ACCOUNTANT AGROLOGIST ARCHITECT
ENGINEER EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR
FORESTER GEOLOGIST INSURANCE
LAWYER PARALEGAL REAL ESTATE
SOCIAL WORKER TEACHER AUDIOLOGY

TO OBTAIN A POSITION AS...
DENTIST DIETICIAN THERAPIST MENTAL
THERAPIST OPTICIAN OPTOMETRIST
PHARMACIST PHYSICIAN AND SURGEON
PHYSIO THERAPIST PSYCHOLOGIST
RESPIRATORY VETERINARIAN ACUPUNCTURE
ENGINEER EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
SCIENTIST INSURANCE BROKER
LEGAL REAL ESTATE AGENT
CONTRIBUTING JOURNALISTS

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EDITORIAL

By Izumi Sakamoto

“Do you have Canadian experience?”

This is a question that new immigrants dread being asked when going for a job interview. By definition, of course, immigrants who are new to Canada do not have experience in Canada.

In this special issue of New Voices on the theme of Canadian Experience, four internationally-trained journalists address the significance of the concept from the four different perspectives of immigrants, newcomer service providers, employers, and academics, respectively. What emerges from these articles is how problematic and elusive the term really is. And this ambiguity has real life consequences for immigrants, as you will read in these articles.

With funding from the federal government, I have been conducting a series of research on Canadian experience as a major employment barrier for immigrants for the past six years. Although you’ll read more about it in this issue of New Voices, here’s some of what our research team has learned. Some employers actually may not use the term “Canadian experience” any longer. In fact, what they are really concerned about seems to be whether they can trust immigrants to fit in with the Canadian workplace culture when they are unfamiliar with immigrants’ backgrounds including aspects such as foreign education and credentials.

Without the up-to-date knowledge, effective tools and strong pro-immigrant visions of many senior managers, hiring managers (for whom hiring often represents an additional workload) can be more drawn to candidates with familiar backgrounds. Requiring immigrants to have Canadian experience then is to define who is Canadian enough and who is un-Canadian, unfamiliar—and therefore cannot be trusted to function well in the familiar Canadian work environment. The issue of Canadian experience encompasses ambiguities and contradictions, perhaps hiding the dominant society’s implicit wish to put immigrants in their “rightful,” subordinate place while not overtly contradicting the celebrated (and undisputed) Canadian multiculturalism as our social policy and ideology.

There is some good news, however. Many people and organizations do recognize that relying on Canadian experience as the standard for employability is a problem. To address unfamiliarity and uncertainty in hiring immigrants on the part of employers, organizations such as ALLIES and TRIEC (Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council) have been working with employers and creating resources to support their employment of skilled immigrants. Some large corporations—some of which you’ll read about here—are leading the way by putting in place successful strategies such as competence-based hiring. For too long, initiatives aimed at addressing employment challenges have focused on changing immigrants themselves. However, we believe that since mobilizing diverse talent is critical to corporate and community success, employers and policy makers both have their own roles to play in overcoming the Canadian experience barrier.

One of the current projects I lead is the university-community collaboration called the “Beyond Canadian Experience” project, which pulls together recent community and academic research findings and deconstructs the notion of Canadian experience with an eye to reducing barriers to employment experienced by immigrants. The partners include the Mennonite New Life Centre, Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter, TRIEC, and the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Building on the success of the interactive conference that the Beyond Canadian Experience team hosted last December (you can find the transcript of John Tory’s keynote speech from the conference in this issue), we are planning another public forum in the fall of 2012 to engage more employers to tackle this complex issue together (for more information about the Beyond Canadian Experience Project including the video of the speeches and theatre production, please visit: www.beyondcanadianexperience.com).

To address the issue of Canadian experience as a requirement for immigrant employment, do we need better programs or better policies? Or maybe both? How can employers improve hiring practices so that they do not have to rely on the questionable criteria of Canadian experience? Even though efforts are being made to address the issue of immigrants’ (perceived) lack of Canadian experience, ultimately, these attempts will never be enough if we cannot arrive at a common understanding of the term itself and why it continues to be seen as a legitimate concept to the general public.
Canadian experience: THE CORPORATE VIEW
By Sandhya Ranjit

Many employers show a preference for Canadian work experience based on a poor understanding of newcomers’ academic qualifications and work experience.

When he came to Canada with fifteen years of experience working in Fortune 500 companies, Alan Rego thought he was well-positioned to land a dream job in Canada. It did not take him long to realize how wrong he was. “It was Canadian experience that employers most wanted. Not any experience.” Indeed, no matter how well-qualified they may be, newcomers find that Canadian experience is disproportionately important—crucial in fact. This puts immigrant job seekers, who may have been attracted to Canada as skilled workers with the promise of well-paying jobs in their area of expertise, in a depressing chicken-and-egg conundrum. No Canadian experience—no job. No job—no Canadian experience. “We are still not recognizing the skill level and talent that newcomers bring to Canada—and it’s as much the country’s loss as it is to our immigrants,” said Camon Mak, director, Newcomer and Multicultural Markets, at RBC while releasing his bank’s 2011 report, Immigrant Labour Market Outcomes in Canada: The Benefits of Addressing Wage and Employment Gaps.

The report found a large gap between unemployment rates of new immigrants compared to the Canadian-born emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. It
has continued to grow, and by 2006, immigrant unemployment rates were significantly higher than those of Canadian born. “Underutilizing skilled labour [represents] a gap we need to fill and immigrants represent more than 20 per cent of our population,” said Dawn Desjardins, assistant chief economist, RBC.

Perhaps because of the shortage in Canadian-born skilled labour, some businesses are starting to see that rather than being a necessary requirement for the job, asking specifically for Canadian experience may in fact mask a not-so-necessary cultural discomfort.

“Culture, your perception of it, plays on your mind. But, it is the inertia, the laziness to get out of the old frame of mind and recognize that global talent can open your doors to global markets, bring in out of box thinking,” says Corin Toporas, manager, GTA marketing, KPMG Management Services LP. “It is the unconscious mind at work. The tolerance level to something that is unfamiliar is low,” explains Shakil Choudhury, co-director of Anima Leadership Institute, a company that offers organizational and leadership development services to individuals and teams in both the private sector and non-profit organizations. “It is like I prefer what I know best, I prefer someone who shares my sense of humour. Why? Because it is easier to predict their behaviour. One must realize that there is a big insider and outsider dynamic at play here. Unless workplaces work on it, it is going to defeat the goal of welcoming immigrants.”

Many employers show a preference for Canadian work experience based on a poor understanding of newcomers’ academic qualifications and work experience, says Blair Crichlow, manager of diversity recruitment at RBC. “They are concerned about whether the newcomer will fit into their workplace culture.” “Considering that the quality of university education varies from country to country, there may be some legitimacy [to this concern],” Choudhury allows. “But, having doctors and PhDs driving taxis is a waste to the economy.” “There isn’t a simple answer”, argues Michael Bach, director of diversity, equity and inclusion at KPMG Management Services LP. “Not every country has the same level of education and that can be a differentiator and an important factor.”

**Employment equity**

Federal employment equity regulations have perhaps been the most effective strategy in encouraging the corporate sector to consider the value that newcomers bring to their organizations. Indeed, RBC and other organizations governed by federal regulations have not only complied but have gone beyond their obligations to accommodate newcomers. “Internally, we provide our recruitment staff with knowledge and resources on assessing foreign credentials to enable them to make informed and inclusive assessments and recommendations,” notes Blair Crichlow of RBC.

Although federal employment equity legislation seems to have been key in motivating the corporate sector, some forward-thinking organizations are already on the right track. Take Xerox, for example. Internally, the company has a top-down approach, explains Shelley Ralson, Director, Talent & Culture at the company. “Diversity and inclusiveness is part of the business review of our leaders. Their performance is benchmarked against the market. Depending on the results, our recruitment team gets into action, working with leaders to customise recruitment strategy to make the talent pool as diversified as it can possibly be.” Other organizations which have taken that step to go beyond the regulations to support newcomers integrate into their work culture are reaping the benefits of this initiative.

Smaller businesses, however, may lack the resources to ‘on-board’ newcomers. A 2012 study by Progress Career Planning Institute (PCPI) found that one-half of employers do not have policies to welcome new Canadians. Where there are policies, internationally educated professionals and employers disagree on effectiveness of diversity programs, it said.

Xerox, while facilitating diversity and inclusiveness internally in a systemic way, has also put in place an external solution to address this issue, reaching out to smaller organizations. “We work with our direct channels to mentor, provide resources and support to help them grow as equal opportunity employers,”
Shelley Ralston says. “While employers recognize the value of hiring new Canadians in our global economy, we are finding workplace diversity and recruitment policies lack the bite needed to really make a difference,” said Silma Roddau, president of PCPI. “Internationally-educated professionals recognize they are responsible for learning about the Canadian workplace, but employers also need to do more to welcome new Canadians and workers from different cultures.”

“We need a multi-sectorial approach to better public and private programs and policies. Our governments need to work better together with each other and with the private sector,” said Mitzie Hunter, CEO of the Greater Toronto CivicAction Alliance, a collaboration among business, academic, government, labour and not-for-profit partners to address complex, multi-stakeholder issues in this city. Newcomers too need to be prepared for the very challenging climate that awaits them. “They should come prepared to work really hard, be aware that there are going to be challenges, tap into support networks, basically they need to totally immerse into the Canadian context,” said Choudhury. “It is a real tightrope that is discriminating and demoralizing. A newcomer should hold on tightly, however immobilizing it may be, with determination that ‘I must get past it’.

Allan Rego was among the first batch of candidates who applied for an internship program through Career Bridge and got accepted at P&G, happily only excelled in his role during the internship, but impressed his colleagues as an active volunteer. He was absorbed into the company and has risen to his current position. Adds Rego, “Don’t stop dreaming, for that will help to keep you going on your career journey, no matter how long it may take.”

Smaller businesses, however, may lack the resources to ‘on-board’ newcomers. A 2012 study by Progress Career Planning Institute (PCPI) found that one-half of employers do not have policies to welcome new Canadians.
Canadian experience: THE ACADEMIC VIEW

By Randa Ozair

Izumi Sakamoto is an associate professor at the University of Toronto’s Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and lead researcher on Beyond Canadian Experience, an academic-community collaboration (the Mennonite New Life Centre is one of four organizations collaborating on the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-funded project). Altogether (through Beyond Canadian Experience and through other work), Sakamoto has spent the past six years researching the concept at the heart of this issue of New Voices.

“Canadian experience is an elusive concept that is difficult to define,” she says—although many employers nevertheless consider it a prerequisite for successful employment in Canada.

In fact, by “Canadian experience” some people actually mean general exposure to Canadian culture, acquired by living here. “Others,” Sakamoto explains, “think that it is an actual work experience in Canada in immigrants’ fields of specialities; some others think that volunteering and working in survival jobs would be sufficient [...].

Many immigrants seeking employment struggle to understand what is required as Canadian experience. They feel frustrated because unless they can understand what it is, they can’t successfully obtain it. The problem is that nobody can really define a benchmark or competency requirement” for work experience in Canada.

Sakamoto warns that lack of Canadian experience can in fact be a euphemistic way for an employer to talk about their biases or discomfort with difference. As a matter of fact, newcomers who feel that they are actually discriminated against in the job search process do now have research to back up their hunches. Philip Oreopolous, a researcher at the University of British Columbia, put it to the test (the results of his experiment were published in 2009, as “Why Do Skilled Immigrants Struggle in the Labor Market? A Field Experiment with Six Thousand Résumés”). After sending out those six thousand resumes, Oreopolous found that English-named applicants with Canadian education and experience were more than three times more likely to land an interview than his imaginary applicants whose résumés bore Chinese, Indian, or Pakistani names and foreign education and experience.

Although it’s hard to separate the role played by the foreign-sounding name from the foreign experience or education, this does suggest that something more than just relevant knowledge or experience are being evaluated when applications are screened. Indeed, says Dr. Luin Goldring, an associate professor in sociology at York University, “we know that employers make hiring decisions based on race as well as other information.”

Many employers have merely replaced Canadian experience with something else—and may look for ‘fit’, ‘familiarity’, and ‘trust’ in job candidates as a ‘risk aversion’ strategy in hiring.

“Canadian experience” is the catch-all term used to describe the requirement that job applicants have work experience in Canada, rather than simply having equivalent skills and experience somewhere else. Officially, Canada’s Foreign Credentials Referral Office admits that getting that experience is one of the biggest challenges for newcomers and it may take time to get your first job in Canada. But the use of the term hides a tremendously complicated set of potential barriers to employment—some reasonable, and some absolutely not. Dr Patricia Landolt, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Toronto who
The "Beyond Canadian Experience" project main purpose is to deconstruct the notion of “Canadian Experience” with an eye to reducing barriers to employment experienced by immigrants.

writes about migration and transnationalism, suggests that it’s important to consider who is using the language of “Canadian experience”.

“It has to do with who is speaking and with what purpose. Is it an employer? A recent immigrant or a more established one? Or a person who is Canadian-born? Each uses the language of Canadian experience with a different purpose; to signal power over a worker (employer), to express frustration about not getting a job in their field (newcomer), to distinguish themselves from the more recent arrival (other workers in the labour market, settled immigrants and the Canadian-born”).

One might think the right mixture would be to get Canadian credentials, to prove language proficiency, to know the workplace ethics and practices, and to communicate in a culturally-accepted way. Dr Landolt thinks that Canadian experience from the employers’ perspective includes objective, reasonable concerns about whether a worker “knows the ropes” of a job. But between soft (or “employability”) skills and hard (or “technical”) skills, the concept, according to Sakamoto and her colleagues Matthew Chin and Melina Young), can serve employers “as a means of exploitation...a tool to take advantage of immigrants and obtain free labour.” Dr Landolt explains that this could mean not hiring a newcomer who is able to do the job, or it might mean hiring a newcomer at a skill and wage rate lower than they would receive if their skills and education were taken into account.

Sensing that Canadian educational certifications may make the difference, many newcomers rush to earn a new certificate to land a job. Still, more education—which results in years of reduced earnings as well as debt—does not necessarily lead to that job.

Through a project called Immigrants in the Global Economy: Precarious Employment and the Transnational Dimensions of Economic Incorporation, Landolt, Goldring and their research team interviewed three hundred Caribbean and Latin American immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area in 2005-2006.

They learned that “today’s immigrants are much more likely to encounter "new" economy, regardless of their education, pre-migration work experience and language skills.” And even newcomers who find jobs do not always make a living. “We should be looking at the quality of the jobs available in the labour market” Dr. Landolt says.

“Are Canadian employers offering decent work for a living wage? What government regulations allow poverty wages to continue? Are employers making productive use of the skills, expertise and education of workers?” She concludes that Canadian experience, as an instrument for systemic erosion of immigrant skills, is one of a range of strategic weapons in the employers’ arsenal that enables them to offer short-term work, under poor conditions and for low wages.

Clearly, defining the problem is a necessary but not sufficient condition for making real progress. Indeed, while Sakamoto has found that some employers—such as the big financial institutions, for example—now tend to avoid the term Canadian experience and are making strides in what is called competency-based hiring rather than hiring based on the vague notion of Canadian experience, the problem persists.

“Many employers have merely replaced Canadian experience with something else—and may look for ‘fit’, ‘familiarity’, and ‘trust’ in job candidates as a a ‘risk aversion’ strategy in hiring,” she says. “So even if employers may not use the word, Canadian experience, they may still be reluctant to hire immigrants.”
Canadian experience: THE NEWCOMER SERVICES VIEW
By Gerard Keledjian

By 2015, 100 per cent of all labour growth in Canada will come from immigration. Still, recent statistics show that GTA unemployment rates, for example, stand at 5.4 per cent for Canadian-born workers, while they’re almost double for immigrants, at 9.6 per cent. If we just look at those who arrived in the past five years, the figure is as high as 14.2 per cent.

In an effort to study the employment barriers faced by immigrants and the effective strategies used by Canadian companies to take advantage of their skills, University of Toronto academics joined community and corporate leaders in “Beyond Canadian Experience.” Authors of the 2011 study agreed that the request for “Canadian experience” is one of the most significant barriers preventing immigrants from contributing their skills to the national economy.

But newcomers looking for work in Canada can be stymied by employers looking for “Canadian experience.” And yet even the settlement sector itself has trouble defining that badly over-used term.

“I think it’s something that, unfortunately, employers use to express their lack of understanding and knowledge about international experience, education and credentials. For companies looking to hire somebody they look for what’s familiar to them and that’s why they talk about Canadian experience,” says Allison Pond, Executive Director of ACCES Employment in Toronto.

Pond sees organizations like hers as a network for newcomers, connecting them to the workplace. As one of the major barriers newcomers face is their lack of networks, ACCES tries to build relationships with employers, and connect newcomers to employers, regulators and licensing bodies—always with the intention of moving them to their field of work.

But for others in the sector, “Canadian experience” is actually a convenient shorthand for some important qualifications for prospective job candidates. For Shabnum Budhwani, Manager for Programs and Services at Skills for Change, by “Canadian experience” people refer to “soft skills” (as opposed to so-called “hard skills”, which can be supported by evidence). “When they talk about “Canadian experience”, they talk about being able to fit into the Canadian work environment, being a team player, responding to issues and solving problems.”

According to Budhwani, Skills for Change tries to foster the environment newcomers need to acquire these skills over time in its workshops. At the same time, through visits, job fairs, work placements and panel interviews employers gain knowledge about the benefits New immigrants are working with community agencies and service providers but there’s a huge gap between the settlement sector and actual employers who have those jobs. We’re trying to build bridges between those two communities.
of hiring skilled immigrants, overcome their “fear of the unknown” and trust them with added work responsibilities.

Peter Paul is the project leader at Assisting Local Leaders with Immigrant Employment Strategies (ALLIES), which supports local efforts to successfully adapt and implement programs that further the suitable employment of skilled immigrants. He says that there are in fact employers who are open to hire skilled new Canadians.

“Canadian experience be damned--but they just can’t find the right people for the right job”. New immigrants are working with community agencies and service providers but “there’s a huge gap between the settlement sector and actual employers who have those jobs. We’re trying to build bridges between those two communities,” says Paul.

One way ALLIES builds these bridges is through one-on-one mentoring, which creates direct connections between employers and new Canadians. ALLIES also manages a website called hireimmigrants.ca, which provides businesses with the tools and resources to better recruit and retain skilled immigrants. Through webinars, success stories, videos and other tools, hireimmigrants.ca showcases best practices of employers across Canada to help other corporations make progress in sourcing and integrating skilled immigrants into their workforce.

Highlighting experiences like the “buddy system” matching new and seasoned employees at financial advisory firm Deloitte & Touche—where a new Canadian or other new employee is matched with a long-time employee for six months—could help employers be better equipped in recruiting, retaining and promoting skilled immigrants.

Another way immigrant-serving agencies are trying to better connect skilled immigrants with employers is through internships. Through the Career Bridge paid internship program, for example, 1700 internationally qualified professionals have connected with leading Canadian employers since 2003. Eighty per cent of those succeeded in leveraging their internships into full-time, professional-level positions in their field.

“A internship can potentially lead to a permanent opportunity in your field, we know that is true.

The internship would give you that Canadian work experience,“ says Anne Lamont, president and CEO of Career Edge Organization (CEO), which manages the Career Bridge program. But she notes that some agencies, with all the best intentions, tell newcomers not to include all their skills and experience in their resumes to avoid looking overqualified and make themselves eligible for the internships or job opportunities. All this does, Lamont says, “is perpetuate a continued lower level of regard employers have for skilled immigrants.” Employers want to see comprehensive, well-documented cover letters and resumes, which are reflective of the individual’s skills and accomplishments, she says.

In regards to building connections, progress has been achieved on other fronts, according to Paul. “Employers are more aware now of immigrant talent and the values they bring to their companies than in past years. Programs are being developed in Canadian cities like mentoring and internships across different sectors. Though relatively small bridges are being built between the manufacturing sector in the community and the community sector that sources talent.”

Still, there is a long way to go. Paul says that some immigrant-serving community agencies, especially the small ones, are not as well placed to work with employers, as it’s difficult to be knowledgeable about accounting, finance, manufacturing, insurance and other sectors. That’s why ALLIES tries to deal with their own knowledge deficit by working closely with immigrant employment councils across Canada.

One of these councils coordinating between employers and the settlement sector is the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). “We get a chance to interface with employers to get an idea of what they are looking for. So whether it would be an actual skill set, an experience or type of profession or occupation, it gives TRIEC an opportunity to get that information from employers and then be able to pass it on to community agencies that we partner or work with,” says Charles Achampong, Manager of Corporate and Stakeholder Relations at TRIEC. Conversely, he sees this giving them an opportunity as well to learn about what challenges some immigrant-serving agencies are facing and pass this information on to employers.

He warns that the settlement sector needs to get better at making information available to professional regulatory bodies, different levels of government and prospective skilled immigrants as well.

A special report published by TD Economics in February 2012 recommends that the federal government consider giving the provinces a lump sum of settlement funds. Since the provincial authorities, according to the report, have a better idea of what services best suit the settlement employment and other needs of immigrants present in their
By 2015, 100 per cent of all labour growth in Canada will come from immigration. Still, recent statistics show that GTA unemployment rates, for example, stand at 5.4 per cent for Canadian-born workers, while they’re almost double for immigrants, at 9.6 per cent.

In jurisdictions, they would be better positioned to fund particular community-based groups and optimize service delivery and outcome. The report also urges that immigrant-serving agencies adopt a coordinated approach to service delivery including sharing common best practices. As stated in the report, “standardization of the language programs, credential recognition services, and employment services could mitigate much of the risk that businesses associate with hiring an immigrant.”

A Participatory Action Research report published by the Mennonite New Life Centre-Toronto back in 2009, likewise pushed for improved coordination and coherence of services, proposing that professional regulators establish and disclose a consistent and transparent process to evaluate relevant competence and knowledge of skilled workers, create and promote a government loan fund for newcomers to access the credential recognition process and promote a standardized language exam for newcomers.

Pond, Budhwani and others working in the sector admit the existence of the lack of coordination, fragmented services and competition for funding. However, they quickly point to the attempts at improved coordination, and at the collaborative work that is being achieved within platforms like the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) or the Consortium of Agencies Serving Internationally-trained Persons (CASIP), where independent, community-based agencies, service providers and colleges in the GTA have developed formal partnerships and strategies to coordinate and enhance service delivery to newcomers.

“I know we’re not moving immigrants into their field quickly enough. It’s not happening at the level it should be by now and for all the energy that goes into it, barriers continue to be there. It involves us, but it also involves licencing bodies, educational institutions, employers, funders and governments. There are a number of players who have to participate in creating this coordination of services,” says Pond.
Canadian experience:
THE VIEW OF NEWCOMERS THEMSELVES

By Alex Utrera

Pedro Quiroz came to Canada twenty-one years ago in search of a better life. For two years, the Peruvian lawyer ‘re-learned’ English. He spent eleven months in a government pre-employment program, rewriting his resume and practicing interviews. Despite all this preparation, after almost three years, the 150 resumes he had sent out garnered just five interviews.

At each, his potential employers asked for specific Canadian experience—something Quiroz just did not have.

Generally, newcomers—including skilled professionals—cannot begin with the formal job search. Instead, they must start off by improving their communication skills. English as a Second Language schools typically offer seven levels of functional English (which take between 21 to 42 months to complete). Only after this can newcomers begin accumulating Canadian experience of various kinds through more courses, internships and volunteer positions.

By now, two or three years will have passed. Lacking Canadian work experience, Pedro Quiroz went back to school—to study at a community college in the hopes of gaining a foothold in the Canadian job market. For two years he worked in the fast food industry at three different places to finance his studies. Then he applied to different jobs closer to his background as a lawyer. Upon landing a part-time job in a paralegal office, he quit his fast food jobs to focus on doing his best and advancing in his field. It seemed like his big opportunity had arrived at last.

Six months later, Quiroz was laid off. Without money or (still!) sufficient relevant Canadian experience to be considered at new interviews, he had to get a job in a big grocery store and is working there today.

“The idea I had about coming to Canada was absolutely unrealistic,” concurs Marcela Diaz, who came to Canada around ten years ago from Colombia. “Because I took English classes in Colombia for two years during my masters degree studies, I though I was ready to come to Canada and get a job similar to the job I left there. But I needed to apply for the job I have now as a settlement worker.”

Diaz’s co-worker, Carlos Ruiz, also came to Canada about a decade ago, from Mexico, where he used to work as a member of the country’s National Electoral Commission. He was forced to make a complete career switch, and initially worked as a carpenter in a construction company. His wife, a lawyer back in Mexico, is still looking for a new career ten years after their arrival in Canada.

“This has also been my own experience”, says Luis Alberto Mata. Like Ruiz, Mata found steady work by finding a new career. In his case, he was

Many skilled immigrants bring to Canada knowledge, diversified experiences, determination and an eagerness to advance in the Canadian labour force.
able to transfer the skills and work experiences he had in International Human Rights Law and Journalism from his native Colombia and apply them in a new setting.

“The best approach,” Mata says, “is combining several strategies such as getting involved in volunteer work, and if possible, getting support and coaching from a community-based organization. Sometimes a short certificate or re-training can be very helpful when we are talented at transferring our skills into another field.”

According to Statistics Canada, immigrants are more likely to have a university education than native-born Canadians. However, the unemployment rate is twice as high for immigrants who have been in Canada less than five years compared to Canadian-born citizens. It is even worse for immigrant women, who have the lowest employment rates when compared to both immigrant men and Canadian born women regardless of how long they have been in Canada.

Many skilled immigrants bring to Canada knowledge, diverse experiences, determination and an eagerness to advance in the Canadian labour force. At the moment, though, they face two unsatisfactory alternatives. The first involves going back to school for years (and accreditation of foreign degrees is complicated and expensive). The second is taking what is known as a “survival job”. These kind of jobs provide money to cover basic needs --sometimes not even that-- at minimum wage, or close to it. That is the very real source of the urban legend of Canada’s overqualified taxi drivers.

You might see a civil engineer from India at the front desk of McDonald’s or a cardiologist from Colombia cleaning washrooms at Metro. At the same time as they are accumulating experience in the Canadian labour force in this way, their chance of landing a job in their own field gets further away with each ten-dollar hour.

Mata says that this situation is very common, and it is not just the individuals stuck in decades-long limbo who suffer. “My main concern is about having a broader reflection on poverty and of systemic barriers, what is happening now to new Canadians is also a problem for the general population. Therefore it leads to a general impoverishment of society as a whole.”

“Statistics says that the 2008 economic crisis is over because 37% of the Canadian labour force is now employed, but they do not distinguish between part-time and full-time jobs,” Mata says.

There are also newcomers trying to tackle issues related to poverty and employment barriers by organizing and working together. The Newcomer Advocacy Committee is an initiative of the Mennonite New Life Centre which supports newcomers in reflection and action to advocate for employment equity and a reduction of poverty.

“Members of the Newcomer Advocacy Committee, all immigrants and refugees, see themselves as more than just service recipients, they want to be active members of their communities and neighborhoods, they want to be part of the solution and work with others to improve the lives of newcomers in Toronto.” says Adriana Salazar, Project Coordinator at the Mennonite New Life Centre.

A start at a solution might be to reconsider current governmental employment programs. Providing a comprehensive system of internships and practical, focused volunteer opportunities must be a focus of these programs. It is time to stop directing new Canadians to survival jobs. Enough with the lawyers, cardiologists or journalists re-training for jobs in customer service or fast food.

“If I had a chance, I would take it, my dream is to get a job in my career even if the wage is less than what I am making now,” says Pedro Quiroz. “My profession is what I am.”
I don’t think there is anybody that would really challenge that diversity has enriched this country in every single respect, culturally, economically, and politically. Diversity presents a huge competitive advantage for Canada and for communities like the Greater Toronto Region within Canada. People coming into the GTA almost without exception have come to seek opportunity, and they have come because of what they would’ve considered to be their conception of the Canadian Dream, which is that you can be whatever you want to be.

Our Canadian values say, plain and simple we don’t let people fall between the cracks. And when you invite people to come to your country and let them languish for a long period of time, unable to fulfill their own aspirations, unable to fulfill their true potential, unable to support their own families and themselves, and have that self-respect that comes with filling your potential, I think that’s letting ourselves down in terms of our Canadian values. This is something in and of itself that should motivate us to do something to address these issues. It is necessary to motivate business, and all of the other sort of actors that can help get things done in this country, to understand that it is in our own interest, in terms of the success that can make us an example to the world but also the success that we can maintain our standard of living and that we are prosperous going forward. The moral case as to why we have to address proactively and tangibly the challenge of making sure that we fully integrate people of diverse backgrounds is that these are people who today are, if not fellow Canadians, fellow residents of the country who are going to become Canadians. They are people we invited to come to this country after they went through a rigorous process of selection, and I think they are people of immense potential, and this puts in our lives the moral responsibility of making sure that these people are given the opportunity. Not a handout, nobody’s looking for that. There are people who are looking for a little bit of a ‘hand-up’, looking for some tools that might help them adjust from their particular circumstances, to the world of work or to the world of living in the GTA.

And if you look at the reality of our own marketplace, our population, it is that fifty percent of the people who live in the GTA marketplace are people who are born outside the country. So by definition the very people you’re trying to sell products to are people who have come from somewhere else. So why wouldn’t you want to have inside your own enterprise to lend the expertise, the experience, the understanding of all those different groups of people, people who represent that marketplace to which you are selling your services? And if you look at those who’ve done it, who have made an effort with respect to diversity in many different respects internally, market-wise, and so forth, that oftentimes it is showing itself in terms of reputation but also in terms of bottom-line results which are obviously very important for the enterprise.

And of course I think the business case for government is the most powerful one of them all. The governments who have a hand in inviting those people to come to Canada can see that if they’re better employed they will be able to provide better for their families. But it also means that they will pay more tax because they’ll be earning more income. The flip side to that is they will rely less on government services because they’ll be able to manage for themselves. And so, there’s a business case for governments to act more aggressively and by that I mean not passing laws and so on but by doing some of the practical things I talk about.

I consider that many government-sponsored programs and approaches have to get even more practical. The whole challenge of Canadian experience we have today, we come perhaps to misunderstand what that means. If somebody is an excellent computer technician or computer programmer, their need here is often not to have any more training on how a computer, or software, or hardware works, they know that. Maybe their need is to have a bit more help with their language. Or maybe their need is to have a bit more help in how to operate in the workplace, in terms of the social experience of working in a Canadian workplace versus what you might’ve done if you came from a place like Egypt, or from South America. I don’t think there is any better way to achieve that than to have some Canadian experience inside a Canadian workplace which is why I am such a believer in internships and programs that allow people to have periods of time working inside enterprises. But the bottom line is we have to take account of the fact that it isn’t just about the skills. So often, we know the skill is there, that’s why they’re here because they got points on the system for the skills they had. People say that they are motivated by success and tangible things and doing better for themselves, but in their heart of hearts, they know, that doing the right things makes you feel better than anything else including financial success. And that is what I think sometimes sets Canada apart, that we do the right thing, and it ends up being the right thing for people and for enterprises and for governments and for all of us. It’s not that we hand things out to people or give things out to people, just that we give the people a bit of a hand up so they can, perhaps be in position to do the same for us one day.

* This is an excerpt from a speech delivered by Mr. Tory during his keynote address at the “Beyond Canadian Experience” conference in December 2011. It has been printed with his permission.
The “Beyond Canadian Experience” project is a collaboration of the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, Mennonite New Life Centre, Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter, and the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). The project is funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Our main purpose is to deconstruct the notion of “Canadian Experience” with an eye to reducing barriers to employment experienced by immigrants. The goals of this public outreach project are to:

- Profile and disseminate findings from recent community and academic research relating to the labour market integration of immigrants and the concept of “Canadian experience”;
- Create opportunities for multi-stakeholder, solution-focused dialogue through workshops, conferences, social media, theatre and other arts-based, interactive activities;
- Highlight promising solutions and practices that challenge the concept of “Canadian experience” and/or seek to enhance the meaningful and long-term integration of immigrants into the labour market.

Lack of “Canadian experience” is a barrier to finding good jobs for many immigrants.

Canadian immigration policy currently favours and encourages foreign nationals who have high skills and prior work experience to immigrate to Canada as permanent residents. Once in Canada, however, these immigrants face serious employment challenges despite a number of government-sponsored services focusing on immigrant settlement, including employment services. Lack of “Canadian experience” is a significant factor contributing to immigrants’ unsuccessful attempts to obtain gainful employment.

The meaning of “Canadian experience” is not well understood.

Many immigrant newcomers to Canada do not understand how they can be asked to have “Canadian experience” when they have just arrived. On the other hand, employers admit that many immigrants have the hard skills (experience and expertise) required for the job but they want immigrants to show them that they have the soft skills (fitting in with the team, conflict resolution, workplace communication) they will need to figure out who to know and how to be successful in the workplace more broadly. But the soft skills they are looking for are culturally embedded and can be different for different work environments.

Mobilizing diverse talent is a collective challenge and responsibility.

Immigrants have expertise and experience – the “know-what” and “know-why” to do the job. What they often need to develop is contextual knowledge and contacts – the “know-how” and “know-who” to be successful in the Canadian environment. Employers can use a variety of workplace learning approaches, including internships and mentoring, to create the trusting environment needed for contextual knowledge development. Government can support targeted job creation through economic incentives and support for employers who create internships or permanent jobs for immigrants.

Mobilizing diverse talent is critical to corporate and community success.

Evidence shows diversity drives innovation: when it comes to increase in the number of patents, more research chairs in academe or boosting international trade – thank immigrants. By 2012, Canada will be 100% dependent on immigration for labour market growth. 2/3 of university-educated immigrants are underemployed. Lost income due to underemployment estimated at $13 billion/year (RBC Economics).

For more information visit us at: http://beyondcanadianexperience.com/home