

INTEGRATING NEW CANADIANS – OPPORTUNITIES TO OPTIMIZE AND TRANSFORM WORKPLACE CULTURE

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The general consensus in Canada is that immigration benefits the economy and is good for business. Study after study concludes that new Canadians can help businesses tap into new local and international markets and enhance creativity, productivity, and decision-making through diverse approaches. The Conference Board of Canada, in its Report *Immigrants as Innovators: Boosting Canada's Global Competitiveness*, states that immigrants are a “source of diverse knowledge and experience that can increase innovation in Canadian businesses.”¹

However, there is evidence that suggests that much more work needs to be done to optimise the often-cited benefits that new Canadians bring to the country.

- In a publicly funded study undertaken by the Progress Career Planning Institute (PCPI),² internationally educated professionals identified several hurdles to establishing a career, including workplace acculturation, disparity in wages, underemployment, lower levels of job satisfaction and security, lack of networks and undervaluation of qualifications.
- The CIBC Focus Report “Long-Term Immigration Approach Needed To Maximize Newcomers’ Employability” estimates that the current employment and wage gaps between new immigrants and native-born Canadians cost the economy slightly more than \$20-billion in forgone earnings.³
- In its report, *How Canada Performs*, The Conference Board of Canada recommends that in order to ensure strong employment growth for the future, annual immigration levels should be increased, the process for immigrant selection and processing should be improved and foreign credentials recognition should be reformed.⁴

But beyond these general recommendations, there is a much larger issue to be addressed. It is the effective integration of new Canadians in the workplace in ways that are beneficial to their Canadian-born colleagues, the organizations in which they work and the Canadian economy. This issue must be identified, understood and appropriately addressed. Frequently cited challenges include managing resistance to change, finding appropriate tools to support integration and eliminating communication barriers.

In the absence of adequate integration and acculturation programmes, organizations not only miss opportunities to optimize talent, but also face the risks of having a disgruntled, disengaged workforce,

¹ The Conference Board of Canada *Immigrants as Innovators Boosting Canada's Global Competitiveness*, October 2012. Available at <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=3825>

² Progress Career Planning Institute study: *Progress: IEPs' Experience Matters*, February 2012. Available at <http://www.iep.ca/proceedings.htm>

³ CIBC Focus Report: *Long-Term Immigration Approach Needed To Maximize Newcomers' Employability*, August 13, 2012. Available at <http://business.financialpost.com/2012/07/24/immigrants-face-steep-climb-to-success/>

⁴ The Conference Board of Canada: *How Canada Performs: A Report Card on Canada*. Available at <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/details/economy/employment-growth.aspx>

giving rise to the formation of informal groups that jeopardize efforts to build teamwork and threaten business success.

- ***Give non-Canadian experience a chance***

Early in my marketing career in Canada, I was asked to plan the first ever major site visit for an important potential customer. Realizing that the site visit was a critical point of differentiation for the potential client, I drew on my past experience as a Protocol Officer in the Jamaican Foreign Affairs Ministry. I paid close attention to detail, with a balance of formality and hospitality that I was convinced would help the company win the business. A senior manager who was reviewing my plans for the site visit commented that I was “orchestrating a circus” and implied that this was not quite the way business is done here. I asked him to give me a chance, as site visits were new to the company’s sales process and could become a competitive advantage. As it turned out, the site visit went extremely well. The lead negotiator for the client wrote a personal note to the President of the company stating how very impressed he was with the site visit, how efficiently it was managed and the positive impression it gave him of the company. The plan I developed was used as the planning model for future site visits that became an integral part of the company’s sales pitches.

Initial resistance to new ways of doing business can be expected, particularly when foreign perspectives are being introduced. By giving new Canadians the opportunity to apply new approaches, businesses stand to benefit, particularly when there is convincing evidence that these new approaches work, whether in Canada or elsewhere.

Furthermore, the workplace culture is positively impacted when diverse perspectives are encouraged. Employees do away with limiting groupthink. Innovative thinking and action emerge as valued skills. New Canadians whose contribution is valued are regarded as colleagues with global experience and not as immigrants. In this context, inclusiveness and innovation emerge as traits of the workplace culture.

Optimizing foreign experience: how one company does it

SMTC Corporation, a global electronics manufacturing services provider that is based in Markham, Ontario, has found that diverse experience can result in diverse and innovative ideas. The company is the recipient of the 2012 CBC Toronto Immigrant Advantage Award in recognition of its commitment to hire qualified immigrants. Their employees have experience in manufacturing environments around the world and they have brought new ideas and methods that have helped improve quality standards and processes at SMTC. Similarly, the cultural know-how and language skills of immigrant employees are also a great advantage. Whether negotiating with suppliers in Asia, or transferring projects to their facility in Mexico or China, SMTC’s skilled immigrant workforce has the language skills and cultural know-how to get it done efficiently and effectively.

Source: TRIEC Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council website <http://triec.ca/2013/smtc-%E2%80%932012-cbc-toronto-immigrant-advantage-award/>

- ***Look beyond the numbers and focus on needs***

Many companies are making concerted efforts to attract and hire a diverse workforce. However the adequacy of programmes to support workplace acculturation for new Canadians after recruitment is questionable.

In the PCPI study, 92% of respondents supported the need for orientation training, particularly in the areas of workplace culture, company and job specific orientation. Yet only 49% indicated that their employer has a workplace policy that welcomes new Canadians and workers from different cultures. Of 49%, slightly over two-thirds indicated that their workplace's policy is successful or very successful. The survey results beg the question as to whether or not Canadian employers understand the needs of new Canadians and if so, whether they have the tools to support their integration in the workforce.

A few years ago, a senior HR professional present a report with statistics indicating that her company's workforce demographic profile closely reflected the community's demographic make-up. She then concluded that her company was "progressive, open and welcoming" based on the statistics. I inquired whether there was any qualitative data to support her conclusion. Were ethnic minorities and new Canadians in her company's workforce surveyed to get their perspective on how "progressive, open and welcoming" the workplace really was? There was no straight answer to my question, but my inquiry opened the door to a constructive discussion on the ways in which the company could support integration and retention of new Canadians and ethnic minorities beyond recruitment.

Organizations would do well look beyond the statistics of new hires and observe patterns of behaviour of new Canadians in the workforce. Do cliques, informal divisions among staff and work groups exist? How do turnover rates compare among ethnic groups, new Canadians and other employees? What is the rate of volunteering, attendance at social events among new Canadians and other employees?

Answers to these questions provide corporations the opportunity to understand the needs of new Canadians and the root causes of integration issues where they exist. Armed with this understanding, HR departments are in a better position to design and implement appropriate training programmes and social activities that encourage acculturation and integration.

By taking an informed approach to the design of workplace integration programmes, opportunities are created to build a supportive workplace culture of effective team collaboration and that includes measures that break down communication barriers, discourage the formation of siloes and informal social groups. This kind of work environment makes new Canadians feel valued and predisposes them to actively participate in the social dimension of workplace culture, through volunteering and participation in the organization's social activities. This is not only good for employees, but also good for the organization's public image and its efforts to attract more foreign-born job-seekers.

'Small things' make a big difference

Legal firm Stikeman Elliot recognizes that hiring professionals from culturally diverse backgrounds is not enough. Mentoring and engagement are important elements of the employee on-boarding process. Included in the employees' career lifecycle development plan is a mentoring program providing each junior staff member with more than one mentor giving both the mentors and mentees exposure to professionals from diverse cultural backgrounds and ensuring that diversity issues are addressed.

The firm understands that seemingly small things really make a big difference. For example hearing one's name being repeatedly mispronounced which can become offensive when it happens too often. The "Hear my name" initiative allows co-workers to listen to a recording of an individual saying their own name before calling them. This broke down barriers where team members might resist asking for help or collaboration out of fear of mispronouncing a name. There's also a reflection room available for religious observances, and the company's Outlook Calendar includes multi-faith holidays to help accommodate any potential conflicts. It's made a difference to engagement at the company, with the last few years' surveys showing Stikeman staff feel welcomed and supported by the company.

Source: Diversify Your Team: Looking Beyond Recruitment on HRM online <http://www.hrmonline.ca/hr-news/diversify-your-team-looking-beyond-recruitment-174228.aspx?p=2>

- ***Beyond political correctness to cultural intelligence and sensitivity***

When faced with harassment, intolerance, offensive comments and actions, employees may stay silent for fear of losing their job, being labelled as sensitive or being told that they have misinterpreted the situation. This is particularly true in the case of new Canadians. Excusing offensive actions as being the result of cultural differences or considering the situation as an isolated case can often be ways in which corporations avoid appropriately resolving offensive situations.

I am aware of a particularly disturbing incident involving a new Canadian whose country of origin has a reputation for gang-related gun crimes. At a team event, when a co-worker complimented the new Canadian on her ethnic outfit, to which a senior colleague added "so where is your gun?" When the senior colleague was asked to apologize by the new Canadian – and not by another more senior colleague present – she questioned whether or not the new Canadian could take a joke. This incident took place in the presence of a large group of co-workers who were dumbfounded. Their silence and discomfort gave way to politically correct interactions for the remainder of the event. Hopefully the offensive comment was rooted in a lack of sensitivity and cultural intelligence and not in prejudice. This coincides with the PCPI study that finds that the majority of respondents indicated that the underlying issue in workplace diversity is not lack of respect, but that both new Canadians and their Canadian-born colleagues need to acquire cultural intelligence in order to support integration.

A better way of addressing cultural sensitivity is to include diversity training modules in on-boarding programmes and in ongoing employee development activities. The professional services firm Deloitte takes this approach. On their first day, new hires are introduced to a "buddy," an initiative the firm sees

as an opportunity for cross-cultural training for both participants. An interactive workshop helps immigrant hires understand local culture and practice.⁵

A culturally intelligent workforce fosters harmony among co-workers and contributes to a global mindset that is absolutely essential in today's world. With a higher percentage of foreign-born employees, a global mind-set will likely emerge as a competitive advantage in corporations that are successful at integrating new Canadians in their workplace. Companies whose workplace culture is marked by a global mindset use their understanding of cultural differences and how to navigate them to enter foreign markets and expand business overseas.

- ***Optimizing talent***

With an aging population and low birth rates in Canada, immigration is necessary for sustained economic growth. Statistics Canada predicts that by 2031, one third of the labour force will be foreign-born with one in three workers belonging to a visible minority group.⁶ The Conference Board of Canada's Immigrants as Innovators report indicates that although immigrants comprise just 20% of the Canadian population, at least 35% of Canada Research Chairs are foreign-born. In fact, based on the Conference Board's model of known factors influencing trade, a one-percentage-point increase in the number of immigrants to Canada can increase the value of imports into Canada by 0.21 per cent and raise the value of exports by 0.11 per cent. Foreign direct investment into Canada is greater from countries that are well represented in Canada through immigration.

In the face of these statistics, no one can deny that immigration is a necessity for Canada's future economic well-being and that optimizing the skills and experience of new Canadians will contribute to the country's competitive advantage in vital areas such as trade, education, innovation in industry, technology and other sectors of the economy.

Optimising foreign talent requires that Canadian companies revise their recruitment methods to recognize foreign qualifications and ensure that foreign experience is evaluated rather than dismissed. Criteria for determining 'the fit' of employees also needs to be carefully reassessed, with greater emphasis placed on acculturation programmes that support integration. Flexibility and inclusiveness will of necessity characterise the culture in workplaces with a significant number of new Canadians in their workforce. Greater flexibility in schedules to allow for religious and cultural observances, dietary options in workplace cafeterias and the support for charitable causes in foreign countries will likely become the rule rather than the exception in years to come.

As the research and examples in this article illustrate, there is much work to be done to unlock the potential of new Canadians. Is your organization ready to open its doors and invite new Canadians to sit at the table?

⁵ Source: IS Awards Recognizing Leadership and Innovation. Available at : <http://triec.ca/how-we-make-change/is-awards/past-winners/2010-immigrant-success-award-winners/#Deloitte>

⁶ Statistics Canada: Canadian Economic Observer, August 2011, available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-010-x/2011008/part-partie3-eng.htm>

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