

Hire Immigrants Ottawa helps employers reflect community diversity



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An Employer Excellence Award was presented to members of the Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre at the Employer Council of Champions Summit held earlier this year. Left to right: Adrian Harewood, Host, CBC News Ottawa; Kevin Bisback, Coordinator of Volunteers and Student Services; Wanda MacDonald, Chief Executive Officer; Debbie Johnston, HR Manager; Waffa EL-Haddad, Family

Resource Facilitator; Frank Bilodeau, Co-Chair Employer Council of Champions and Vice-President, Scotiabank, Ottawa and West Quebec. *SUPPLIED BY NEIL VALOIS*

As Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO) calls for submissions and nominations for its 2016 Employer Excellence Awards, a past winner is encouraging any company using innovative policies and practices to recruit and integrate foreign-born workers to put their name forward.

The chief executive officer of Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre, which won a Hire Immigrants Ottawa 2015 award of excellence, says the award confirms what the organization has been doing to reflect the diverse and immigrant-rich community it serves in its hiring, training and retention practices.

“The staff really are involved in making diversity work, so it really is an award that is reflective of staff across the organization,” says Wanda MacDonald.

Almost 40 per cent of PQCHC’S staff of 300 and 67 per cent of its 450 volunteers are visible minorities.

PQCHC, a community centre offering health, employment, housing and other services, actively recruits among the immigrant population by, for example, advertising in ethnic media and otherwise recruiting within specific communities.

They also look for job candidates among their own volunteers, people who have taken part in the PQCHC on-the-job mentorship program for internationally trained professionals, and the post-secondary students who have interned there. When those interns and internationally trained professionals become jobseekers, their knowledge of the organization increases the likelihood they will apply there.

MacDonald notes that just building a diverse staff isn’t enough.

“There must be flexibility around policies, with needed accommodations — for religious holidays — for example, reflected in the policies,” she says.

Those kinds of accommodations spills over into the physical space, she adds, with, for example, the offering of a prayer room, and in workers’ schedules, which are adjusted to accommodate religious and cultural practices.

Newly hired employees take diversity training to help them understand what it means to work alongside people with different cultural backgrounds, and there are regular social events.

“We try to recognize different cultural events and holidays and, through the staff, help others understand what they’re about so people get to know a little bit about each culture,” says MacDonald.

Even the physical space should reflect diversity, she adds, as at PQCHC where a multi-lingual welcome signs greets visitors.

Human resources and administration manager Debbie Johnston says a report on diversity-related activity goes to the board of directors each year, keeping it top of mind for everyone.

“In it, we talk about all that we’ve done during the year, all the activities we’ve done related to ensuring that our policies continue to be inclusive, talking about our staff complement, talking about training we’ve done,” she says. “Diversity really is a big part of the things that we do.”

Since being established in 2006, Hire Immigrants Ottawa, which brings together employers, immigrant agencies and others concerned with tearing down barriers to skilled immigrant employment, has handed out more than 20 Employer Excellence Awards.

Henry Akanko, the executive director of the provincially funded organization, stresses it’s not just the immigrants who find gainful employment that benefit.

“There’s a compelling business case why any employer should be paying attention to changing demographics and where the net new growth in the labour force is coming from,” says Akanko.

The statistics alone should have employers paying attention: 60,000 immigrants settled in Ottawa over the past decade with another 60,000 expected over the next decade; 3,000 immigrants with university degrees and 1,000 with graduate degrees make Ottawa home every year; 51 per cent of Ottawa’s new labour force growth between 2001 and 2011 attributable to immigrants.

The benefits are many, and include alleviating skills and labour shortages, better responding to an increasingly diverse customer base and seizing opportunities for developing global markets.

While PQCHC seems to be doing it all right in its bid to reflect the community diversity, not every employer has the know-how. Hire Immigrants Ottawa does.

Hire Immigrants Ottawa has helped more than 200 employers make systemic changes to their human resources policies and practices and build cross-cultural competency; it has reached more than 600 employers, creating awareness, building employer capacity, developing tools and resources, and facilitating linkages with partners and stakeholders.

For more information about the 2016 Employer Excellence Awards or HIO’s programs and services for employers, go to hireimmigrantsottawa.ca (<http://hireimmigrantsottawa.ca>).

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