

LA FRANCOPHONIE ÉCONOMIQUE DE DEMAIN
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ATELIER A - L'IMMIGRATION ÉCONOMIQUE

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Introduction: For me, my direct involvement in Economic Immigration over the past 17 years has simply been a means to an end. The employers I know and have worked with are PRAGMATISTS. They just need to find good people to fill their job vacancies. It's been more like a supply chain issue. The resources they need (in this case "Human Resources") have not been available through their previously normal channels or markets, so, like all Entrepreneurs, they look elsewhere for their resources. And like all other strategic initiatives, the value proposition must make sense. The benefits must outweigh the costs.

Most employers have bemoaned the so-called "skilled labour shortage," (which has now extended into a "low or unskilled Labour shortage".) As a major collateral benefit however – employers are now talking about "Human Capital" and the need to develop workplaces that are people-oriented (as opposed to profit oriented). Now we are not only talking about the costs and challenges of recruitment – we are giving much attention to workforce development and employee retention. Employers now see the need to invest more in the people of the Organization. For most Human Resources professionals this is music to our ears.

Considerable challenges still exist however for both Immigrant job seeker and employers:

1. **Language competency** is the greatest single obstacle (sadly even for Francophones). I've seen countless immigrants denied employment because the employer wasn't confident in the candidate's ability to understand and interact. This confidence is primarily achieved through language exchange. The greater tragedy is that many New Comers have adequate language skills and even fluency in the mechanics of language but whose ACCENT betrays them. My rant for years has been "work on your accent!" The music of the language is in my opinion even more important than the mechanics of the language. Sadly this is the same message for French Speaking immigrants because they will likely and eventually find themselves in a predominantly English speaking workplace – and certainly so in the Western Provinces.
2. The next large and growing barrier to employment for Newcomers is self-created – and I mostly blame the Human Resource profession for this. It goes by several names: Applicant Tracking Systems or Candidate Management systems. Job seekers have only one means through which they can apply for work – the dreaded on-line application protocol. A recent study done by a company that develops these Applicant Tracking systems has identified that as many as 75%

of all applications never get read. They get screened out by the system – often for reasons not at all related to the applicants' qualifications. I wonder what the percentage is for Newcomers??

3. Related to the AST barrier – more and more employers are using psychometrics to screen applicants. These are often complex questionnaires designed to identify an applicant's personality, values, work ethic, customer service instincts, interpersonal skills and so on. These questionnaires often use language that is awkward, abstract and uncommon. It is not uncommon for Newcomers to score zero on these tests.
4. Another obstacle for employers is the New Comers immigration status. The Temporary Foreign Worker phenomenon is its own worst enemy, especially the temporary part. Employers are reluctant to invest in Newcomers in any serious way if the relationship is temporary. Because Employers cannot come right out and ask a job candidate what their immigration status is out of fear of stumbling into a human rights issue I encourage all New Comers to be forthright with their employer or potential employer about their status. If the Newcomer intends to apply for Permanent Resident status they should inform their employer immediately and provide timelines. Incidentally, this issue related to Temporary Foreign Workers is unprecedented. Past generations of immigrants came to Canada through conventional immigration channels with no intention of returning to their home country to live – and everyone knew it. They “burned their boats.”
5. Although there are many more challenges to address I will conclude with the issue of Accommodation. In Canada, the employer's Duty to Accommodate is enshrined in Labour Legislation and for the most part I see Employers accepting this duty as part of the investment of having Newcomers in their workforce. I am a regular presenter to groups of Newcomers working with groups like the Open Door Society and sister agencies. The presentation is called Employment Issues for New Canadians. This past year I have included a section on Accommodation that Newcomers need to make for their employers. In Saskatchewan and Alberta in particular – the mosaic that has become our workplaces is a relatively new thing – really just in the last 15 years. Our employers are experiencing entirely new challenges showing up in their workplace. Employee groups speaking a multitude of different languages on the job, wearing clothing not address in the dress code policy, wanting time off for religious observances the employer never heard of, employees wanting extended Leaves of Absences to attend to family matters across some ocean, religious persecution among work team members, to name just a few. I find myself encouraging Newcomers to cut their employer some slack – because we still trying to figure out this new workplace culture of diversity.
6. I find it rather inconceivable how just 4 or 5 generations ago – when everyone in Canada (except for First Nations Peoples) was an immigrant – we now struggle with diversity issues.
7. On a humorous note, I still know at least one large employer who believes that this entire labour shortage issue will go away, there will be no more need for economic immigration and things will return to how they were 40 years ago – with an abundance of applicants for every job. LOL.

