



Skills Without Borders



Connecting employers and skilled immigrants

FINAL REPORT

Sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (with support from Service Canada)

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Project Concept and Objectives

In September 2005, The Brampton Board of Trade had a policy, relating to support for employment integration of skilled immigrants, unanimously approved at the Canadian Chamber of Commerce Annual General Meeting.

In order to implement this policy, and as part of its strategic plan to further the development of business relationships within its cultural diverse community, The Brampton Board of Trade took the initiative to develop and implement a project titled “**Employer Awareness – Capitalizing on Skilled Immigrants in North Peel**”.

The aim of the Employer Awareness campaign was

- *To educate employers about the needs, importance and benefit of hiring skilled immigrants*
- *To make employers aware of the various programs, services, and community resources available to support the hiring, integration, training and retention of skilled immigrants*
- *To provide immigrants settlement and employment organizations and service providers with a clear and better understanding of the labour demands, needs, challenges and expectations of employers in North Peel*

To lead, coordinate and implement the project, a Program Coordinator was appointed, and an Advisory Committee was created, comprised of representatives of the BBOT, leading settlement organizations providing employment services to newcomers, including **ACCES Employment Services, COSTI Immigrant Services, TRIEC(Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council), United Way of Peel and Brampton Neighbourhood Resource Centre, as well as the City of Brampton Economic Development, The Region of Peel, Human Resources Professional Association of Peel, and the Caledon Chamber of Commerce.**

Planned Activities and Events

The planned activities and events of the project included:

Labour Market Research to provide a comprehensive study of labour demands/gaps amongst local employers with a view to utilizing this information to assist local

immigrant settlement and employment agencies that support the placement of skilled immigrants in opportunities where their skills and qualifications are in demand.

Research and Focus Groups to Identify and Assess the Hiring Challenges faced by employers when considering skilled immigrants, and utilize this information to develop strategies that will help employers and prospective immigrants/employees overcome the identified barriers

Employer information sessions on capitalizing on skilled immigrants in North Peel, that will educate employers and employment services agencies on the benefits of hiring immigrants; raise awareness of existing government programs, services and support available to employers and immigrants; provide accreditation assessment information; improve access to skilled immigrants in North Peel seeking employment; share Employer Best Practices; and introduce cultural awareness programs to employers.

Job Fair to provide employers with resources that link skilled immigrants with employers that have job opportunities to fill, and employment agencies recruiting applicants.

Marketing and Promotions of various programs and services available through this program and other local service providers and government programs that assist with settlement and employment integration of skilled immigrants.

The information was to be consolidated in one **“Hire Immigrants” Resource Kit** that would be disseminated at all program-related events and general business events of the Brampton Board of Trade.

A **website** was also to be developed where all this information, related to the project, would be posted and that would also serve as a portal to other related resources.

Expected Results

- *Develop, through a study, a clear understanding of labour market demands, and provide recommendations and actions that facilitate the effective integration of skilled immigrants in the local economy*
- *Support skilled immigrants in acquiring gainful employment*
- *Educating and increasing awareness of employers and employment service agencies about programs and services offered locally to support employment integration of skilled immigrants*
- *Support the local economy by capitalizing on the contributions of skilled immigrants*

The culmination of all the activities proposed in this program was to minimize the labour gap that exists between the large supplies of skilled immigrants available to contribute to the economy in North Peel by increasing the demand amongst employers for such employees. Engaging the involvement of businesses and employers was the key to making all the other programs, services and resources related to supporting skilled immigrants successful

As the leading association of businesses in the community, with direct access and communications to all employers, the Brampton Board of Trade was confident to be in an excellent position to deliver on this program

Development of Logo, Branding and Website; Promotion and Advertisement

The project was formally launched on June 6th, 2006, in the presence of the Ontario Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, the Hon. Mike Colle, at a breakfast attended by more than a hundred employers, representatives of settlement organizations, post secondary educational institutions and with extensive media coverage.

Following the launching a full marketing service company was contracted and, in consultation with the Advisory Committee, a logo was developed and the project was re-titled and branded under **“Skills Without Borders- Connecting employers and skilled immigrants.”**

Subsequently a promotion campaign of the project was implemented, posting ads in different media, issuing press releases and networking with settlement agencies.

Simultaneously the website www.skillswithoutborders.com was developed. Among others it features project objectives, partners, announcements, events and testimonials of success stories. At the same time a reference and a link to the **“Skills Without Borders”** website was added to The Brampton Board of Trade website. The website has been continuously updated to feature the project’s events, and it has been visited by more than 4000 people.

Together with the advertisement campaign, and as a result of the project activities and events, the website generated countless inquiries and requests for help from internationally trained professionals and trades people unemployed or underemployed in others than their fields of training and expertise. Those requests were channelled to our project partners (settlement agencies), mainly to **COSTI Immigrant Services**, for follow up and resolution, resulting in the concrete integration of skilled immigrants into the Canadian workforce in their fields of training and expertise.

Research results: Labour needs in North Peel

The results of the survey on **Labour Needs in North Peel**, released on March 22nd during the first employers’ presentation **“Meeting the Skills Challenge”**, show that while many

employers in North Peel (Brampton and Caledon) are expecting their business to grow (38%) or at least stay the same (56%) over the next 12 months, the majority (79%) are already having difficulty filling positions.

Employers identified sales and marketing (31%), skilled trades (constructions, mechanical, technical) (22%), Information Technology (16%), engineering (14%) as the skills they need to meet their short-term needs.

In addition, 40% said they are having trouble filling jobs today in areas of skilled trades (construction, mechanical, technical). 19% said engineers (structural, electrical and civil); sales and marketing was mentioned by 15%; and managers and administration 15%.

Selecting from a list of possible reasons 39% of respondents attributed it to a shortage of applicants with the appropriate skills, qualifications or licenses and 24% said there was a shortage of suitable labour available in the marketplace.

Skills required in the future covered a broad spectrum, but there was common ground around a need from skills in new technology, including computers, robotics, electro-mechanical, IT and engineering (structural, mechanical and electrical), including design.

A majority of respondents expressed concern over an expected shortage of skilled trades, and the majority agreed, as well, that communication, written and oral, and marketing and sales are required for employers to sustain, improve and expand over the next 5-10 years.

A complete report of the results of the survey “**Labour Needs in North Peel**”, was published and disseminated among settlement agencies and other stake holders, and is available online at www.skillswithoutborders.com.

Research Results: Barriers to Hiring Skilled Immigrants in North Peel

Employers participating in the discussion about **Barriers to Hiring Skilled Immigrants in North Peel** stated that language skills, difficult to assess foreign education and credentials, a lack of Canadian experience and cultural “fit” are significant obstacles for immigrants seeking employment, and employers hiring and retaining immigrants as employees.

These findings came as a result of a survey and a series of three focus groups that explore what employers consider major barriers for qualified immigrants looking for work in their areas of expertise.

The results of the research on **Barriers to Hiring Skilled Immigrants in North Peel**, also released on March 22nd during the first employers’ presentation “**Meeting the Skills Challenge**”, show that most companies, 87%, insist on a “high level of proficiency” in language, and not just ESL training, but proficiency in both written and oral skills and a

comprehension level that meets the need for meaningful communication in their professional field.

Most employers, 73%, said foreign credentials are too difficult to assess and would not consider hiring skilled immigrants without a clear understanding of how their credentials equate with Canadian standards.

With respect to foreign experience, 73% of participants said work experiences and references, provided by skilled immigrants, were “too difficult to verify”. However, 60% agreed that foreign experience is equivalent to Canadian experience and 87% said they would hire a skilled immigrant without Canadian experience, assuming skills and experience were comparable.

Most employers acknowledged that skilled immigrants are a growing part of the employee landscape in North Peel, but expressed a need to “improve integration” of immigrants into Canadian culture. They claimed that there is a lack of understanding by many immigrants about expectations and business practices in the Canadian workplace, and believe there is reverse onus on the immigrant population to better understand “Canadian culture”.

Conversely, employers expressed fear in hiring immigrants because of confusion around religious rights and cultural practices and indicated concern about how others in the workplace might react to someone perceived to be getting special treatment. Some had concerns about workplace tolerance by other employees and how people would get along, admitting “prejudice” was a concern for workplace harmony.

In focus groups discussions, employers expressed concern about cultural differences and said they would welcome programs to assist with social integration, and programs that specifically deal with training immigrants in Canadian culture. One employer said, “We as employers are being encouraged to diversify our workplace, but they (skilled immigrants) are here and know nothing about our culture and are not prepared to integrate.”

Implied in many of the responses was that hiring skilled immigrants was more complicated and time consuming than hiring Canadian born/trained employees. Some employers even proclaimed they supported a “hire Canadian” practice.

About 80% of employers said they were unaware of the work of settlement agencies and the programs and services offered to help immigrants find employment in their related fields. They agreed that skilled immigrants face challenges not only regarding formal language skills, but also in interpersonal and effective communication (written and oral) skills, analytical skills, and soft skills like creativity, diplomacy, flexibility, change-readiness, problem solving, leadership, team building and listening skills.

Employers expressed, as well, a need for help with verification of education and work credentials, and that they also wanted help with mentoring, apprenticeships and assistance with the cost of getting Canadian certification for immigrant employees.

Notwithstanding these barriers, employers agreed there are benefits to hiring skilled immigrants, and acknowledged that immigrants are, in most cases, conscientious and have a good work ethic.

They also realized that immigrants could potentially open new markets in other parts of the world, an advantage to a global company.

Employers recognized, as well, that cultural diversity in the workplace was important in a community where immigration comprised most of the growth. They added that immigrants can help them by providing a stronger community connection, and that immigrants can also help other employers and employees better understand new cultures.

A complete report of the research results on “Barriers to Hire Skilled Immigrants in North Peel ”was published and disseminated among employers, settlement agencies and other stake holders, and is available online at www.skillswithoutborders.com.

Development of the Employer’s Resource Guide

Through extensive and thorough research that included online requests for information, on-site visits and internet research, an **Employers’ Resource Guide** was developed to assist business owners, employers and hiring managers:

- *Access the large and growing pool of internationally trained professionals and trades people available in the Brampton-Caledon communities, that are currently unemployed or underemployed;*
- *Overcome barriers encountered while hiring immigrants; and*
- *Better recruit, hire, and retain a culturally diverse workforce.*

In its first section, the Guide includes information and suggestions about:

- *Why should businesses hire immigrants*
- *The benefits for businesses of hiring immigrants*
- *How to access the pool of skilled immigrants*
- *How to improve hiring practices*
- *How to assess language skills, proficiency levels and specific job related language skills*
- *How to assess, compare and recognize foreign credentials and experience*

In its second part, the Employer's Resource Guide consolidated in one handy publication a fairly exhaustive list of the many various programs and services available to help employers facilitate the effective employment integration of skilled immigrants.

The guide, launched during the first employer's presentation "**Meeting the Skills Challenge,**" in the presence of the Ontario Minister of Citizenship and Immigration the Hon. Mike Colle, was published on hard copies (available for pick up or mailing at the BBOT office) and it is also available online at www.skillswithoutborders.com.

Copies of the Guide have been mailed to 2000 employers, and distributed among settlement agencies and other stake holders, as well as during several Brampton Board of Trade and ACCES events.

Employers' presentations "Meeting the Skills Challenge"

Two **Breakfast Employers' Presentations** were organized and conducted to further increase employers' awareness about the importance, urgency and benefits of hiring skilled immigrants. They featured, as keynote speakers, the Ontario Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, the Hon. Mike Colle, and Marni Johnson, President of Workplace Communications & Diversity Inc.

Included on the agenda for both events were testimonials from employers of success stories of integrating skilled immigrants into their workforce in their fields of training and expertise.

Both events featured a panel of experts from relevant settlement agencies providing counselling and other employment services to newcomers, to answer employers' questions and address their concerns regarding:

- *Language skills*
- *Foreign credentials evaluation and recognition*
- *Licensing for regulated professions*
- *Assessment of international experience and*
- *Cultural Diversity issues*

During the first of these presentations, the results of the research on Labour Market and Barriers to Hiring Skilled Immigrants were presented and the Employers' Resource Guide was launched.

These presentations took place on March 22nd and April 4th at the Brampton Golf Club, and were attended by more than 150 companies, representatives of post secondary educational institutions, settlement agencies, the City of Brampton and the Region of Peel, and both were extensively covered by different media.

Job Fair

As a culmination of the project, a **Job Fair** was organized to provide concrete opportunities to employers to access the pool of skilled immigrants living in North Peel, and to give them the possibility to meet face to face with potential employers.

The Fair, that took place on April 19th at the Holiday Inn Select Brampton, was heavily publicised in settlement agencies as well as in the main stream and ethnic media. It counted with the participation of over 40 employers-exhibitors with current job openings or anticipated opportunities within the next six months.

The event was attended by more than 500 job seekers, who handed out countless copies of their resumes and filled out numerous applications.

Feedbacks from employers stated that the Fair lead to a significant number of job interviews and actual hiring.

Networking with Settlement Agencies

As part of the “**Skills Without Borders**” project, and to better connect employers and skilled immigrants, The Brampton Board of Trade has fostered close ties with leading settlement agencies providing employment services to skilled immigrants.

As a result, The Brampton Board of Trade will be pursuing future joint initiatives with leading settlement organizations providing employment services to newcomers to further advance the cause of “connecting employers with skilled immigrants” and achieving the full integration into the Canadian economy of internationally trained professionals and trades people already living in our community..

Project Results Evaluation and Conclusions

The Brampton Board of Trade project “**Skills Without Borders**” has exceed, by far, all the expectations and goals it was set up to achieve.

Besides the accomplishment of all its objectives and deliverables, the project brought the issue of integrating internationally trained professionals and trades people into the Canadian economy, and the needs, importance and benefits for businesses of hiring skilled immigrants and diversifying their workforces, to the front page all across the board in our community.

The level of awareness of employers about this issue has increased significantly; they have started to realize the urgent need and benefits for their bottom line, of hiring, retaining and management a culturally diverse workforce.

They have also begun to learn that there are services, programs and resources available to help them tapping into the pool of skilled immigrants already living in our community, and how they could provide the answer to their present and future skills needs.

In a survey that was developed to evaluate the results of the project, and that was given to a sample of participants on the project, its events and activities, employers were asked to assess how the project has changed their understanding of the issue of integrating skilled immigrants into the Canadian economy.

Participants on the survey were asked if and how, as a result of the project “Skills Without Borders”, their levels of awareness and activities have change regarding

- *Needs, importance and benefits of hiring skilled immigrants*
- *Knowledge of programs, services and resources available to assist employers hiring skilled immigrants*
- *Recruiting, interviewing and hiring skilled immigrants*

The results of the survey speak by themselves:

The vast majority of participants (95%) stated that their level of awareness with respect to the needs, importance and benefits of hiring skilled immigrants have increased somewhat or significantly.

Similarly, most employers (85%) expressed that their level of awareness about services, programs and resources available to assist them hiring and retaining skilled immigrants is now higher or significantly higher, and many (55%) said that they have increased their recruiting activities, placements and mentorship’s opportunities leading to the actual hiring of skilled immigrants.

The Brampton Board of Trade project “**Skills Without Borders**” was the recipient, in recognition of excellence, of a **Chair’s Award** at the **Ontario Chamber of Commerce Annual General Meeting** that took place in London, Ontario on May, 2007. In a press release on May 4th, 2007, Len Crispino, President and CEO of The Ontario Chamber of Commerce stated that “*Skills Without Borders has effectively enabled employers with vacancies, to understand and access foreign-trained workers with training*”, and that “*Skills Without Borders has become a model for other communities in Ontario and has received well-deserved accolades from government, employers and immigrants*”.

Recommendations

Despite all the progress made by different levels of government, settlement agencies and the outstanding achievements of The Brampton Board of Trade project “**Skills Without Borders**”, pervasive barriers are still preventing skilled immigrants from gaining employment in their fields of training and expertise, and employers from considering internationally trained professionals and trades people as suitable candidates to join their workforces in our multicultural community.

In fact, in the Region of Peel (Brampton and Caledon), where the Labour Needs Research clearly identified a shortage of skills in several sectors of the local economy,

newcomers remain unemployed or underemployed, performing menial or “survival” jobs, with the subsequent waste of talent and detrimental consequences for the local economy.

The hiring barriers preventing newcomers from joining the labour force in their professions and trades, identified in the research, can be grouped in four main categories:

- *Language Skills related barriers*
- *Credentials Assessment, Evaluation and Licensing barriers*
- *Canadian Experience Barriers, and*
- *Acculturation barriers*

To bring down barriers in the first three main categories, numerous agencies, programs and services have been implemented with substantial funding from all levels of government, most recently Bill 124 and the Employment Ontario initiative from the Provincial Government.

Barriers related with acculturation, however, have not yet been sufficiently researched, identified and addressed, and are still playing an enormous role in preventing the full integration of Newcomers into the Canadian trade and professional labour force. The lack of information about Diverse Ethnic Cultures, the fear of the unknown, previous negative experiences, bias, and discrimination, are often “hidden” and the usual pervasive excuses and justifications for not hiring internationally trained Professionals and Trades people are, instead, given to internationally trained applicants:

“The level of Language Skills and proficiency are not good enough”, “the Credentials are difficult to understand and to assess”, “the previous experience is hard to verify” and it’s, after all, “not Canadian.”

In summary, cultural barrier are undermining the efforts and progress already made to bring down hiring barriers in the other main three categories, and yet, little or no attention have been paid to this cultural divide, despite the numerous concerns expressed by employers and its paramount implications in preventing the full integration of skilled Newcomers into the Canadian Economy in their fields of expertise. As a consequence, and despite all efforts and progress, according the most recent report, released by Statistic Canada on January 30, 2007, *“Immigrants are financially no better off now than they were before the turn of the millennium, even though they have more education and skilled qualifications than a decade ago.”*

The urgent need for addressing the issue of Cultural Diversity and Canadian Acculturation, and their implications in preventing Newcomers from breaking into the Canadian Labour Market in their fields of expertise, is strongly supported by the results of the Brampton Board of Trade project **“Skills Without Borders”**. In fact, most of the employers who participated in the discussions about **“Barriers to Hiring Skilled Immigrants in North Peel”** expressed concerns about cultural differences in the workplace, and stated that “immigrants do not understand the Canadian workplace

environment and business practices.” They also stated that “cultural fit is a significant obstacle for immigrants seeking employment, and employers hiring and retaining immigrants as employees”, and expressed a need to “improve integration of immigrants into the Canadian culture”.

Employers said as well that there is a lack of understanding by many immigrants about expectations and business practices in the Canadian workplace. They believe there is a reverse onus on the immigrant population to better understand Canadian culture.

Conversely, employers expressed “Fear in hiring immigrants” because they were unaware of religious rights and cultural practices. They also expressed loud and clear, that they “would like to see programs to assist with social integration, and a program that specifically deals with training immigrants in Canadian culture.”

These findings sustain and strengthen several other recent studies and research results. For example, Compas Inc, conducted a Research Study, for the Development of a Marketing Plan, for hireimmigrants.ca TRIEC, The Toronto Immigrant Employment Council. The Report, published in March 31, 2006 states, ***“The difficulty faced by skilled immigrants in seeking employment is sometimes believed to be a result of two factors (one of them)***

- ***Cultural discomfort, psychological distance, prejudice, or outright racism among employers...”***

Based on these findings, and in order to bring down these Hiring Barriers, resulting from cultural diversity, a comprehensive and two-sided approach should be implemented. The issue is to be addressed, and the barriers are to be brought down, by a simultaneously approach from both, the side of the Newcomers, as well as the side of the Employers.

From the side of the Newcomers, the barriers result from the lack of knowledge and understanding of Canadian Corporate Culture and Customs and from the side of the Employers from lack of accurate information about diverse and ethnic cultures, misconception or negative perceptions, prejudice, previous negative experiences, as well as to a lesser extent, due to protectionism of “main stream” and simply discrimination.

We are convinced that it is only through the participation, commitment and engagement of employers, settlement and employment agencies, community ethnic organizations and society at large that the collective of all resources and programs developed around this issue will yield results in terms of promoting the hiring, retention and management of a cultural diverse workforce as well as the achievement of a social harmony and further economic growth in our community.

The Brampton Board of Trade, as the leading business association in our community, is fully committed to fulfill its social responsibilities and business interests by carrying on its engagement with different levels of government , employers, settlement agencies and other partners to lead the cause of integrating internationally trained professional and

trades people into the Canadian economy for the sake of business growth, economic prosperity and social justice and, at the same time, to set an example and provide a model to other boards of trade and chambers of commerce across Ontario and throughout Canada.