



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In a 2008 experiment where resumés were sent in response to job ads, candidates with English-sounding names got interview requests 16% of the time, compared to 11% for candidates with the same skills and credentials but with Chinese, Indian or Pakistani names.

Source: Philip Oreopoulos, *Why Do Skilled Immigrants Struggle in the Labour Market? A Field Experiment With Six Thousand Resumes* (2009)



Don't ask skilled immigrants for Canadian work experience

BY YALDAZ SADAKOVA

What's the safest place to have a heart attack?

The back of a Canadian cab—because the driver is likely a foreign-born doctor. A friend told me this joke when I moved to Canada almost three years ago. Too bad it isn't funny.

Many skilled immigrants who land in Canada struggle to find jobs in their fields, despite holding proper credentials. A major barrier they face is not having Canadian experience. Employers here frequently devalue foreign experience—despite the fact that diversity has been proven to boost business results and Canada has the world's largest per capita immigration rate (foreign-born people represent about 20% of the total population).

This puts new immigrants—those who have been in the country for up to three years—in a Catch-22: they don't get jobs because they lack Canadian experience, and they lack Canadian experience because nobody will hire them.

"It's very sad that we get all these brains and we don't utilize them," says Eyob Naizghi, executive director of MOSAIC in Vancouver, an organization that connects immigrants with employers.

What's Canadian Experience, Anyway?

It turns out Canadian experience doesn't always mean technical skills.

"Employers admit that many immigrants have the hard skills (experience and expertise) required for the job, but they want immigrants to show them that they have the soft skills (fitting in with the team, conflict resolution, workplace communication)."

That's a key finding of Beyond Canadian Experience, a recent research project by the University of Toronto and several Toronto community organizations.

So asking for Canadian experience "becomes a polite or maybe even passive-aggressive way to turn someone down without giving honest feedback about what you were looking for," says Margaret Eaton, executive director of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council. "We tend to hire people who are like ourselves."

This means newcomers often don't even get interviews. Consider the findings of a

2009 University of British Columbia study, *Why Do Skilled Immigrants Struggle in the Labour Market? A Field Experiment With Six Thousand Resumes*.

The study showed that employer callback rate in the Greater Toronto Area for English-named applicants with Canadian education and experience was 16%—compared to just 5% for candidates who had Chinese, Indian or Pakistani names as well as foreign education and experience.

Altering resumés that had foreign names and foreign experience to include Canadian experience changed the experiment's outcomes.

When one Canadian job was added, the callback rate rose from 5% to 8%. When all the jobs were listed as Canadian, the rate rose to 11.4%. This is despite the fact that only the job locations changed; job descriptions remained the same.

Prima Facie Discrimination

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) says evaluating candidates based on whether they'd fit in allows biases to creep in. In July 2013, the OHRC issued a policy banning the Canadian experience requirement in Ontario.

"A strict requirement for 'Canadian experience' is prima facie discrimination and can only be used in very limited circumstances," says the directive, without clarifying the limitations. "The onus will be on employers and regulatory bodies to show that a requirement for prior work experience in Canada is a bona fide requirement."

The policy, which isn't a law, says employers and regulatory bodies shouldn't "discount an applicant's foreign work experience or assign it less weight."

Other provinces haven't followed Ontario's lead, says Catherine Coulter, counsel at Dentons Canada LLP in Ottawa.

But some, such as MOSAIC in Vancouver, have lobbied for similar directives. "We did contact some officials within the provincial government and there seems to be no interest," says Naizghi. "We even submitted a proposal to the Law Foundation of BC to see if we could explore it, but we did not get any funding [from the Foundation]."

Still, Coulter notes, there's at least one recent case—in Alberta—where a human rights tribunal has sided with an immigrant, stating that requiring domestic experience is a proxy for discrimination

based on country of origin, which is illegal.

Even in Ontario, many employers remain unaware of the OHRC's policy. "This is the sort of information that, unless you opened the paper on the day that it made news—and it was very small news—you wouldn't have caught it," says Coulter.

Eaton's experience confirms this. "I still hear of skilled immigrants going to job interviews and [employers] won't ask specifically about Canadian experience, but they'll say, 'Have you done this in Canada?'"

Far from avoiding candidates with foreign experience, companies should embrace them.

More than a decade ago, researchers already knew diversity improves business outcomes. A 2000 U.S. academic study, *Problem Solving by Heterogeneous Agents*, pointed out that culturally heterogeneous groups solve problems more efficiently than homogenous ones due to the variety of perspectives different members have.

Intellectually and socially diverse groups also produce more innovative results, Katherine W. Phillips, a Columbia Business School professor who researches workplace diversity, wrote last year in *Scientific American*.

"This is not only because people with different backgrounds bring new information," she wrote. "Simply interacting with individuals who are different forces group members to prepare better, to anticipate alternative viewpoints and to expect that reaching consensus will take effort."

Having diverse staff can boost customer satisfaction, too. "When people come to your point of service [and] see themselves reflected, that helps," says Henry Akanko, director of Hire Immigrants Ottawa, which connects skilled immigrants with employers. Diverse employees can offer better insight into the needs of diverse customer bases, he adds.

So what can you do to attract newcomers?

Word Job Ads Correctly

State in your job ads you're an equal opportunity employer, something not all companies do.

Be specific about the skills you need, and don't list qualifications that can be obtained only in Canada. For example, the OHRC policy advises, an accounting firm can say it needs a designated accountant, rather than demanding that he or she have an accreditation from a local regulatory body.

Expand Your Pool

To capture newcomers in your applicants pool, go beyond posting your vacancy on your company website and places like Monster, says Akanko.

Reach out to local community organizations that help new Canadians land jobs. These places have candidates with a variety of skills. "You can cultivate

those relationships over time and utilize them when you need to hire," says Akanko. If you already have these relationships, it's a matter of simply sending an email when a position opens up, he adds.

Once you get resumés from new immigrants, don't reject those with employment gaps—these are typical for newcomers because they've had to move and look for work, Eaton says.

Change the Way You Conduct Interviews

Assemble diverse recruitment teams to eliminate unconscious biases and cultural misunderstandings during interviews and earlier in the recruitment.

Keep in mind new immigrants may not be able to market themselves well during a high-stakes, in-person conversation—either because their English isn't advanced or because they come from cultures prizing modesty.

Also, they may display body language—such as avoiding eye contact and not smiling—that is frowned upon in Canada but considered a sign of respect for authority elsewhere, adds Akanko.

"Once you get that out of the way, you can delve into what you're looking for [instead of deciding] within the first three minutes, 'Okay, this is not my candidate because they're not making eye contact.'"


Also, rephrase questions, Akanko advises. If in response to "Tell me about yourself" the newcomer tells a personal story because she doesn't know that's code for "Tell me about your skills," be more specific.

And, of course, don't ask directly or indirectly about Canadian experience. If you need to verify newcomers' skills, you can assign tests, says Coulter.

Then "you [can] provide an offer letter, which has as a condition of employment that the employee's educational and work background actually checks out. If they can't demonstrate that, they don't have the job," Coulter adds.

Another way to verify foreign credentials without bias is to provide paid internships, short contracts and probationary periods, the OHRC directive notes.

That way, employers and newcomers can meet in the middle. "So much of the emphasis is on what the immigrant has to do to change. Immigrants do have to make some adaptations in the workplace, but employers need to change, too," says Eaton.

Companies also have a social responsibility to change their ways. Employment is the main factor that helps immigrants integrate and make positive economic contributions. When skilled newcomers don't work, they don't pay taxes. When they take low-paying jobs they're overqualified for, they waste precious talent and grow resentful. That's a recipe for creating an underclass of disaffected people. 

Yaldaz Sadakova is associate editor of *Benefits Canada*.
yaldaz.sadakova@rci.rogers.com



LOCATION MATTERS

In a 2008 experiment where resumés were sent in response to job ads, listing four to six years of Canadian experience, regardless of whether a candidate's degree was Canadian, produced no effect on the chances of getting an interview.

Source: Oreopoulos (2009)