

Overcoming the "Canadian Experience" Barrier

By Trisha Richards

Lack of experience in the Canadian workforce outweighs all the obstacles new immigrants must overcome in their search for employment.

Among the 65,600 prime working-age immigrants who looked for employment 6 to 24 months after landing, 71 per cent encountered at least one problem, the 2003 Statistics Canada survey results revealed. Of these individuals, about 26 per cent cited a lack of Canadian work experience as the most serious problem they encountered, while about 21 per cent said their hurdle was lack of acceptance or recognition of their foreign work experience or qualifications. Language barriers were the impediments for 15 per cent, while a shortage of jobs was the main setback for 14 per cent.

Instead of rehashing proverbial methods newcomers often use to search for employment, perhaps accounts of proven methods from actual success stories who broke through the 'Canadian experience' barricade and other stubborn roadblocks might be more practical and encouraging.

Dave Lympany came to Canada in 2003, after being based in Germany and the U.K as an aircraft maintenance engineer. He and his wife made a calculated decision to set up residence in Calgary. His strategy was to be on top of Canada's job prospects before he arrived in the country.

Although he had many years of work experience, his qualifications would not transfer directly across in Canada, but Lympany opted not to upgrade his skills when he arrived. Instead he pursued an

found him a contract position in the accounting department of a publishing company, which later led to a permanent job and the start of a successful career. It may have taken more than two years, but his aggressiveness paid fittingly, as he is now the accounts receivable administrator of a well-acknowledged corporation.

Persistence is vital when dealing with employment agencies, says Pranchu. "You have to disturb them. That's what I did. Everyday I called for a job, and eventually they gave it to me," he says.

There are also some programs available which are designed to suit new immigrants' individual situations or barriers. Take age, for example: the prime working age in Canada is 25 to 44-years-old, yet many of the immigrants coming to Canada are already in their forties, says Audrey Taylor, coordinator, 45+ Employment Program, Jamaican Canadian Association.

"Age is an issue in North America. We can't deny that," she says. Her organization runs a job search program particularly designed to help newcomers 45 years and older obtain employment.

For professionals, like lawyers, doctors, and web designers, there is a program run by the Adult Learning Centre which encourages the development of Canadian experience. The curriculum includes lessons in compiling a resume, excelling in an interview, and cold calling. When the training is completed, students will be found jobs in their fields where they will complete 11 week voluntary placements.

oil company that he had investigated before leaving the U.K., and they hired him for a maintenance position on his fourth week of arrival. He now holds the title of project manager.

"I had done a bit of researching before I arrived, and the company was up-and-coming in Calgary, so I followed up, and luckily they were looking for someone with my experience," he explains.

Lympny has since developed a free information website about Canadian immigration to assist other newcomers, www.onestopimmigration-canada.com. His recommendation to new immigrants is to use personal experiences as a positive example of what they're capable of.

"One thing I think people don't actually push is what they've been through to get to Canada," says Lympny. The whole process demonstrates that they have research skills and the ability to complete a complex application, he says.

"It's not an easy process and it's not a short process. It can take several years and it shows dedication. It takes guts as well to leave everything in the country you live in," he says.

Unfortunately, not everyone is lucky enough to secure employment within a month of arrival. The process took a little longer for Thomas Pranchu, who came to Canada in 2001 from the Middle East. He came equipped with a post-graduate degree in accounting and almost 15 years of accounting experience under his hat.

"For the first year I was facing problems finding employment," he says. "I was applying through the internet and newspaper advertisements, and I was not getting any response."

During his down time from the job hunt, Pranchu completed accounting and computer courses but says the upgrades still didn't lead to any callbacks. It wasn't until he registered with employment agencies that his luck changed. After some hounding, an employment agency

"When we send a student on a placement about 50 per cent get hired at the placement, and then within two months after that, about 75 per cent find jobs because then they have the skills to go out and hunt," says Jo-Anne Thomas, cooperative education instructor, Adult Learning Centre. Find out more at www.dpcdsb.org/coopcentre.

Additionally, there is a program offered by Skills for Change that is specific to newcomers interested in secretarial, accounting and administrative careers, called Clerical Employment Services. This is just one of a few programs offered by Skills for Change, which first assesses a newcomer's career background, skills, ambitions, and then guides him to the most appropriate program within the organization or the community.

The most important thing new comers should remember is to not close themselves off from networking opportunities, says Kanchan Lakhota, Program Assistant, Clerical Employment Services Programs, Skills for Change.

"They should try to mix more in the multicultural community, not only in their own community," she says. "Try to understand, learn from and make friendships with people from other communities. That plays a big role in getting jobs."

On average, immigrants arrive in this country better educated, in better health and at similar stages of their careers as those born in this country, according to a report by RBC Financial Group. Maybe in time employers will realize that it's in their best interest to hire newcomers to Canada, says Lympny.

"I think as an employer, if you employ somebody who is new to the country, you're going to get a very dedicated and willing employee," he says. "They're going to give it their best shot; that's for sure."