BACKGROUNDER

The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC)

TRIEC was created to address a need of the Toronto Region – effective integration of immigrants into the labour market.

In June 2002, the Toronto City Summit – a conference of leaders representing the city’s various sectors and communities – was held to assess the Toronto region’s strengths and challenges, and shape future directions to move the region forward. Following the Summit, the Toronto City Summit Alliance (TCSA) was formed to address the challenges the Summit identified as critical to a shared future.

One of the challenges identified by the Toronto City Summit Alliance was immigration, more specifically the labour market integration of immigrants. Employment is a key benchmark in settlement, and immigrants face many barriers to employment in the Toronto Region. To face this challenge, the TCSA, along with the Maytree Foundation, formed TRIEC – the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council.

TRIEC is comprised of members that represent various stakeholders in this issue: employers, community organizations, labour, occupational regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions, assessment service providers, and all three levels of government (see attached Council Membership).

Members are leaders in their respective communities, and have the capacity to engage their communities in TRIEC’s work. As opinion and community leaders they are able to make decisions based on the broader common good. Members are also champions of labour market integration of immigrants among stakeholders and the general public.

The issue: Immigrants accessing the labour market

Employment is a very significant part of settlement, and immigrants face many barriers to employment in the Toronto Region. These may include difficulty obtaining Canadian work experience, a lack of information about employment opportunities and requirements, a lack of workplace communication skills, a lack of targeted training programs to bridge gaps in qualifications and, a lack of recognition of international education, training, and experience.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, the lack of recognition of qualifications and experience alone – a common phenomenon for immigrants – costs the country an estimated $4.1 to $5.9-billion each year.

Why it matters to the GTA

Toronto’s net labour force growth depends on immigration. The Toronto Region is growing and its workforce is declining. Skilled immigrants are needed to help fill vacant positions created as
The economy expands and baby boomers retire. With an ageing population and low fertility rates, we do not have the numbers of skilled workers needed for the labour force.

The Toronto Region is Canada's largest immigrant receiving centre. Between 1996 and 2001 more than 445,000 immigrants arrived and settled here. Based on the 2001 census, 43.7 per cent of the population of the Toronto Census Municipal Area (CMA) was born outside Canada, one of the highest proportions of any city region in the world.

The solution

The issue of better integrating immigrants into the labour market is very complex. The solutions lie in strategic efforts that have all stakeholders working together. Immigrants must have increased access to value added services such as internships, mentoring, and advanced communications training. The way that stakeholders value and work with skilled immigrants must change. This means employers better integrating immigrants in their workforces, it means occupational regulatory bodies recognising foreign work experience, and it means the public being aware of and supporting the issue. And finally, government must recognise the role of cities as key partners in immigration settlement.

What TRIEC is doing

1. Increasing access to value added services for skilled immigrants

There are many programs available to immigrants in the Toronto Region, but they may have very limited space, or do not match the skill levels of today’s immigrants. TRIEC is developing a number of initiatives with a variety of partners, such as:

Existing programs:

- Internships offered through Career Bridge (www.careerbridge.ca). The program is designed to address the Canadian work experience barrier of skilled immigrants. Since its launch in November 2003, Career Bridge has created 180 paid internships for internationally educated professionals throughout the GTA. The program has a high rate of success with 85% of interns finding employment after the internship. Also, employers have come back to hire more interns after their initial participation.

- The Mentoring Partnership, a network of community agencies providing occupation specific mentoring to skilled immigrants (www.TheMentoringPartnership.com). Launched in November 2004, the program deals with one of the main obstacles skilled immigrants face: the lack of networking in their profession. Canadian experienced professionals (mentors) are matched with internationally educated professionals (mentees) based on a number of criteria including shared educational background, similar work experience and common career goals.

All mentees are assessed by community agencies to be job-ready (i.e. language skills, resume, credential assessment, etc.), and needing support in building their networks to access the labour market. Mentors and mentees commit to the mentoring relationship for 24 hours over a four-month period. As of April 25, 2005 there were 359 registered mentors and 175 matches made, of which 20 mentees have found full-time employment in their field.
Ideas on the table:

- Advanced occupation or sector-specific communications training.
  This initiative is aimed at skilled immigrants in the technical and technology professions. It is a partnership of academia, employers, regulatory bodies and headhunters. The program addresses three main barriers: Canadian experience, employability/non-technical skills for immigrants and, active involvement of employers and recruiters.

- A navigation tool allowing immigrants access to information and services so they can begin the integration process sooner.
  The concept of the portal will include a splash page that will direct visitors to enter the site as either Immigrant or Employer. Skilled immigrants will learn more about the Canadian labour market, assessment, training and bridging programs, job search tools and a discussion board. Employers will access information on immigration and labour market, database of pre-screened skilled immigrants, and internship and mentoring programs.

2. Changing the way stakeholders value and work with skilled immigrants

TRIEC is working with stakeholders to try to change the way they value and work with skilled immigrants. Primarily, TRIEC is focused on building the capacity of employers to better recruit, retain and promote skilled immigrants into their workplace.

This work began with research on employers that already have innovative and progressive practices to include skilled immigrants. The learnings from this research have been converted into an interactive website for employers to be launched in June 2005. This site will become a platform for an employer outreach strategy, marketing the issue and strategies to all sizes and sectors of employers. This work is complemented by broader public awareness initiatives, raising the profile of the issue generally and within employer communities.

In addition, TRIEC is working through sector specific tables to engage all the relevant stakeholders in identifying opportunities to collaborate on initiatives for skilled immigrants. These tables explore systemic implications, including funding structures and licensure requirements.

3. Changing the way government behaves

- Convening various levels of government, ministries and departments, so they are better aware of what each is doing, and can better co-ordinate policy and programming around issues of immigrant labour market integration.
- Engaging in direct communication with the highest level of decision making (see attached Open Letter to Prime Minister Paul Martin) and sharing this information with the public through the media.

TRIEC believes that if all stakeholders work together, we can find the solution.

It’s time to act – and it’s time to act together.