

In A Foreign Land

The opportunities for today's highly-skilled, immigrant professionals are changing as recruiters employ new tactics to leverage this growing pool of labour.

BY DEREK SANKEY



Nigerian-born Adeniyi Ogundana has wanted to live in Canada for as long as he can remember. "Since I was a child, I always wanted to live in Canada," explains Ogundana, who earned a bachelor's degree in Nigeria before travelling to the U.K. to obtain his master's degree in engineering. "It's just been a personal dream."

He originally made the journey across the Atlantic back in June of 2007, stepping off the plane in Toronto. "When I landed in Toronto in June, I found out that there are no oil and gas jobs in Toronto, so I had to go back to the U.K. and get myself ready to come to Calgary."

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Calgary hospitality has fostered some bold inventions...



It was the first in a series of rapid discoveries in a new land, but Ogundana came to Calgary from the U.K. in October and is now navigating the maze of assessments, re-certifications and immigration papers with some help.

Since Canada has one of the most highly-skilled workforces in the world, it makes sense that Ogundana's high level of education earned him points to gain entry as a new immigrant. For many, those dreams of a new life become filled with frustration at trying to have their foreign credentials recognized, not just by the immigration officer approving the entry, but by employers and recruiters. You hear the stories; doctors end up driving taxis or perhaps engineers have to settle for low-paying, general labour positions.

A series of new actions is driving innovative solutions for immigrants like Ogundana and the growing number of employers looking to recruit them efficiently. Statistics Canada projects that the country's entire labour force growth will come from immigration within the next 20 years due to declining birth rates and rising death rates, while the number of immigrants coming to Canada rises dramatically every year. In 2006, there were 20,561 immigrants who came to Alberta alone, up from 14,363 in 2000.

Ogundana heard about the booming, oil-and-gas-driven economy in Alberta. If his dreams of making it as a successful engineer were going to happen anywhere in Canada, it would be Calgary. But it's not going to be easy.

He made the return flight and landed in Calgary last October. That's when he got accepted into a program called Immigrant Works run by Bowen Workforce Solutions Inc. in conjunction with the provincial government. It's a facilitated recruitment process for employers who want to tap into the highly-skilled, professionally-accredited immigrant pool, says Debbie Wershler, vice-president of workforce management for BOWEN.

"Recruiting is about screening out," she explains. "When you get 100 or 200 applications for a job, all you're trying to do is narrow it down to three or five resumés you can bring in for an interview. It's all a numbers game to get it down to a manageable size."

Unfortunately, for many highly-educated immigrants that lack Canadian experience or have not received accreditation from the appropriate professional association, they end up in the "no" or "question-mark" pile. "If you look at it from the eyes of a recruiter . . . they might not know what a degree even out of the U.S. means, let alone out of Egypt or wherever else," says Wershler.

Ogundana sees a long road ahead and it hasn't been easy so far. But there is light at the end of the tunnel. He already took advantage of a program called the International Qualification Assessment Service (IQAS) to have some of his foreign education recognized. "Then I realized APEGGA (the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta)

doesn't recognize IQAS, so they are going to do their own assessment," he says.

There are transcripts to obtain, professional fees, experience requirements and exams, immigration papers, language requirements all while making ends meet during the whole process. Ogundana is in it for the long haul. "I'm going to get a good job pretty soon here," he says. Right now, he's working part time with a view to doing some related field work while he gains his provincial licence.

APEGGA recently introduced a provisional accreditation level to help facilitate the journey for Ogundana and others in his position. He still has to meet all of the association's criteria, which could take weeks or months, but if he satisfies everything he will gain provisional membership, laying the foundation for permanent membership. "Once APEGGA has said this guy has finished his credentials and knows how to do the work . . . they're ready to



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~ Debbie Werchler

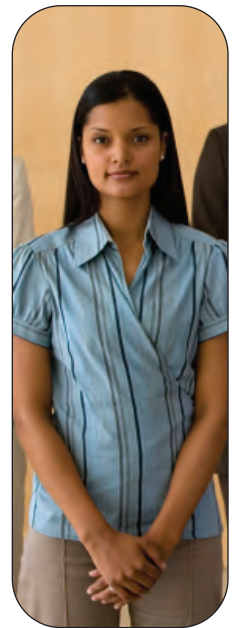
jump at you," says Ogundana.

In Alberta's strong economy, he could very easily be correct. There is a wider willingness among all stakeholders to develop better ways of expediting skilled immigrants like Ogundana into the workforce. Nowhere is that more evident than in Alberta.

The provincial government has boosted its spending on programs at institutions such as Bow Valley College, which runs several courses to facilitate the integration of new immigrants into the workforce (including an exam preparation course for immigrant professionals).

SAIT Polytechnic recently teamed up with the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society to offer a seven-month course for foreign-educated engineers that leads them through the maze of training toward full accreditation. The program provides a solution to a common obstacle: lack of experience in the Canadian workforce. Students spend two months immersed in a professional workplace, learning the ropes and honing their English skills. Part of the problem is bridging the cultural and language gaps.

"There are language assessment tools that exist today and tons being developed . . . but employers don't generally know that there is a means of mitigating that risk by having language assessed,"



says Wershler. There's also some confusion around what level of English is required or needed to fulfil different roles within various job families. The Canadian Language Benchmark Level 8, for example, means a person can function in the workplace at a professional level. That doesn't necessarily address technical jargon unique to certain jobs.

Companies also have to take into consideration factors such as heavy accents, which can become safety issues in operational roles where an immigrant may be dispatching crucial safety information over a radio, for example. "There's work that needs to be done to try and manage the expectations of the immigrant and teach them the game, but there's also work that needs to be done with employers to equip them to look at different candidates in different ways," she says.

There's no shortage of creative, innovative solutions occurring

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right now. The University of Calgary, for example, has enjoyed great success with its Medical Communication Assessment Project (M-CAP). Actors are hired to play patients under the care of foreign-trained medical doctors who are going through the rigorous licensing process to seek a prized residency seat in the Canadian medical system. They face a barrage of real-life simulations.

Last year, 15 out of the 20 foreign-trained physicians who took

...for example the Bloody Caesar.

Invented by Walter Chell, a bartender in Calgary in the late 1960s



the program gained a seat. It highlights things such as command of English and proficiency, but also a type of patient-centred care environment that differs from other countries around the world. Education researcher Dr. David Watt says Alberta's current doctor shortage could be partially alleviated by getting the existing doctors into practice in the community. Many come from abroad who are highly skilled and have not been able to successfully get licensed in Canada.

Immigration experts such as Herman Van Reekum, who spent eight years working in Calgary as a federal immigration officer before setting up VRV Immigration Services, assert that everybody, from business leaders to recruiters to governments, has to

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realize the world's workers are highly mobile now and will only be more so in the future.

"Just as Canadian employers are having to reach out overseas for good people, other companies are doing that as well," says Van Reekum, who recently worked with a Venezuelan company to import highly-trained engineers into Alberta. "I think governments at both levels have taken some significant steps to improve the process for immigrants."

Now, the challenge is educating recruiters and employers about some of the new strategies needed and emerging options available. It's not just immigrant professionals trained abroad who are in high demand in Alberta as the provincial economy steams ahead.

In December, the province unveiled four new employment standards offices in Calgary and four in Edmonton along with a team of inspectors to investigate complaints and conduct on-site inspections, part of a broader effort to ensure adequate rules are in place and enforced for thousands of foreign temporary workers.

Federal Human Resources Minister Monte Solberg said Calgary was the epicentre of the country's labour shortage and unveiled a plan to fast-track more temporary foreign workers by cutting bureaucratic red tape involved in the process. His goal is to reduce the length of time it takes to bring in foreign temporary workers from about five months to five days.

Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry officials are also paving the way for new actions to streamline and better prepare new immigrants for integration into the workforce at all levels, including an upcoming "action plan" to help professional associations and trade certification bodies.

"One of the hurdles is how to recognize foreign educational credentials and we will be releasing an action plan soon that will detail how we're going to work with all stakeholders to make that process run smoother," says Terry Jorden, a government spokesman in the agency.

Ogundana, meanwhile, just keeps focusing on the next step in the process of making his Canadian dreams come true. Wershler believes it will take a sweeping effort to change the current system to adapt to the new realities of today's global workforce.

"The bottom line today is that immigrants don't get through the standard recruitment process effectively," she says. "We have to start looking at those systemic recruitment processes and finding means of breaking down those barriers." Judging by the rising immigration numbers and aging demographic picture, business leaders should heed the growing calls for new strategies. "It's going to have to change if this is going to be our primary source of labour force growth in the next few years," Wershler says. ■

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