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Lack of soft skills keeping immigrants underemployed

StatsCan study shows new immigrants slow to achieve success in Canada, but training is only part of a winning job-market formula

Glen Korstrom

Statistics Canada data released last week revealed that two-thirds of university-educated recent immigrants to Canada are underemployed and work in jobs that require at most a college education or apprenticeship.

But StatsCan failed to reveal why this disparity exists or how new immigrants can find jobs commensurate with their training.

Soft skills are the answer, according to Nick Noorani, the founder and publisher of Canadian Immigrant magazine.

"I don't need to pick up a newspaper to read that it's hard for immigrants to succeed in this country. Please don't tell me that. I know it. Tell me how to succeed," Noorani told Business in Vancouver.

Noorani lectures on what he calls the seven success secrets for Canadian immigrants. He developed them from speaking to countless immigrants while growing his magazine from a startup in 2004 to an asset he sold to Star Media Group, a subsidiary of Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd., for a six-figure sum in December 2006.

His seven secrets are:

- learn English;
- stay positive;
- embrace Canada;
- have a Plan B;
- steer clear of ethnic silos;
- take risks; and
- volunteer and take advantage of mentorship and networking opportunities.

"Immigrants come here with 90% technical skills and 10% soft skills because this is how Canada chooses immigrants – on the basis of technical skills," Noorani said.

"What do Canadian employers want? Sixty per cent soft skills and 40% technical skills."

The Business Council of British Columbia's (BCBC) biennial skills and attributes surveys reveal that recruiters' hiring decisions come down to which candidate has the strongest soft skills. BCBC's surveys give recruiters a list of 15 attributes and ask which are most important.

In 2008 and 2006, the three most sought-after attributes were:

1. Accountability/responsibility
2. Positive attitude/motivation/energy/passion
3. Honesty/integrity

Noorani said soft skills involve being able to relate to clients. He added that networking, volunteering and approaching potential mentors can also pay off. Noorani founded the networking website immigrantnetworks.ca.

"When I started Canadian Immigrant, I had 12 mentors," Noorani said. "I said, 'I admire what you do. I'm new at this, new to Canada. I would love to be able to speak with someone who has your depth of experience. I wonder if you would be willing to mentor me?'"

The multi-service Asian settlement society S.U.C.C.E.S.S. launched a research project November 25 to try to determine the positive factors that contribute to the success of new immigrants.

S.U.C.C.E.S.S. has partnered with University of British Columbia psychology professor Norman Amundson for the project, which will involve interviews with 20 immigrants who believe they've achieved success in Canada.

Amundson and his assistants will analyze the in-depth interviews, which will be conducted in the immigrants' mother tongue. They plan to release a report in March at the Career Management Association of B.C.'s annual conference.

New StatsCan data shows that the average hourly wages were \$23.72 for Canadian-born workers in the core working age group of 25 to 54. That's \$2.28 more than those of immigrant workers. The wage gap was larger – about \$5 per hour – among those who had arrived within the last five years and between immigrants and Canadian-born workers with university degrees. According to StatsCan, immigrants that have been in Canada for more than 10 years have a similar likelihood of being underemployed and similar salaries to those of their Canadian-born counterparts. •

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