

## HIO Case Study

# Algonquin College: Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Workforce that is Representative of the Student and Community Population

## Algonquin College Case Study at a Glance



To better serve community and clients, Algonquin College strives to develop a diverse and inclusive workforce that is representative of the wider community and Algonquin's student base. Algonquin is working to understand and address the barriers immigrant job seekers face to enhance their employment prospects with Algonquin.

Specific initiatives include:

- Uses staff participation in coaching and mentoring along with input and insights from Algonquin's English as a Second Language (ESL) students to understand barriers to employment
- Regularly and routinely sends job descriptions to LASI World Skills and other organizations supporting internationally trained immigrants (automatic email list)
- Collaborates with immigrant serving agencies to hold workshops on how to apply for a job at Algonquin (format a resume, assess skill requirements, interview skills, etc.)
- Accepts international qualifications, values internationally obtained work experience, provides feedback to unsuccessful job candidates
- Full orientation program for all new employees, formal mentorship program for all new academic staff, less formal mentoring program for support staff

## ABOUT HIO CASE STUDIES

**Hire Immigrants Ottawa** is pleased to profile the innovative and best workplace practices of Ottawa-based businesses and organizations as they pertain to the recruitment, integration and retention of new immigrants within the workplace. The case studies describe the types of initiatives being undertaken by local employers, the motivations for introducing the initiatives and their impacts on individual, team, and workplace performance.

By sharing successful recruitment and integration practices more broadly within the management and human resource communities of Ottawa-based organizations, HIO seeks to inform and encourage other workplaces to undertake their own recruitment and integration efforts. The case studies are based on interviews held with company representatives who are actively engaged with the implementation of recruitment and integration initiatives in the Ottawa area.

## Algonquin College: Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Workforce that is Representative of the Wider Community and Student Population

Algonquin College has close to 1,200 full-time and 1,500 part-time employees who serve the diverse needs of more than 50,000 full- and part-time students. Algonquin has twice been recognized by Hire Immigrants Ottawa with awards of employer excellence for their practices in recruitment and retention of internationally trained immigrants. To learn more about Algonquin’s initiatives, Hire Immigrants Ottawa interviewed four members of Algonquin’s HR team: Stephanie Box, Recruitment and Succession Planning Officer; Leah-Anne Brown, Acting Manager, Organizational Effectiveness; Lisa Gardiner, Recruitment and Performance Management Officer; and Nigel Parker, Human Resources Consultant. Algonquin is represented on HIO’s public sector working group and the Employer Council of Champions.

### Algonquin’s Core Values: Caring, Integrity, Learning, Respect

Algonquin’s commitment to diversity and inclusion is rooted in its **core values**, which “value the dignity and uniqueness of the individual” and “value equity and diversity in the community”. The College’s commitment to diversity is further formalized as a key strategic policy of the College’s Human Resource Department, which strives to “create a culture in which diversity and equality of opportunity are promoted actively and in which unlawful discrimination is not tolerated. The College recognizes the educational and business benefits of having a diverse community of staff and students and to this end, is working towards building and maintaining an environment which values diversity”.

For the members of Algonquin’s Human Resources team these are ideas firmly embedded in Algonquin’s workplace culture, and they are seen as contributing to the college’s continued standing as a leader in post-secondary education and an employer of choice. According to Nigel Parker, Human Resources Consultant with the college, Algonquin’s

core values are a big part of the reason the HR team is so active in reaching out to Ottawa’s new immigrants: “Our core values of Caring, Learning, Integrity and Respect permeate everything. It comes from everybody that works here, from the President and senior leadership to mid-management and staff; everybody ‘talks the same language’ and that is huge. It is a pretty good indication of the spirit and culture of this place”.

Offering a dynamic and exciting place to work, competitive compensation, ongoing career and professional development, comprehensive benefits and a demonstrated commitment to employee wellness, Algonquin is widely regarded as an employer of choice, and typically has little difficulty attracting candidates for its job openings. But Parker recalls that several years ago, Algonquin’s senior leadership and executive committee took a growing interest in diversity, and wanted to make sure that the college’s workforce reflected the growing diversity of the student base enrolled in its programs.

At that time, Algonquin’s HR team members were engaging with culturally diverse immigrant job seekers, but realized that those candidates were not necessarily successful in landing jobs at the college. According to Parker, “while there was an interest and drive to really open up the college to a more diverse workforce, we needed to understand the barriers facing immigrant job seekers, and how to break those barriers down”. For Parker and his HR colleagues, it was also a matter of very practical need: “There’s this huge untapped labour market of skilled immigrants, and knowing that the labour market is going to get tighter, as scarce skills become even more difficult to find, we had to be able to tap into this workforce. As much as we love helping people be successful, it was also the fact that Algonquin is going to need these people”.

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### Understanding the barriers to employment faced by immigrants

To gain a better understanding of the barriers preventing internationally trained immigrants from landing jobs at Algonquin, Parker took the time to meet with many

culturally diverse skilled immigrants who were enrolled in the college's English as a Second Language (ESL) program: "What I found was that many of them did not understand how to effectively look for jobs, apply for jobs, or assess job skill requirements against their own competencies and skills. They didn't always understand the Canadian workplace, and the Canadian way of doing things, including what might be expected in an interview situation. And so we saw this huge gap, and this is what we really wanted to try to start breaking down".

## Expanding the pool of immigrant job applicants

As a first step in breaking down barriers, the HR department began sending all of their job descriptions out to LASI World Skills and other immigrant serving organizations. The goal was to gain access to Ottawa's networks of immigrant job seekers and thereby increase the pool of immigrants applying to jobs at Algonquin. "These organizations would get knowledge of the jobs", explains Parker, "and through their job networks and their employment services, they could identify qualified people and get them to apply for the jobs. We always believe you have to hire the best candidate, but if you get more candidates who come from a certain area, the chances are you are going to hire more of them, so over time, you will end up with a better reflection of the student base".

Tapping into the resources and networks of community organizations has proven itself as an easy yet effective way for Algonquin to reach out to diverse immigrant job seekers. It is a practice that continues to this day: "They're still on our automatic e-mail list so they continue to get all of our job postings. We just wanted to widen the pool of candidates and open it up so that we could still hire the best candidate". According to Stephanie Box, Recruitment and Succession Planning Officer, this strategy/initiative has paid off, with a number of full-time and contract positions at Algonquin having been filled by internationally trained immigrants coming through World Skills and other immigrant serving organizations.

## Outreach Workshops that Inform and Educate Immigrant Job seekers

The Algonquin HR team also undertakes a variety of outreach initiatives designed to educate and prepare

immigrants for better success in Algonquin's hiring process. For several years now, the HR team has been holding workshops co-hosted with local immigrant serving organizations, community centres, and other organizations. These workshops have provided concrete advice and guidance on what Parker fondly describes as "the Algonquin way" of applying for a job. "We let them know how to format a resume so that we'll be able to recognize the skills and attributes we are looking for, and so that they will have the best opportunity to get an interview. A one- or two-page doesn't work for us. We want to know all your skills and all your experiences, and in full. So going out there and discussing that with skilled immigrants and letting them know that's what we're looking for is incredibly helpful to them".

"We also tell them about our interview format and process, what to expect in a panel interview, and advice about how to best answer questions. Even information about how to present one's self in an interview can be a big eye opener for people from diverse cultural backgrounds, because they've never had to go through this before. So helping them get that kind of knowledge, specifically about Algonquin, really gave them a sense of wanting to apply here".

Leah-Anne Brown, Acting Manager of Organizational Effectiveness at Algonquin has had firsthand experience of the success these outreach initiatives have created for immigrant job seekers: "At a HIO/LASI World Skills volunteer coaching event, I spent some time chatting with about 20 people who had recently immigrated to Canada. A month later, I was on an interview Board, and one of the candidates was a person from the coaching event. I didn't recognize the name, but he said later that we had met at the coaching event. He was eventually hired. I found that rewarding, to me that was a win-win".

The College's outreach activity has also led to their active involvement with the Hire Immigrants Ottawa initiative since its inception in 2007 participating on the ECC, Working Groups, and in HIO coaching and networking events.

## Accepting International Qualifications and Valuing Foreign Work Experience

Algonquin has also taken steps to address two common barriers faced by newcomers to Canada: foreign credential

recognition and lack of Canadian work experience. Parker explains that for all intents and purposes, it used to be a ‘requirement’ that internationally trained job applicants have their foreign credentials evaluated to determine Canadian equivalency. “It was a cost prohibitive process for many of them”, says Parker. Similarly, Algonquin’s hiring managers more often than not wanted Canadian work experience, an obvious barrier for most newcomers to Canada. For Parker and colleagues, these requirements often seemed like an “unnecessary and unfair bias in the workplace”.

While Parker recognizes that certain occupations and professions have “very specific credentialing requirements” in which applicants simply must meet Canadian or provincial licensing and regulatory standards, he also suggests that this is not necessarily the case with all job postings. “One of the things we have worked really hard to do is to break down the barrier if immigrants don’t have Canadian experience. Internationally trained and educated immigrants may have to understand the Canadian context, but why does the experience have to be Canadian?”

By routinely raising this question with hiring managers and bringing it to the attention of the selection committees in which they participate, members of Algonquin’s HR team have helped to make international qualifications and experience far more acceptable than in the past. “We all kind of came at it from the same perspective. You know, when we’re talking to the managers, this is how we would like to look at experience and qualifications. While it is always helpful to have international credentials evaluated to determine Canadian equivalency, unlike in the past, we now take international credentials at face value to start off with, rather than having that as a barrier until such time as they have proven it”.

## Integration and inclusion practices

Algonquin provides a full orientation program for all new employees, and has several mentorship programs and initiatives underway or under development. These include a formal mentorship program for all new academics, a

mentorship program in support of succession planning, and a program for support staff. Mentorship is seen as an important tool for integration, learning and career development, and ultimately, an inclusive workforce. Stephanie Box sees mentoring as an ongoing commitment: “The mentorship program is definitely growing, and it’s something we’re very proud of at Algonquin College, but it’s still undergoing development”.

## Impacts –A diverse and inclusive workplace

As a result of their programs and practices, the HR team has seen a notable increase in the level of immigrant job applicants, and along the way they have learned a great deal about the challenges faced by skilled immigrants from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is knowledge that has

augmented their professional development as HR specialists. Parker explains, “You do get a lot back. To have these highly educated and motivated people tell you their story about when they came here and how they have dealt with it and what they’ve done, it opens your eyes to how easy we have it compared to so many others. We also understand that while a culturally diverse workforce can be a great opportunity for personal development and learning,

sometimes it does bring difficulties as well. People come with skill sets that they have developed abroad, and it can take time for them to understand the workplace culture in Canada, and for us to understand the way they work. It really is a two-way street”.

While managing a diverse and inclusive workforce is not without challenges, the HR team at Algonquin believes that a diverse workforce is something that contributes to Algonquin’s adaptability, sustainability, and success. “For an organization to be competitive and responsive,” says Lisa Gardiner, Recruitment and Performance Manager Officer, “it has to be constantly changing and adapting, and diversity helps by bringing different thoughts and different skills and different ways of viewing things to the table”.

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