

Employer Challenges in Attracting and Integrating Immigrant Talent into BC's Tech Sector

Final Report Submitted by the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) on behalf of the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia (IEC-BC)



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

British Columbia is Canada’s leader in tech and has one of the fastest growing tech ecosystems in the world. However, the current supply cannot meet the industry’s growing demands for tech talent. By 2021, there will be an anticipated shortfall of over 30,000 skilled individuals to fill tech-related jobs in the province. Unless immediate action is taken by the provincial and federal governments, tech employers, the settlement and integration sector and other key stakeholders, this employment gap will severely limit the potential growth of the industry in BC. It will also limit economic benefits to be gained, which currently stand at over \$15 billion in GDP annually.

The 2016 Tech Talent BC Report identifies three talent pools that can be tapped into, which can help offset the impending shortage of tech workers in BC: (1) new entrants or recent graduates, (2) immigrants, and (3) other local supply to include career transitioners and people from under-represented groups. The focus of this report is on the second group identified: immigrants. According to the 2016 report, we will need to source 8,500 more immigrants than are currently projected to arrive to BC by 2021 in order to meet the growing tech sector demand.

The Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia (IEC-BC), in partnership with the Association of Canadian Studies (ACS), carried out a joint research project to identify the specific needs and challenges in attracting and integrating immigrant talent into BC’s tech sector. Additional project partners included the Surrey Board of Trade and Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce along with representatives from 31 different tech companies located in BC’s Lower-Mainland/Southwest region who participated in one of three focus groups across the province or individual, on-on-one interviews.

Key Findings

Results are presented in relation to one of five themes identified in the consultations with BC tech employers. Under Theme 1, focus group/interview participants discussed their *experience with government programs and initiatives* (e.g., Federal Skilled Worker, BC’s Provincial Nominee, Temporary Foreign Worker, etc.). Most employers had used at least one of the programs to source international talent and had mixed reviews. There was some confusion when “navigating the system” and knowing what program to choose when, and frustration over the amount of paperwork required. Less was known of the newly launched Canada Global Skills Visa Program, but those who had used it and were past the learning curve had positive reviews.

The second theme concerned *alignment between immigrant talent and tech employer needs* as they relate to soft skills (e.g., language) and hard skills (e.g., technical). With a few exceptions, most employers felt that immigrants’ soft skills were in short supply, and in particular, their interpersonal communication styles often do not align with Canadian employer’s expectations. “Canadian Experience” was also seen a crucial ‘soft skill’ for newcomers to have before applying for more senior positions in the tech field.

Theme 3 related to *push and pull factors* or those factors that either push foreign talent away from the province or draw tech talent to live and work in BC. Immigrants are enticed by BC’s natural beauty, climate and its many green spaces, but also by the province’s reputation as a fast-growing

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tech hub with a lot of different companies to work for. The most prominent push factors were the inordinately expensive housing market, transportation issues and a high cost of living.

The fourth theme reviews *best practices for BC’s tech sector* and much of the discussion with employers focused on mentorship and/or buddy programs as well as networking opportunities for newcomers. Most companies had either internal or external mentorship programs in operation (or had developed buddy programs for new hires), but very few had a formal mechanism for tracking successes. Employers from smaller tech companies also tended to use an ‘ad-hoc process’ to help out newly arrived employees find housing, transportation, language training and other professional development opportunities.

The final theme involved *settlement and integration services and supports for newcomers and their families*. Employers identified community-based organizations such as S.U.C.C.E.S.S., Mosaic and DIVERSEcity as accessible service providers in the lower Mainland. Camosun College in Victoria was also recognized for an exceptional class they teach to newcomers called “professionalism in the workplace,” which provides great insight into Canadian business culture. IEC-BC’s on-line FAST program was also highlighted, which gives skilled immigrants a head start in the BC labour market before they even arrive in Canada.

Recommendations

The summary discussion also includes a set of recommendations for government policymakers, employers and other vested stakeholders in the BC tech industry. For *policymakers*, five recommendations were put forth: (1) develop an easy-to-use primer and interactive website detailing all current immigration programs and initiatives that employers can use to source international talent; (2) streamline the amount of paperwork employers must fill out when sourcing international talent, especially with regard to collecting information that has already been gathered from the employer in the past; (3) increase awareness of the new Global Skills Visa Program among employers; (4) provide BC tech employers with access to a database of newcomer’s skills and qualifications that are collected during their application process; and (5) build incentives for universities to work with their students after graduation to help them find jobs in BC’s tech industry.

For *employers* in BC’s tech industry, it was recommended that when developing recruitment strategies or “pitches” to attract foreign talent, they portray both the push (e.g., housing ‘crisis’) and pull factors (e.g., tech hub) to potential candidates. It was recommended that tech companies invest more time and resources into developing formal mentorship opportunities for newcomers to BC’s tech industry, with mechanisms for tracking successes and barriers in the mentoring relationship. It was also recommended that tech companies compare the costs of the various interventions available for newcomers to the costs of losing skilled workers and having to hire new ones (or not being able to fill vacancies at all). Moreover, the report recommends that the *community and settlement sector* do more to promote awareness of their services and supports for newcomers and their families in BC, and create awareness of programs for employers hiring new tech talent. And lastly, employers strongly recommend that newcomers to Canada be taught about Canadian workplace culture and employer needs prior to applying for employment opportunities in the BC tech industry.

INTRODUCTION

British Columbia has emerged as one of the leading tech ecosystems in Canada and the world, with a host of successful companies in information and communications technology, interactive and digital media, clean tech, life sciences, and IT/engineering services.

BC’s high tech sector now comprises more than 9,500 companies in the province from startups with a few employees to multinational firms employing thousands of people. Information Technology roles are in the highest demand, including systems engineers, programmers and software developers (BC Tech Association 2017). With more than 92,700 jobs in tech, the sector now employs 4.6 percent of BC’s workforce – more than the mining, oil and gas, and forestry sectors combined (BC Stats, 2016).

Despite tremendous growth for BC’s tech sector, the province is on the verge of a major shortfall of tech talent. According to the 2016 TechTalentBC report, there will be a demand for over 47,000 tech workers by 2021, but only 16,500 of these vacancies will be filled through current employment growth rates and the availability of talent in the province. This leaves 30,500 unoccupied tech-related jobs for BC in 2021 (BC Tech Association 2017).

The study presented herein presents the findings from a series of three focus groups and five one-on-one interviews with tech employers in BC. Companies participating in the study ranged in size from small and medium corporations to large multinational firms and represented multiple tech industries.

The report starts with a scan of the literature related to the BC tech industry, to include an overview of the sector’s growth, talent shortages, and the current needs of tech employers and settlement service providers. The literature review also discusses government immigration programs along with current initiatives, tools and resources for employers and tech talent in the province of BC. This is followed by the study’s methodology and results, which are summarized according to one of five themes identified in the focus groups and interviews:

Theme 1: Experience with Government Programs/Initiatives

Theme 2: Aligning Immigrant Talent and Employer Needs

Theme 3: Push and Pull Factors

Theme 4: Best Practices for the Tech Sector

Theme 5: Settlement Services and Supports

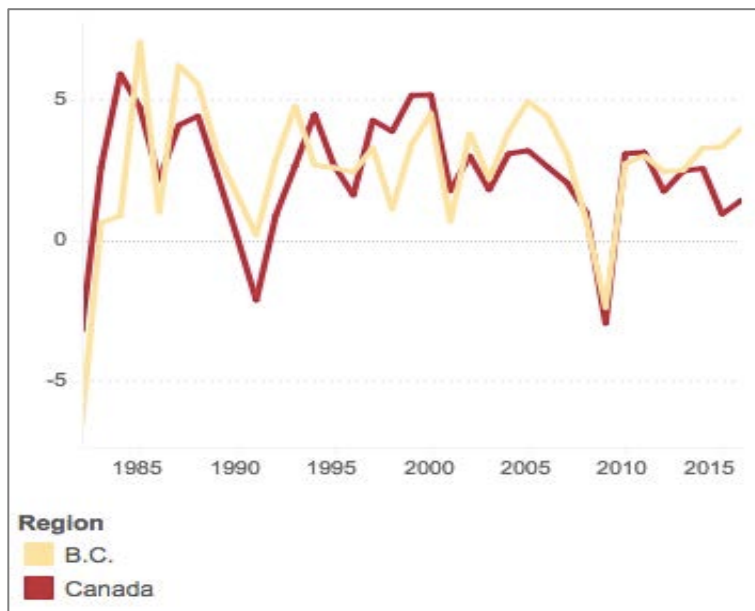
The report concludes with a summary of the study’s key findings and set of recommendations for policy-makers, tech employers, the educational system, community service providers and other vested stakeholders in BC’s tech industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Growth of BC’s Tech Sector

“British Columbia has cultivated a vibrant and diverse technology community – an emergent network that can propel BC to becoming a top ten technology ecosystem.” – KPMG 2016

BC is Canada’s leading province in terms of economic growth and is second only to Ireland amongst international peers (Conference Board of Canada 2018). Real GDP, which measures economic growth while taking into account inflation, was 4.0 percent in 2016, 3.2 percent in 2017 and is projected to grow at an average of 2.2 percent per year through 2025 (BC 2025 Labour Market Outlook; see also Conference Board of Canada 2017). This is compared to a 1.4 percent average real GDP growth rate for all of Canada (Conference Board of Canada 2018). Figure 1 presents historic GDP growth rates for BC and Canada over the past two decades.



*Figure 1. Real GDP Growth for BC and Canada, 1985-2015
(Source: Conference Board of Canada 2017)*

Tech is the fastest-growing sector in British Columbia with revenues growing at a compound annual rate of 6 percent (see Figure 2 below). Since the 2008 recession, BC’s tech GDP has grown at double the pace of the provincial economy, and in the last 15 years, BC’s tech sector has grown by 91 percent to generate over \$15 billion dollars in GDP per year (KPMG 2016).

Over the past decade, BC’s tech sector revenue growth has outpaced tech sector revenue growth in both Ontario and Quebec; yet there is still plenty of room for the tech industry to grow in BC, especially when compared to the successes seen in U.S. states like California, Washington, Oregon, Massachusetts and New York (KPMG 2016).

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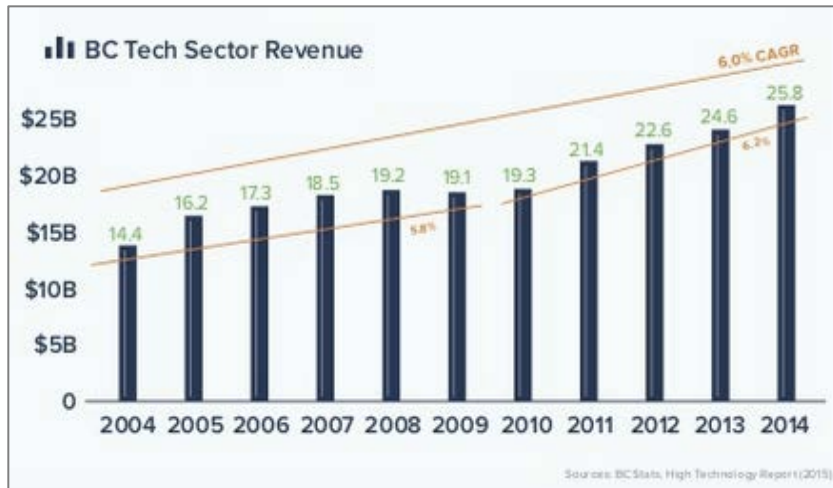


Figure 2. Annual Growth Rate of the BC Tech Sector (Source: 2016 TechTalentBC Report)

Facing a Tech Talent Shortage

“The BC tech sector is facing a talent shortage. By 2021, it is estimated that 30,500 jobs will go unfilled if actions aren’t taken to bring more talent to the industry.” – BC Tech Association 2017

The 2016 Tech Talent BC Report quantifies three objectives to accomplish in order to meet the tech labour force gaps as described above:

1. 8,500 more *immigrants* (defined here as individuals who have immigrated to Canada within the past year) than are currently projected to arrive in BC will be required by 2021 to meet the growing sector demand.
2. 12,500 more *new entrants* (i.e., graduates from BC post-secondary institutions) will be needed by 2021 to meet tech sector demand.
3. 9,500 more *career transitioners* (i.e., those who are upskilling to transition into tech jobs from other sectors) and *individuals from underrepresented groups* (women, First Nations, individuals with disabilities) will be needed by 2021 than are currently expected.

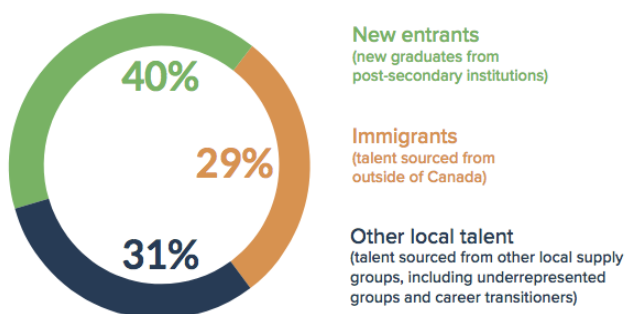


Figure 3. BC Tech Talent Recruitment Pools

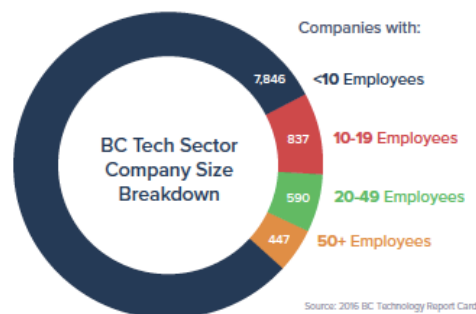


Figure 4. BC Tech Company Size

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The focus of this literature review and report is on issues in attracting and retaining *immigrants* with tech skills. According to the 2016 TechTalentBC report, 29 percent of new industry hires are immigrants (see Figure 3); BC’s Labour Market Outlook projects that by 2025, migrant workers will fill up to 35 percent of labour supply additions in BC.

Immigrants are vital to the growth of BC’s tech industry and will play pivotal roles in BC becoming a top ten ecosystem worldwide. To help fill these projected employment gaps, BC employers will have to source an additional 8,500 immigrants with tech-related skills to the province between 2016 and 2021. The current rate of arrival is simply insufficient to meet the increased demand. As stated by former CEO of the B.C. Tech Association, Bill Tam: “The demand for talent is outstripping the supply.” He goes on to add that “the number one issue” is in attracting “the talent that tech companies need to be able to grow their businesses;” and that “bringing trained workers from outside of the country and increasing the capacity of post-secondary institutions is essential for economic growth” (CBC News 14 March 2017).

To successfully compete with tech players on the world stage, BC needs to promote the growth of small companies to become medium and large anchor companies by improving and supporting competitive tax structures, and educating, attracting and retaining the best talent in the world (KPMG 2016). Four out of five BC tech companies employ fewer than 10 people, although the rate of growth for medium and large size tech companies is currently faster than that of small enterprises (see Figure 4 above; see also KPMG 2016).

Barriers and Opportunities for Growth

BC Tech’s Association has developed a 4-Point Plan to accelerate growth in BC’s tech sector, create more high-paying jobs, boost the province’s economy and competitiveness on a global scale. The plan outlines strategies for scaling up (encouraging companies to grow and achieve global competitiveness) and expanding access to global markets and capital, but the first point in the plan is on *talent* or investing in developing and attracting world-class talent by streamlining immigration and investing in expanding and improving the education system to nurture a homegrown tech talent pool in the province.

The tech sector in BC has historically relied on foreigners to fill gaps in the local talent pool and meet the industry fast-growing needs. Nearly one in three job vacancies in BC tech companies are filled by immigrants, mostly in the Life Sciences subsector (see Figure 5 below) where they are frequently employed at mid and senior levels as biologists, scientific researchers, and scientific technical writers. Keeping these roles filled with qualified, talented individuals in the tech industry is critical for company growth and competitiveness on a global scale.

The number of immigrants arriving to BC has remained stagnant or even declined in recent years, despite the increasing need for attracting foreign talent in the tech sector. In 2014, British Columbia attracted 35,174 or 13.5 percent of all immigrants to Canada, the lowest level observed in the past 25 years (Statistics Canada 2016). BC has also seen its share of recent immigrants decrease over the past 15 years, from 19.9 percent in 2001 to 14.5 percent in 2016 (Statistics Canada 2017).

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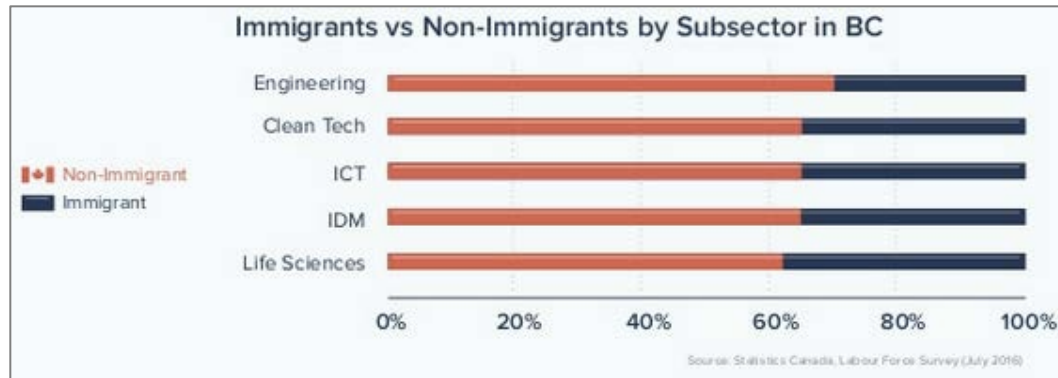


Figure 5. Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Employment by Subsector in BC

BC has also experienced a decline in recent years with regard to the number of skilled workers (economic class) who are arriving. From 2001 to 2006, there were 65,190 skilled workers admitted to the province, but this number dropped to 56,325 for the 2006 to 2010 immigration period and dropped to only 34,830 skilled workers for the period spanning 2011 to 2016 (Statistics Canada 2018).

Government Programs for Sourcing International Talent

Top channels currently used by tech employers to bring international talent to BC are through the Federal Skilled Worker Program-Express Entry (22%), BC’s Provincial Nominee Program (20%), or the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (16%). Other immigration pathways are via NAFTA (14%), post-graduate work permits (13%), transfers from multinational companies (8%) and International Experience Canada (7%) (see 2016 TechTalentBC report).

In past, there were several barriers for tech companies in Canada trying to source international talent through these programs, which included extended application timelines (from 4-6 months to over a year), the requirement to complete a Labour Market Impact Assessment for work permit applications, cumulative duration caps and changes to the points system for applicants.

Recent changes to Canada’s visa program were intended to reduce some of these barriers and help attract specialized foreign talent to BC’s (and Canada’s) tech industry. As part of its Global Skills Strategy, the Canadian government’s *global skills visa program* launched a 24-month pilot project in June 2017 designed to allow high-growth firms to bring in international talent within two weeks, rather than up to a year, which is how long it usually takes. Canada’s Global Skills Strategy also recruits professionals from around the world to train Canadian workers and works with employers planning job-creating investments in Canada. This Strategy provides businesses in Canada with a faster way to bring in global talent in order to scale-up and grow—creating better jobs for more Canadians (Government of Canada, 2017).

Changes to U.S. immigration policies are likely to increase the availability of tech talent in BC. In January 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump issued an executive order banning immigration from three Middle Eastern and four African countries. According to a January 30, 2017 article in the *Globe and Mail*, “high-level engineers, managers and PhD or master’s students working in the U.S. tech industry want to move to Canada due to Trump’s immigration ban.” A Global News

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story on December 25, 2017 also reports that a BC firm has helped 100 tech clients avoid U.S. travel bans and set up shop in Canada. This U.S. immigration policy opens the door for foreign talent to relocate in British Columbia (and Canada) rather than the big technology hubs of the United States.

Incentives to Work in BC Tech

Once foreign talent arrives in the province, there needs to be strong incentive for them to stay here. The percentage of new immigrants settling in British Columbia has been on the decline over the past four censuses, with economic factors such as housing costs playing a significant role in where recent arrivals end up (Globe and Mail 25 October 2017). This “brain drain” of tech talent from BC to other provinces, the United States and other countries has been substantial and has hurt the province’s economy. Over 90 percent of BC students indicated in the BC Tech Student Survey that they would consider leaving the province for a better job opportunity, with half of those respondents indicating that they would be willing to leave Canada altogether. Nearly 35 percent of students indicated that ‘Better salary offers in other provinces’ was the ‘Most motivating’ or a ‘Very motivating’ reason to seek a new job.

Some tech companies in BC are creating special incentives for tech talent to stay in the province that go beyond regular medical and dental benefits, to include offering employees unlimited vacation and flexible work hours. RingPartner, a digital marketing firm in Victoria, cut work down to five hours a day in an effort to recruit new employees and promote work-family balance. Another company even paid for down payments on new Tesla cars for its employees (CTV News 2017).

Table 1: Top Tech Opportunity Occupations In British Columbia by Job Openings

OCCUPATION	Job Openings To 2025	Median Wage Rate
Information systems analysts and consultants	9,100	\$36.06
Computer programmers and interactive media developers	7,800	\$35.00
Software engineers and designers	4,300	\$39.42
Computer and information systems managers	4,100	\$43.27
Computer network technicians	3,800	\$27.40
Civil engineers	3,200	\$36.05
Web designers and developers	2,600	\$24.04
Electrical and electronics engineers	2,000	\$40.00
Mechanical engineers	1,900	\$35.40
Electrical/electronics engineering technologists and technicians	1,800	\$27.00
Computer engineers (except software engineers and designers)	1,400	\$41.03
Engineering managers	1,100	\$45.67

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, as provided by BC Stats.

Table 1 above highlights the top tech opportunity occupations for the province through to 2025.

BC’s proximity to major tech hubs such as Seattle and Silicon Valley has also contributed to rapidly rising salaries for tech workers. In 2014, BC’s tech employees earned an average weekly salary of \$1,580 – 75% higher than the average wage in the province, and higher than the Canadian technology sector average of \$1,340/week (KPMG 2016).

Current Initiatives, Tools and Resources

BC PNP Tech Pilot

BC’s Ministry of Jobs, Trade and Technology is responsible for establishing BC as a preferred location for new and emerging technologies, increasing the growth of domestic BC tech companies, and removing barriers to attracting skilled workers. In support of these priorities, a pilot under the BC Provincial Nominee Program (BC PNP) works to ensure the technology sector can attract and retain the talent it needs to be sustained and to grow the sector further.

BC PNP staff work with local tech employers to address their talent needs by providing a fast-track, permanent immigration pathway for in-demand foreign workers and international students. Through this pilot, eligible candidates with a job offer in one of 32 eligible occupations (e.g., civil engineers, database analysts and data administrators, graphic designers and illustrators) may be invited to apply for a provincial nomination, which may then be used to apply for Canadian permanent residence.

The BC PNP Tech Pilot features:

- A dedicated concierge service so tech employers understand the immigration process with timely and relevant information about the application process.
- Weekly invitations for tech registrants to apply so employers have timely access to qualified individuals in the 32 key technology occupations.
- Priority processing to meet the sector’s fast-paced demands so if you are working in the technology sector and you submit a complete application to the BC PNP, your file will be assigned the next business day to a dedicated technology sector-focused team.
- Focused outreach and engagement with the technology sector and industry partners with tailored presentations, networking opportunities and one-on-one employer support.

BCTechBase

The BC Tech Association launched the BCTechBase, a database with an interactive dashboard that displays information about over 3,000 of the province’s technology companies. The tool

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displays recent financing and acquisition activity, and enables users to parse information about companies by growth stage, tech subsector, and workforce size.

Immigrant Employment Council of BC

The Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) is a not-for-profit organization that provides BC employers with solutions, tools and resources they need to attract, hire and retain qualified immigrant talent. IEC-BC’s mission is to integrate immigrants into the labour market and build BC’s economy. IEC-BC has developed innovative tools and resources to help employers access this untapped talent pool and build a diverse and inclusive workplace.

- BC JobConnect brings together employers seeking skilled people to fill specific roles, and newcomers residing in BC. Registered employers have access to a constantly updated database of job-ready newcomer candidates who have uploaded their profiles through an on-line tool.
- Onboarding Refugees Toolkits were produced to assist employers more effectively recruit, hire and retain a diverse workforce that includes refugees. This series of three publications includes tips, guidelines and best practices from employers who have successfully onboarded refugees.
- FAST Program – a suite of free, web-based services targeting 68 occupations in skilled trades, IT, biotech and life sciences. It gives individuals pre-approved to immigrate to Canada a head start even before they land here. Key features include occupation-specific competency assessments, resources, training on Canadian workplace culture and communications, and direct connections to BC employers.
- MentorConnect Program – provides participating mentors with valuable professional development and leadership skills, while helping mentees gather local insights, access professional networks and enhance employment opportunities. Since the inception of the program in 2011, more than 500 mentors and close to 2,000 immigrants have participated in the program with 70% of mentees finding employment in their field.

METHODOLOGY

This research project used three key methods to collect data: a scan of the literature on the needs of BC’s tech industry to identify challenges faced by employers in attracting and integrating immigrant talent, a series of three focus groups and five individual (one-on-one) interviews with employers in BC’s tech industry.

The literature review (see above) helped to inform the development of a focus group moderator’s guide and a set of focus group and interview questions for HR professionals, hiring managers and business leaders the tech industry who have successfully hired and integrated immigrant tech talent in BC (see Focus Group Moderator’s Guide and interview questions in the Appendix).

IEC-BC organized three focus groups and five one-on-one interviews with tech employers across three regions in BC: Vancouver, Victoria, and Surrey/Fraser Valley. A targeted approach was used to recruit eight to 10 participants per group across the three locations through its current networks, employer partners and business affiliations in the BC tech industry.

All attempts were made to recruit a diverse group of tech employers representing small (1-99 employees), medium (100-499 employees) and large enterprises (500+ employees) from various tech industries to include: clean tech, information and communications technology, interactive and digital media, life sciences, IT/engineering services.

The first of three focus group consultations was held on January 30, 2018 in the Boardroom of the IEC-BC offices in downtown Vancouver. The second group was held on February 1, 2018 at “The Chamber” or Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce in Victoria, BC. The third focus group session was held at the Surrey Board of Trade in Surrey/Fraser Valley on February 2, 2018. One-on-one interviews were held during the last week of February and first week of March 2018. Senior staff and leadership from the ACS conducted the three focus groups with a total of 26 participants as well as the five individual interviews.

What follows are the key findings and themes discussed in these consultations. Below each theme is a set of related questions that were used by moderators to help guide the discussions (see also the Moderator’s guide in the Appendix for the complete set of questions used).

KEY FINDINGS

Theme 1: Experience with Government Programs/Initiatives

Have you ever used any of the following channels to help you source international talent? If yes, please describe the process and your experiences.

If “yes”, did you encounter any barriers when trying to hire international talent via [...]? What barriers did you experience? (e.g., extended application timelines, Labour Market Impact Assessment, cumulative duration caps, changes to the points system for applicants)

Who is familiar with Canada’s Global Skills Visa Program? Has your company/organization participated in this program? If so, can you please describe the key benefits and/or drawbacks of the Canadian government’s strategy?

BC tech employers were asked about their knowledge and awareness of several government programs and initiatives to help source international talent. Specifically, we asked focus group participants and interviewees about the following programs:

- *Federal Skilled Worker Program-Express Entry (FSWP)* – Skilled workers are chosen as permanent residents based on their education (equivalent to a Canadian secondary or post-secondary degree as determined by an Educational Credential Assessment), work experience (in the same type of job as primary NOC, paid work, for at least one year and within the past 10 years), knowledge of English and/or French, and other factors.
- *BC’s Provincial Nominee Program (BC PNP)* – a way for high-demand foreign workers and experienced entrepreneurs to gain permanent residency in B.C. A BC PNP Tech Pilot supports the attraction of skilled workers and to satisfy the demand for tech talent by expanding the province’s technology talent pool. The Tech Pilot features a dedicated concierge service, weekly invitations for tech registrants to apply, priority processing to meet the sector’s fast paced demand and focused outreach and engagement with the technology sector and industry partners.
- *Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP)* – allows Canadian employers to hire foreign workers to fill temporary jobs when qualified Canadians are not available. Employers must obtain a Labour Market Impact Assessment to hire foreign workers to fill temporary labour and skill shortages or employers can hire temporary workers without an LMIA through the International Mobility Program.
- *Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP)* – allows foreign students who have graduated from a participating Canadian post-secondary institution to gain valuable Canadian work experience. Work obtained through the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program may help support your application to become a permanent resident of Canada.

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- *International Experience Canada (IEC)* – a program designed to allow youth the opportunity to work in Canada for temporary periods. Citizens of countries with a bilateral youth mobility arrangement with Canada who are between 18 and 35 years old may be eligible for IEC work permits. The program is composed of three categories: Working Holiday Permits, Young Professionals, and International co-op (for students enrolled at a post-secondary institution in their country of citizenship).
- *Canada’s Global Skills Visa Program* – Canadian government’s global skills visa program launched a 24-month pilot project in June 2017 designed to allow high-growth firms to bring in international talent within two weeks, rather than up to a year, which is how long it usually takes. Canada’s Global Skills Strategy also recruits professionals from around the world to train Canadian workers and works with employers planning job-creating investments in Canada. This Strategy provides businesses in Canada with a faster way to bring in global talent in order to scale-up and grow—creating better jobs for more Canadians.

Most interviewees were familiar with several of these government programs and initiatives to bring in tech talent from overseas or south of the border, and some had experience using the programs before. For instance, the Federal Skilled Worker Program was viewed as most beneficial for employees who were looking for express entry to attain permanent residency (PR), International Experience Canada was “used for certain employees with unique skills” and Canada’s Global Skills Visa Program was perceived to be ideal for a small percentage of candidates who are “making over \$80,000 per year, with 5 or more years of experience.” In other words, there was not a ‘one size fits all’ scenario, but different programs were used for different types of candidates.

Federal Skilled Worker Program-Express Entry

For instance, one employer discussed using the Federal Skilled Worker Program when trying to bring in an “express worker for purposes of very specialized services in our company.” While the process appeared to work out, the experience with the employee was not good: “The individual came in, pre-built with an expectation of performance. We spent a year training that individual only to have him return back to their country of origin.” Another employer from the one-on-one interviews who had used the Express Entry program to hire a few of her employees from Iran and Germany felt that the program was effective, but recommended that the government reduce the amount of “burdensome paperwork” and time that needs to be spent filling out a quarterly survey, which collects redundant information for job positions that are yet to be filled.

BC’s Provincial Nominee Program

The majority of employers were familiar with BC’s Provincial Nominee Program, and those who used it said it got easier to navigate the more they used it. “It’s been fairly good. The first time was a bit bumpy as we learned through the program, but once we learned the process the first time, the second and third was fairly seamless.” Efforts have been made in recent years to improve the program and users overall experience, which was acknowledged by one employer:

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When we were using it [the BC Provincial Nomination Program] three years ago, [it was] awful. Wouldn't even touch it. Now, it's so fast. Someone got drawn within a couple of days, then I had the manager call me personally and say, if you need any help with this, just let us know. We're here. So, we've seen night and day changes, for sure.

Still, others were impatient with the amount of time it took to process applicants: “It's a very good program for the people that qualify for it, but man, is it slow... we need people between two to four weeks. So, we think [it takes] three, four months, it never works for us.”

Another employer took issue with the program’s requirement to prove that equivalent Canadian talent is not available to fill the tech role, which made the process very difficult: “Trying to actually secure the worker in their position, get their clearance. Proving that there isn't a Canadian talent of equivalent capability. That was the biggest issue...” And by the time the employer finally had all the paperwork approved to secure the position, after all that effort, the candidate ultimately left the organization anyways [finding another job in the end]. “A lot of money and effort [spent] for not a lot [in return].”

Temporary Foreign Worker Program

Interviewees were also well acquainted with the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, and one employer stated that 55 percent of their current staff were temporary foreign workers. Another BC tech employer used the program to source talent from specific European countries. And one company used this program to bring people from their other international offices to BC. Although the program was generally viewed in a positive light, at least one employer found it difficult to keep up with the constant changes to the program: “...any time there's a change in the temporary foreign worker's program, it's challenging. We have to figure out the new idiosyncrasies...It's slower than it typically is that we expect. But, overall, it's good for us.”

Post-Graduate Work Permits

Post-Graduate Work Permits were an avenue taken by several employer to hire recent graduates in the short-term, which can help qualified candidates obtain permanent residency in the long-term. Several employers favored work permits because they are relatively straightforward to obtain: “[It’s] Great. It's my favorite when someone has a diploma.” When asked why, the participant responded: “It's easy. We know how to extend them. We provide PR support to people if they're good after a year. So, it's just simple and easy.”

There were some concerns regarding *access* to Post Graduate Work Permits, and in particular, access for private education institutions. According to one focus group participant, regulations changed a year ago to only allow public institutions access: “I've used it. It was probably 35 percent of my business and the government cut it off completely to us a year ago because we're a private college and they just wanted the public colleges to be able to get the permits.” This employer anticipated that the decision would come under judicial review in the next year and stated that they were trying to get it changed around. Prior to the cut-off, “It was great. It was one of the reasons that students came to our school. They wanted to get training. They wanted to get skills and they wanted to use [those skills] in Canada.”

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Global Skills Visa Program

While almost all focus group members and interviewees were at least familiar with the government programs and initiatives used to source international talent, as discussed to this point, there was less knowledge or awareness of Canada’s Global Skills Visa Program.¹

This was probably due to the fact that the program was just launched last June. One of the interviewees was familiar with the new government initiative, but felt they needed more clarity on how to navigate the program. The employer went on to state “a lot of companies will just hire locally because they don’t have the time to navigate the system.”

An employer who had just used the Global Skills Visa Program prior to being interviewed felt that it was a “pretty solid” strategy once you get past the learning curve. And although it took longer than the anticipated two to three weeks to hire the foreign candidate, the process was still faster than any other program, according to the interviewee. Another employer whose colleague had just put someone through the program said the experience was “amazing.” They added:

The program was pretty straightforward, easy to use. We actually have somebody who's ready to come over the next time we get a project that's right for them. It's one of those things like once you do it the second, the third, the fourth time, it just gets easier, so we're ready to use it again. We had a really positive experience.

One employer had already “brought four people in through that avenue. Two of them [were brought in] very quickly. Within two, it was, I think three weeks.” But for the other two, there were “huge triage problems.” Apparently, these individuals were identified as not being qualified or eligible for the global talent strategy. According to this employer:

The government is very well aware of this triage problem, but then they immediately go to be processed to whatever embassy they're closest to, or country they're located in. Then, [once its in there hands], it's nearly impossible. I've had very high up government officials try to get people out of there, but they can't at that point... So, it's very frustrating from our point of view. You don't really know if you're going to get that two to three weeks, or if it's going to be six months, or four to six months... I think, in theory, it is going to be good. It's nice to be able to talk to somebody in government, which we haven't seen, historically. [But] there are still a lot of kinks to work out.

Apparently there was a “bug in the system” at first involving the questionnaire to determine a candidate’s eligibility for a Visa. The employer felt that this question needed to be updated.

¹ The Canadian government’s global skills visa program launched a 24-month pilot project in June 2017 designed to allow high-growth firms to bring in international talent within two weeks, rather than up to a year, which is how long it usually takes. Canada’s Global Skills Strategy also recruits professionals from around the world to train Canadian workers and works with employers planning job-creating investments in Canada. The Strategy provides businesses in Canada with a faster way to bring in global talent in order to scale-up and grow—creating better jobs for more Canadians.

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So while there were some mixed reviews, the Global Skills Visa Program was generally viewed as an improvement over previous strategies under Canada’s Global Talent Stream:

[It’s a] mixed bag. It’s getting better. I think, most recently, with the global talent strategy, we’re utilizing that a lot more...Any time that we’re using the immigration program, we know going in full well that it’s probably going to be double the processing time. There’s going to be things that come in that we don’t expect. So, we kind of go in very optimistically. [But] overall, it’s been good for us.

Another employer indicated that they had not used the Global Skills Visa Program, but were aware of it. They were under the impression that it was easier to go through the regular Visa process because there was “a tremendous amount of follow-up required” during the process. They did not intend to use the program in the foreseeable future.

Co-op Programs

A couple of companies also relied heavily on Co-op programs to hire new tech talent out of schools, which integrate academic study with on-the-job experience. As one employer described:

“Before we bring people in, if they’re new immigrants, we go through a contracting period with them to really kind of assess [their skills]. We hire a lot of co-ops. If they’re successful in their co-op and they understand our environments and can contribute positively, then, we’ll hire them on full-time. We do a lot of things beforehand to ensure we’re assessing [skills].”

Another participant added: “We’ve started off with contracts, too. We need to hire a lot of contractors. If people are successful, then we’ll hire them on full-time to support their PR. We do a lot of different things to help mediate some of the issues that we have [with new hires].”

In Victoria, there was also a discussion on about the disconnect between “the number of foreign students that the University is attracting, and the fact that they don’t make the transition into the [local] workforce.” One focus group participant described it as a sort of “cliff effect”:

We have all these employers who want that talent, and we have the graduate students who are [talented] ... and undergraduate students who want to stay, and there just seems to be a gain. There’s the gap between the University and employers. We don’t seem to be able to bridge that gap. We had a good talk with [the University] about it. They run a co-operational program, very successful, very robust co-op program, entirely focused on people who are active students. Once they graduate, again, cliff effect.

One participant suggested that the federal government might try to focus on what incentives universities have to work with their graduates to get them employed after their studies. “Because universities are entirely focused on currently enrolled students, and that’s why they fall into this chasm after they graduate.” Another employer who had hired a lot of employees through a co-op program asked: “Is there something we can do to connect, or other organizations [can do], to bring these [graduates] back into the [local] marketplace? Right now we’re actively recruiting. We’ve been actively recruiting for the last year because we’re continuing to grow. We need more people.

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How do we get connected with these people that are in this chasm that are unable to find employment?

One suggestion put forth by an employer was to create an incentive-based system for universities to track their students after studies, which may facilitate connection to local employers:

In my mind, the universities need some type of financial or mandate based incentive to keep track of their graduates in some sense, so that when an employer says, do you have an graduates who will fit my vacancies, my build my needs, they have answer. Right now they don't. They just lose touch with them.

However there was some scepticism in regard to motivations to integrate recent graduates into the local marketplace. BC universities “would much rather have a graduate go to Tesla, than to stay local. For them, that's a much bigger tick in the box. It is how they're rewarded, and so if you can provide a different reward...”

Navigating the System

Although employers seemed to appreciate the many different avenues to immigration offered by the Canadian government, some felt the many different programs (and regular changes or revisions to these programs) could be a bit overwhelming to navigate at times:

“It's only been six years since I immigrated. So, I'm very intimately familiar with the process. I don't have a clue how it works. I have a PhD in physics, [but] I can't figure out how to renew my PR card. I can't even find the page on the government website on how to renew my PR card. So, I can't help the people we try to hire. They're immigrating. The way I came in, it's got nothing in common with them. [It seems like there are] 50 different ways [to immigrate].”

In some instances the business owners were also immigrants, which having already gone through the process of obtaining PR gave them special insights and knowledge to help out newcomers embarking on the same pathway. “During the interview process they actually ask, what are the challenges about being in Canada? What are things that are going well? We actually know what challenges they're having before they even come into the job.” For one company, with two owners who are also immigrants, “they've been through some different visa processes, [and] our CEO obtained permanent residency last year. She was actually coaching somebody through that whole process, which is pretty awesome to have those two as advocates.”

Other Issues / Concerns

Some of the key issues mentioned in regard to the various government immigration programs was that although they are helpful in sourcing international talent, “they don’t allow us to bring in enough people [job candidates]” and “we can’t bring them in fast enough” to meet their volume and growth. One employer mentioned that “we use all the programs [mentioned above], but it’s still not enough.” The “growth of the tech industry [in BC] is much faster than government processes.”

Employers also described a gap between supply and demand from an educational perspective: “Canadian schools are not preparing enough graduates” for jobs in BC’s tech industry. From this employer’s standpoint, highly qualified candidates “are not being pumped out of the school system at a fast enough pace.” That is to say, there are simply not enough graduates from the university system with degrees in tech to fill the available positions in BC.

Theme 2: Aligning Immigrant Talent and Employer Needs

BC employers often report a mismatch between the skills that newcomers bring to their company and the skills required by employers. These gaps can be related to both hard (tech) and soft (people) skills. From your standpoint, what can be done to ensure that newcomer skills are better aligned to labour market needs?

While focus group participants (tech industry employers) generally felt that both hard and soft skills were important when hiring foreign tech talent, a lot more emphasis was placed on the importance of soft skills. One employer from a smaller tech organization described the ideal balance that foreign candidates must have between developing hard and soft skills:

It's a tricky balance. We're a small shop. So, when we onboard a new individual or new talent, it's expensive. It's time consuming. We often look at tech chops that the individual brings to the table for what we need, whether it's a business analyst or a full stack programmer ... More importantly, we look at the soft skills: how well will this individual fit in with the small culture of our company? How do they communicate with others?

One of the largest ‘mismatches’ between newcomer skills and the expectations of employers was related to soft skills, particularly related to *communication*.

Communication skills ... not language skills, but communication style ... Everything is about presentation... whether it's selling yourself in an interview, selling a book to the developer, [or] presenting a small report. Here, presentations happen at all levels, [not just at] the manager level. In other countries and ... cultures, you don't speak [publically] until you hit a certain level of seniority. It's different here [in BC].

“We've done a lot of hiring of immigrants, and have a lot of immigrants on staff, especially in our Vancouver operation,” described one employer. “I think that it's the soft skills that are our biggest challenge.” The employer went on to describe a bias held by many of their client base: “90 percent of our staff are customer facing staff, and they're bright people but customers can perceive them as not as intelligent as they truly are just because of the communication gap.” Another employer elaborated on this false perception from customers: “All of our technicians are here in town [Victoria]. If somebody calls [our company] and... they hear what they perceive is a foreign accent, they're assumption is that they're talking to a call center overseas.”

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One employer reiterated the notion that soft skills are in shorter supply, but also drew upon a recurring theme discussed in both the focus groups and the individual interviews related to culture or more specifically, the “*Canadian Experience*.”

I would say soft skills. Usually when we hire, because we have hired people from other countries and they're very qualified. They have the technical skills. The problem is these interpersonal skills, communication skills specifically, and also adapting to the culture in Canada meaning ‘work culture’. I think that's one of the biggest issues we have, so I would say soft skills.

A cultural mismatch was reported in related to the Canadian experience that can impact the newcomer’s work experience as well as hinder retention. And it goes far beyond communication or language skills:

I think it's beyond the English skills for us. The developers, that's not as big of an issue to integrate. It's more those client-facing roles. I did this class when I was at Camosun [local college in Victoria] called ‘professionalism in the workplace’, and it just teaches you what it's like to work in a Canadian-based company, and I thought that was really useful. So something like that, other than just offering English based skills...

“Training is required for soft skills from a cultural perspective,” added an interviewee. It was suggested that newcomers be made aware of the cultural customs of Canadian corporations and know that these customs may differ greatly from those in the employee’s home country. One employer summed up the underlying problem for businesses when it comes to hiring immigrants who lack this “Canadian experience”:

When you identify a foreign worker or immigrant or refugee or somebody who has the actual academic background, where the problem come in is the Canadian experience and the language issue because there's a fundamental gap in understanding what the product is that we're trying to deliver. It's not the skillset. It's translating the skillset into something that the customer is expecting. It's an intangible almost. It's something that has to be developed through a Canadian presence in order to frame and couch the information in terms and perspective that the buyer understands.

Another focus group participant went on to describe the cultural differences that exist between Canada and other countries in relation to hierarchy and fraternization:

...a lot of different cultures have a huge hierarchy, and tech is going toward that whole flat structure, and that is a huge change if you've only ever worked in a hierarchy before. Knowing that you can only go to this person, you can't jump the line if you want to talk to the next person, right? I sit and eat lunch with the CEO all the time. I'll sit with the developers. We all sit together, we all talk because we all socialize together, and that is one of those things that I think we have newcomers come in and start working with us, they don't know what to do with that because that's something that they're not used to.

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One employer also mentioned that in Canada, “you have to earn your job” on the basis of merit, not because of familial ties (nepotism). An anecdote was recalled by one female employer, who described her recent experience while interviewing a candidate from overseas alongside her male business partner. Although the female interviewer was clearly positioned as the lead in the interview process, the male candidate insisted on only addressing the male interviewer, who he felt more comfortable with because of a similar last name and gender (perceived). Both the female and male interviewers felt insulted and did not hire the candidate, despite his highly advanced technical skills. One interviewee had indicated that training on some of this was provided in a module as part of the on-boarding training within their company so employees have a better understanding of language.

The importance of hard skills were brought more frequently by employers and educational institutions in the Surrey / Fraser Valley focus group. After some participants described the issues surrounding soft skills, a few focus group members in Surrey also described the technical needs of their employees:

...I find that the hard skills are our problem. We usually get students from places like Success, Mosaic [community-based organizations serving immigrants in BC]. They've been inundated with soft skills and they've been made to go to so many soft skills to get their different funding and things. What happens is we try to hire these people to help us, usually to instruct. They're already behind a couple of versions. Of course, schools have to be up almost on the leading edge, so we find the hard skills tend to be the problem we have within our organizations.

Another participant added: “My experience is more on the hard skills, too. Softer skills...they learn very quick. The hard skills take longer to train.” And a third employer agreed: “I think for us it's hard skills is the first layer for making decision and then it comes down to soft skills, but because we're boutique it's all around the project. It's specific.”

Although not all focus group participants agreed, an observation was made across the three focus groups and five interviews that the larger the company, the greater emphasis that is placed on soft skills development and for smaller tech organizations or start-ups, greater importance is placed on the development of hard or technical skills.

Another issue brought up by employers was related to unemployment and underemployment and the way in which the Canadian government recognizes the educational degrees and certifications of foreign talent.

...the biggest frustration that I see is the ones that have been here for a while. They've been here for two or three years and they're still not employed in the field that they were trained in. We hear that around the table all the time. We have surgeons that were in [country name] for 25 years. They can't find work. They were brought in under the understanding that when they got here they'd be able to get employed, but of course they find that their skillsets don't match. They have to go back and retrain. There's all of these certification issues, the standards across the country. It's not that they don't have the skill. It's that the

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skill can't be directly applied in the company that would like to hire them, so invariably they get passed over...

The employer went on to describe the dire situation face by these ‘potential’ candidates: “In my business, in my particular sector, these people are floating around all the time. Whenever a job posting goes out by any company, they always apply for those jobs. Everybody knows who they are. They never hire them.”

Those immigrants who do manage to find meaningful employment in BC’s tech industry often have to settle for less pay or a title that is below their level of experience:

We hire a lot of engineers from Iran, India, with 25 to 30 years of experience, but we cannot call them engineers because they do not have the certification. They have to go through the process with [Engineers and Geoscientists of BC]. We have to call them designers and the pay is less. Their expectations are higher, so I think there's a gap...

Another focus group member who worked at an educational institution added to the discussion:

Almost always they're in different fields because they are underemployed. I would say 60 percent of my students are underemployed. I would say 70 percent of my students are immigrants at my schools... almost all of them are doing something other than what they're trained to do because they couldn't get work in their field.

A lack of Canadian experience remains a significant cause of underemployment. Employers are saying: “That's great that they're here and have all this experience, but they're not prepared to start essentially at the bottom.” For example, “if you've got an engineer with 25 years of training in Iran and he comes over, he wants to start right at the top of the pecking order. Being realistic about where they start when they come based on their skill and the fact that they're in a competitive market is the other thing.”

The employer went on to state that the Canadian government has an opportunity here to solve these issues by being realistic with those that they're bringing in and also helping the employers get that message across that “when you do come to work, you're not going to start at \$95,000 a year with 25 years of experience. You're probably going to start mid or even possibly lower in the management chain and work your way up until you do have that Canadian experience.”

Respondents also pointed to confusion around the federal government’s role in assessing credentials for the purposes of immigration versus the assessments performed by credentialing bodies. This can result in newcomers overstating their level of experience and becoming frustrated when employers discount their accomplishments:

“I do find that sometimes people feel pressured to over-inflate what they've done. They dismiss [that] the learning curve is going to be steep. This over-inflation of skill and dismissal of what the challenge will be is a big turn off for the hiring manager. It's huge. I know when we assess a candidate, we look at the skills that they'll bring, but we also want to have our eyes wide open about what gaps they have.”

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This experience points to a need to better inform immigrants of how their skills fit within the Canadian labour market.

The problem lies not in the immigrant’s technical ability or knowledge in their field, but rather in the Canadian governments evaluation and certification process, according to some employers:

Their expectations are not met when they come here. I see it as an educator all the time, and it's really sad, actually. If Canada would take more time in assessing someone's credentials before they come over, I think it would just be so much better, so many doctors, nurses, people, and they end up coming to my school to take administrative courses. Why do we bring them all here and then just to find out either their skills don't match or it's too expensive to take a look at what your skills are? It's just going to take a long time, so why not have a program where they assess their skills and get them certified in whatever they should be certified in or let them know what they need to do before they come [to Canada].

In a way, this phenomenon might be described as the elusive Canadian Dream. Immigrants come here with high expectations of a better life full of opportunities, opportunities which may in fact not exist or are at least more difficult to obtain than original thought:

The biggest thing we've identified through our round table discussions in the labor side of things, people coming into the country feel, quite frankly, that they were sold a bill of goods. They feel that they were told a lot of things that just, quite frankly, weren't true. We've seen it across all sectors...the government being realistic about what new immigrants...can expect when they come into the country is one thing. Making sure they're properly trained and skilled for what they're about to embark on is another...

Another mismatch reported in the interviews was related to the resumes/CV’s of foreign talent, which are often formatted in a different way from those submitted by Canadian job seekers. A couple of employers stressed the need to adopt Canadian style guidelines and customs, which emphasize work accomplished in terms of deliverables. Too often employers will reject a potentially great candidate from the pool because their resume/CV has an unfamiliar layout or does not present the desired information.

Similarly, it was stressed that foreign talent needs training in how to prepare for interviews with Canadian employers. An educator from Victoria described how they help out newcomers by providing “a little bit of guidance about how to best prepare for an interview.” Most of the job seekers she helps are very technical people, “and one of the biggest concerns they share with me is that they don't have the [correct] resume or CV.” She went on to say that “What really matters is the portfolio that they can show. I guide them through how they best develop that portfolio” so that they have a good chance of landing a role in the tech field.

Theme 3: Push and Pull Factors

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What are some of the key push and pull factors that draw tech immigrant talent to BC? Who are BC tech companies competing with nationally and internationally when trying to attract tech talent globally?

What can the BC tech industry do to promote employment opportunities for immigrant tech talent in BC? What about the Canadian government? Are there other players who are or should be involved in attracting immigrants to BC’s tech sector?

Push Factors

Without question, the biggest push factor mentioned by virtually all focus group members and individual interviewees was related to housing in BC, or what can more aptly be described as the “housing crisis.” The average house in Vancouver now costs over \$1,000,000 and as one employer put it: “we need to tell people the goods straight away.” One employer in Surrey lamented: “I don’t think anyone shares that [reality] with them before they come here because the immigrants I see say, “No one told me how difficult it was going to be...They just told me there was jobs and they told me what a beautiful country and they told me what the standard of living was,” because that’s a great selling point for BC, “but the affordability issue is just beyond the comprehension of most of the immigrants that I speak to.”

As one employer described, when “a new immigrant comes [to Vancouver] and they want to rent, forget about buying, they are hard pressed and need to go live in the suburbs, with long commute times. So that’s almost the immediate pushback.” Another employer from Vancouver added: “The detriments are mounting everyday with the cost of living here... Where are the immigrants going to move to? They’re either going to live into a very subpar basement suite in Vancouver somewhere or they’re going to have to go out to [the suburbs]... They will not be living in a mansion by the ocean close to work, but more likely commuting long distances. In other words, we have to make potential job candidates aware of the realities of living in BC from the start (before they arrive) and not sugarcoat the realities of living in beautiful British Columbia.

One employer characterized the “housing crisis” in Vancouver as more of an economic development issue: “They talk about a housing crisis. Well, they talk about a housing crisis in Vancouver. There’s no crisis. The housing market’s actually very healthy. It’s an economic development issue, at the end of the day.” When one compares Vancouver to other sectors, “Santa Clara County. San Jose, Palo Alto [California]. No rental controls. But, you know what? They’ve got the economics there to support the jobs for people to make it happen in those markets, right? We need to cultivate more of that type of thing.”

Coupled with the housing issue are transportation and commute times. If you can’t afford a place in the downtown core where the work is, and most immigrants cannot, then you are forced to live in the suburbs with long commute times to your place of employment. For some newcomers who are hired, “it’s a one and a half, two hour commute each way, so they’re spending four hours a day commuting. You tell them they should move out here, get closer, but then it’s the affordability issue of housing. What we’ve heard a lot, too, is even just getting a worker to the job.” “In Vancouver, there’s one downtown core, and no one has typically less than a 45 minute commute. No one owns a house within those 45 minutes. Salaries are not higher than anywhere else. Silicon Valley is really close. Why stay here when you can make more money down there?”

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And another issue faced by tech employers in BC, which may affect their ability attract foreign talent is related to a slow onboarding process. “One of the questions that have come up around the IT and tech area that I’ve come across is that employers have a slow hiring attitude,” stated one focus group participant. “Candidates can go through quite a few different interviews, up to maybe five, over the course of a period, and could take two to three months in some cases.” The belief was that some candidates would get frustrated with having to endure this long employment process and might choose another destination or give up in their endeavors all together.

This leads to another push factor identified up by employers related to the sheer size of the employer base in BC, which although large and growing still does not match the opportunities that can be found elsewhere in other Canadian provinces and abroad. “Every time I try to bring in employees from Toronto,” said one interviewee, “they are always aware of the number of employers in Vancouver, which is less than in Toronto. If they have children and families, they will think twice [before moving to BC] – it can be a limiting factor.”

When asked if they had seen any kind of a push from the United States with the recent travel ban, one focus group member responded: “we’ve absolutely seen people who, in their immigrant process, had applied to multiple countries, and either had waved off of going to the States recently, in that they were now looking through the immigrant process in Canada. They were looking at a couple options, and that was the option that they settled on.” A representative from a large multinational added: “Nationally, we’ve had a significant amount of [employees] from the states relocate to work in Canada. Not so many in Victoria, but in some of the bigger cities.

Pull Factors

Some of the most obvious pull factors that bring immigrants to “beautiful British Columbia” as mentioned were: “the weather, the climate, location, geography and proximity to the San Francisco Bay area.” Vancouver is often cited as one of “the most livable cities in the world.” You have lots of green spaces, snow-capped mountains and the ocean all in your backyard. “It’s the quality of life message that we promote” to potential candidates living abroad. They went on to add: “We’ve spent a lot of time, effort, and money on the message...it almost always [comes] down to lifestyle.”

A couple of employers mentioned developing tailored recruitment strategies for potential candidates, depending on the country that they were from. For individuals from European countries, for instance, the recruiting message would emphasize the cultural similarities that can be found between Canada and their home country. This would allow for an easier transition, based on cultural congruence from their country to Canada. In contrast, the tech employer would also emphasize the vastly different cultural climate that is found in the United States, despite the fact that in Canada, pay is generally lower and the dollar is weaker.

Another company that recruited tech workers from China and India would emphasize the opportunity to come to a new country and culture that embraces diversity and inclusion (Canada), and has a work culture that emphasizes *work-life* balance. Canada is also known as a place that fully embraces *multiculturalism*, especially relative to the U.S., which is a draw for many

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immigrants as well. Moreover, Canada has a “good reputation as a country that respects diversity and helps people” in need, regardless of where they come from.

Being on the Pacific Rim was an advantage for BC companies when recruiting tech talent from other Pacific Rim countries (Japan, China, Philippines, New Zealand, etc.). There is a large presence by overseas companies in BC as a result of this geographic proximity. The digital tech industry in Vancouver is one of the biggest in the world, with many opportunities to earn more relative to other cities in Canada.

“The Canadian Experience” was also alluded to during the discussion on push and pull factors. “The [biggest] pull for newcomers to Canada [is] the idea that they would come into a completely different place for a short period of time, so if they didn't like it, well, it was only a year. They rented a room, they learned to ski, they learned the lifestyle, and they had that *Canadian experience* on their resume. That was so precious for them...”

Although the BC tech industry is often characterized as a homogeneous entity, there is still a degree of competition between different BC regions in attracting foreign tech talent. This was especially apparent in Victoria:

If you're immigrating to BC, Vancouver has such a larger cultural community base, and once somebody brings their family, or comes over and puts their feet in Vancouver, it's really hard to convince them to come and move to Victoria when we have... small pockets of community, but not the same sort of support you could get in Vancouver.

Employers in Victoria were quick however to point out some of the more attractive features of their community relative to Vancouver: “There was just that story in the [newspaper] about Victoria coming second after St. John, Newfoundland, for being friendly, and open, and welcoming to newcomers, and other people in the community helping them adjust.” Another employer contrasted the cost of living in Victoria relative to Vancouver: “...since affordability has become a major issue in Vancouver, we've actually seen net migration change. We're actually attracting more people. I think that just underlines the messaging.”

Another focus group member who described having only a 12-minute commute to work every day went on to describe some more of the differences between Victoria, Vancouver and other tech labour markets, both national and global:

[Victoria is] a community that's big enough, where there's a lot of things that you can do both in terms of professional life and personal life, but it's small enough that it's not overwhelming like Vancouver. Cost of living for a city this size actually isn't that bad when you take everything into account... Certainly if you're recruiting on a global basis, there's additional attraction here. If you're recruiting from Winnipeg or Saskatoon, that's different. [Compared to] leading centers, [like] San Francisco or Hong Kong, we're a very inexpensive community.

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Several companies also referred to “industry mobility” or the notion that since BC’s has a large tech industry that is growing at a very fast rate and as a result there are opportunities abound. One focus group participant filled us in on some of the key stats in Victoria:

Tech is actually the number one industry in Victoria. There are 904 companies that are involved directly in tech. 15,000 people employed. There's another 7,000 employed in government agencies that also are in tech related roles. So a significant proportion of the workforce here is in tech, which means there are lots of different types of opportunities to move around. That's one of the selling factors that we talk about too.

“Tech is a very large industry,” added another participant from Victoria. “One of the things that we suffered for a long time was the plan B syndrome, that if you got recruited into a company and that didn't work out, well what else there? It's Victoria, right? This notion of industry mobility makes it an easier sell to source international candidates who might otherwise be trepid when making the big move from overseas:

Part of the pitch [to newcomers is] that there are a lot of jobs [in BC’s tech industry]. There are a lot of opportunities...If you don't like working for us, there's a lot of other jobs... There's no permanent job where you're expected to work 30 years for the same company anymore... I don't expect a lot of them to work for us for more than three, five years. People move around. I think a permanent job is not very long term.”

Also, a big sell for some of the larger companies or multi-nationals was in their name and reputation: “It's easy for to recruit [immigrant tech talent]. A lot of people want to work with us, so it's not a hard sell.”

Theme 4: Best Practices for the Tech Sector

Have you identified any “best practices” for employers when hiring immigrant tech talent in BC? What about lessons learned? Please provide specific examples of successful initiatives that could be replicated by other employers.

Tech employers had identified and were using several “best practices” available to them when hiring newcomers entering the BC tech workforce. The most widely adopted practice among tech employers, as identified in the focus groups and interviews, was related to mentorship and/or buddy programs. Smaller companies tended to use less formalized, more “homegrown” programs while larger companies tended to adopt more formal mentorship models. Most programs were internal to the company (i.e., external mentors were not used).

Formal Mentorship Programs

Representatives from a couple of different tech companies mentioned using *MentorConnect*, a mentorship program developed by the Immigration Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC)². One

² IEC-BC’s MentorConnect program brings together skilled immigrants and established professionals in occupation-specific mentoring relationships. Skilled immigrants entering the program have the education,

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employer felt that the two-month mentorship program had a very easy process and was a great way to get their employees to network and find resources in the community. Another focus group member described the work IEC-BC is doing to teach Canadian workplace culture to recent immigrants:

I know IEC-BC is doing some work to prepare for work in Canada, which I think is really helpful. It kind of sets the expectations from black and white. This is the Canadian culture, or the context of which you'll be working with. This is how we communicate. This is how things get done. If I had that, ten years ago, I would have been a happy guy because we crashed and burned on a number of new hires from people coming in, like, newly arrived Canadians. We thought, wow, this person is a rock star. Then we get in, and it just doesn't work, because accountability is completely different from our expectations, communication is completely different.”

One focus group participant described how they have a formal mentoring program in their company that deals directly with preparing newcomers for the “Canadian Experience.”

Part of the mentoring process is to deal with this Canadian experience and it's to help integrate the employee, not only to the company culture, but also to Canadian and BC culture. It's taking them out to lunch, inviting them out after work and participating in group activities outside of the company... That's only once they're in the company. It's getting the person from the outside into the company that's the challenge, finding the right person. Once they're in, then we have a process to try to ensure their success.

A focus group participant from Victoria described how their company used both formal and informal mentoring processes with employees:

What we have is, officially, a mentorship program that matches someone with experience with someone [who has been] identified that we want to [develop] globally, not just here. Unofficially, there's always a mentorship within our office for people to approach others to get the guidance that we need... Our HR folks are really strong in bridging that gap, and getting them comfortable within both the environment within the office.

And another tech employer from Vancouver also described how they have a two-part program for all employees during the onboarding process. They have “office specific mentors that connect every single employee.” They also have a more technical, formal buddy program. “Every single person that comes into our company, doesn't matter what your level is, you are connected with a buddy. They help you get oriented on the team specific technical knowledge, questions, things like that.”

experience and language skills to succeed in the Canadian labour market. However, they may not understand the Canadian context of their profession, workplace culture, or know how to translate their skill sets. Often what they need are the local insights and access to professional networks that a one-on-one connection with a local mentor can offer.

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Informal Mentorship / Buddy Programs

There were also several examples of internal mentorship models or buddy programs used by employers, especially those from small to medium size enterprises. For instance, an employer in Victoria described how their company has mentorship for all new employees: “...some of it's official, and then the rest of it's pretty organic.” “I would echo that,” stated another employer.

“We don't have any formalized mentor program, but we encourage every single one of our staff to connect with someone else internally that can help them along their way. We're always checking in with. It's not really formalized. I agree, the nature of our organization and Victoria as a whole, is everyone's always looking to help each other. Especially within this sector for sure.”

A Vancouver employer described a quasi-apprenticeship model that their company developed internally for use when onboarding new tech talent:

When we onboard a new resource, we don't look necessarily at the resume, we look at their interest in the work. We look at their ability to work the work... If we have someone coming in, particularly if they're younger, and this may be the first or second time in the work force, we can put them in... a quasi-apprenticeship model. We [match] them with a senior person in our company and have them shadow them and work very closely with that person on our team. It works out really well, because they learn so much faster. They get their confidence quicker, and then, in two years, they're doing that with someone else... So, how do you cultivate that apprenticeship or mentorship? You've got to do it internally. That's worked really well for us.

Networking Activities

In Victoria, there was a unique form of mentoring used by a group of employers that was similar to a speed-dating event. They hosted several nights where people who wanted a mentor (several who were in startup phases of their own company) were asked to make a pitch to local tech employers. Half of participants were “pitchers” and the other half mentors. “Then there was the opportunity for the mentors to answer either a specific question that the person had, and [job seekers] could go around to give their elevator pitch to numerous [employers], or set up an ongoing mentoring relationship.”

Community networking was seen as a very special skillset for tech job seekers to master. The reality is, stated one interviewee, “If you can network, it's easier to get a job.” Several companies organized networking activities for their employees to increase moral and provide opportunities for staff to connect on an interpersonal level. Some groups organized had karaoke nights, others just went out to lunches or happy hours. An employer described how employees at their company “can sign up for different sports events, if they want to be part of a ski group or if they want to get together they can do dragon boating, they can do different events. There's toastmaster's, there's all kinds of activities that are facilitated. They're not culture specific.” Another employer added: We have everything from playing volleyball and bowling, to baseball, etc. [We do] a lot of team

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building [with employees], lunch and learns... We’re a tech company, so we have the foosball table [at the office]...we’ve got everything.”

One employer who was interviewed also had positive comments about *Destination Canada*³, an annual forum used to recruit French-speaking job candidates from France, Belgium and beyond. They found the initiative to be “incredible effective.” At the event, representatives from the BC tech employer networked and met with around 2,000 individuals (400 per day across 5 days). To date, the company has hired one individual they met with through *Destination Canada*, but intends to hire more candidates from that pool of talented individuals in the near future.

Flex Hours / Work at Home Models

Employers also discussed best practices in terms of structuring the workday to create a work-life balance for employees and their families. “One of the main reasons they want to work with us, especially woman in STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics],” said one employer, “is because of the work life balance [we offer]. In STEM, it's known that you do a lot of hours. That’s the main draw, for women, specifically, that they’ll be able to finish their day to be able to go get their kid out of daycare. That's huge.”

Alternative work arrangements such as flex time or work at home models are facilitated by the tech industry, as “tech has always been outside the traditional employment model.” A Vancouver employer described this flexibility and the idea of a global work environment:

You have to keep in mind [that] in the tech sector, the type of outputs that we produce. It doesn't follow, necessarily, traditional employment models. Since 1992, if you had a computer and an Internet connection, you could sit at home in your bunny slippers and deliver code. So, people don't necessarily have to come to a place of work. We just hired a business analyst. She's lives in [U.S. city]. There's no way I'm going to move her from to Vancouver... She's planted. She's good. She's accountable. Communications all work. So, I don't care if you're here. You can be anywhere.

There is also the expectation from many job seekers in the tech sector that they will be able to work from home or virtually. One focus group member discussed how the developers of Wordpress had just sold their 180,000 square foot building in San Francisco. “They sold it because five people showed up to their 8-story office every week. So we are at an age now where...you can sort of work from anywhere.”

³ *Destination Canada* is an annual forum and event in support of the *Roadmap for Official Languages* which aims to inform French speaking candidates living abroad (in France, Belgium and beyond) of the opportunities available to them to live and work in Canada. Employers attending *Destination Canada* are companies of all sizes and sectors seeking in particular bilingual and French-speaking talent. Over 80 employers participated in the last edition (2017) and recruited for over 1,200 jobs.

Resource Challenges

A key challenge for employers implementing mentorship programs or other best practices is related to time, or lack thereof. “It’s a challenge, because at the end of the day, we’re a billable company. So, it’s hard to get those hours. When an individual can spend more time and has higher percentage of their week dedicated [to mentoring], then it’s more successful.” Another employer from Surrey described how their company’s buddy system where they pair a new hire with someone from the team hasn’t worked very well, “because sometimes the person that is the buddy does not have the time to invest in this person just because they’re so busy with work. At an HR level we’re trying to find a way of making this work and make it more effective.”

A Vancouver-based employer said that it can be difficult to allocate the necessary time and resources to properly assess a new employee’s talents and gaps and finding the right pathway to success for them:

We have to do a self-assessment: we really want these skills that this individual brings, but we [also] want to set them up for success. Do we have mentorship available? Do we have a program internally to fill those gaps so that they will be successful? Sometimes the answer is no. It’s not because they’re missing something, it’s because we’re missing the proper foundation to support them.

Representatives from larger tech organizations (1,000+ employees) in BC mentioned that it is not always cost-effective to offer newcomers additional supports and services to increase retention. The motto was “if you can’t offer it to everybody, then you can’t offer it at all.” As a business, there is a bottom line. And without an obvious return on investment, some companies may not be able to consider offering mentorship programs or other services to new tech hires to increase their retention (although one company did have a buddy system in place to help new employees understand the organization). One employer from a large tech organization stated that these supports would be welcome if the “government is offering to pay for them, at no (or little) cost to employers.” The employer felt that too often the BC and Canadian government want businesses to do “their jobs for them,” but at the end of the day they still have to be a “profitable business” and cannot incur additional costs to remain profitable.

For many small to medium size tech companies, there was not always a means of supporting new tech workers through formal mentorship or other programs, so more informal, ad hoc guidance was provided to help immigrant tech workers integrate into the community. This practice was very evident in Victoria: One employer said she has spoken with several newcomers, but it’s all very ad hoc. “I have no resources to send them to that I’m aware of...Typically what I end up doing is connecting them with [employers] in town based on the industry that their interested in. I’ve formed sort of a connector role from that perspective.”

“There is a lot of unofficial mentoring that goes on, and a lot of people willing to give back even outside of their own companies...it’s just part of the culture of Victoria,” added an interviewee. A focus group participant from Victoria further described this “ad hoc” process of helping new newcomers on a personal level to foster their development of a sense of community:

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I think that it's just good citizenship to care for your employees, and to take an interest, and help them any way you can, and we do that. Whether it's helping them find housing, or helping them secure a mortgage, or helping them with car repairs, we're sort of connected. If I walk through the parking lot and I see someone's got a problem with their car, even just a little tire, make sure that we're engaged with them to help them out. To make sure that ... connect them with our ... We get better rates in ... because we bought a few cars that we're running. We'll connect them with our mechanic. It's just good practice to care for your staff.

Other employers (especially from smaller companies that are run by immigrants who have come to Canada through similar government programs) took it upon themselves to help recent immigrants feel at home and identify necessary resources. Some employers would sit down with a new employee and help them find housing (on the Internet, Craigslist, etc.), purchase a car or open a new bank account.

Theme 5: Settlement Services and Supports

Once they have arrived to live in work in BC, how do we ensure the retention of immigrant tech talent in British Columbia? How do we help integrate newcomers before/after arrival?

Do any gaps exist in terms of the supports needed to assist employers to more effectively hire and integrate immigrant talent in BC? What are these gaps and how would you like to see them addressed?

What supports would your company be willing to help provide to employees and their families? For instance, would any employers be receptive to paying for a ‘concierge’ service to help with the settlement and integration of new tech employees and their families?

Have you heard of any specific issues or difficulties faced by immigrants who are already employed by your company (or anecdotally from other companies)? What are these issues?

Relocation Assistance

Several BC tech companies offered new employees a ‘robust’ relocation package to move to BC and work for their company, one even providing company apartments. Another company had a support desk to assist new employees with housing, travel and relocation support. However, there was a preference to hire someone from Canada for many companies (if their credentials were equivalent), in large part due to the increased costs of relocation and other associated costs for someone living overseas.

English Language Training

Focus group participants were asked if they would be open to providing language training in the workplace for newcomer talent who did not have English as a first language. One employer stated that “it would be part of the calculation” that may put a foreign candidate at a competitive disadvantage relative to a Canadian candidate:

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At the end of the day we're trying to put a product out the door, and the more we're having to invest in one person over another person becomes a competitive disadvantage for hiring that person. That's the reality. Obviously if they came to the table with a distinct set of skills that we're going to invest the time and energy, we would actually make the hire. In my world, I would rather have it where people coming into it are able to be treated at parity, or close to parity. I would hate to be turning somebody away who is good at the job simply because they're language skills aren't up to snuff, and we don't have a mechanism [to translate this into]...the time, the money, the energy, that we simply wouldn't be able to commit to.

Some employers provide funds for new employees to take English classes, usually in the evening. “We'll pay for the courses. They do it on their own time.” According to focus group participants, there are many programs that exist in the community to help newcomers learn English, but as one focus group member put it: “I would go as far as to say I'm not very impressed with any of them. When they came out of the program, ...they didn't have very strong English language skills.” Most of what these programs teach is “really fundamental English, and it's being able to go shopping and order at restaurant, or something like that. It's not effective in learning (workplace) English.”

In Victoria, an employer had positive comments regarding an English language program at their local college: “I also use the Camosun Program. There's an English program in there that's government funded, and that, I think, was far, far more valuable for the people I've dealt with.”

The most visible community-based organizations mentioned during the focus group discussions were S.U.C.C.E.S.S.⁴ and Mosaic⁵. Focus group participants in Vancouver and Surrey / Fraser Valley were asked what they do in the scenario where an employee comes to them and asks them for help in finding housing. One employer responded:

I send them to S.U.C.C.E.S.S. or Mosaic, but really, very little can get done there when it comes to these fundamental housing issues. I'll open a Craigslist with them and I'll say, "Hey, I'll help you out." I help my employee, because they're immigrants, I help my employees buy cars. I help my employees with their leases. It's just how I am. I'm very in touch with my employees. I will open up Craigslist with them and try to find them something.

⁴ Initially founded to assist new Canadians of Chinese descent to overcome language and cultural barriers, S.U.C.C.E.S.S. has evolved into a multicultural, multi-service agency assisting people at all stages of their Canadian experience. Today, the organization is recognized as one of British Columbia's largest social service providers.

⁵ MOSAIC is a registered charity serving immigrant, newcomer and refugee communities in Greater Vancouver for the past 40 years. Services are delivered from 26 client-accessible sites and include settlement assistance, English language training, employment programs, interpretation and translation, counselling services, and community outreach for families and individuals, including children, youth and seniors. MOSAIC also offers services for temporary foreign worker communities.

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Other settlement service organizations in Surrey, as identified by focus group participants, included DIVERSEcity⁶, ISSofBC⁷ (Immigrant Services Society of BC) and WorkBC, a government agency that helps newcomers find employment in British Columbia.

The consultations looked at ways in which employers were helping to integrate immigrants not only into their company’s work culture, but also into the surrounding community. “It’s always a challenge,” said one employer. “A newcomer coming to a foreign place. Someone that’s going to an office environment and integrating with [other employees] is going to settle better than someone that’s isolated at home that maybe not be integrated, so for sure there’s challenges.”

Some employers discussed the cultural networks that are found throughout the community, and how these networks can help establish a sense of belong to the community, ultimately increasing their retention in BC:

I know that there's a group of employees that we have from Iran and a group from India and they have a very strong community. Any time someone new is coming in from one of those countries, it's instantly welcoming them into the community. So, I find that when there's groups like that, that have a really strong community base, really helpful. They help integrate into society. They help individuals integrate into society and provide instant community.

Several employers also felt that *family* was a very important factor to consider when settling and integrating new tech talent in their community. They themselves were immigrants and remembered what it was like when they first arrived. One employer said: “we recruit a lot of immigrants because we ourselves are immigrants ... it feels like a family.” However they use only informal measures to help newcomers integrate.

Focus group participants in Victoria were asked if they had run into issues where they had an immigrant employee who was basically not working out because their family wasn’t happy. Perhaps they say, “I love my job, but my husband or my wife or my kids, they really are just not doing well here. So, we’ve got to leave.” Employers were asked if they were seeing any instances like that, and if so, whether or not they had any advice on how to deal with that scenario.

One employer responded by describing how they try to involve the family members of new employees in social gatherings and activities because if someone is not happy at home, this will likely transfer to the office environment:

⁶ DIVERSEcity is a not-for-profit agency that helps integrate immigrants and new Canadians into the culturally diverse communities of the lower mainland. Services delivery areas include: settlement and community programs; language training and literacy programs, employment services and skills training services, counselling services, programs for children and youth; interpretation and translation services.

⁷ ISSofBC is the settlement agency of its kind in Western Canada, with targeted programs for refugees, women, children and youth, plus support services in over 45 languages. Our programs and services are available throughout Metro Vancouver, Squamish and the Okanagan.

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I think we all do some kind of social thing within our companies to bring in the families whenever we can and make connections. One of our newcomers, he had a couple kids and a wife that was staying at home, and so (my wife) connected (with) them. They sit and have in the coffee in the backyard on a spring day, and start to build relationships outside of their small community.

Still there were other instances encountered by employers where immigrant tech talent was hired on an open work permit, but had to leave the company because their spouse or partner could not find work, or was not permitted to work due to an expired Visa:

“We have encountered situations where people were hired, where the person that works for us is the spouse on an open work permit. No problem. But, the other partner has to work for an assigned employer. Their work permit expires, or they get laid off.”

An employer shared another anecdotal account:

We have this brilliant [employee hired on] an open work permit, but they can't stay anymore. Their partner had to go somewhere else. That has actually been a bigger problem, that I would say, that the family doesn't like it or, kids are not happy in school. It's been more, usually it's a family, two people, two different work permits. We work with one of them. The other partner works somewhere else. That depends on the other company...There's no [formal] connection between us, but we're interconnected.

A focus group member suggested that local tech companies work together with their employees who are spouses to ensure that they can both work in the same city, which will ultimately lead to higher integration and a better chance at long-term retention.

In addition to seeing more cooperation between tech companies in BC, one interviewee called for better transparency and cooperation between tech companies and the Canadian government. For instance, it was suggested that government assessments of immigrant qualifications and credentials (that are completed at the time of applying for Canadian citizenship) should be shared with potential employers so they can tap into this resource talent pool. “The biggest gap,” proclaimed the interviewee, is that “employers do not have access to a database of Canadian immigrants’ qualifications or government assessments of these qualifications.” Employers need to know how many immigrants are coming to Canada with the qualifications needed by their companies. They need to know who and where the talent pool is.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following discussion provides a summary of key findings from the focus groups and interviews with BC tech employers in Vancouver, Victoria, and Surrey / Fraser Valley. The findings are grouped according to the five themes as outlined above, although some findings have relevance across multiple themes. A set of recommendations are embedded in the summary and are intended for government policy-makers, employers, and the BC tech industry, in general.

Theme 1: Experience with Government Programs/Initiatives

Some employers felt overwhelmed with all the different immigration programs and government initiatives that can be used to bring foreign talent into the country and to British Columbia. Several employers felt they just didn’t have the time to “navigate the system” and learn all the ins and outs of each immigration track, especially when they seem to change on a regular basis. Others reported a certain comfort level with some of the programs, after they had used them several times and learned the nuances. But a few employers who were immigrants and had gone through the process of obtaining permanent residency in Canada still were not confident that they could help their recent immigrant employees do the same, as new initiatives have been launched since then and the rules have changed.

To help employer’s navigate the system *we recommend that the Canadian government develop an easy-to-use primer and interactive website detailing all current immigration programs and initiatives that employers can use to source international talent.* Different scenarios or walk-through examples could be presented to provide employers with a step-by-step process on how to select and apply to the best program based on a set of criteria. Similar to a *decision-tree* graphic, the employer can follow if-then statements to arrive at the immigration program that is best suited for the foreign candidate(s). This on-line resource could provide information on anticipated processing times for the application as well as links to external resources. A video learning tool with training modules could also be used to provide employers with instructions on how to use the interactive website to find the most efficient pathway to immigration.

Another issue brought up by employers in relation to government programs and initiatives was the excessive and burdensome amount of paperwork that needs to be filled out on a regular basis (i.e., quarterly surveys) by employers when trying to fill vacancies in their company with foreign talent. A lot of this information is redundant, according to some employers, and the amount of paperwork could easily be reduced. *Hence it is recommended that the Canadian government find ways of reducing the current amount of paperwork employers must fill out when sourcing international talent, especially with regard to surveys collecting information that has already been gathered from the employer in the past.*

Also, the requirement for businesses to prove that similar Canadian talent is not available through a Labour Market Impact Assessment before hiring slows down the application process and can cause other complications for businesses. This process should be streamlined. On more than a few occasions employers reported losing tech talent, which they believe was due (at least in part) to the long duration times and confusing paperwork when completing PR applications. This was

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after investing a lot of time and resources into recruiting and training international talent, only to have them leave the organization to find jobs in other labour markets.

One of the easier ways for tech employers to hire foreign talent, at least for the short term, is to hire recent graduates of Canadian universities through Post-Graduate Work Permits. Employers seeking to hire open work permit holders are exempt from the requirement of first obtaining a positive Labour Market Impact Assessment, which was seen as very beneficial and time saving for employers. The work permits are good for a maximum of three years and can help immigrants qualify for their PR status through the Canadian experience class.

Employers also discussed the use of co-op programs, which integrate academic study with on-the-job experience. According to focus group participants in Victoria, co-ops provide a good mechanism for students to gain important work skills, while offering employers an arena to evaluate these skillsets. They allow employers to hire talent and fill gaps, but only for the short-term. The 2016 TechTalentBC report also recommends increasing *“investment to significantly expand co-op and experiential learning opportunities in both post-secondary and K-12, with an emphasis on developing students’ interpersonal, communication, and team working skills.”* However the main issue with co-ops, according to the consultations, is that they only focus on active students. Once they graduate, there is a “cliff effect” where the universities lose track of their students’ progress and experiences out of school. Many of these students would be great candidates to work in BC’s tech sector, and employers would love to have access to them, but the universities have no incentive (or funding) to keep track of them after they graduate. So there is this disconnect between employers wanting highly skilled graduates to fill tech roles in the industry, and many recent graduates who are looking for these jobs, but cannot find them.

One employer felt that universities need some type of mandate or incentive to track their student’s progress upon graduation, through a database of some sort. Employers should be able to call a university office and ask them: “How many recent tech graduates do you have that fit X, Y, and Z criteria? Or we need someone who knows a certain software program very well, or who has experience doing...” Currently, there is no mechanism or support system for universities to track the status or successes of recent graduates, and so they often get lost in this chasm after graduation. Some employers suggested that the provincial government support educational institutions with this endeavor.

It was recommended that the federal government focus on building incentives for universities to work with their students after graduation to help them find jobs in BC’s tech industry. Too often these students are leaving the province and seeking out tech jobs in other labour markets, often the same jobs they could find in BC if there was a system in place that could connect talented grads with tech employers looking for a specific set of skills. Universities need to work closely with recent graduates to help them integrate into BC’s tech sector through local employment opportunities and/or entrepreneurship. And they need government support in order to accomplish this. This will reduce the amount of “brain drain” in the province, or the phenomenon that occurs when talented young tech workers leave to find work in other labour markets, which impedes economic growth opportunities in the province of BC.

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There have also been noticeable changes to government immigration programs and initiatives, as observed by BC tech employers. The BC Provincial Nominee Program has improved a lot recently in terms of processing times and they have added more of a ‘human touch’ by having case managers that are better at communicating with employers and/or new arrivals to Canada.

The most significant addition to the pool of immigration programs in recent years was the launch of Canada’s Global Skills Visa Program in June 2017, which is still in its pilot phase till 2019. Those employers who had used the program were for the most part very pleased with it. They felt like it was a great improvement over other programs because of the shorter processing times and the ability to actually get someone in government on the phone (improved communication). While there appear to be a few bugs that still need to be worked out, employers who had experience using the program were optimistic as to the road the government was taking, especially with regard to the quicker two-week processing times (although the reality is that these processing times can often take longer).

That being said, there were still a lot of employers who had never heard of the Global Skills Visa Program before – well over half of all interviewees and focus group members who participated in the consultations. Therefore, *it is recommended that the federal government do more to advertise the new Global Skills Visa Program and promote awareness of its benefits to employers.* An awareness campaign could also be used to dispel myths or certain preconceptions of the program that may prevent some employers from accessing it (i.e., that it only applies to candidates who make X number of dollars per year, that Labour Market Impact Assessments are required in all situations, etc.).

Theme 2: Aligning Immigrant Talent and Employer Needs

There was a general sense during the discussions that in order to curtail the anticipated shortfalls of tech talent in BC by the year 2021, more had to be done to connect the tech talent that was already in the province (or soon to arrive) with tech employers who can’t fill tech roles fast enough – be it through the educational institutions or by working directly with provincial and federal governments.

One way to connect employers with new tech talent in BC is to increase employer’s awareness of skilled workers and their qualifications. *It was recommended during the consultations that the Canadian government provide tech employers with access to a database of newcomer’s skills and qualifications* (i.e., based on newcomers skill assessments and evaluations of their degrees and certifications). The government collects this information at the time of applying to come to Canada, so why can’t employers access information on immigrants’ skills and credentials? Providing access to this largely untapped talent pool could greatly facilitate employer’s recruitment and hiring of immigrant tech talent even before they arrive in the country and reduce the number of unfilled positions in BC’s technology industry. It should be noted here that Express Entry applicants are asked to create their profile on the government of Canada’s Job Bank as a way of accessing employment opportunities and job offers. Employers may not be using this resource to its fullest potential.

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What many employers need and what many newcomers lack is the “Canadian Experience”, which is perhaps the most important experience for immigrant talent to have in order to land the perfect job in BC. This skillset was found to be lacking amongst several highly qualified candidates who may have had the required technical experience, but still could not find meaningful employment in their field. And those who do secure employment without this experience will likely start “at the bottom” of the organization with a salary and title below their level of experience (underemployed).

BC tech employers strongly recommend that newcomers to Canada be taught about Canadian workplace culture and employer needs. Without this insider knowledge of how Canadian businesses operate, immigrants are unlikely to land their dream job in their field. The Canadian experience involves learning about Canadian cultural customs and business etiquette, but it also involves the ability to *communicate* with others in the workplace (and with customers), working as a part of a team, resolving conflicts and earn coworkers’ trust and confidence. This experience cannot be taught in a classroom, but can only truly be gained by working directly for a Canadian business for a set period of time (usually at least a year) and learning all the day-to-day nuances of working in Canada. The Catch-22 scenario here is that one cannot easily gain this experience without first being employed by a Canadian company.

There are also programs available in the community that go beyond basic English-language training for newcomers and teach them how to gain the valuable “Canadian Experience.” For instance, there is a class called “professionalism in the workplace” at Camosun College in Victoria, which provides great insight into Canadian business culture.

Another way newcomers can gain the Canadian experience before even arriving in the country is through pre-arrival services and/or best practices such as IEC-BC’s FAST program. FAST helps skilled immigrants become better prepared for work in Canada, and connect employers with internationally trained workers. FAST gives skilled immigrants a head start in the Canadian labour market, all before actually moving to Canada. Along with information about the Canadian workplace, the online program provides immigrants a comprehensive assessment of their competencies that includes recommendations to improve their knowledge when needed in specific areas as well as alternative careers where their skills are in demand. The results of the FAST assessment also present employers with a trusted snapshot of the abilities the prospective candidate brings to the table.

Teaching this “Canadian experience” to newcomers also relates to a recommendation found in the 2016 TechTalentBC report, which calls for increased “*investment in pre- and post-arrival skills development programs for foreign talent to provide mentorship and training in management, leadership, business development, communication, and other interpersonal skills.*”

Theme 3: Push and Pull Factors

Employers felt that foreign tech talent should be made aware of the realities of living in BC before arriving. Many immigrants are drawn to work in British Columbia because of its natural beauty, moderate temperatures, its many green spaces and wide acceptance of diversity and multiculturalism. But they should be made aware of some of the harsh realities in the province

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and not simply be sold a “bill of goods” to lure them to live and work in BC; they should know upfront about the housing “crisis” (especially in Vancouver), long commute times to work, and the high cost of living in general. Therefore, *we recommend that when employers are developing their recruitment strategies or “pitches” to attract foreign talent, they portray both the push and pull factors to potential candidates.* While it may be tempting to only highlight the positive aspects of working and living in BC, this strategy may hurt retention in the long-term if newcomers cannot stay in the province due to the housing issue or other economic concerns.

Theme 4: Best Practices for the Tech Sector

HR departments were responsible for developing and implementing a lot of the identified best practices for employers when hiring or onboarding newcomer tech talent. While most of these programs and practices were informal in nature, some were external to the organization and more formalized. Smaller tech companies tended to use an “ad hoc process” to help newcomers integrate into the workplace and community. This included helping new talent to find housing, transportation and/or social services from settlement providers. Larger tech companies tended to use more formalized mechanisms for support and were concerned with being able to offer the same services to all employees.

A common practice for tech companies was to offer relocation assistance to help newcomers and their families with the move to BC. Following an industry trend, employers were also open to offering their employees flexible or work-at-home schedules and competitive salaries, which tended to be higher than in other (non-tech) industries. Another practice was to offer training to develop (workplace) English-language skills and in some cases, on interpersonal communication. Employers would often link new employees whose first language was not English to classes offered in the community through settlement and integration service providers (see Theme 5).

Mentorship was seen as an effective way of teaching newcomers the “Canadian experience” and helping to integrate them into the BC tech work force, but they would often have to be hired on by a company before gaining such experience. Most companies participating in the focus groups and interviewees had adopted either informal or formal mentorship and/or buddy programs for their employees and these initiatives were seen as “best practices” with positive outcomes. However, these programs only worked if there was a significant time investment from both the mentor and mentee, as well as buy-in from the company and its management. *Therefore it is recommended that tech companies invest more time and resources into developing formal mentorship opportunities for newcomers to BC’s tech industry, with formal mechanism for tracking successes and barriers in the mentoring relationship.*

Networking was also seen as very beneficial skill for immigrants to learn. Those who can network with others in the public sphere get jobs easier, according to the employers. And those immigrant families that socialize with other families are more likely to integrate and feel a sense of belonging to their community.

Although mentorship programs, language training and other initiatives to teach immigrants the culture of Canadian business operations may be timely and/or costly to implement, they may actually improve the company’s bottom line. *We therefore recommend that tech companies*

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compare the costs of these various interventions for newcomers to the costs of losing skilled workers and having to hire new ones (or not being able to fill vacancies at all). With small investments upfront in best practices that are sustainable, employers may be able to offset some of the long-term costs tied to the impending shortfall of tech talent in BC.

Theme 5: Settlement Services and Supports

There are several community-based organizations providing settlement and integration services to newcomers and their families in BC (e.g., housing, employment and other social services) such as S.U.C.C.E.S.S., Mosaic and DIVERSEcity. Yet not all employers were aware of these resources in the community or at least had never accessed them. *We therefore recommend that the community and settlement sector do more to promote awareness of their services and resources for newcomers and employers hiring new tech talent to BC.* A centralized resource list could be compiled, published on-line and in brochure format, and updated on a regular basis so that employers and newcomers alike would know where to go to find the appropriate resources to meet their needs.

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