

# Rolling out welcome mat

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BY APRIL FONG

**CANADA OFTEN PRIDES** itself on being a land of opportunity, where multiculturalism thrives and immigrants are welcomed with open arms.

But a survey commissioned by the Progress Career Planning Institute (PCPI) paints a slightly different picture when it comes to the workplace.

About one-third (34 per cent) of 238 employed internationally educated professionals (IEPs) said their employers do not have resources to address the issues of new Canadians in the workplace, such as culture.

“There’s a disconnect between employers and IEPs,” said Silma Roddau, president of PCPI in Toronto. “While employers’ intentions may be good, a lot of employees do not think that diversity programs have been executed.”

Companies need to do more to welcome new Canadians and workers from different cultures, she said.

“If not, they miss out on a whole talent pool of people and the potential to compete on both a local and global level.”

At the recruitment stage, the challenge is twofold, according to Elizabeth Mclsaac, executive director of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC).

Many newcomers might not understand hiring managers’ expectations or know how to demonstrate their skills and abilities in a Canadian setting, while the interview and screening processes of employers still emphasize professional Canadian experience, she said.

Companies should work with community agencies to diversify applicant pools and also find ways to better assess international credentials, said Mclsaac.

“You have to invest in your recruiters and make sure that the people who are doing the hiring are properly trained about diversity and how to evaluate immigrants’ education and true skills,” said Mclsaac.

“So often, we fall victim to not paying enough attention to the hiring process but these are some of the most important decisions made in a company.”

George Kelk, a Toronto-based engineering firm, has a hiring policy that strictly emphasizes technical merit rather than Canadian work experience, said president Peter Kelk.

The result is rich diversity — 80 per cent of its 165 employees were born outside Canada. When it comes to verifying the international credentials of applicants, the company often turns to its own staff.

“We have employees from all over the world, so if somebody applies for a job from, say, Bulgaria, chances are we may have a number of employees who are from the same country and know the reputation of the applicant’s particular university,” said Kelk.

Some candidates have also used the University of Toronto’s Comparative Education Service to assess international credentials, he said.

Gaining a better understanding of immigrant applicants' skills during the recruitment process can also help make sure new talent are happy and fulfilled in their jobs, said Nancy Steele, director of technology at American Express in Markham, Ont.

She noticed many immigrant hires at Am ex weren't performing well and had to leave the organization. So the company turned to TRIEC and its Build IT program, which pre-screens immigrant applicants to evaluate their home country's education and assesses their hands-on experience.

"You have to remember that what a project manager, for example, does elsewhere might not be the same as in Canada," said Steele. "Pre-screening helps us take the guesswork out of hiring skilled immigrants. It's helped us place people in the right roles, which has really helped our retention rate."

Pairing immigrant workers with another colleague, who can help explain unspoken workplace expectations and cultural nuances, is one way to do this, she said.

"Every new hire — whether they're a new Canadian or not — usually needs time to decode the organizational culture of the company they're working for," said Mclsaac. "And while having someone to coach you through this is important for anyone, it's all the more true for people who are new to the country."

Other resources include creating employee resource groups, which can help staff build connections in the company, or referring new hires to external programs, such as language training or Toastmasters, to help employees build confidence for presentations.

Once new Canadians join a company, managers should also stay vigilant about cultural differences. It's important to address communication issues, which goes beyond just language barriers, said Mclsaac.

Both George Kelk and Amex have brought in experts to help educate leaders about cross-cultural issues and techniques to address them.

"An Eastern European worker might be used to strong criticism, whereas people from Asian countries are more subtle and soft with criticism," said Kelk. "These kinds of differences can cause difficulties, so it's important that supervisors understand them."

One of the biggest obstacles to improving diversity policies is whether a company can make a corporate culture change, said Steele.

"Definitely, at large corporations, this can be difficult," she said. "There's often a fear of the unknown and you have to make people look at their usual HR practices differently."

The payoffs of such a culture change can be numerous. For Amex, promoting a diverse workforce has not only helped it become a better reflection of Canada's multiculturalism but invigorated other areas of the company, said Steele.

"A variety of information and backgrounds breeds innovation," she said.

"For us, the process of just rethinking how we operate as a global company has helped break down barriers and improved communication across the enterprise."

*April Fong is a Toronto-based freelance writer.*

## **RESOURCE GROUPS**

New immigrant networks initiative

From the Latin American MBA Alumni Network to the Association of Filipino Canadian Accountants, groups organized by ethnicity or professions — or both — are often a useful resource for new Canadians seeking employment.

Yet associations of immigrants helping immigrants have mostly been operating in isolation and under the radar.

To address this issue, in February, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Scotiabank launched a new website that helps newcomers access professional immigrant networks and forge connections with employers.

The site — part of TRI EC's Professional Immigrant Networks (PINs) initiative — includes a searchable directory of associations and a messaging function for employers to post jobs.

“We're creating a place for immigrant groups and community agencies to connect with each other so that they can collaborate, build linkages between networks and connect with employers,” said Elizabeth Mclsaac, executive director of TRIEC. “The goal is to create a network of networks, which will create synergies and opportunities.”

For more information, visit [www.networksforimmigrants.ca](http://www.networksforimmigrants.ca).