

# Opening the Door when local Immigrant Talent Knocks

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CALGARY, June 18, 2009/ Troy Media/ -- While Calgary employers were recruiting applicants from around the world during the height of the boom, thousands of Calgarians – many of them immigrants – were unable to find work in their field.

There are no easy answers to the dichotomy, Arif Ansari, Coordinator of Bow Valley College Works, said, but the fact remains that immigrants continue to face challenges meeting Canadian employers' expectations as suitable members of their workforces.

"At least half of the 12,000 immigrants we see each year are not looked at by employers," Ansari said. Which is disconcerting, he added, considering that a large number of immigrants are both qualified and available for work and that employers had been having a hard time finding suitable candidates.

Ansari pointed out that, although there are a host of programs available to immigrants (Bow Valley offers programs specifically tailored to help immigrants adapt to the Calgary job market - from language training, internship work programs to assistance preparing for accreditation exams), the various organizations that offer the programs don't always work together. "We have a very fractured system of services for new Canadians. The services are not tightly knit together. It's hard for an employer to come to one place and find that qualified immigrant. For whatever reasons, they are not seeing what they want when they are looking for people to apply for jobs."

"The Canadian immigration process is (also) disconnected from the realities of local markets," he said.

"The federal selection may not match what is needed here in Calgary. We keep seeing people who have, for example, manufacturing experience, but we don't have much of a manufacturing industry in Calgary."

New Canadians, Ansari said, face plenty of challenges in accessing the Canadian labour market. For example, he said, while many are coming to Canada with English language skills, mastering the nuances of business communication is another story. Immigrants also often have difficulty adapting to Canadian culture and are often unsure how to write a resume for Canadian employers.

"It's hard to translate work experience from overseas into experience for the Canadian market place. The way an employer may interpret the resume, it may look like they don't have the right experience," he said.

Briar McGinnis, Calgary Communications Manager with Alberta Employment and Immigration said that, in 2008, 13,000 immigrants arrived in Calgary, and this does not include the over 11,000 people who were working in Calgary under the federal Temporary Foreign Worker program. McGinnis cited two possible reasons why employers are by-passing immigrants and going outside Canada to recruit: an employer's need to fill a position in a skill niche, or something as simple as a knee-jerk reaction to desperately fill positions.

One of the organizations that decided to recruit overseas is the Calgary Police Service. During the height of the boom, the Police Service was very successful in its foreign recruitment campaign, said Staff Sergeant Craig Skelton, who is in charge of recruitment. Calgary's growing population and its need for officers with previous experience forced them to look outside. The jobs simply could not be filled locally.

As well, he added, “there’s been a decreased interest among young people in Canada to choose policing as a career.” Combined with the opportunities available in other fields over the past several years, he said, “we were seeing a decrease in applications,” Which meant foreign recruitment became a necessity.

But while its recruitment focused primarily outside the country, the Police Service still tried to hire locally. “There has always been a strong focus on hiring local applicants. Given that the recruitment process is quite labour intensive, we look for people who are already connected to the community. The police are an extension of the community, so to have applicants who are already connected to the community gives us a leg up.”

Skelton said that there has been an increase in the number of local applicants recently, which will mean the Police Service will be re-examining whether to continue their foreign recruitment campaign.

Julie Ball, executive director with the Calgary Chamber of Commerce Talent Pool, cautioned that, even though employers are breathing a sigh of relief right now, the labour shortage is not over in Alberta. In fact, the provincial government estimates that Alberta will need 93,000 workers over the next 10 years.

Ball said that employers often hamper their own recruitment efforts through ineffective screening processes that can actually weed out qualified people making it difficult for non typical applicants, like immigrants, to be chosen for interviews. For example, Ball added, online application portals often do not allow applicants to upload documentation like language proficiency certification or professional qualification assessments.

Ball went on to say some employers become complacent in their recruitment practices instead of trying new methods that may lead to more fruitful results.

Employers looking to tap into Calgary’s “hidden labour pool” can access information on-line at the Calgary Chamber of Commerce Talent Pool web site ([www.chambertalentpool.com](http://www.chambertalentpool.com)). The site, in the process of being improved, will be going live in early July, Ball said. Employers will be able to find a wealth of information on how to target the immigrant labour force, as well as other groups identified by the Talent Pool as part of the untapped labour force. Employers and immigrants can also visit [www.calgarycareerconnect.com](http://www.calgarycareerconnect.com) for links to programs to help immigrants prepare for the Calgary workforce.

Ball pointed out that the Calgary Career Show, being held October 30 and 31 at the BMO Centre at the Calgary Stampede, will also be a great source of both information and job candidates for employers. Businesses can share details of careers they offer, along with the preparation required to qualify for these careers. It is an opportunity for exhibitors to meet face to face with potential candidates, including immigrants. “The Career Show is the largest show of its kind in Calgary. It was created to provide anyone in Calgary with an up- to-date look at the broad range of careers that are available now and in the near future,” she said.

Exhibitors and job seekers can find information on the Career Show Information at [www.thecareershow.ca](http://www.thecareershow.ca) or by calling Cynthia MacDonald at (403) 452-6630.