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The Myth of Canadian Work Experience

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When the question arises of why skilled newcomers are so often frustrated in their efforts to become employed in their professions - the usual answer is that they do not have Canadian work experience. This apparent "catch 22" of no Canadian experience/no job is inevitably raised in any discussion of the workforce integration of immigrant professionals. I would argue that this is not, in fact, the answer. Instead, I would suggest that the central reason highly qualified newcomers struggle so hard to integrate into the workforce - is that employers do not like to take risks. When faced with a resume which includes education from a university or college in a distant part of the world or work experience in a company they have never heard of in some far away place, many employers don't trust it.

By and large, employers don't trust what they don't understand. Hiring someone they don't know, with qualifications they are unfamiliar with, simply seems too risky to the average employer. The key challenge then becomes to develop programs and mechanisms to bring skilled newcomers into direct contact with potential employers. In this way, employers are educated and their perception of risk is removed.

For the past ten years, I have worked on a daily basis assisting skilled newcomers who are striving to enter the Canadian labour force. For many years, we have provided a six-week Work Placement Program designed to help skilled professionals get a "foot in the door" in their occupation.

Our program turns the job search process on its head. Instead of beginning with identified job opportunities - the program begins by asking a skilled newcomer, "Where do YOU want to work? With your qualifications and interests - where do YOU think you would fit in best?" If they don't know they answer to those kinds of questions - we urge them to research potential employers in order to develop a "wish list". Then, we start with their list and contact the identified employers in order of preference. We introduce our program and invite them to host a work placement. The employer is able to review the resume and meet the skilled newcomer before committing to the placement. We reassure them that there is no requirement to pay the participant or obligation to hire. Either party may terminate the work placement at any time. In other words, there is no risk. This is an offer too good to refuse.

Not surprisingly, most employers are keen to take part. In fact, many now seek out the program. But what about the newcomer professional? Is working six weeks without pay a good investment of their time? Does it increase their chances of working in their occupation of choice? Well, the outcomes of this program over the years have been consistently excellent. To begin, half the time, the host employer decides to hire the participant at the end of six weeks. We have even had situations where the employer had no job openings but created a job anyway. In some cases now, employers have gone through all the initial steps towards the placement and then decided to offer the participant a paid job before the placement even started. And within three months of completing the work placement, 80% of our participants are working in their fields - the same outcome of longer and more expensive programs in larger provinces with presumably more job opportunities.

When we first developed the Work Placement Program, we thought that it would assist newcomers to overcome the infamous barrier of "lack of Canadian work experience" but could that really be the explanation? This period of Canadian work experience is a "drop in the bucket". While six weeks is too brief for significant Canadian work experience, it is a perfect length of time to assess the qualifications and "fit" of an individual in a real worksite setting. The work placement validates the education and previous experience of the skilled newcomer. The perception of risk is eliminated. The newcomer is seen for what he/she really is - a skilled professional with enormous potential to contribute to the workforce.

Now clearly, there are other important results of the Work Placement Program for a newcomer. These include valuable local references, a perfect chance to network in their field and the opportunity to explore how their occupation is practiced in Canada. The work placement provides a "reality check" on the specific qualifications needed to be competitive in a particular field. This successful program is part of a larger bridging program for newcomers called *Work in Nova Scotia (WINS)*, a program which is client-centred, intensive and strategic. Employer engagement is at its core. Labour market language programs and other sector-specific services are other important options of WINS.

Programs which bring immigrants into direct contact with workplaces related to their professional qualifications are the key mechanism for facilitating workforce integration. In addition to work placements, these can include internships, mentoring programs, co-op work terms, observorships, temporary licenses and others. All these kinds of programs enable the potential employer to assess the qualifications of the newcomer in the real world. They address employers' aversion to taking risks in hiring. Canadian work experience is not the issue. Newcomers need opportunities to demonstrate what they can do. Host employers need the chance to determine the relevance and applicability of international qualifications. This is the real solution.

Jan Sheppard Kutcher has worked for the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA) in Halifax, Nova Scotia since 1997. Jan and her team deliver an intensive and strategic program of services to assist newcomers to integrate into the workforce in Nova Scotia. She has a keen interest in issues related to international qualifications assessment and recognition, and in developing innovative approaches to the workforce integration of newcomers in smaller provinces. She has participated on numerous conferences and forums across the country and is a co-author of "Work in Nova Scotia (WINS): a bridging program for newcomers". Her university education includes a BA, B.Ed., MA and MSW. Prior to working in the settlement sector, Jan worked in the fields of employment equity, career counselling, adult literacy and ESL education.