Get ready for the new global REALITY

Canada's economy can't advance unless businesses incorporate foreign-trained employees into the workplace. The Chamber is working with Ottawa organizations to get the message across.

» By Stefan Dubowski

Henry Okanko, director of Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO), believes that Canada's ability to tap into its multicultural population will impact its global competitiveness.

COLIN ROWE

THE OTTAWA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE is getting into the global spirit with a program funded through Global Experience @ Work – an initiative of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce intended to help integrate foreign-trained professionals into the labour force by facilitating a bridge between workers and potential employers. The initiative has support and funding from both the Ontario and federal governments.

According to people involved with the Ottawa Chamber, the program addresses an important issue that Chamber members would be wise to understand – because it's going to become even more important in the near future.

GLOBAL REACH

Ottawa businesses need to adjust their hiring practices to ensure they're capturing the most qualified candidates, regardless of where they were trained. Magdalene Cooman-Maxwell, manager of the Ottawa Job Match Network (OJMN) says Canada as a whole isn't in a position to thrive without immigration.

OJMN is an organization operating under LASI World Skills and aligned with the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization and the YMCA that works with immigrants to improve their chances of finding employment.

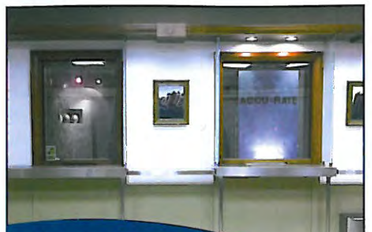
Referencing research from The Conference Board, Cooman-Maxwell said that by 2014, Canada's labour demand is expected to outstrip the labour supply. For any economy to grow the birthrate has to be 2.2 per cent – about 20 births for every 1,000 people. In Canada, the birthrate is 1.1 per cent.

"The country is not producing enough people to keep the source of labour going," Cooman-Maxwell said.

Henry Okanko is the director of Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO), which works with organizations to enhance their hiring practices. He noted that as Canada competes in a global marketplace, the country's strengths may lay in its ability to tap its own multicultural population.

"Our community is changing as well," Okanko said. "For any local busi-

Continued on page 26 »



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« *Continued from page 25*

nesses that want to continue to enjoy a good share of the market, they have to begin to understand the needs of the new market. What better way is there to do that than have your business reflect that market?"

Jessica Hak Hepburn, the Ottawa Chamber's communication manager who also manages the Global Experience @ Work program, points out that Ottawa might have a friend in Toronto, since that city has elected Rob Ford as mayor. According to media reports, Ford has said he's keen on ensuring Torontonians find employment before newcomers do.

"It could create a higher flow of immigration to Ottawa," Hak Hepburn said. If Ottawa businesses understand how to best benefit from foreign-trained workers, they could be in a stronger position than less globally-minded businesses in other areas.

BARRIERS

But certain barriers keep companies from hiring foreign-trained workers. "Hiring anyone new takes that money and time factor," Hak Hepburn said. "When it comes to new immigrants, there are language barriers, foreign credentials and the lack of Canadian experience, and cultural differences. Small- and medium-sized enterprise don't have the resources to deal with all these issues."

Some of the tools that businesses use to make hiring more efficient could actually hinder their ability to find the best people. Okanko points to online hiring filters as an example. These computer-based systems are usually designed to seek certain keywords in applicants' resumes and cover letters, but depending on the applicant's culture, they might use different words to describe the skills the company is looking for. Since these words are not in the selection computer's program, the candidate could be skipped.

Companies need to make sure that their web hiring filters are adjusted to allow people using alternative phrases to stay in the game. "It may sound a bit trivial, but it can go a long way to making a difference," Okanko said.

It's also important to understand that the North American approach to resumes differs from that of many other countries, Cooman-Maxwell said.

"If I wrote a resume in China or India, I would be expected to provide a lot of personal information. By just the merit of the school I went to, that would be enough for the employer to decide to hire me. Schools have certain elite statuses."

Here in Canada, resumes aren't supposed to have any personal information, and whereas the personal info would help someone get a job elsewhere, it could land the person's application in the recycling pile in this country.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Hak Hepburn says businesses need to understand those differences, and change their practices to address them. "Knowledge is power. We have to raise awareness that this is something we can't ignore, and that there are lots of organizations and programs out there to help employers. And most of them are free."

Hire Immigrants Ottawa works with employers to address systemic challenges in order to hire people into skills-appropriate jobs. The organization helps businesses identify and address challenges they may have. Are there problems with the company's systems and policies? Is the company tapping the right sources to find new workers?

HIO holds cross-cultural competency training sessions for employers to help them deal with cultural challenges and manage a multicultural workforce. Sometimes that comes down to understanding how certain cultures show respect. For instance, in some places it's disrespectful to look someone in the eye when talking to them.

"If you were in an interview situation and you're interviewing somebody who constantly was looking away from you, how do you interpret that?" Okanko said. "Some people interpret it as the person not being truthful about what they're telling you. But in some cultures... it's a sign of respect." If the interviewer doesn't know that, they could disqualify the person for the wrong reason.

OJBN works with about 1,000 people at any given time, helping foreign-trained workers in a range of fields hone their resumes and understand what employers are looking for in new hires.

"We work with employers, and they tell us we need to work with our clients on their resumes," Cooman-Maxwell said, adding that interview preparation is also among the services this organization offers.

The Chamber is working with HIO for an employer workshop: "Introduction to Cultural Competency Building" on Nov. 30 at the Hampton Inn Conference Centre. It's free and will teach how to build a foundation for effective communication between new Canadians and Canadian employers.

The Chamber is also planning an "ARE YOU READY?" session at Algonquin College in December. This program is designed to help companies develop recruitment action plans that address the growing need for global experience in the local economy. The exact date of the session has still to be determined. For more information, please visit www.OttawaChamber.ca and click on "Events."

Hiring immigrants to battle the baby-boom retirement

ALONGSIDE THE GLOBAL-MARKET SHIFTS that emphasize the need for Canadian businesses to employ foreign-trained staff, there is an issue closer to home as well: a shrinking labour force as baby boomers retire.

According to The Conference Board of Canada's report, "*Canadian Outlook: Long-term Economic Forecast*," released earlier this year, the country's economy will struggle to grow beyond 2014 as tens of thousands of baby boomers prepare to hang up their business suits.

While researchers say the near-term outlook for the economy as a whole is good, labour shortages resulting from the baby boom generation's retirement en masse will impact Canada's economic stability well into the future - until 2030.

New immigrants coming to Canada (350,000 a year) won't reverse the trend, but it will at least help keep the country's overall population growth stable, The Conference Board says.

In 2009, the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology said that from 2008 to 2015, Canadian employers will need to recruit 126,000 to 179,000 workers in the information-communications technology (ICT) industry alone. That's 16,000 to 22,000 new recruits each year. But at the same time, the supply of domestic graduates only meets 49 to 70 per cent of those hiring requirements.

The way forward is clear, says Henry Okanko, director of Hire Immigrants Ottawa.

"It's absolutely crucial that employers begin to take steps to position themselves to be able to attract from this talent pool that hasn't traditionally been part of the groups considered for employment. We know the baby-boomer generation is retiring, and in terms of volume it's an unprecedented number that we have. Employers need to pay attention to where the new labour force is coming from."

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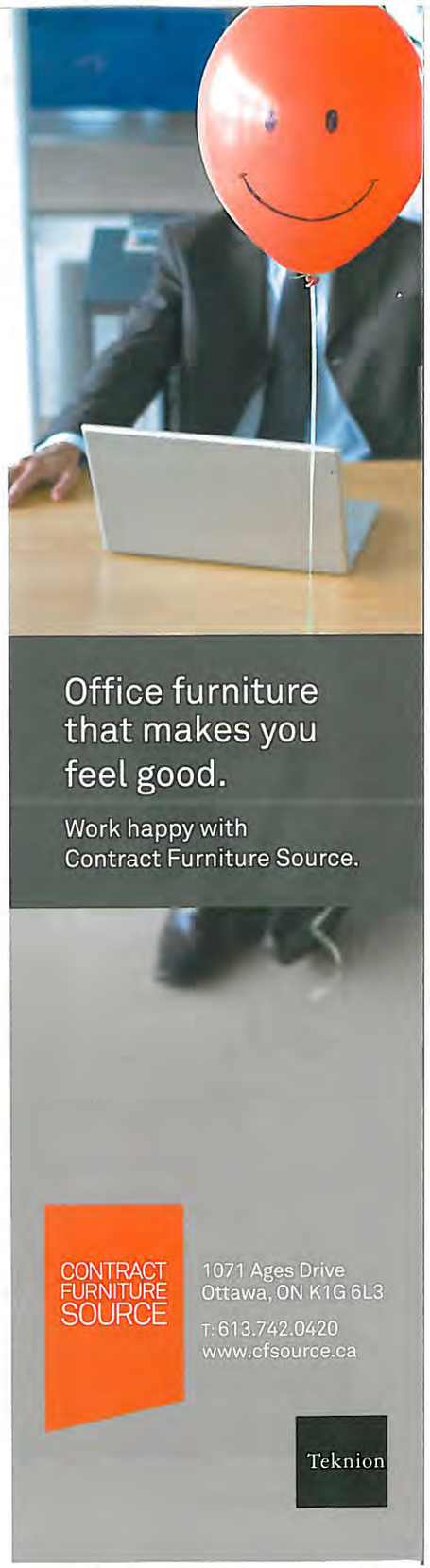
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