

Ottawa-area employers recognized for integrating immigrants, new Canadians

Smaller employers such as Bridgehead, Kivuto 'great inspiration' to others

BY SARAH DOBSON

TWO MID-SIZED employers in Ottawa have been recognized for their ongoing efforts to attract and retain talented immigrants and new Canadians to their workforces.

Bridgehead and Kivuto Solutions were presented with Employer Excellence awards by Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO) and the Employer Council of Champions (ECC).

"These are relatively medium-sized, small organizations and that's really nice for us to see because often larger organizations have a greater capacity around developing these initiatives. So this is kind of more grassroots," said Kelly McGahy, senior manager of stakeholder relations at HIO.

"And it's a very nice model for other organizations to see. These guys are not huge, they don't have giant HR departments and they're able to do this and make it work, so it's a great inspiration."

Started in 2008, the awards were conceived as a public awareness strategy to highlight the importance of integrating immigrants into the labour force, said Henry Akanko, director of HIO.

But, more importantly, they recognize the work organizations are doing in this area and help spread the word that this is something that's doable, with best practices, he said.

Kivuto works in many languages

Kivuto Solutions, provider of digital distribution solutions, was recognized in the recruitment category. More than one-half of its 85 employees were born outside of Canada and the employee base reflects its global reach. In 2012, the company hired 16 internationally trained IT professionals.

This didn't happen deliberately, it was really because of business needs, said Janet Robertson, human resources consultant at Kivuto. The company's main business model is the distribution and licensing of software such as Microsoft products to academic institutions.

"We're a global industry, we're in a global business, so we've got customers in 194 countries and we support customers in 15 languages," she said. "We're quite humbled by this award actually — I had no idea we were in a unique position because it's just sort of good business for us and it just makes sense and our focus has always been on hiring the best person for the job."

When it comes to recruitment, hiring managers at Kivuto have attended HIO's

cross-cultural training workshops and they make a point to evaluate job candidates based on their skills and education.

"It's not only Canadians who are our hiring managers but we've got new Canadians who are supervising staff from many other cultures," said Robertson.

The company has also simplified some of its interview questions to avoid misunderstandings, and tries to avoid acronyms and culturally based expressions. On occasion, other staff will join the interviews to help assess the questions being asked and the language skills of the candidates.

"We've developed recruitment guidelines just to help them rephrase things and rework the questions to get the desired information, but coming at it from a different way and trying not to use too many buzzwords," she said.

And Kivuto is not afraid to hire people who may be considered overqualified, said Robertson.

"We've hired people with PhDs. It doesn't matter, because we have a formal mechanism in place to encourage staff to bring forward ideas for making process improvements, and they do. And we draw on those experiences and appreciate it and also understand that, if they're a physicist, we don't have a job for a physicist, but we can bring their other skill sets and use it, and we do. And when they do find that job as a physicist, we're happy for them."

Kivuto also uses resources such as In-TAC (International Talent Acquisition Centre), a community organization that helps immigrants find jobs in their area of expertise, and it places ads or calls out to local organizations that serve specific cultural or language groups, such as the Ottawa Japanese Community Association.

Bridgehead brews up diversity

A specialty coffee roaster and retailer, Bridgehead has 15 coffee houses in the Ottawa area and about 300 employees. It was recognized in the retention category.

Considering its business, diversity makes sense, according to Tracey Clark, managing director.

"Coffee appeals to everybody, so we have everybody as customers and in that, it's really important to have that mirror, where you have diversity behind the counters as opposed to just on the customer side."

The company has several initiatives to attract and retain a diverse team, including networks with community orga-



Photo courtesy Hire Immigrants Ottawa

Joanne Lefebvre (left), president and CEO of Regroupement des gens d'affaires de la Capitale nationale (RGA), presents Bridgehead's Acheley Bien-Amie, barista team leader, and Tracey Clark, managing director, with an Employer Excellence award.



Photo courtesy Hire Immigrants Ottawa

Kivuto's Maya Chikaishi (left), director of customer and product support, Ram Raju, president and CEO, and Janet Robertson, HR consultant, receive the Employer Excellence award.

nizations serving immigrants, community job fairs and providing all employees with opportunities for growth.

All new hires receive extensive orientation and a buddy system matches new hires with employees who have the same cultural or linguistic background — making it easier for them to adjust.

"It's fairly informal but it sort of helps with that entry," said Clark. "In a way, it's a bit of an affinity group."

Being in the service industry, there are limited advancement opportunities and it's sometimes a struggle for people to make a career out of it,

said Clark. So Bridgehead has a hire-from-within policy that's been really effective, along with a management apprentice call-out twice per year. And with all the stores corporately owned, people are able to move around more easily.

"One of our stated values is to encourage employee development as we can, and with our promote-from-within policy, we really recognize value in teamwork and in having a very collaborative process around planning and operations. So in our front-line positions, we sort of treat that as a journey position where when people start with us, they can have many

more training opportunities." Advanced training is also offered, along with greater responsibilities, said Clark.

"That has helped to increase retention as opposed to having front-line positions that turn over rapidly," she said.

"We sort of flatten that and give people lots of opportunities for work experience that they'll probably find valuable elsewhere, whether that's ordering or scheduling or dealing with difficult situations... What we find is that creates higher levels of satisfaction, provides a little more autonomy but also more accountability — and people like that."