

# Skilled Immigrants: An Untapped Resource for Hiring Managers

**F**inding the best candidate to fill a vacancy is one of the challenging tasks a human resources professional does for an organization, from large to small-and-medium sized enterprises. To attract the best and the brightest, they need a pool of talent to draw from, but what happens when the pool is small or starts to shrink?

Shortages of skilled workers are an important issue that many organizations are now tackling. With lower birthrates, declining numbers of post-secondary graduates and unprecedented numbers of retirements, the labour shortage will soon be acute. According to Statistics Canada, within two years the entire growth in the labour force will come from immigration. Ottawa is the second largest recipient of immigrants in Ontario, yet many local internationally trained workers are under-employed, or outright unemployed. The underutilization of newcomers accounts for a loss of between \$3.4 and \$5.0 billion dollars per year for Canada's economy, according to the Conference Board of Canada.

In this "war for talent," diversity can be a competitive edge for employers who recruit from a rich, but sometimes overlooked, labour opportunity: skilled immigrants.

Some of the benefits of doing so include:

- addressing an organization's labour shortages with diverse, qualified and experienced trades people and professionals;
- increasing the talent pool of the workforce;
- achieving a competitive advantage through a diverse workforce where innovation, creativity and productivity are enhanced because of the wide range of backgrounds and experiences;
- as well, many businesses are beginning to appreciate that they need a better understanding of an increasingly diverse

local market, as almost a quarter of the city's population was born outside of Canada;

- saving on unnecessary employee training costs; and
- building intercultural understanding and enhancing harmony and prosperity in the community.

Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO), a project funded by the Government of Ontario, works with employers who need support to ensure the successful recruitment and integration of foreign-trained workers. A community-based initiative, HIO is led by United Way/Centraide Ottawa in partnership with the Ottawa Chamber of Commerce and Le Regroupement des gens d'affaires de la Capitale nationale, along with OCRI, LASI World Skills and the City of Ottawa. It brings together employers, immigrant-serving agencies and other stakeholders to help recruit Ottawa's skilled immigrants into the workforce.

To date, more than 30 Ottawa organizations have joined HIO's Employer Council of Champions (ECC) to champion the recruitment and integration of skilled immigrants into their workplaces and sectors — and into jobs that use their skills and experience. Because of their efforts, close to 600 internationally trained individuals have been hired since the initiative was launched in 2007.

Accessing a qualified pool of skilled immigrants is easier than you think. There are many local resources that HIO can help you connect with, including the Ottawa Job Match Network (OJMN). Many recruiters have turned to this resource for help in finding the best people to fill critical positions. OJMN prescreens immigrant candidates to ensure that their educational credentials meet Canadian equivalency requirements and that their experiences are a good fit with the employer's needs before

employers and candidates are matched. This mutually beneficial relationship addresses the difficulty that employers face in finding qualified internationally trained people.

As well, HIO works directly with its sector-specific working groups, which are made up of human resources professionals, to address the barriers that employers face in recruiting and retaining skilled immigrants. Engaged hiring managers are adapting more inclusive policies and are gaining important skills and knowledge about culture and communication style. The working groups host networking sessions and coaching nights to help qualified immigrants with their job search. Occasionally, employers find the perfect match for their organizations at these same events.

One employer success story is the University of Ottawa, which is an active member of both the ECC and the HIO working groups. The university's 2009 HIO award-winning Access U Program is an innovative example of how an employer can promote diversity internally.

When the University of Ottawa was about to launch its program — an internal employment agency to fill managers' needs for qualified and bilingual candidates — the focus was to increase diversity to include immigrants. Through its engagement with HIO, the University recognized that skilled immigrants' international credentials and qualifications were valuable assets that would fit perfectly with its needs.

The Access U Program was implemented as a pilot to service four faculties. Word of its success spread across campus and the program was soon extended to all of the university's faculties and services. The program brought about a change in perception and changed the culture at the university. By shattering the myth that immigrants are unable to assimilate into a Canadian workplace quickly enough to be productive, the program serves as a successful example for why skilled immigrants are important to employers.

The current economic condition will eventually improve, and organizations need to plan now to address their dwindling labour pool and ensure their workplaces stay