out, it felt there was no job I could do. This time was very difficult for me. My self-confidence dwindled and I questioned my decision to come to Canada. My finances were becoming a challenge as well. I didn't want to ask my parents back home for financial support. Nor could I talk to someone about my fears. I'd put myself in this mess by leaving a good job behind. I was listless, fearful, depressed.

By chance, I signed up for a mentorship session offered by a non-profit organization for new immigrants. In retrospect, that's when my luck turned. My mentor helped me understand the Canadian work culture, key words to keep in mind, and the hard-to-read details that govern person-to-position fit. I gained insights into how best to prepare and conduct an interview, taking into account both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Here were the key lessons I learned:

- Don't apply for every role. This will just create anxiety and a feeling of failure.
- Non-Canadian accreditation and work experience are usually not recognized. Therefore, one may need to start in a lower level position and then use deliverables to build the employer's trust. For me, it was important during interviews to be able to explain why I believed I was a good fit and the winning candidate, even if it seemed the role was too low based on my past experience.
- One must be capable of telling a good story. That means being able to clearly and concisely summarize one's accomplishments and mention both technical and soft transferrable skills. The goal is to showcase a talented individual who is capable and willing to learn, one who can adapt and has a strong work ethic. This is an individual who will be easy to interact with, work hard, and learn and contribute to the company's success.

My mentor introduced me to a paid internship. That was the right decision for me. Through this position I was able to gain entry into a large organization. I was thankful to actually work again after being out of the workplace for close to a year. The routine rebuilt my self-confidence and introduced me to a team and work culture. During the first couple of months, I was almost too eager. I worried about speaking too much or too little (I ended up speaking too little) and I worked long hours to ensure my deliverables were on time, with high quality. I was polite (I learned later that I was too polite). I put so much pressure on myself that I was starting to feel ill.



One day a teammate came to me and offered to be my work buddy. This was a lifeline for me. I was able to ask questions I didn't feel comfortable asking in a team setting. I was coached and helped in finding information, how to connect with others inside and outside of the organization, and how to get feedback on my work. This opened the way for a more productive environment. After six months, I gained a full-time position when the opportunity arose. With the conversion, I was still in a junior role based on my experience. So, it was gratifying when, after one more year, I was promoted to a role at the right level.

All this was a three-year journey that saw me change my country and my future. During its tough spots, I questioned my decisions and my abilities. I considered giving up and going back home. I am so happy that I toughed it out. I have grown in so many ways. I now know that I can take on anything because I have faith in myself. I've learned that growth comes from stretching oneself and taking risks.

I have often wondered how I can take my learning and share my journey with others, so that they can benefit from it. I've also wondered how Canada as a whole can do better. What would be a helpful, I've decided, is fostering an environment so that new immigrants can contribute to Canadian society quickly, be productive in a short period, and not be burdened by too much stress.



These are the steps I think Canada needs to follow to create a more diverse, inclusive and productive society:

- Government and companies must formally recognize international education and past experience.
- Government and community-based non-profit organizations need to be proactive in connecting and assigning work buddies who can help with the transition to Canadian work culture.
- Organizations should assign a team member to guide recent hires in learning about business processes, available tools and the distinctive aspects of an organization's culture.
- Direct managers need to give frequent and actionable feedback.
- Organizations should set metrics and report progress on diversity and inclusive hiring.
- Organizations need to profile and celebrate diversity role models and success stories.

There is much research to show that inclusive workplaces result in high performance. Diversity is good for both the employees and the employer's bottom line. Looking back at my personal journey, I am thrilled that I made the decision to come to Canada and that I'm now a productive individual in a great country. I see my role as acting as a mentor for new immigrants. Through this role I hope to give back by offering the same sort of support I received when I needed it most.



Sue Chan is VP IT PMO - HSBC Integration at RBC and a [WINS Advisory Board member](#). This article combines elements of her own story as well as the stories she has heard from the newcomers she has counselled throughout her career.

Integrating Immigrants into the Workforce: 10 Key Suggestions for Employers

By Debroy Chan

According to a news release by Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada: “the Canadian economy has experienced one of the fastest recoveries from COVID-19 among advanced economies, but is now facing critical labour market shortages causing uncertainty for Canadian businesses and workers.”¹ As part of its plan to grow the economy, the federal government has set ambitious targets in its new immigration plan that will see 465,000 new permanent residents in 2023, 485,000 in 2024 and 500,000 in 2025. This follows 405,000 immigrants welcomed in 2022. By 2025 over 60% of admissions are projected to be in the economic class. This means a significant number of skilled immigrants aiming to use their skills in Canada’s labour market. The question is, will they be given the chance to do so.



Research has consistently shown that immigrants to Canada face multiple barriers to employment, including the devaluation of their international education and experience. Immigrants also experience significantly higher unemployment and underemployment than their Canadian counterparts. In 2022, the unemployment rate for immigrants between the ages of 25 and 54 who landed in the past five years in the Toronto region was nearly double that for the Canadian-born population (9.5% versus 5.0%). In 2021, more than one-quarter of all immigrants with foreign degrees were working in jobs that require, at most, a high school diploma. If immigrants are to be the solution to our labour market shortages, then more has to be done to leverage their immense wealth of skills, with employers playing a key role.

Yet employers have shown reluctance to hire skilled immigrants. Much has been said about Canadian experience requirements and foreign credential recognition. I will not go into these issues. I wish to focus instead on how employers can help quickly integrate immigrants who are needed to fill talent shortages and help grow the economy.

¹“An Immigration Plan to Grow the Economy,” IRCC, November 2, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/11/an-immigration-plan-to-grow-the-economy.html>

Here are 10 key suggestions:

- 1. Recognize immigrants' credentials and drop any requirement for Canadian work experience, except where this is a bone fide occupational requirement.** More than ever the world is a global village. That means an ever greater value in the international experience and knowledge that immigrants can contribute. Organizations such as World Education Services (WES) provide credential assessments that prove equivalencies of foreign credentials. These should be recognized.
- 2. Pay immigrants at the same rate as their Canadian counterparts.** According to a recent report by United Way Greater Toronto, for every dollar a Canadian-born person in permanent, full-time work earns, an immigrant in Canada for 10 years or more in the same form of work earns 67 cents.² If immigrants are paid lower wages, employers will ultimately face problems of retention. Employers can and should do better.
- 3. Hire immigrants in positions commensurate with their qualifications and experience.** Just as organizations will improve retention down the road by paying immigrants fairly, so they will benefit if they make sure to fully recognize immigrants' qualifications and experience from the start.
- 4. Take advantage of the potential benefits of organizational diversity.** Numerous studies have shown that businesses which are diverse are more innovative and productive. Diversity is not just a nice thing to do; it is a good business decision.
- 5. Be more inclusive in talent management practices.** It is not enough to have a diverse workforce. All workers must feel a sense of belonging and being appreciated. Too often, immigrants feel that their contributions are not taken seriously and are not recognized. Unless this is addressed, employers will not benefit from the talent they bring and will continue to experience a retention problem.
- 6. Train managers and staff at all levels in intercultural communication through use of such tools as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).** Training in intercultural competence will become more and more important as workplaces become more diverse. Middle managers, in particular, have a critical role to play and should be trained to be able to work in an inclusive environment.



² United Way Greater Toronto, <https://www.unitedwaygt.org/the-work/settlement/>

Here are 10 key suggestions: *(Cont'd)*

- 7. Partner with service provider organizations (SPOs) when running training programs for immigrants and for recruiting talent.** A recent survey by TRIEC found that 71% of employers who participated in the survey were not aware of the services offered by SPOs. However, almost all employers who engaged with SPOs (99.0%) reported that they contributed to their organization's goals through enabling them to find good candidates (56.4%), increase their workplace diversity (37.6%), and improve their recruitment and hiring practices (35.6%).
- 8. Offer paid work attachments to allow immigrants to gain experience in a Canadian work environment.** Two key career resources that skilled immigrants lack are professional networks and knowledge of the Canadian workplace. Paid work placements are a great way for employers to assess the skills and ability of immigrants and for immigrants to learn more about Canadian workplace culture while building their professional network in Canada. These placements can be a win-win for all.
- 9. Participate in mentoring programs for skilled immigrants.** Mentoring plays an important role in helping immigrants integrate quickly and build professional networks. It also gives employers a sense of the skills that immigrants bring. The findings of an independent evaluation of the TRIEC Mentoring Partnership (TMP) program released in 2020 showed that skilled immigrants who participated in the program were 2.5 times more likely to be in good quality jobs within 3 months of completing their mentoring relationship than those who did not benefit from mentoring. They were also 4 times more likely to have built a professional network which is so important to success in the Canadian labour market.³



- 10. Appoint a champion for DEI at the C-Suite level.** If organizations are to be successful in transforming from within, it is imperative that there is a champion for this transformation at the highest levels. HR departments will struggle to make the changes necessary without this level of support.

It is clear that immigration is needed to help replace an ageing population and grow the economy. However, this can be achieved only if employers are willing to leverage the talent immigrants bring through diversifying their workforce and creating inclusive work environments.

³ Demand & Impact of Mentoring for Newcomer Professionals: Evaluation Findings, TRIEC, April 2020. <https://triec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Demand-for-Impact-of-Mentoring-Newcomer-Professionals-The-case-of-TRIEC-Mentoring-Partnership.pdf>



Debroy Chan is Interim CEO and Vice President, Programs & Operations at Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC).

Showcasing Community Voices

“What more can employers do to help quickly integrate the huge wave of immigrants we expect in Canada during the next three years?”

Naomi Alboim is Senior Policy Fellow in the Canada Excellence Research Chair program at Toronto Met University.



Many of the ‘new immigrants’ expected over the next few years are actually already here as international students and temporary foreign workers. Many of these individuals are interested in staying and working in Canada as permanent residents, but need to find work in managerial, professional, or skilled occupations in order to qualify for permanent residence. These are talented, energetic, motivated individuals who already have some experience working in Canada, but many are currently underemployed and unable to fully utilize the skills, education and expertise they have. Employers need to look to these individuals as potential employees able to step in quickly to their organizations, and with some orientation, training, and support can unleash all they have to offer.

Beth Clarke is Senior Director of Strategic Partnerships for World Education Services.

The benefits of including immigrant talent are well researched and many [employers benefit](#) from this talent pool. While competition for talent will increase with current and future labour shortages, the number of new immigrants and fears of an impending recession make it imperative for employers to review hiring practices to avert the underutilization of immigrant, refugee, and international student talent. The good news is that there are proven, easy to implement, practical strategies to support employers in our free [Employer Playbook](#). Employers can also advocate for affordable housing, so immigrants stay and thrive in our communities and share successful practices with other employers to inspire greater change. Additionally, regularly reviewing compensation, working conditions, and flexible arrangements increases appeal to a broader audience and can help compete for talent.



Nick Noorani is CEO of Nick Noorani Business Group and Founder of the Canadian Immigrant Magazine & Top 25 Canadian Immigrant Awards.



For years economists have been talking about the ‘graying tsunami’ of baby boomers exiting the labour force. Add to that declining birth rates in Canada and a global pandemic and you have the perfect storm.

Today, SMEs and large businesses alike are feeling the impact of a shrinking labour force with challenges such as work from home and hybrid work. Recognising and utilizing immigrant talent is going to be the only way Canada and employers can retain global competitiveness. The next step, probably equally important, will be retaining that talent. Employers will have to work on this in order to prevent employee churn. Helping newcomer employees with mentorship programs will help.

Marianne Meed Ward is Mayor of the City of Burlington

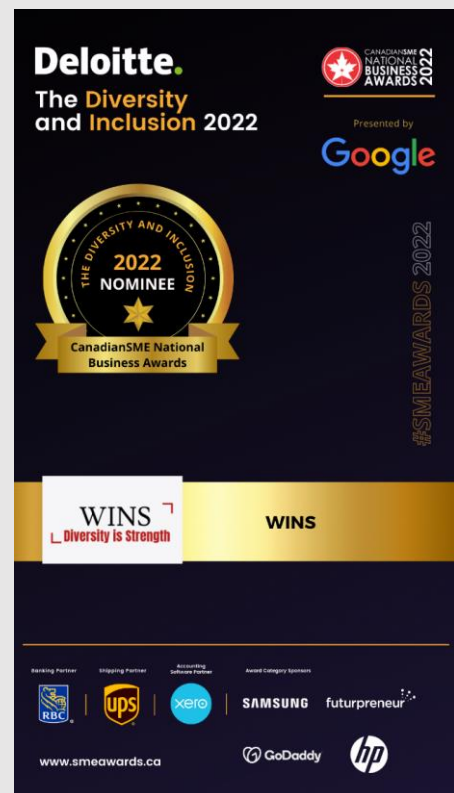
Employers should avail themselves of integration programs in their communities, for example the Halton Multicultural Council. These programs provide English classes, transitional housing and counselling to newcomers to help them adjust to life in a new community. Language barriers often present the biggest challenge to newcomers in obtaining services. Employers who connect with organizations like HMC can help their newcomer employees feel more welcomed, gain a sense of community, and get connected to the supportive resources they need faster. It's critical to build relationships with community stakeholders to create easier access to essential services that newcomers can benefit from.



From the Newsstand

WINS has the honour of being nominated for the 2022 Deloitte Diversity and Inclusion Award by CanadianSME Small Business Magazine's editorial team.

Thank you to all of you, our partners and community for your continuing support for our ongoing advocacy for under-represented groups in pursuit of a Canadian workspace that is more equitable, diverse and inclusive.



To help WINS continue this work please donate and/partner with the organization.

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