



ALLIES

A Maytree idea

Attracting, Retaining and Integrating Skilled Immigrants

An Analysis of Canada's Leading Employers

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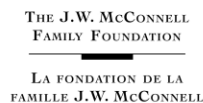
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About ALLIES

ALLIES (Assisting Local Leaders with Immigrant Employment Strategies) supports local efforts in Canadian cities to successfully adapt and implement programs that further the suitable employment of skilled immigrants. Through a series of multi-stakeholder initiatives, ALLIES and local partners contribute to building a stronger Canada by using the talents, connections and experience of skilled immigrants who have made Canada their new home. The project is jointly funded by Maytree and The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

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Employer Practices for Attracting, Retaining and Integrating Skilled Immigrants: An Analysis of Canada’s Leading Employers

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Attracting, Retaining and Integrating Skilled Immigrants: A Trend Line Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Organizations across Canada have developed and implemented practices to attract, retain and integrate immigrants into their workforce. Examples include outreach, credential recognition, mentoring, professional upgrading, language training, and community partnerships. The value of these initiatives has been clearly outlined in the literature (see, for example, Conference Board of Canada, 2009 or visit hireimmigrants.ca). A diverse and multicultural workforce improves the reputation of an organization, enhances innovation and helps the organization reach new and growing markets.

The purpose of this project is to identify and analyze these types of employer practices by reviewing shortlisted applications to the *Best Employers for New Canadians* competition, managed by the editors of Canada's Top 100 Employers. It is hoped that this work will contribute to a body of knowledge on the role of employers in successfully adapting and implementing local ideas for skilled immigrants to find suitable employment.

This project was undertaken by ALLIES (Assisting Local Leaders with Immigrant Employment Strategies), an initiative jointly funded by Maytree and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation. ALLIES works with employers and other groups to find solutions to the underemployment of skilled immigrants in cities across the country. ALLIES is a sponsor of Canada's Top 100 Employers, and works closely with the editors on the *Best Employers for New Canadians* category.

METHODOLOGY

Winner and short-listed employer applications from the New Canadian category of 2008, 2009 and 2010 were examined. These consisted of 28 employer applications for 2008, 33 for 2009, and 40 for 2010. A standardized template for collecting program descriptions, requirements, processes, resources, relationships and evaluation metrics was created (see Appendix A).

The analysis was conducted by reviewing submitted materials consisting of completed application forms and supplementary documentation on business practices related to immigrant employment. Employment practices were categorized by type: recruitment, credential recognition, mentoring, internships, upgrading skills, language training, partnerships, and diversity training. Employer information was collected on company size, region and industry, based on self-reported information. Company size was determined by looking at the number of permanent employees in Canada. From this, businesses were classified as small, medium or large as defined by Industry Canada (see Table 1).

Table 1: Defining Businesses according to Industry Canada

Goods-producers:

Micro: 1-4 employees

Small: 5-99 employees

Medium: 100-499 employees

Large: 500+ employees

Service-producers:

Micro: 1-4 employees

Small: 5-49 employees

Medium: 50-499 employees

To supplement information from employer applications to Canada's Top 100 Employers competition, interviews were conducted. The purpose of these interviews was to gather more insights and perspectives and more detailed information on employer practices reported in their New Canadians competition applications. These employers were chosen because the author felt their practices were particularly novel or extensive. Consideration was given to selecting employers representative of a variety of employer sizes, industries and regions across Canada.

Of the fifteen employers contacted, thirteen participated in the key informant interviews. All interviews were conducted over the telephone, lasted between 25-40 minutes in length, and took place over the span of a six-week period. The interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix C for Interview Schedule). Confidentiality was guaranteed and key informants were assured that the report would not contain information that could identify a particular employer unless permission was granted.

For the purpose of this study, skilled immigrants are defined as individuals who have immigrated to Canada with post-secondary education and/or professional training and experience and who are landed immigrants (rather than temporary foreign workers).

While it is hoped that this project will inform researchers' understanding of the practices of Canadian employers and their motivation for undertaking them, the data presented in this project does not provide a representative sample. The small number of employers involved and the self-selection of employer participation prevents generalizing the results to all employers across Canada.

ABOUT THE APPLICATIONS

Employer Region

Two-thirds of the applications examined were from Ontario employers. Twenty employers in Ontario reported current practices for immigrants, followed by six employers in Alberta and five in British Columbia. Fewer winning or short-listed applications were from Quebec, the Prairie and the Maritime provinces.

Table 2	
Province	Number of Employers
British Columbia	5
Alberta	6
Saskatchewan	2
Manitoba	3
Ontario	20
Quebec	2
Nova Scotia	2
New Brunswick	0
Prince Edward Island	0
Newfoundland	0

Among employers examined, those with the highest number of practices are located in Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver. This is perhaps not surprising given the large immigrant population in these cities. See Appendix D for a spreadsheet of the types of employer practices with company and region data.

Company Size

Large companies make up most of the shortlisted and winners of the Top 100 applications. There were seven large companies that reported at least five types of practices in 2008, but no small or medium company applications. The trend was similar in 2009. In 2010, two small companies, no medium companies, and eighteen large companies reported at least five practices.

Table 3 - # of employers who report five or more types of practices, by year and company size

	Small	Medium	Large	Total
2008	0	0	7	7
2009	0	1	11	12
2010	2	0	18	20

Industry

The majority of short-listed or winner applications are from the energy/environmental, financial and health sectors. Table 4 provides the number of employers in each industry that reported practices in 2010.

Table 4 - # of employers in each industry that reported practices in 2010

Industry	Number of Employers
Energy /environmental	10
Financial	10
Health	9
Manufacturing	3
IT/Telecommunications	2
Law	2
Education/Social services	2
Trade	1
Government	1

FINDINGS

Employers are engaged in a range of practices to more effectively hire and integrate skilled immigrants into their workforce. This project reveals the nature of programs around:

- 1) recruitment and hiring;
- 2) credential recognition;
- 3) mentoring;
- 4) internships;
- 5) upgrading skills and designations;
- 6) language training;
- 7) partnerships; and
- 8) diversity training.

(See Appendix D for a spreadsheet of types of employer practices and Appendix E for completed templates of detailed employer practices).

1) Recruitment and Hiring

Recruitment initiatives are one of the most prevalent practices for skilled immigrants from Canadian employers. Of the employers studied in this report, 70 percent (28 of 40 employers) reported recruitment practices for attracting and hiring skilled immigrants in 2010. Recruitment practices include:

- working with community associations and multicultural media to advertise job openings to diverse populations;
- creating a direct channel for immigrant-serving organizations to make applicant referrals to HR managers;
- asking for referrals from existing employees and providing a signing bonus;
- creating website information specifically for immigrant job seekers;
- using plain language in advertised job postings;
- training managers around diversity in recruitment and selection;
- having an internationally trained employee or diversity manager involved in application and interview processes;
- screening resumes for education, but not country of education;
- providing interview questions in advance to allow immigrants to prepare and to lessen language barriers;
- evaluating technical skills during first interview stage (i.e. technical assessments, project assignments or online tests);
- sharing resumes amongst nation-wide human resource offices;
- considering years of international work experience when determining the starting salaries of new hires; and
- adapting job titles to match employee skills and designations so that licensing barriers have less effect on job entry (e.g., modification of Design Engineer to Engineering Designer to meet candidate's credentials).

2) *Credential Recognition*

Approximately half of the employers examined (22 of 40 employers in 2010) conduct practices around the recognition of foreign education or professional credentials. These initiatives include:

- training managers to increase understanding and awareness of international credentials;
- validating experience and education credentials through increased emphasis on reference and/or educational background checks to gain more information about unfamiliar positions, companies or schools;
- taking international education and work credentials at face value;
- referring to third-party evaluation services in Canada (e.g. World Education Services);
- assisting the applicant with the accreditation process (i.e. information, documentation support, funding); and
- accepting accreditation decisions made by occupational regulatory bodies.

3) *Mentoring*

Mentoring practices vary in size and scope, ranging from in-house mentoring relationships among employees, to formalized programs that bridge between the organization and community members. The findings show that 62.5 percent of employers examined reported at least one type of mentoring practice in 2010. Examples of mentoring practices and employer support include:

- organizing internal peer buddy programs to welcome and orient new employees, with some programs specific to immigrant employees;
- providing in-house mentoring relationships with supervisors and senior management;
- being involved in the TRIEC Mentoring Partnership program as corporate partners and mentors;
- providing mentor participation and financial support for community-based speed mentoring programs;
- implementing policies that allow for mentoring practices to occur on paid work time; and
- offering additional opportunities to mentees, including job shadowing, offers of employment and career development plans.

4) *Internships*

It was found that over half (55 percent) of Canadian employers examined offered internship, work placement or co-op opportunities for skilled immigrants in 2010. The practices varied greatly, with internships that were paid and unpaid, and ranging between six weeks and twelve months in length. Employer participation in the Career Bridge internship program operated by Career Edge Organization and funded by the Government of Ontario was a common finding in the data analyzed. Noteworthy internship practices include:

- providing qualified supervision that will allow the intern to meet professional licensing requirements;
- paying interns at going industry rates;
- covering costs associated with hosting interns centrally, not as a cost to the department, to provide financial incentive for managers to hire skilled immigrants; and
- hiring interns after the successful completion of their internship.

5) Upgrading Skills and Designations

Practices around upgrading skills and designations were reported by 35 percent of Canadian employers examined in 2010. Types of support reported include:

- providing partial or complete financial support for education courses;
- assisting with information, forms and references for professional licensure;
- providing time off for studying for licensure exams;
- paying for licensure application and exam fees, or reimbursement upon proof of completion;
- providing paid training time in a workplace setting (e.g., classroom, lab and clinical training);
- developing individualized employee development plans with managers and Human Resource departments to help immigrant employees meet their credentials; and
- funding participation in industry events and conferences related to an immigrant employee's profession or desired profession.

6) Language Training

The data shows that 42.5 percent (17 of 40) of employers supported language training for immigrant employees in 2010. This practice took various shapes and forms:

- developing language training programs on per need basis, based on employee request or a manager's identification of needs;
- bringing an ESL teacher into the workplace to work with a new employee;
- funding tuition for ESL courses in community college settings or with private consultants;
- providing language training classes on paid work time; and
- addressing language skills including: technical terminology; intercultural communication (e.g., non-verbal communication, slang, and small talk); business communication; and professional writing.

7) Partnerships

The development of partnerships was very prevalent among the employers examined. In 2010, 75 percent of the employer sample reported partnership practices. These partnerships addressed relationships with community organizations and agencies, focusing on outreach, but also used to run mentoring and internship programs. Specific initiatives that resulted include:

- creating and delivering workshops in community settings to share company or industry information and job search tips;
- providing individual feedback on resumes and applications, coaching on hiring processes and skill development;
- participating in career fairs, networking events and speaker panels;
- posting job openings directly with community organizations;
- teaching entrepreneurial skills to groups;
- supporting agencies with letters to secure funding from government sources; and
- providing financial contribution to events and programs.

8) Diversity Training

Diversity training for employees and managers is a practice implemented by over half (65 percent) of Canadian employers studied in 2010. This training consists of:

- facilitating on-line and in-class orientation sessions for select groups (e.g., new hires and managers) and/or all employees;
- offering e-learning diversity modules and resources on internal website/intranet;
- creating networks of various forms, including diversity councils and international clubs that provide information, support and advocacy;
- coordinating nation-wide sessions around cultural training and discrimination policy;
- publishing books, manuals and guides as internal and/or external resources;
- organizing regular cultural events and providing social support for spouses; and
- offering awareness programs and resources about culture, politics and business in other countries.

In addition to the aforementioned categories from the New Canadians application data, other practices from Canadian employers emerged through the key informant interviews (see Appendix F for employer interview reports). It was found, for example, that many employers create and implement practices around religious diversity. These range from celebrating religious festivals and producing a faith calendar, to organizing field trip visits to a series of religious institutions. Several organizations had an explicit policy of religious accommodation which included providing prayer rooms in the workplace, time off work for religious and cultural reasons and standardizing food offered at events to take faith-based dietary restrictions into consideration. Of the employers interviewed, nine out of thirteen reported religious diversity practices. Among these, the majority of employers said that they accommodated employee requests around religious diversity on a case-by-case basis, while one organization formalized policies and practices.

Another practice that emerged in the employer interviews was advocacy. Some employers reported focusing time and energy on educating other employers and elected officials by presenting the business case for hiring skilled immigrants, writing to Members of Parliament, and referring internationally trained job candidates to other organizations.

The employer data from 2008, 2009 and 2010 suggest changes in the adoption and frequency of many employer practices for skilled immigrants over time. Overall, companies that were short-listed year after year showed an increase in their practices over time. This trend is most robust with the increase in mentoring, partnerships and diversity training over the three-year period, but is also evident with trends in credential recognition, internships and upgrading courses (see Table 5 below). Other practices, such as recruiting and language training, did not show a steady or progressive increase over time. Recruiting practices dipped from 61% in 2008 to 48% in 2009, before rising to 70% in 2010. Language training, on the other hand, increased from 32% to 51.5% from 2008 to 2009, but then dropped to 42.5% in 2010.

Table 5 - % of employers conducting employment practices, by year and type			
	2008	2009	2010
Recruiting	61	48	70
Credential recognition	46	48	55
Mentoring	39	48	62.5
Internship	43	48	55
Upgrading courses	21	30	35
Language training	32	51.5	42.5
Partnerships	50	73	75
Diversity training	39	48	65

DISCUSSION

Promising Practices

While it was not the purpose of this study to define ‘best practice,’ there were a number of practices that the author found particularly innovative or effective, or that hold strong potential for replication. One example is considering years of international work experience when determining the starting salaries of new hires. This practice was reported by several employers across the country, who explained that it assisted with recruitment for in-demand positions and ensured they valued international experience appropriately. Another example is employers who help to prepare applicants for interviews through online resources, samples of behavioural-based questions and providing the interview questions in advance. The rationale for this practice was to ‘level the playing field’ so that hiring decisions were based on job skills rather than interview skills. Yet another example is that of a community-based social service organization which wants its staff to reflect the community it serves, and as such actively recruits from its clientele base. Practices such as these are easily replicable by other companies and industries, and can play a large role in facilitating entry and integration in the Canadian labour market.

Trends suggest that, once they have started, employers will likely continue to create and implement practices for skilled immigrants. The increase in all types of employer practices from 2008 to 2010 points to this, suggesting that employers will not only continue what they are currently doing, but will also develop additional practices and policies. A prime example of this trend are mentoring initiatives. There was an increase in the number of employers conducting mentoring practices from 39% in 2008, to 48% in 2009, to 62.5% in 2010 (see Table 5 in the Findings section of the report). While these numbers only speak to the quantity of these practices, the interviews conducted with employers provide insight into how these practices have changed. Different types of mentoring practices have developed over time, where companies started with informal in-house mentoring relationships and moved toward more formalized relationships and programs. Currently, many employers have co-existing internal and external elements of mentoring practices (see Appendix E). Employers expressed enthusiasm and a commitment to expand mentoring practices, particularly when they had formal support for their work through programs, such as The Mentoring Partnership in Toronto.

Employer Rationales

This research sought to better understand the employer's rationale for engaging in practices for skilled immigrants. Labour market conditions are likely to play a role in employers' likelihood of investing in particular types of practices. In 2009, at which time Canada experienced an economic downturn and deterioration of the labour market, there was a dip in practices in areas such as recruiting (see Table 5 in Findings section). Key informant interviews alluded to changes in employer practices because of tough economic times. Employers stated that they conduct less practices for skilled immigrants when they were not actively recruiting. However, the commitment to this issue did not fade as there were spikes in other types of reported practices, such as language training. That may be explained by employers' need to maximize the potential of their existing workforce.

The reasons they undertook this work fell into three categories:

1. human/community interest;
2. reputation; and
3. the business case.

The human/community interest rationale includes employer statements about how practices for skilled immigrants fit with community needs, are a part of the cultural mindset, foster inclusivity, and create more fair and equitable workplaces. These responses allude to the idea that employer practices for skilled immigrants are the 'right thing to do' as a member of the community. One employer explained that their company, being in the people business, needed to put people first and take action to make people happy. For this company, as well as many others, the rationale behind their practices is social justice.

Key informants expressed the desire to protect or enhance their reputation - for their companies to be seen as employers of choice, both with respect to their product or service, as well as in attracting and retaining employees. Many employers spoke about their policies and practices as

‘brand building,’ to create a particular image both internally and externally. This image was often associated with being seen as a socially aware and responsible organization.

Most employers interviewed (even those using human/community rationales) linked practices to bottom line issues and a business case. Many interviewees spoke about employer practices for skilled immigrants as a way to attract and retain talent, allowing access to a larger pool of candidates and specific skill sets (e.g., language abilities) that matched business needs. Investment in skilled immigrants was seen to bring a financial return, and seen as part of the business imperative or strategic direction of the organization. Some employers referred to the global nature of their business and changing demographics in Canada, alluding to the importance of the immigrant population for recruitment in the future. Responses centered around the idea of a ‘war for talent,’ where talent is changing and companies need to innovate and collaborate to be successful. In addition, companies spoke about business rationales in light of their position in a regulated industry. One employer explained practices for skilled immigrants as being motivated by compliance, that is, meeting regulation requirements of their industry.

A notable mention from several employers was that new practices for recruiting and retaining skilled immigrants were started so that the company did not need to go outside of their geographical region to find new employees. Employers identified that there was already talent in their province and that they could take steps to access and integrate this talent into their workplace. One company stressed that their long-term plan did not include recruiting overseas, citing it as unnecessary and expensive given the talent already in their region.

Strategies and Future Plans

While many employers articulated clear rationales behind their practices for skilled immigrants, many new practices began somewhat organically. In key informant interviews, employers explained that new practices were seldom part of a strategic goal. For example, many practices of religious accommodation were based on single or reoccurring cases of need. Practices stemmed from employee requests and employer observations, and in some cases, resulted in more formalized policies.

With regards to future development, almost all employers interviewed reported that they plan to continue practices for skilled immigrants. Many spoke about ‘moving forward,’ ‘improving,’ and ‘doing a little more.’ However, only one employer explained that her company was undertaking an internal assessment to determine gaps and plan accordingly. Most employers expressed uncertainty about whether they would create a strategy around future practices. Instead, they said that they will ‘go wherever employees want to go.’

While not part of a comprehensive organizational strategy, when probed further, employers identified what activities they planned to undertake in the future. These included: focusing more time and energy on educating managers, building up language abilities to support communities, looking at succession lists and moving immigrant employees into managerial positions. One national employer said that they will explore expanding their practices beyond their head office in the GTA to different locations with high proportions of skilled immigrants. Several employers mentioned their desire to explore religious accommodation practices and policies.

Employers did not agree about the value of formalizing practices and policies. Several employers talked about developing more formal policies to address barriers and support skilled immigrants to enter and integrate to the Canadian labour market. Other employers spoke against formalization, suggesting that there were many detriments involved with ‘instituting’ or ‘bureaucratizing’ practices.

A reoccurring theme amongst employers was the desire to talk to other companies to see what they are doing, what is and is not working, and to learn from each other. Employers are looking for new ideas around skilled immigrant employment, but also for guidance to be better able to articulate the business case. As put by one employer, ‘to engage business, we need a business case.’

Recommendations

Reviewing shortlisted applications to the Best Employers for New Canadians competition and conducting interviews with some employers, the author found that employers are undertaking a number of interesting practices to attract, retain and integrate skilled immigrants. As well, they will likely continue to broaden both the scope and the nature of their work. The research also suggests that in order to encourage more activity among business, it is necessary to have a business case, appealing to their desire for a good reputation in particular.

Currently, there are no benchmarks for analyzing or understanding employer practices, programs and policies for skilled immigrant employment. To some extent, employers are doing their own measuring. In Canada's Top 100 Employers applications some employers substantiated their application with measurements, such as participation rates in their programs or the number of immigrant employees hired, others included no such measures of success. The application process could be improved by asking for more detailed information from the applicants. Current questions focus on a yes or no response and ask the employer to attach a brief description. Instead, employers could be given explicit instructions on what the description of the initiative could or should include (e.g., nature of practice, delivery, time, cost, partnerships, outcome, and rationale), allowing for a more complete picture of the initiatives and their impact.

Employers may - in the best-case scenario - communicate their success with each other, with local immigrant associations, with regional immigrant employment councils and with government stakeholders. But without formalized benchmarks, it is difficult for researchers and practitioners to know the extent to which employer efforts are successful in cities across the country. If the goal is to successfully adapt and implement ideas for skilled immigrants to find suitable employment, there must be a way of tracking and measuring outcomes to create a standard for practice across Canada.

Employers could look at demographic data for ways to track and measure workforce representation. This is currently done with companies that are federally regulated, which must

track and report on the diversity of their staff. This diversity is then compared to labour force participation rates. Employers which are not federally regulated could do this as well. Measurement tools could include existing resources on community demographics, such as Statistics Canada reports and census surveys, and internal organizational information on staff and clientele profiles.

In addition to creating opportunities for a more representative workforce, demographic measurement will allow businesses to better understand and be able to respond to the needs of their staff, clients and community. Currently, two employers in this sample reported the practice of looking at demographic data and working to be representative of their community contexts.

Another measurable outcome is for individual organizations or industries to set human resource staffing targets. One employer reported a self-imposed target for the employment of visible minorities. This company currently reports that 3.8% of their workforce has visible minority status, and that they are working toward a company goal of 4.5%. There are possibilities of extending this type of policy to a larger scale, where ALLIES communities propose benchmarks for local companies based on factors such as company size, region, industry and labour force availability. ALLIES communities can work in consultation with employer, immigrant and policy maker groups to establish and promote benchmarks appropriate to each city.

Consideration should be given to ways in which ALLIES communities and government can promote good practices. Through research and case studies, a guidebook of initiatives could be created and pitched to organizations. This guidebook could present ideas and examples of initiatives for consideration by employers, to assist with implementation and replication of good practices. In particular, emphasis could be placed on formalizing programs and policies within individual organizations and allowing for outcomes to be clearly tracked and measured. The content of this guidebook should also be published online on websites such as www.hireimmigrants.ca.

With a better understanding of practices that have measured success, standards can be adopted at larger, more systematic levels. Standardization within a particular practice can be created when groups of employers agree upon ‘good’ practices and commit to outcomes. This may most likely occur at industry levels, such as among the major national banking institutions in the financial sector, or public hospitals in the healthcare sector, which have similarities among themselves with respect to company size and structure. For standard practices to be established, it would be necessary to have communication and partnership among employers. This is something that employers are currently mentioning as a goal - to look at what other companies are doing and share practices - suggesting employers are interested in taking steps in this direction.

Finally, practitioners may wish to encourage organizations outside the Greater Toronto Area to apply to the competition. Current applicants are overrepresented in Ontario, though there are likely innovative practices happening in other provinces and in other cities across the country. Once companies apply, the indication is that they will continue to apply year after year, and that these employer’s activities will continue to expand.

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Appendices

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