

Diversity: smart hiring brews success



Written by Michelle Morra

One fine day five years ago, when Sybil Taylor was director of marketing at Steam Whistle Brewing, she noticed a resumé on her desk. Someone named Stefan Atton, who had immigrated to Canada only two months before, was applying for a delivery job.

"But when I read his credentials," says Taylor, "I thought, oh my God. What is this guy doing?" The applicant had worked in Sri Lanka and in India as brand and market manager for multinational companies Procter & Gamble, Reckitt & Coleman Inc. and Lion, the largest brewery in Sri Lanka, where he oversaw export sales of Carlsberg and Guinness in the U.S., Germany, U.K., and France. Yet since arriving in Canada, Atton had sent out 700 resúmes for jobs in his field, which yielded nothing, except for one job he narrowly missed out on because he lacked Canadian work experience. To get at least some experience, he had worked for his first two months here as a telemarketer.

Then a friend suggested he approach companies in a different way — by applying for an entry-level position. He tried Steam Whistle, having heard the company was involved in several community marketing initiatives.

The small brewery didn't have an HR department, so Atton strategically sent his resumé to Steam Whistle's director of marketing. What he didn't know was that Taylor was preparing to step down to a less-demanding position within the company to spend more time with her young family.

He'll never forget the e-mail.



"Sybil wrote to me and said, 'Why don't you interview for my job?'" says Atton. "I nearly fell out of my chair."

Not all skilled immigrants are so lucky. A Statistics Canada report from September 2007 says recent immigrants who have been in Canada five years or less have had difficulty integrating into the labour market, even though they are more likely than the Canadian-born population to have a university education: "In 2006, the national unemployment rate for these immigrants was 11.5 per cent, more than double the rate of 4.9 per cent for the Canadian-born population," according to the report.

Those in Alberta and Manitoba fared best, with some of the best labour market outcomes. Montreal had the worst unemployment rate among very recent core-working-age immigrants, followed closely by Toronto and Vancouver.

What seems to defy logic is that Canada is facing a labour shortage. The Conference Board of Canada released a report in June 2007 that stated, "Without a major policy shift, our economy is unlikely to have enough workers."

Why the gap?

So what's stopping Canadian employers from hiring skilled immigrants when the need for talent is so great?

Making a hiring decision is risky no matter what the company's circumstances, and many find the prospect even riskier when the candidate comes from unfamiliar territory. Elizabeth McIsaac, executive director of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, says lack of Canadian work experience is the number-one barrier preventing skilled immigrants from getting jobs in their field. She believes some employers might actually be using this as an easy way out of a potentially risky hire.

"It's like they're saying, 'Let someone else take that risk, and I'll look at you afterward'," she says.

Phil Schalm, program director of Gateway for International Professionals at Ryerson University's G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, says that when he entered this field of work, he assumed racism was the problem. "It isn't that," he says. "It's a question of how to find the right people."

It needn't be so difficult. Here are some of the most common perceived barriers to hiring skilled immigrants:

- Not knowing where to look – Employers might consider expanding their recruitment efforts into different cultural groups. "Banks caught onto this a long time ago," says Schalm. Many financial institutions foster relationships with the Indo China Chamber of Commerce, for example, so that job seekers in that group will be aware of potential employers in their field.
- Communications skills – Granted, good working knowledge of the language is essential in any skilled position. To avoid missing out on an amazing new recruit, though, know the difference between language proficiency and accent. Skilled immigrants can always supplement their English or French skills through training and education.
- Unfamiliarity with foreign qualifications – McIsaac says employers often have a difficult time making sense of new Canadians' credentials. Fair enough, but there are resources that directly address this issue (see sidebar). For quick reference, as an example, if you visit the World Education Services web site, www.wes.org, and click on "Preliminary Equivalency," you can type in the applicable foreign credentials (such as an Engineering Degree from the University of Sao Paolo) and see the Canadian equivalent.



- Cultural differences – As humans we naturally gravitate to people like ourselves, and employers might not know what to expect when hiring someone whose country of origin, values, language, and culture are different from their own.

But meanwhile, in the applicant's shoes...

Imagine for a moment how you would look in the workplace if, after your job interview, your potential boss gave you a company tour and you walked several feet behind him because, where you come from, walking alongside the boss is considered an insult because it implies you see yourself as his equal.

And you might look funny to your new co-workers if you were the only one calling everyone "Mr." or "Ms." because that's how you were raised.

Schalm once met a skilled engineer who had to learn at his new job in Canada that his boss expected him to share his own interpretation and advice when presenting an analysis for a bridge or trestle. In his country of origin, that would have meant he was encroaching on the boss' job, whereas in Canada he might be seen as incompetent and get fired for not having his say.

These simple cultural nuances can be learned. Lisa Mattam manages a consulting firm, The Mattam Group, which focuses mainly in the areas of leadership development, training, and organizational development. She says often the way people conduct themselves in the workplace could be based on culture. The Mattam Group offers a course that helps both new and established Canadians understand the image they project in the workplace.

Mattam says a simple training program can really empower skilled immigrants in the workforce, and shows that their employer wants to help them succeed. Besides, she adds, in today's global economy, cultural differences bring competitive advantage.

"Rogers, for example, recently put together a Latin American TV bundle. Who better to work on that than someone who has an understanding of that culture?"

- Tokenism – Mattam says people sometimes feel uncomfortable around diversity "because of the feeling you're giving a handout that shouldn't be given." Fortunately, the may-the-best-man-or-woman-win rule still applies: hiring should be done fairly, no matter what.

Schalm says it's time employers got over that hesitation. "This is an economic issue," he says. "It's not about being nice. There's something in this for employers."

Smart hiring

There's another Statistics Canada Study, from 2006, that says one in six male immigrants — primarily businessmen and skilled workers — leave Canada for better opportunities elsewhere within the first year.

You don't just want to hire the right candidates. You want them to stay awhile. How you recruit, what you're looking for in terms of skill sets, and how to interview can help ensure a good fit.

"If you are looking for someone for a particular purpose, you might very legitimately ask that person to create a prototype of something to demonstrate their proficiency," says Schalm. "It's a different approach than asking about where they worked and what they did. It's also different from saying, 'We need Canadian experience'."

Mattam says creatively tailoring the questions to better know the applicant can help uncover a gem. "For example," she says, "research shows that visible minority women tend to have strong leadership positions within their cultural group. You might have someone who's a pretty junior manager, and find out she ran a 1000-person cultural organization. So it's being able to ask those questions."

Since hiring Stefan Atton at Steam Whistle five years ago, the company has never looked back. The small brewery has since hired a colleague of his from Sri Lanka, too, who is now Steam Whistle's chief financial officer.

As employers start hiring new Canadians, Mattam says they need to move beyond just inclusiveness, such as honouring employees' different religious customs, and move toward a culture that really enhances and trains the skill development across the whole spectrum of their people. "Diversity is really about engaging individuals so you're getting the best performance from them."

Michelle Morra is a freelance writer and former editor of Workplace News.

Diversity resources

Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC)

This multi-stakeholder council works to improve access to employment for immigrants in the Toronto region so they are better able to use the skills, education, and experience they bring with them to Canada. TRIEC offers internship programs; a mentoring partnership that connects funding providers, agencies, and employers with skilled immigrants; awards programs; and more. Visit www.triec.ca

World Education Services

World Education Services (WES) provides evaluation services for immigrants who wish to convert their educational credentials from any country in the world into their Canadian equivalents. It describes each certificate, diploma, or degree and states its academic equivalency in Canada. The web site offers preliminary equivalency information, but employers can obtain detailed credential evaluations for a modest fee. Visit www.wes.org

hireimmigrants.ca

Another initiative from TRIEC, this site addresses any questions and concerns employers might have about why they might consider hiring skilled immigrants, and exactly how to go about doing it. The site also includes stories about employers' experiences and diversity resources covering the different Canadian jurisdictions.

Visit www.hireimmigrants.ca

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