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Arriving JUST IN TIME

PHOTO SUPPLIED

What will Canada's new immigration policies mean for SMEs?

By **Leo Valiquette**

CANADA'S IMMIGRATION POLICY is undergoing a massive overhaul intended to put more skilled workers in more jobs more quickly, but the question is where small and medium-sized businesses will have to turn for help in navigating the new system.

Addressing skilled labour shortages in specific industries and in specific regions of Canada has been a priority for the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper for a number of years. Efforts to reform the system have accelerated, with plans to relaunch the Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) this year and bring in an Expression of Interest (EOI) program in 2014. Both programs take a demand-driven approach to tighten the qualification criteria for applicants and create a "just in time" immigration system focused on the needs of employers.

"We think it's essential to dramatically reform our immigration system to better align it with our labour market so that newcomers can work at their skill level shortly after they get to Canada and they can fully contribute to our country's productivity as much as possible," Immigration Minister Jason Kenney told *The Voice*.

"The way I describe this is we are moving from a slow and passive immigration system to one that is fast and flexible," he added. "We're moving from a system that used to consider applicants' work regardless of the relevance of their education and skills to the Canadian labour market to one that will be driven by the needs of the labour market."

It is an ambitious undertaking that has earned its fair share of criticism. Some argue that tightened language requirements that emphasize proficiency with French or English discriminate against, and threaten to deprive Canada of, skilled workers from nations such as India and China. And efforts to clear the current backlog of immigration applications by tossing out those that predate Feb. 28, 2008, has provoked a class action lawsuit that is still before a Federal Court.

But the ultimate issue is how the very businesses that these immigration policies purport to serve can best take advantage of them once implemented.

Continued on page 11 »

A HUGE OPPORTUNITY

A shortage of skilled and even semi-skilled workers across Canada, and the impact of that on employers struggling to recover from the recession, is a pressing issue for the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. Sara Anson-Cartwright, director of skills policy at the Canadian Chamber, agreed that the new federal programs represent a welcome change in immigration policy.

"It's a huge opportunity for Canada to be more selective and for employers to be more involved," she said.

Her concern, however, is how, in a period of fiscal tightening, the federal government, and Kenney's department in particular, expects to have sufficient resources in place to ensure employers can take full advantage of the new programs. It's a point of particular concern

Continued on page 12 »

WHAT'S ON DECK**The Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP)**

evaluates immigrants on a 100-point scale based on their official language ability, age, education, work experience, employment already arranged in Canada and adaptability. The program is expected to relaunch in May of this year with tightened criteria that place greater emphasis on proficiency in either of Canada's two official languages, applicants that are younger, and on education, with a mandatory assessment intended to evaluate foreign education credentials.

These new criteria for FSWP will work in hand with other changes implemented recently to reduce processing times on applications from a few years to a few months.

This is expected to be followed in 2014 by a new **Expression of Interest (EOI) program**, which is being modeled after a similar program pioneered by New Zealand.

With this program, prospective immigrants will be able to complete an online form indicating their interest in coming to Canada as a permanent resident. These forms are evaluated and scored on a points system similar to that used to rank FSWP applications and put into a pool. Employers can review this pool and if they find an applicant they would like to employ, it will trigger an accelerated immigration application process to become a permanent resident.

These two programs compliment the new **Federal Skilled Trades Program**, which began accepting applications on Jan. 2. to ease the labour crunch being felt in 43 trade occupations.

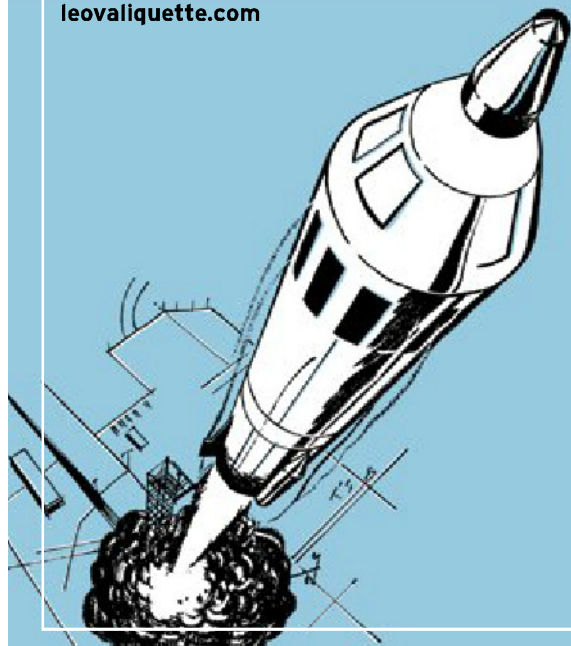
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« Continued from page 11

for SMEs that do not retain immigration lawyers or have full-service HR departments comparable to large corporations.

"There is always a question of resources when you have fewer human resources and you are more reliant on electronic resources," Anson-Cartwright said. "There is always that concern about servicing ... our members across the country are quite aware of that."

Kenney acknowledged that resource allocation is always an issue and could only specify what he would like to see as the new system unfolds.

"I would certainly like to have some resources dedicated to working with businesses, industry and sector councils, etc., in helping them make the new system work," he said. "And in promoting Canada as a desirable destination among the best and brightest around the world."

Bridging that gap between a large bureaucracy and the small owner/operator with a business to run is already old hat for Hire Immigrants Ottawa. HIO is a community-based initiative that works with the Ottawa Chamber and other local stakeholders to help employers and skilled immigrants in the Ottawa area connect.

A ROLE FOR CHAMBERS?

"When SMEs need people, they need people yesterday," said director Henry Akanko.

While his organization is pleased with how Kenney and his department has been engaging with the business community across Canada, Akanko emphasizes there are still many unknowns about how the new system will work and what new resources will be available for organiza-




tions such as HIO to help employers.

Because there will be a limit on how many immigration applications will be accepted in any one year and there will be a greater emphasis placed on those applicants who already have a job lined up, Akanko fears this will mean that, even with the EOI program, there will be a more limited pool of qualified applicants for employers to choose from.

Kenney admitted much remains to be worked out.

"That's why we're looking at keeping the new system as simple as possible and working with local and regional chambers perhaps to act as kind of points of service to help give SMEs access to the new pool of prospective immigrants that we will be creating through the EOI system," he said. "We're trying to figure that out."

And while local support organizations such as HIO wait to see how the new programs will shake out and where tweaks will have to be made, Kenney makes the point that immigration reform is only one piece of the puzzle to solve Canada's labour crunch. He cited double-digit unemployment levels among recent immigrants, youth and Aboriginals that point to a need for changes to the education system and improved vocational training to get youth into skilled trades and semi-skilled occupations. It's a complex problem, he said, that requires cooperation with private industry and provincial and territorial governments.

"It really frustrates me when I run across, like in parts of Atlantic Canada, where there is double-digit unemployment and yet employers are bringing people in from half-way around the world (through IIRSDC's Temporary Foreign Worker Program) to work in fish processing plants or in chocolate factories," he said.    Follow us on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.



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