

LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIPS

WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS: CHILLIWACK B.C.



Submitted to: Chilliwack Community Services
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INTRODUCTION

This report describes phase three of a series of projects undertaken by Chilliwack Community Services to better understand the challenges and experiences of immigrants, service providers and employers in relation to newcomer settlement in Chilliwack, B.C. Approximately 13% of Chilliwack's population is represented by immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2011). The overall objective of these projects was to improve these experiences in a manner that develops a sustainable model of community-based supports and services.

These projects were a response to the historical and growing importance of immigrants to the social, economic and political fabric of Canada. As noted in the report¹ documenting phase one of the research, "twenty per cent of Canada's population is made up of immigrants with that number continuing on an upward trajectory (Bloemraad, 2006; Stewart et al., 2008, Thomas, 2011; Tossutti, 2012) with some estimates that as many as 70% of those individuals would be identified as visible minorities (Stewart et al., 2008). Because of the federal responsibility for immigration, too often the instrumental and more symbolic (Bilodeau et al., 2012) aspects of immigration are discussed at a national level without an appreciation for the regional variation with respect to services, policies, and attitudes of immigrants and non-immigrants. As more research explores provincial variation there is a need to contextualize this research in an even more localized manner to assess the responses of various municipalities as they address the issues presented by these individuals, families and communities". All three of the projects guided by the work of Chilliwack Community Services Immigrant Services Department engage in this more localized examination of these issues.

Phase One of this multi-year initiative engaged service providers in interviews to explore their perspectives on the key challenges for and needs of newcomers to Canada settling in Chilliwack. The most critical challenges identified related to language, employment, social supports, and a lack of public awareness. While it was expressed in different terms, involved varied examples and contexts, it was clear the most profound need of newcomers, from the point of view of service providers was that of affirmation, described as a sense of appreciation, valuing, understanding, and recognition.

Using the work documented in the report entitled "Welcoming Communities Program Community Partnership: Framing Welcoming within a Local Context"² the second research project was initiated under the umbrella Local Immigrant Partnership (LIP). This project utilized

¹ "Welcoming Communities Program Community Partnership: Framing Welcoming within a Local Context"

² A report prepared by Dr. Martha Dow.

focus groups with immigrants to explore their settlement experiences. Without exception the singular, and yet complex, issue that dominated all of the focus groups was employment.

The purpose of this third phase is to develop a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing employers in Chilliwack as they engage with newcomers through their recruitment and hiring processes. This report will highlight the key results of the survey and use these findings to ground a discussion of potential next steps.

METHOD

In consultation with a sub-committee of the Local Immigrant Partnership, a survey was developed to explore employer perceptions about their current and potential immigrant employees. In an effort to maximize participation in the survey, the Chilliwack Chamber of Commerce sent an introductory email and an invitation to participate to all of its members. Additionally, the sub-committee generated a list of key employers resulting in a total of 693 employers being contacted and invited to respond to the online survey which was hosted by hostedincanadasurveys.ca. Employers were sent a reminder invitation at the midway point of the data collection period.

There was a low response to the survey invitation with only 96 of the 693 employers contacted opening the survey. More importantly, only 57 of those employers that opened the survey fully completed the survey resulting in a response rate of 8%. Equally important is the completion rate and for this survey the completion rate was 60% which is reasonable for an external survey. With partially completed surveys included, that completion rate increases to 74%.

Some of the most common reasons for low response rates include the exploration of a sensitive topic, survey fatigue, and disinterest. Some of the most common concerns associated with a low response rate include margins of error, reliability, and non-response bias. It is worth noting that this survey was sent to employers in a tense political climate in relation to immigration fuelled by federal, provincial, and regional discussions of responsibility with respect to the Syrian refugee crisis and a media engagement with immigration and refugee issues in the highly charged environment of the U.S. election activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will highlight some of the key highlights of the survey results and discuss them in the context of the other research conducted and the current and future opportunities to use the results to inform some potential next steps.³

Profile of Respondents

Sex: There was approximately a 60/40 representation of male and female respondents respectively.⁴

Age: Approximately three quarters of the participants identified as 40 years of age or older which is in line with more individuals in senior positions completing the survey.

Primary Language: Almost all of the participants (99%) indicated that “English” was their primary language.

Ethnicity: Approximately two thirds of the participants indicated their ethnicity as “Western European” and another 1 in 10 indicated “Multiple Ethnicities”. Interestingly, 13% noted “Other” and then specified “Canadian” which is an intriguing and intentional claiming of Canadian identity.

Profile of Organization/Business

Type of Employer: A wide range of employer types were represented in the respondents including community and social services, retail and sales, computer and mathematical fields, construction and extraction, and architecture and engineering.

Length of Time in Community: Fifty-six of the 67 employers that responded to these descriptive questions indicated that their organization/business had been in the community for more than six years.

³ Despite the small sample, percentages are utilized throughout this report.

⁴ It is important to note that one of the respondents identified as “Other” reminding researchers of the importance of inclusive primary design.

Size of the Organization/Business: Approximately half of the employers reported having fewer than 10 employees. Approximately 11% of the participants indicated they employed 50+ employees

Profile of Employed Immigrants

Employers indicated that approximately 50% of these immigrant employees were of “Asian/Pacific Islander” or “Western European” origins. Another 20% were reportedly of “Multiple Ethnicities”.

A substantial number of participants reported that when they hire immigrants, they are hiring for full-time employment. Having said that, only two of the employers indicated that they hire a significant number (10+) of new immigrant employees each year. It would be interesting to explore the nature of these employers and other non-participating employers that have similar robust hiring practices in relation to immigrants. In particular, it would be helpful to explore the nature of the employment (skills, opportunities for mobility, compensation, full-time vs other employment statuses) engaged in by these individuals.

In terms of trends, 42% of the employers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “the number of immigrants in your workplace has increased in the past 5 years”. Conversely, 23% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. It would be important to further explore if there are different experiences of hiring in different occupation sectors or if these differences are related to other factors.

Key Issues for Employers

Recruitment and Hiring

The most common methods of recruitment used by the employers were word of mouth being by far the most common method of advertising for new employees followed by referral, Craigslist, and WorkBC. The most obvious challenge for potential immigrant applicants is that word of mouth and referral are often limiting to those who may not be strongly connected in their communities. This reality is aggravated by the finding that other than WorkBC and Service Canada there was relatively low recognition of employment and credential evaluation services in the community. Even in the case of these two services that were known to participants, there was relatively low usage by employers.

The primary reason cited by participants for employers not using external services is a perceived lack of need. This finding points to the need to increase the understanding of employer of the varied agencies and services available to support their current and potential workforce. It is likely that in many instances, this perception is grounded in both a lack of understanding of their own needs coupled with their inadequate understanding of services. It is the former gap that can be addressed by more progressive professional development for employers. One of the key challenges to employment identified by service providers and immigrants in Phase One and Phase Two, was the lack of Canadian work experience possessed by immigrant applicants. Despite the small sample size, it is interesting that more than two thirds of employers indicated that they do not “require new hires to have Canadian work experience”,

Importantly, approximately 42% of the respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that immigrants have difficulty finding employment with an additional 42% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Retention and Employment Satisfaction

As important as the challenges associated with hiring are issues of retention. Occupational retention is often related to the experiences of satisfaction of employers and employees (????). There are various factors related to retention that were explored in the survey. From the employer’s perspective, the most often cited incentive for long-term employees is extended medical coverage, followed by bonuses, discounts, and retirement plans.

An important area for exploration given feedback from Phase One and Phase Two relates to survey results in relation to skill utilization. Approximately 63% of employers indicated that “the qualifications and skillsets of immigrant workers in your business are being used to their fullest extent”. This number should be higher in any workplace and in relation to any employee category; however, more problematic is the reality that this number is likely an over-reporting based on a lack of information regarding employer qualifications, certifications, and skills.

While some employers are providing support through extended training, mentorship, career advancement strategies and credential recognition, by far the most common response to the question asking about “ways your business actively helps immigrant employees” was “none”.

Interestingly, despite what might be a lack of supports provided by employers, a significant proportion of respondents indicated that once hired, immigrants are likely to stay. This likelihood may be supported by a sense of team, welcoming, friendliness, tolerance of diversity that the

majority of employers indicated characterized their workplace attitudes towards immigrant employees.

Given that, there a number of employers engaged in practices aimed at enhancing immigrant and employer experiences including:

- Designating someone in the workplace to assist immigrants with any special needs;
- Implementing mentorship programs for new employees;
- Supporting unbiased hiring;
- Career advancement strategies; and,
- Engaging in inclusive hiring practices.

All of these efforts likely contribute to retention and need to be considered as potential best practices that may be employed more broadly and with greater attention to community sharing initiatives that explore the transferability of these strategies.

Importantly, the results of this survey indicate that employers are interested in:

- Diversity training;
- Accessing more information regarding inclusive hiring practices;
- Learning more about blind-screening hiring practices;
- Accessing more information regarding credential recognition for immigrants;
- Encouraging more immigrant applicants for future vacant position;
- Learning more about the benefits of hiring immigrant workers.

In reference to this last point, participants were asked to identify some of the key opportunities and challenges of culturally diverse workforce. The opportunities associated with a diverse workforce cited most often by employers are: None; Different Languages; Multicultural Market; Improved Customer Service; and, International Business

Interestingly, the challenges associated with this same workforce cited most often in the survey, in order of highest to lowest frequency, are: Language; Cultural differences; Other; Time-off Requests; and, None.

It is highly instructive that the same factors identified as opportunities are also noted as challenges in relation to a culturally diverse workforce. It is in this nexus that there is tremendous opportunity to promote sustainable and innovative change in the experiences of newcomers as they settle in Chilliwack and other communities in British Columbia.

LOOKING FORWARD

Based on the descriptive analysis of the survey results coupled with the previous qualitative projects engaging with service providers and immigrants, the following represent some potential next steps.

1. Raise awareness among employers/general public

A strategic and sustainable community awareness initiative will challenge harmful “burden” myths about immigrants and motivate meaningful and productive engagement with these new citizens as resources. Key issues to be addressed would include:

- Needs of current and potential immigrant employees
- Available services and access points
- Benefits of diverse workforce
- Most effective supports
- Enhance Brokerage Functionality

Fundamental to this initiative is a more nuanced understanding of the LIP as knowledge broker in its liaison role in connecting research and knowledge generation with front-line realities of employers and community members at large.

2. Develop a pilot project to highlight best practices and evaluate implementation and impact.

The completion of this third phase of research lays the foundation for the LIP to support a pilot project hosted by an employer identified for their progressive practices in the area of recruitment, hiring, and retention of immigrant employees. LIP involvement may include activities such as: pilot site selection, organizational awareness-building, evaluation (process, impact), and dissemination of evaluative results in a manner that supports increased use and development of best practices.

3. Develop employer mentorship programs in relation to diversity initiatives

The LIP may identify employers engaging in innovative and impactful diversity initiatives and develop a mentorship rubric to promote innovative knowledge transfer and engagement with these practices.

4. Celebrate evidence-based approaches through a targeted media and professional development framework.

The LIP has a strong record of engagement with service providers and there are tremendous opportunities for more robust models of engagement.

REFERENCE LIST

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