

“Canadian Experience,” Employment Challenges, and Skilled Immigrants

A Close Look Through “Tacit Knowledge”

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Abstract

Skilled immigrants to Canada continue to experience high rates of underemployment and unemployment. A lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience, language and communication barriers, discrimination and employers’ requirement for “Canadian experience” all contribute to this disconnect. This article presents the preliminary findings of a research project exploring what “Canadian experience” means in the context of skilled immigrant employment. Given confusion over “Canadian experience,” the authors argue for use of the term “tacit knowledge.” While Canadian experience seems to encompass hard skills, the tacit dimension of Canadian experience (soft skills) is much harder to acquire. Not everything about how one needs to operate within a new workplace (and new cultural environment) can be explained in words (codified knowledge). Some of this knowledge always remains tacit. A structured, nurturing environment (e.g., successful mentoring and internships) could provide a context in which immigrants could obtain tacit knowledge. Ultimately, we need broad structural changes in how immigrants are perceived and treated in our society. In the interim, the authors believe that acquiring tacit knowledge will provide immigrants with a more nuanced understanding of the Canadian job market and thus a strategy to address this complex issue.

Keywords: Immigrants • Canadian experience • immigration services • tacit knowledge • soft skills

Over the past two decades, the Canadian federal government has acknowledged a skilled labour shortage. Given the national demographic trends of an increasingly aging population and decreasing birthrates, Canada has attempted to address this shortage by attracting skilled immigrants to ensure the country’s continued economic well-being (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2008). Yet despite an articulated need for skilled labour and an immigration system that grants entry to skilled immigrants on the basis of a positive evaluation of their

potential to contribute to the Canadian economy (Reitz, 2005), current skilled immigrants to Canada experience high rates of underemployment and unemployment and earn less than their Canadian-born counterparts (Picot & Hou, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2005). This is truer now than for previous immigration cohorts (Picot, 2008). Major reasons for this disconnect include: lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience; language and communication barriers; discrimination; and employers’ requirement for “Canadian experience” (Weiner, 2008).

Focusing on the last of these barriers, the authors are conducting a federally funded research project (the Canadian Experience Project), which explores how “Canadian experience” plays into the contradiction between the economic need for skilled immigrants and the employment challenges they face. In collaboration with several Toronto-based community agencies serving immigrants, the research team collected various kinds of data through semi-structured interviews with skilled immigrants looking for employment, their service providers and mentors, as well as Human Resources personnel; arts-based focus groups with job-seeking skilled immigrants, their mentors and service providers; participant observation in job search workshops and bridging programs; and archival research. What follows are the preliminary findings on the notion of “Canadian experience” using a constructivist grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

“Canadian experience” is more nuanced. Some believe that it serves as a means of exploitation: “Employers use Canadian experience as a tool to take advantage of immigrants and obtain free labour.” In attempting to obtain “Canadian experience,” some job-seeking skilled immigrants come to realize that the term means a world view into which they have to be socialized, as opposed to a textbook to be memorized. One focus group participant states, “I would like to know about the Canadian culture and the right way to get a job.”

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Canadian experience

You are stung with the word because they say, you have 25 years of experience you have been all over the world but you don’t have Canadian experience. Come on, this is Mars? This is Saturn?...But in here they say you don’t know how to do this the Canadian way. (Job-seeking immigrant engineer¹)

Many skilled immigrant newcomers to Canada believe that “Canadian experience” means having work experience in Canada. They do not understand how they can be asked to possess this when they have just arrived. Often, more recently arrived skilled immigrants seeking employment perceive “Canadian experience” as concrete knowledge, and look to social service providers as a source of obtaining this transferable information. Those very recent immigrant research participants have asked: “Canadian work experience. Where can I get that?” Skilled immigrants who have been in Canada for longer periods recognize that

Service providers working with immigrants are more careful in talking about “Canadian experience,” with some musing that this is largely an “abused term.” One administrator of an immigrant-serving agency states that “the requirement for Canadian work experience may in part be about ensuring a candidate has the appropriate technical skills, but it is often about the cultural competency in the workplace.” This administrator also sees a strong need to unpack “Canadian (work) experience” to examine to what extent employers use it to seek technical abilities and/or workplace cultural knowledge. In the meantime, this agency provides a multitude of services to help immigrant successfully obtain employment by addressing issues such as “the understanding of the workplace, of language, of some of the norms that make it easier as somebody coming from another country, to be comfortable, [with] the cultural [aspects] of our workplace or workplaces.”

In working with skilled immigrants, service providers use the language of “hard skills,”

which describe technical abilities that can be quantified and enumerated on a resume, and “soft skills,” skills that are culturally embedded, such as communication skills, working with others (teamwork), and conflict resolution, and are demonstrated through interviews and other interactions. Contrary to what many skilled immigrants may think, soft skills are just as important as hard skills. One service provider states, “I’ve had clients who are teachers and who went to interviews thinking that since they’re a science teacher, they’ll be asked about science or about math. They don’t do that, they ask [about] your soft skills.”

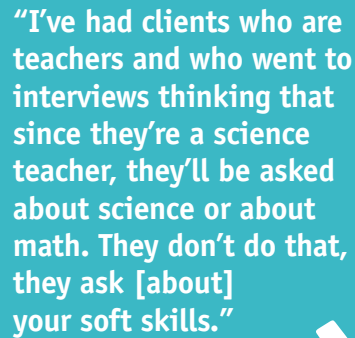
In this sense, soft skills serve as one way to talk about Canadian (work) experience. One social service worker states that “when they [potential employers] refer to Canadian experience, most of the time they’re referring to soft skills, because the hard skills, you can check.” For many employers, assessing Canadian experience through soft skills is a way of gauging how potential employees will “fit” within their work environments. One job developer states, “There are protocols on how interviews are being done...you are assessed in terms of how you fit into that culture.” From this perspective, employers are concerned about what they consider to be the unanticipated costs of hiring someone who they perceive as not “fitting in.” One service provider explains:

I think the challenge is the *hidden cost* from the employer perspective and that’s why they get on about the Canadian experience... so the goal of the participant is to let them know that there isn’t going to be any additional or hidden costs in training them (*emphasis added by the authors*).

Yet, while employers are concerned about potential additional expense in terms of training, job-seeking skilled immigrants find this process to be confusing, frustrating and unfair. One skilled immigrant shares this:

There are a lot of people with a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge, and you come here and they say, “You know what?

“I’ve had clients who are teachers and who went to interviews thinking that since they’re a science teacher, they’ll be asked about science or about math. They don’t do that, they ask [about] your soft skills.”



You don’t have Canadian experience.” For me, Canadian experience is the most stupid thing.

In seeking to obtain employment, skilled immigrants pursue many avenues to try to demonstrate that they possess Canadian experience; that they possess the appropriate soft skills to allow them to “fit in.” Some skilled immigrants deliberately take on forms of speaking and behaving that closely fit what they believe employers to be looking for. One job-seeking immigrant shares the mental checklist of body postures that he goes through when he attends an interview:

If you sit back in the chair during the interview then you are perceived as too lazy. If you sit forward in the chair then you are seen as too eager. If you place your hands on the interviewer’s desk then you are seen as invading the person’s personal space.

Others take on a more comprehensive transformation by adopting entire personas². One mentor described a job interview strategy that she shared with the immigrant she was mentoring by speaking a particular type of English:

And so now I created two characters for her. So on the one hand I am speaking very highly of her Monglish [a hybrid of English and Malayan] culture because it’s beautiful

the way she does it, they should keep it in her family. And we're trying to create another character for her when she uses English as opposed to Monglish, so that she should feel that kind of switch.

Overall, many people expressed that Canadian society celebrates multiculturalism, but individual expressions of culture (including linguistic variations when speaking English) should be toned down in order to fit into the Canadian work environment. In fact, knowing how and when to express cultural and/or linguistic difference may also be part of demonstrating competencies in soft skills. One service provider used the word "implicit knowledge" to refer to what skilled immigrants need in order to appear competent in job interviews (e.g., knowing how to engaging in self-promotion without seeming to be too humble or too aggressive).

Some seasoned immigrants indicated that acquiring Canadian experience through paid work, volunteer experiences, mentoring, internships, and/or co-op programs was very helpful in eventually obtaining professional jobs.

Similar to "Canadian (work) experience," terms such as "soft skills," "communication skills" and "Canadian workplace culture(s)" are used frequently without being clearly defined. How do these terms relate to Canadian experience? While frequently seen as necessary for obtaining employment, soft skills may not

always reflect the entirety of what employers are looking for with respect to Canadian (work) experience. One job search counselor explains that employers may associate hard skills with Canadian experience as well. For example, civil engineers need to learn about unique environmental conditions in Canada to construct a bridge. Canadian experience may then encompass both the hard skills of how particular jobs are accomplished in Canada, as well as soft skills, which are more difficult to articulate and may include understanding Canadian workplace culture and acquiring communication skills necessary to operate effectively within it. Some seasoned immigrants indicated that acquiring Canadian experience through paid work, volunteer experiences, mentoring, internships, and/or co-op programs was very helpful in eventually obtaining professional jobs.

Tacit knowledge

Given the confusion and apparent overlap of these similar terms, one helpful way of thinking about the implicit dimension (e.g., soft skills) of Canadian experience is offered by the term "tacit knowledge." According to Polyani (1966), tacit knowledge can only be acquired through experience, through "learning by doing" on the job or through contextual, relational, situated learning, such as practicums, internships, mentoring and on-the-job training (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Nonaka and Takeuchi contend that tacit knowledge is, "personal, context-specific and therefore hard to formalize and communicate," and exists in opposition to explicit knowledge, which is "transmittable in formal, systematic language" (1995, p. 59). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2000) identifies four different types of knowledge: know-what, know-why, know-how and know-who. The first two are explicit, while the latter two are tacit forms of knowledge. Thus, job-seeking skilled immigrants may have the know-what —for example, they have the ability to work with

complex computer technology. But they may be less familiar with knowing how, for instance, to engage in small talk with co-workers.

While it is important to examine all forms of knowledge, it is also important to look at how this knowledge is transmitted, so that if, in fact, Canadian experience includes tacit knowledge, service providers may strategize about how to transmit this to newcomers who may want it. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) posit four modes of knowledge conversion (Figure 1), depending on the initial form of knowledge and the form in which this knowledge takes after transference, and contend that individuals move along a certain trajectory in dialogue with all four modes. *Socialization* takes place through the creation of a shared field of interaction and allows individuals to access the tacit knowledge of others without the use of language (e.g., immigrants learning typical workplace behaviour through observation at internships). *Externalization* allows individuals to articulate their knowledge with others, while *combination* constitutes the communication of knowledge with others, from which new knowledge is created (e.g., a job search workshop instructor identifying what constitutes Canadian experience). Finally, through *internalization*, individuals acquire knowledge by way of experience or “learning by doing” and, through the “digestion” of materials, come to embody this knowledge.

We posit that tacit knowledge provides a useful framework for thinking about “Canadian experience,” because it speaks to the interaction between the unspoken and

codified (explicit) aspects of knowledge. Tacit knowledge is a more precise concept and can better guide program development for skilled immigrants, compared to the more amorphous terms like “soft skills” or “workplace culture.”

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented preliminary themes from our ongoing research project investigating skilled immigrants’ search for Canadian experience. In our project, skilled immigrants, their service providers, mentors and HR professionals who interact with immigrants have shared with us their experience that there is no universal definition for “Canadian experience.” The enforcement of this requirement for immigrants is highly problematic. Examining this concept offers important messages for those social workers among us who are working with and advocating for immigrants. Beyond the technical requirements that can be regarded as “hard skills,” several government-funded programs seem to effectively access the tacit knowledge embodied in “Canadian experience.” Successfully matched mentors can offer a great deal of tacit knowledge through informal interactions with the immigrants they mentor. Likewise, supervisors and co-workers working with immigrant interns offer a tremendous amount of knowledge and skills that immigrants can witness, observe and internalize. This process may occur at a tacit-to-tacit dimension

Figure 1
Four modes of knowledge conversion

		To	
		Tacit knowledge	Explicit knowledge
From	Tacit knowledge	Socialization	Externalization
	Explicit knowledge	Internalization	Combination

Source: Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, p. 62

(socialization), or at the interface of the tacit/explicit dimensions of the required knowledge and skills at work (internalization/externalization).

The key point is that not everything about how to operate within a new workplace (and new cultural environment) can be explained in words (codified knowledge). Some of this knowledge always remains tacit. However, as humans we have the capacity to learn these tacit dimensions of knowledge in a structured, nurturing environment. Thus, it is important for social workers to try to foster this type of environment when working with job-seeking skilled immigrants. Finally, we would like to offer a word of caution. Whenever social workers and service providers work with immigrants, there is a danger of facilitating assimilation. As mentioned earlier, employers' requirement of "Canadian experience" can be seen as an injunction to fit in. While it is important to support immigrants in trying to obtain employment, it is also important to allow service users to decide for themselves the extent to which they may be willing to change themselves to reach this goal (Sakamoto, 2007). Further, it is crucial that social workers critically assess what it is that we are facilitating immigrants to fit into. Such a discussion is extremely relevant given the history of social work in North America, whereby social workers, who no doubt had the best of intentions, sought to address the socio-economic problems immigrant groups faced by transforming them into the image of dominant society (Sakamoto, 2003). At the same time, the use of the concept tacit knowledge affords us a more sophisticated understanding of Canadian experience, this elusive yet persistent requirement that skilled immigrants face before accessing successful employment. We can then ask whether tacit knowledge in Canadian experience is really necessary, and if so, what/to what extent/where/how it is needed. These questions will, in turn, help us to design services for immigrant professionals and to strategize

about advocating for structural changes in the way we perceive and treat immigrants in our society. Several agencies have sought to foster change in the way hiring companies operate (Kukushkin & Watt, 2009; York South Simcoe Training and Adjustment Board, 2009; Larose & Tillman, 2009) and the resources these entities offer may assist social workers who collaborate with these companies (as job developers, for instance) to transform their practices. In the interim, the authors believe that the concept of tacit knowledge provides a more nuanced understanding and hopefully a solution to addressing the complex issue of Canadian experience.

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Notes

¹ This and other quotes cited in this article are taken from interviews and focus groups conducted for the Canadian experience project, funded by the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada. Individual identities may have been altered to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

² Creating different personas or increasing cultural repertoires (e.g., “code switching”) as a strategy for cultural or linguistic minorities is not new. As early as the early 1900s, an African American visionary and educator, W.E.B. Du Bois (1994/1903) talked about the need for blacks to have “double consciousness.” More recently psychological literature on biculturalism elaborates on the idea of code switching (Laframboise et al., 1993).