

Editorial: Immigrant talent being squandered

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In the Greater Toronto Area - indeed, throughout Canada - we take so much pride in our acceptance of newcomers that we practically take them for granted. As a measure of tolerance, that is good.

But from the perspective of what new immigrants need from us, it is discouraging to them, and costly to all of us, because we are wasting so much talent. The Conference Board of Canada estimates this country loses \$4 billion to \$6 billion a year for one simple reason: our failure to take into account the skills and qualifications new immigrants bring to Canada.

Consider the facts. More than 40 per cent of immigrants to Canada in the 1990s had at least one university degree, nearly twice the Canadian average. Yet far too many of them are unemployed or under-employed.

For the university-educated population, the jobless rate for recent newcomers is at least three times the rate for Canadian-born citizens. When they get a job, six out of 10 immigrants end up working in areas other than those for which they are qualified. As a result, one in four new male immigrants with a university degree finds himself working in a low-education, low-wage job. For women the rate is worse, at almost 40 per cent.

Canada cannot afford such waste. In just six more years, this country will have to rely on immigration for all of its net labour force growth.

Fortunately, the Toronto region has business and community leaders dedicated to tearing down the barriers that prevent new immigrants from contributing all they can. Recognizing that a challenging job is one of the key advantages an immigrant can have for making a speedy and successful adjustment to a new life in Canada, they created the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) to speed up the process for new immigrants to find jobs here that match their qualifications.

Chief among the barriers, it found:

A reluctance among employers, including some of the biggest and most sophisticated, to recognize academic credentials they are not familiar with, and to take on immigrants who have not already acquired Canadian work experience in the fields in which they were trained.

A lack of fluency in the technical language of the workplace, even among immigrants with reasonably good English language skills.

Most immigrants arrive without professional or labour market contacts or networks to provide information on job opportunities and requirements and the culture of Canada's workplace environment.

A lack of targeted training programs to help new immigrants overcome gaps in their qualifications.

While TRIEC has introduced innovative and highly successful programs to help immigrants get past these barriers, it clearly cannot hope to overcome them on its own. Its highly oversubscribed Career Bridge program, which offers immigrants with professional backgrounds the Canadian work experience they need through paid internship programs, likely won't be able to find spaces for many more than 150 interns this year.

Its new Mentoring Partnership Program, which matches Canadian professionals with immigrants in the same field, still has a long way to go - it is starting off with only 214 mentors, although it hopes to make 1,000 matches by the end of the year.

While the council's aim is to keep expanding these kinds of programs, and to make more and more businesses aware of the benefits that can be realized by opening their doors to skilled immigrants, it also says that government could be doing so much more. And this is why current discussions between Queen's Park and Ottawa over federal funding for immigrant settlement and labour market development are so crucial.

Although education has become the top criterion for immigrant selection, Ottawa has only just started to adjust its settlement funding to reflect the change. The snail's pace at which it is addressing these issues is a major concern in Ontario - the province takes 57 per cent of new immigrants, yet receives only 34 per cent of federal settlement funds.

While Ottawa now contributes to shelter costs and basic language training, it also should fund workplace language training and the type of internships and mentoring that TRIEC and other groups are trying to provide. It should work with Queen's Park, our colleges and universities, the self-regulated professions and licensing bodies to develop the means to assess foreign academic credentials and identify the bridging programs needed to ensure that immigrants can meet Canadian standards.

With such tools, Ottawa could provide potential immigrants with more services while they are still overseas and thereby prepare them to hit the ground running upon their arrival in Canada.

Soon, immigrants will be the only source of our labour force growth. The more we do to draw on the skills they bring, the better off we all will be.