

Putting skills to the best advantage

Group awarded for work with immigrants

BY IAN MACLEOD, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

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Henry Akanko is the director of Hire Immigrants Canada, which is one of five winners of the 10th annual Arthur Kroeger College Awards for Public Affairs. Photograph by: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

Hire Immigrants Ottawa has been working since 2006 to assist employers who are integrating skilled new Canadians into the workforce.

It is a commitment that has led the group to be one of five winners of the 10th annual Arthur Kroeger College Awards for Public Affairs presented by Carleton University.

Hire Immigrants Ottawa "brings together employers, immigrants, agencies and other stakeholders, including post-secondary institutions and labour groups to address the systemic barriers that affect the effective integration of immigrants into the local labour forces," said the organization's director Henry Akanko.

"We know that the average skilled immigrant isn't working in a job that reflects the education and experience they bring to this country. So if you look at the underutilization of their talents, that's huge, both from the point of view of the loss to the economy in terms of what they're capable of producing and what they are able to earn for themselves," he said.

The organization has helped 750 skilled immigrants find meaningful employment over the past four years. It is funded by the government of Ontario, Citizenship and Immigration Canada and with support from the United Way.

With lower birthrates, declining numbers of post-secondary graduates and unprecedented numbers of retirements, labour shortages will soon be felt across several sectors of the economy.

Ottawa is the second largest recipient of immigrants in Ontario, says the organization. The underusage of skilled immigrants costs Canada's economy between \$3.4 and \$5 billion per year, according to the Conference Board of Canada.

Akanko said about 20 per cent of new immigrants to Ottawa have backgrounds in licensed professions such as medicine, pharmacy, law and engineering. The other 80 per cent, "should be able to apply to a position and don't need to have their qualifications assessed and require a licensee to be able to work in their field. That's quite a big number."

Akanko said "there's a wide range of issues that account for this. There are employers who are not familiar with the education or the institutions that these people attended and so don't know how that compares with Canadian university standards. You often hear immigrants talk about employers' preferences for Canadian work experience. It becomes a chicken-and-egg then. That becomes a barrier," he said.

He said "you meet people who have incredible work experience and incredible levels of education and yet have been unable to find skills appropriate to work in their fields and are doing other dead-end jobs. There are lots of individuals who are doing jobs very unrelated to their skills in terms of what they're able to contribute."

Hire Immigrants Ottawa's objective is to increase the capacity of employers in the Ottawa region to effectively integrate skilled immigrants into the local workforce. This objective is being achieved through three key elements:

- **Employer Council of Champions:** Hire Immigrants Ottawa's "Employer Council of Champions" (ECC) is a cross-sector council featuring senior executives from top Ottawa public and private sector employers, influential business associations, and labour groups. The ECC gives employers a collective voice, enabling them to champion successful integration of skilled immigrants into the workforce.
- **Working Groups:** To complement the work of the ECC, there are sector-specific Working Groups in health care, information technology, finance, public service and biotech industry. Human resource representatives from ECC organizations sit on the appropriate sector working group, working together with expert stakeholders to address systemic barriers to employment for skilled immigrants.

- Create Awareness: Hire Immigrants Ottawa is creating local awareness to promote greater understanding of the social and economic value immigrants bring to Ottawa.

As well, said Akanko, Hire Immigrants Ottawa hosts sector-specific coaching events, bringing together employers, potential employees and other stakeholders.

Kroeger award organizers say the success of Hire Immigrants Ottawa in working with employers, immigrant assistance agencies and other stakeholders is a model for other municipalities to follow.

The Arthur Kroeger Awards, named after the late chancellor of Carleton University and a public servant of singular distinction, celebrate commitment to the public good.

The awards will be presented at a gala dinner at the Fairmont Château Laurier on April 8.

The other winners:

- Jeffrey Simpson, national affairs columnist for The Globe and Mail, is to accept the award for Public Discourse. The author of eight books, he has won various awards for his writing.
- Purdy Crawford, counsel with the Osler law firm and chancellor emeritus of Mount Allison University, is to accept the award for Management.
- Al Johnson will accept the award for Ethics. His career in public service spanned half a century, beginning in the 1940s with the Saskatchewan government of Tommy Douglas and extending through his work as founder and resident adviser of the South Africa/Canada Program on Governance assisting Nelson Mandela's administration in the transition to democracy.
- Michael Geist is to accept the award for Policy Leadership. He is Canada Research Chair in Internet and E-Commerce Law at the University of Ottawa, and a prolific, outspoken and progressive advocate of intellectual freedom in the digital age.
- Hire Immigrants Ottawa, meanwhile will accept the award for Citizenship and Community Affairs.