

2012 PRINCE GEORGE AND REGION FORUM ON IMMIGRANT EMPLOYMENT REPORT

Coast Inn of the North
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PRINCE GEORGE
CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE

Connecting Employers
to Immigrant Talent

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The skills gap challenge in Prince George and the North has been identified as the number one factor constraining economic growth in the region. The reality is that a shortage of skilled labour is a global issue. Every region of the world will face labour shortages due to the shifting demographics and a mismatch in the supply and demand for skilled labour.

That's why connecting employers to skilled immigrant talent, already in BC, is so important. Earlier this year, the Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) went around the province talking to employers about their workforce challenges. Employers told us they *get* the business case for “why” they need to hire skilled immigrants — but are having difficulties with *how* to do it. They also told us that they want to play a leadership role in developing solutions for attracting skilled immigrants; and that the plethora of services and information that is designed to connect immigrants to jobs is confusing and there needs to be a more coordinated approach.

This feedback helped to lay the groundwork for this solution-focused Forum as well as the 2012 Leaders' Summit on Immigrant Employment we held in September.

Employers told us that IEC-BC's facilitation, coordination and connections would be valuable in helping meet their need to tap into BC's immigrant talent. Given the explosion of current and pending development projects and an acknowledged skills shortage in the north, together with the work already underway by the Prince George Chamber of Commerce and Initiatives Prince George to attract skilled immigrants, Prince George was an appropriate choice for our first regional event. IEC-BC was pleased to partner with the Prince George Chamber and Initiatives Prince George in order to help local employers tap into BC's skilled immigrants.

**Prince George and
Region Forum on
Immigrant
Employment**

The starting point for almost any conversation about attracting BC's skilled immigrants to Prince George is the apparent reluctance of people to leave Metro Vancouver.

Each year about 40,000 immigrants settle in BC, but very few consider making their home outside of Metro Vancouver. Although some employers facing skills shortages are beginning to become aware of the immigrant talent pool, few have the knowledge or experience to take the proactive steps needed to break through this settlement challenge. Employers attending the Forum in Prince George were likely among the most willing to try, but, as a group, they are starting from a narrow base of information and experience.

One of the most important roles that IEC-BC can play in hosting these regional forums is facilitating dialogue amongst employers. While the number of employers with first-hand experience in hiring and integrating skilled immigrants might be low, those that do typically have very positive outcomes. Sharing that positive experience, peer-to-peer, is a powerful tool.

The Forum in Prince George demonstrated another key role for IEC-BC – fostering collaboration amongst employers, community partners and other stakeholders. Many employers noted that immigrants accepting a job in Prince George or the north region were actually choosing a future for their whole family. Immigrants are looking for a career, jobs for other family members, a welcoming community, and a quality of life. Selling a destination as a good place to settle a family requires a concerted, multi-faceted community effort.

Key Forum Themes

Discussion throughout the day was rich and varied, but a number of key themes emerged.

- Employers understand that they are now operating in a demand-driven employment system. They are no longer simply choosing amongst applicants, but must actively compete for talent; but, they are unsure, in practical terms, of what this means.
- Most employers lack experience in reaching out to immigrant workers – and they do not yet fully understand what constitutes a successful approach.
- Employers want and need help accessing immigrant talent. They need to know more about where to find workers and what tools and resources might be available to help them attract, hire and retain them. They are not yet equipped, however, to articulate precisely what tools and resources would be most helpful to them.
- Reaching out to immigrants early in their Canadian experience is key, raising awareness of the opportunities in Prince George and region before they have become rooted in Metro Vancouver.
- Successful attraction and retention is a complex process that involves the entire immigrant family. Partnerships among employers and the broader community will be key to providing a welcoming environment for immigrant families.

Forum Impact

The Prince George and Region Forum attracted 31 participants, 71 percent of whom were employers, representing a wide range of industries and sectors. According to the Prince George Chamber, this was one of their most well attended full-day workshops in recent years.

The event also attracted significant local media coverage, with a front-page story in the Prince George Citizen, news reports on CBC radio in Vancouver and Prince George and stories in popular local on-line media outlets. We can expect that combined effect of the outreach by the Prince George Chamber of Commerce, Initiatives Prince George, local media coverage and the actual attendance will have boosted regional awareness of the potential of the immigrant talent pool.

Our role at IEC-BC is to support the business community to be better able to attract and hire skilled immigrants. We do that in a variety of ways, but one of them is by partnering with organizations such as Initiatives Prince George and the Prince George Chamber of Commerce who are champions in their region. It's their leadership that is critical in order to develop solutions that will work for this community.

I would like to thank our partners and co-hosts, the Prince George Chamber of Commerce and Initiatives Prince George, for their commitment to making the Forum a valuable event for their community, our speakers for sharing their stories and all who attended and added their voice to this important discussion, something that the Prince George and Region Forum attendees are committed to.

Kelly Pollack

Executive Director

Immigrant Employment Council of BC

PROGRAM

Morning Session 1: Employer Panel

The Employer Panel was designed to offer a window into first-hand, locally focused experience in finding and hiring immigrant workers. Three employers were identified and agreed to share their stories and answer questions in a peer-to-peer discussion.

Richard Glazier of Parallel 55 and **Simon Pow** of Allnorth Consultants led the discussion. A storm prevented a third panel member, **Michelle Rolls** of Queensway Fix Auto Collision from driving in from Dawson Creek to join the discussion.

While every employer attending the Forum had experience with the challenge of finding skilled workers, very few had undertaken specific efforts to target skilled immigrants living outside the region. Even the proactive steps recounted by Richard and Simon involved working with the local Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society (IMSS) to make the connections with skilled immigrants.

Some questions were raised about the particular challenges and costs associated with hiring skilled immigrants. In response, those employers with experience invariably noted that the net costs and time required were no greater than comparable efforts with non-immigrant hires.

Indeed, employers said that the great attitude and effort of new immigrant hires far exceeded their hopes for a new employee.

“In terms of the cost of hiring immigrants? Look, we’ve hired everyone from the local market already. So we have to relocate new hires anyway.”

Simon Pow, Allnorth Consultants

“As a company, we need workers. And we need those workers to show up and care about the job. Immigrant workers show up. And we can connect them to the dream.”

Richard Glazier, Parallel 55

The only possible cost barrier to hiring an immigrant worker would be a language barrier. The issue there is being able to communicate well enough to be safe in the workplace. We might help with language training until we are confident about their language skills...but they are so willing to learn and so hardworking that it's probably a wash. And compared to someone who is only worried about the next Friday night...”

Richard Glazier, Parallel 55

When pressed to identify the most effective means to connect with potential immigrant hires, a number of employers cited the ‘word-of-mouth’ efforts of current immigrants working in Prince George and the region. Some employers have made it a key strategy to encourage their own immigrant employees to help recruit friends and family.

“When I was building a recruitment strategy, I asked the applicants if there was anyone else back home who we should get in touch with...do they know someone who wants to come, who would put up a poster, who could spread the word?”

Forum participant

A key theme among participants was the reality that many immigrants settle in larger cities and give up their professions rather than relocating where career opportunities exist. There was agreement that more efforts were needed to focus on selling new immigrants on the opportunities for themselves and their families in Prince George and the north before they put down roots in another community.

Retention was also a key theme in the panel discussion.

“People may get a job, but they only stay in the community when there is a social reason to stay. Retention is based on social networks.”

Forum participant

“Northern Health did a great job for Fort St. James when they were trying to attract doctors. They brought doctors in and introduced them to the community, took them on excursions, helped them get to know the people. Communities are about people, not infrastructure. In smaller communities we need to show how supportive the community can be even if they don’t have a cultural group to join.”

Forum participant

One employer noted that construction — one of the major employment sectors in the region — is seasonal and cyclical, which creates an additional challenge in attracting workers, and in particular, families. Employers were familiar with the challenge of luring Canadians away from big cities, and while those challenges might be greater with immigrants, the Employer Panel demonstrated a determination on the part of participants to learn more about possible strategies. Several employers attending the Forum have traveled outside Canada to find skilled workers, an indication that, for Prince George employers, hiring immigrants is not itself a barrier.

IEC-BC was therefore pleased to partner with the Prince George Chamber and Initiatives Prince George to bring together employers and community leaders interested in encouraging BC’s skilled immigrants to live and work in Northern BC.

Morning Session 2: Tools and Resources for Employers

A prime focus for the Forum was to raise awareness among employers about currently available tools and resources to help them find, attract and hire immigrant talent. IEC-BC also wanted to provide information and glean employer feedback on a database development project linking employers to immigrant talent.

Sangeeta Subramanian and **Javier Ojer** of IEC-BC provided an overview of a range of data sources and tools for locating and hiring immigrant talent. IEC-BC is exploring the development of an online tool to centralize information sources about immigrant talent. A brief introduction to the ten data sources currently being considered for the new tool was supplemented with a handout providing contact information to those agencies and sources of immediate use to employers.

Jacqueline deRaadt of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters also presented information on the Engineering Marketing and Placement (E-MAP) program, which matches immigrant international engineers with employers.

A practical demonstration followed, with participants being walked through the hiring and assessment tools and resources available on IEC-BC's website.

Participants were invited to offer suggestions and commentary on the various resources presented, and in particular, to provide insight into how the new IEC-BC database might support their own hiring efforts. Given the low level of actual experience with reaching out to the immigrant community, most participants were not ready to make specific recommendations.

Some suggestions specific to the development project included:

- Linking to the Initiatives Prince George Live-Work-Play portal, which lists all the Prince George jobs, supports, community information
- Integrate the needs of employers and job seekers by creating an Expression of Interest (for job seekers) and Expression of Need (for employers) system
- Encourage employers to include language about “welcoming and inclusive community” on their websites and advertisements
- Link skilled jobs to other job opportunities in the same community, to encourage the applicant to consider opportunities for the entire family
- Create “pools” rather than single jobs or resumes... so that employers or job-seekers clicking on one, are offered additional options...”You may also be interested in...”
- Find a way to create a facilitation service to help employers and job-seekers make connections
- Create an “alert function” – alert employers and job seekers to new applicants or jobs that may fit
- Ensure that each visitor’s first experience with the new tool is great!

**Afternoon Session:
Taking Action
Together**

Recognizing that longer-term strategies are needed to attract immigrants to Prince George and the north region, the Forum organizing team identified two potential initiatives for participants to explore in afternoon workshops:

1. Virtual Career Fair
2. Destination Prince George 2014

To set the stage for these discussions, **James Clift** of KarmaHire provided an introduction to virtual career fairs and **Heather Oland** of Initiatives Prince George shared information on economic trends and marketing strategies in Prince George. Grounding the strategy sessions in resource terms, **Kelly Pollack** of IEC-BC provided an overview of the new Employer Innovation Fund, a funding initiative designed to support innovative projects that address immigrant talent hiring and retention challenges faced by BC employers.

Tim Woods and **Lynelle Spring** of the Deliberation Network facilitated the two conversations, which each drew about fifteen to twenty participants.

Workshop 1: Virtual Career Fair

Virtual Career Fairs enable employers and job seekers to make connections online. Typically these virtual career fairs involve employers from a specific economic sector or community. For the purpose of the workshop, the participants explored how such a career fair might operate in Prince George, with a focus on recent immigrants to BC or Canada.

The discussion started with a visioning exercise: imagining how such an initiative might look if it were to have the best chance at success. Participants then identified a number of 'lenses' that might help populate a timeline for the initiative. Finally, participants sketched out a rough timeline for stops along the way to completing the Fair. There was unanimous agreement that this initiative was worth pursuing.

Vision

The key insight from the vision exercise was the need to sell Prince George and the region. Job and career opportunities are not typically sufficient to motivate a family to move from the familiar. Participants noted the potential to 'sell' much more than the outdoor opportunities, with testimonials from immigrant residents and video clips extolling the region's religious and cultural diversity.

Lens

Participants identified many elements of this initiative that would contribute to its success:

- Timing
- Marketing initiative to employers/recruiters
- Broadly based steering committee
- Enlisting community partners

- Identifying measures of success
- Strategies to reach immigrants
- Post-fair strategy
- Budget/funding
- Training for employer participants
- Collaboration with immigrant serving organizations
- Finding media partners
- Measures of success

Timing

The group suggested planning for two Virtual Career Fairs, the first taking place in late April 2013 and the second early in the fall 2013.

Recommended steps for the first event include:

- Finding a lead organization, steering committee, budgeting and identifying measures of success. (December/January)
- Marketing to both employers and potential partners in immigrant-serving organizations. (February)
- Seeking media partners, political support and training employers for the event (March)
- Launch Virtual Career Fair (April)

**Workshop 2:
Destination Prince
George 2014 —
Marketing the North
to BC Immigrants**

This workshop was designed to build on the marketing groundwork laid by Initiatives Prince George, the Prince George Chamber of Commerce and other local agencies. Participants were tasked with exploring a marketing strategy to target immigrants in Canada, and particularly in Metro Vancouver. Timelines for the strategy were kept deliberately short, with an implementation date of mid-2014. This timeframe was intended both to convey a shared urgency for the project and acknowledged the need for the region to have marketing “space” to promote the 2015 Canada Winter Games being held in Prince George.

The foundation for the strategy was a shared vision. Participants focused on a two-pronged approach: an outreach strategy that would take the story of Prince George and the region to the target audience, and an “in-reach” strategy that would bring immigrants and immigrant serving agencies to Prince George to learn, build relationships and hopefully carry the messages back to their communities.

Both strategies emphasized some key elements:

- Reach immigrants early on in their Canadian experience
- Work with delivery agencies, service providers and government
- Use formal and informal networks;
- Reach out to and utilize extended family and friends
- Develop a deeper understanding of the advantages of Prince George from an immigrant’s perspective, and
- Use the broader Prince George and region team, formal and informal, to tell the local story

Tactics

Research, partnerships and champions were seen as key to the development of the marketing plan.

1. **Research** was needed in the following areas to support a marketing storyline:
 - Where and what kind of jobs are available?
 - What skill sets are in demand?
 - What infrastructure barriers exist?
 - What does the immigrant community in Prince George value about the community: What is working? What brought them to Prince George, and what keeps them in the community?
 - What do immigrants in metro Vancouver want before they would consider relocating?
 - What do we know about the advantages smaller centres offer immigrants in terms of successful integration?
 - Mapping the Prince George and region agencies, services, infrastructure and amenities of interest to the immigrant community.

Participants noted that some of the data may already exist, but other elements would need to be gathered.

2. **Partnerships** were seen as key to the marketing strategies, in particular working with:
 - IEC-BC, Initiatives Prince George and Prince George Chamber of Commerce, as initiators of the Forum
 - Regional colleges and universities to market the region to the families of international and immigrant students
 - Airlines and transportation networks to build an “inreach” or familiarization tour capacity — bringing immigrants and/or immigrant serving agencies into the community for personal experience
 - Business — to increase awareness and bring them to the table

- Media
 - Multicultural agencies
 - Unions
 - Metro Vancouver service providers
3. **Champions** were seen as critical to tell the story and market the city, giving voice and passion to the message. Participants wanted to draw champions from the employer and the local immigrant community, and to ensure that the scope of the champions' messages extended beyond the jobs issue and included the potential for the entire immigrant family.

Resources

Initiatives Prince George was seen as a potential lead agency, since labour recruitment is a key element of their business plan. Heather Oland, Initiatives Prince George CEO, noted that while companies are charged with showcasing their job and career opportunities, their role is to market the many reasons to invest and live in Prince George. Initiatives Prince George would continue to draw on the Prince George Chamber of Commerce, the local immigrant serving agency, as well as seek private sector support for the plan. Other resources would also be explored, in particular, funding from the Labour Market Partnership program from the BC Ministry of Social Development.

In conclusion, participants considered how the immigrant-focused marketing strategy might integrate with a broader community-based initiative – linking outreach to First Nations, women, youth, seniors, labour and business to create what one participant called “Something Big” for Prince George.

MOVING FORWARD

This Forum was the first regional dialogue sponsored by IEC-BC. A strong theme throughout the Forum was that attracting immigrants to Prince George and region requires more than one employment opportunity. Successful efforts require a more comprehensive appeal to make the region a destination of choice for the entire immigrant family.

IEC-BC's partner hosts know that local leadership will be critical to success. As Heather Oland of Initiatives Prince George stated, "It's the employer's job to show why their company is a great place to work, and it's Initiatives Prince George's job to show why Prince George is a great place to live and invest. We need to work together to grow our population base."

Jennifer Brandle-McCall of the Prince George Chamber of Commerce concurred, saying, "It's our job to help continue this conversation and mobilize today's ideas, making sure we can build a plan to increase economic development."

An effective and sustainable strategy to attract and retain immigrant talent in Prince George will require the collaboration and leadership of partners and stakeholders including the City, educational institutes and private business.

As Kelly Pollack of IEC-BC said: "There isn't one solution to this complex issue – nor can any one employer or organization do it alone. In fact it's better if we collaborate, share best practices and learning and forge relationships that will help to make progress in connecting BC's skilled immigrants with employers who need their talent."

NEXT STEPS

Building on the dialogue of the afternoon workshops, Initiatives Prince George and the Prince George Chamber of Commerce have mobilized key stakeholders and submitted funding applications to the provincially-funded Employer Innovation Fund for the implementation of these two longer-term initiatives.

Moving forward, IEC-BC plans on using the information from the Prince George and Region Forum and the Northern Immigrant Workforce Development Initiative that IEC-BC is leading to inform our work in Prince George and the north. We will work with employers in selected areas of northern BC to design and implement local solutions that effectively address their workforce needs.

In 2013, IEC-BC plans to continue to sponsor and host regional forums as well as an annual Metro Vancouver Summit in collaboration with employers, community and industry partners to develop immigrant workforce strategies that address the local needs of BC employers and communities.

IEC-BC looks forward to continuing to support, foster and build collaboration and dialogue amongst employers and stakeholders to develop strategies that work for the needs of BC employers and communities, for BC skilled immigrants and for our province as a whole.

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