

## **NEWCOMER SKILLS AT WORK: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CITY OF TORONTO**

Immigrant employment is a critical issue for the City of Toronto. Half of Toronto's population are immigrants. Almost one in five Toronto residents arrived in Canada between 1996 and 2006. Within the next decade, immigration will contribute a full 100% of net labour force growth in Canada, and much of that growth will be reflected in Toronto.

Effectively mobilizing the knowledge and skills of internationally trained workers is key to our future as a city and as a country. As the Forum of Labour Market Ministers has stated: "Achieving Canada's economic potential requires that immigrants are able to use to the fullest their skills and experience within the Canadian labour market" (2009: p, 1).

Unfortunately, many immigrants are not able to use their skills and experience to the fullest: internationally trained workers regularly struggle against non-recognition of credentials and unrealistic demands for prior work experience in Canada. According to StatsCan, two thirds of university educated immigrants work in occupations that usually require only a college education or apprenticeship. Precarious work and chronic underemployment put newcomers at risk for poor physical and mental health, and create significant barriers to social integration (VanderPlaat, 2007). In Toronto, to give just one indicator, 64.9% of recent immigrants live in neighbourhoods with high levels of poverty (Social Planning Toronto, 2009).

As we move beyond the recession, now is a critical time for city planners to involve immigrant residents in the search for more effective ways to put newcomer skills to work in Toronto. Action is required on many fronts, from building a more coherent policy framework that integrates immigration, settlement, education and training, labour force development, and labour relations, to working with regulatory bodies to radically improve access to the professions. In this brief, we focus in on two themes of municipal relevance emerging from a participatory action research process with Toronto newcomers: the need to build on current best practices with regards to paid internships for internationally trained workers, and the need for a strong and effective employment equity framework.

## **The Research:**

In 2009, the Mennonite New Life Centre initiative launched a participatory research project with Toronto newcomers participating in our employment initiative, *Newcomer Skills at Work: Refusing to Settle for Less*. Newcomers participated in collective analysis of employment barriers and helped to formulate policy recommendations to improve labour market integration. Forty-five immigrants and refugees from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds participated in seven in-depth focus groups. These focus groups echoed the now familiar story of immigrant underemployment and broken dreams. Of the 45 research participants, 37% were unemployed and 60% were not working in their field of study. 53% of participants had an annual income below \$20,000 and 55% believed that their situation had deteriorated since their arrival in Canada.

Newcomers spoke at length about the barriers and discrimination they faced during the hiring process. In particular, they spoke of facing a double bind: they can't get a job because they do not have Canadian experience, but they can't get Canadian experience because no one will give them a job. In effect, they have no opportunity to demonstrate their competency.

To address this widespread and systemic barrier, research participants proposed a combination of employer incentives and legislative imperatives. They felt that offering economic incentives to employers to hire immigrants would support job creation, give newcomers an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and experience, and contribute to positive public perception of newcomer contributions. At the same time, they felt that legislation was required to mandate broad based change in employment practices. They agreed that it was the duty of the government to regulate hiring policy and practice in order to ensure fair and transparent decision making.

Our research led us to identify paid internships and employment equity policies as two key strategies for increasing newcomer access to fair and meaningful employment. In this brief, we call on the City of Toronto to take specific and measurable actions in these two areas:

### **Paid Internships:**

- Increase the number of municipal internships available to newcomer professionals through Career Bridge
- Explore opportunities and partnerships for piloting paid internships in the trades
- Increase the number of internships available to newcomers in city non-profits through the Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund of Ontario Works

## **Employment Equity:**

- Review, strengthen and enforce municipal employment equity policies, with regards to both hiring and procurement
- Educate city employees and the wider community on employment equity
- Call on the Province of Ontario to bring back Employment Equity legislation

Through employer incentives and effective equity policies, we can open doors for internationally trained workers and together build a stronger Toronto.

### **PAID INTERNSHIPS: OPENING DOORS**

Paid internships are a promising best practice in immigrant labour market integration, allowing participants to gain career related experience while developing their resumes and professional networks. Both participants and employers benefit from the investment in training: participants gain much needed job experience while employers gain access to an untapped market of skilled labour. Moreover, it is common for this mutually beneficial relationship to continue after the internship has ended: employers often hire successful interns as full time employees after the placement has been completed. Typically, internship participants have a much higher rate of employment than non-participants, with up to 80% subsequently finding full time employment in their field.

We applaud the City of Toronto for its active participation in two job creation initiatives benefiting the internationally trained: Career Bridge and Toronto Employment and Social Services' Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund. Through its participation in Career Bridge, the City has offered over 100 career track internships to internationally trained professionals since 2004. The City has also funded the creation of temporary positions through Investing in Neighbourhoods, with many organizations like ourselves using the opportunity to hire skilled newcomers.

### **The Career Bridge Program (operated by Career Edge Organization)**

Assisted by startup funding from the province of Ontario, the Career Bridge Program was launched in 2003 to secure paid internships for internationally educated and trained professionals lacking work experience in Canada. Career Bridge internships are employer paid mid-level professional positions that last 4, 6, 9 or 12 months and are available in specific non-regulated sectors. Career Bridge partners with private and public sector employers,

including the City of Toronto. Over 1400 internationally qualified professionals have benefited from Career Bridge paid internships.

### **Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund**

Toronto Employment and Social Services' *Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund* is an employment program in partnership with community non-profit organizations. Unlike Career Bridge, this program is not specific to newcomers, targeting employment ready recipients of Ontario Works and ODSP. The fund encourages employer participation by covering salary costs - up to a specified cap - for positions lasting up to a full year.

### **Mentoring Partnership**

In addition to its involvement with job creation through Career Bridge and Investing in Neighbourhoods, City of Toronto also promotes newcomer labour market integration through participation in the Mentoring Partnership program. This program partners skilled immigrants with established professionals in one-on-one relationships. The established professional offers the newcomer an insider perspective of their industry and helps their mentee to establish networks in that field.

While these recent initiatives mark a promising step in the right direction, much more remains to be done in the area of paid internships for the internationally trained. Access is a serious concern, given the relatively small number of internships available and the quite narrow eligibility restrictions attached to existing programs. Investing in Neighbourhoods is only for recipients of OW and ODSP, and is not specifically tailored to the needs of newcomers. Career Bridge and the Mentoring Partnership focus on internationally trained professionals, but eligibility is restricted to those in their first three years in Canada. Career Bridge is focused only on the non-regulated professions, while the Mentoring Partnership is open only to newcomers working less than 20 hrs / week. This excludes many newcomers who are still struggling despite longer periods of residency in Canada, or who already hold full time employment, but are not working in positions commensurate with their skills and experience.

More work is needed to expand the range and ensure the quality of internship opportunities through increased municipal participation, expanded funding for non-profits, effective employer engagement and a focused strategy for the internationally trained, including both professionals in regulated and non-regulated professions, as well as the trades.

## **Recommendations:**

- **Increase the number of paid internships at the City of Toronto**

The City of Toronto already offers paid internships to internationally trained professionals through Career Bridge. City leadership in increasing the number of internships offered can send a strong message of support to newcomer residents and play an important role in encouraging other employers to step up to the plate.

We encourage the City of Toronto to create as many internship positions as possible at every job level and in every job category, offering a diverse range of opportunities for newcomers of varying professional backgrounds and levels of experience. Hiring managers should be involved in setting target numbers of internships, in accordance with departmental needs and opportunities.

- **Promote private sector internships, exploring opportunities and partnerships to pilot paid internships in the trades**

While it is important for the City of Toronto to show leadership by creating paid internship positions within its own departments, it is equally important to promote involvement by the private sector. The City, through its community development officers or through collaboration with Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), could play an important role in educating private sector employees about the benefits of employing internationally trained individuals, as well as offering training and support on how to hire and retain diverse talent.

More specifically, the City could explore opportunities and partnerships for piloting paid internships in the skilled trades. Existing programs focus largely on internationally trained professionals, leaving a gap for skilled trades people.

- **Facilitate funding for internships with non-profit organizations**

The Investing in Neighbourhoods Fund has been a remarkable success story for Ontario Works, shifting the focus from monitoring participant compliance to promoting labour market integration. At a time of considerable discussion on social assistance reform, this renewed focus on labour market integration should be a strong priority. Increased funding through Investing in Neighbourhoods could make it possible for a greater number of non-profits to offer paid internship positions for newcomers.

At the same time, the City can encourage its provincial and federal counterparts to strengthen funding in this area. For example, the Province of Ontario could enhance existing funding for bridge training

programs, allowing for the work experience component of these programs to be paid. Linking paid internships to bridge training could help overcome many of the challenges and barriers to creating paid internships in the regulated professions.

The City can also help to promote the following best practices with regards to paid internships for internationally trained workers in the public, private and non-profit sectors:

- **Internships should be six months to one year in length, with time frames adjusted to the learning needs and the complexity of the role.** For successful bridging to permanent employment, participants need adequate time to learn the job and workplace culture, demonstrate knowledge and skills, and build professional networks.
- **Internships should be paid at a rate that respects the level of skill and experience brought to the job by the intern.**
- **Supervisors should provide regular feedback to facilitate on the job learning.**

Furthermore, the City could support development of an online directory of paid internships for newcomers, to facilitate newcomer awareness of existing opportunities.

## **EMPLOYMENT EQUITY: ENSURING FAIRNESS**

The banking sector has shown leadership in hiring a diverse and representative workforce, reaching out to an increasingly diverse customer base. While economic incentive has certainly played a role, so has employment equity. The banking industry is federally regulated, and therefore covered by the *Employment Equity Act*. Employment equity seeks to redress historic inequities by mandating fair employment process and outcomes for systemically marginalized groups, including but not limited to refugees and immigrants.

Employment equity raises many complex considerations, not the least of which are jurisdictional in nature. The City of Toronto can learn from the successes and failures of other jurisdictions in working towards ever more effective employment equity policies and practices at the municipal level. The City can also call on its federal and provincial counterparts to support employment equity.

To date, the recently questioned federal *Employment Equity Act* is the only piece of legislation in Canada that requires proactive measures on the part of employers. The Act requires proactive treatment of historically marginalized groups such as women, persons with disabilities, aboriginal peoples and

visible minorities. This means that in federally regulated industries such as banking, broadcasting, telecommunication etc., employers must identify jobs where these marginalized groups are underrepresented and then implement an employment equity plan to correct any underrepresentation.

Unfortunately, most employers fall under provincial jurisdiction and are not covered by this Act. Provincially, discrimination is prohibited under the Human Rights Code and the Labour Relations Act. However, Ontario's short-lived *Employment Equity Act 1993* was repealed in 1995 because of the fear of so-called "reverse discrimination." In its place, the *Equal Opportunity Plan* was established. Under this plan, employers are encouraged to voluntarily participate in creating a "fair, barrier-free and merit-based" employment model.

Voluntary participation has clear limitations. To date, few employers have actually signed onto the plan. Since this government initiative is not embodied in legislation, employers are encouraged but not required to comply. Furthermore, employers who do choose to participate are left to their own devices. There is no government oversight of the program and no way to ensure that employers are in compliance with the plan's principles. To make matters worse, any employer who has voluntarily joined the initiative is nevertheless allowed to pick their own dispute resolution process should a charge of discrimination arise.

### **Toronto: the Municipal Experience**

The City of Toronto currently has an employment equity policy that names four designated groups: women, racial minority people, people with disabilities and Aboriginal people. However, it is unclear if and to what extent this policy has been successful. Although the City has stated that it is "committed to a policy of fairness and full equity in employment and services" and understands that the "citizens of Toronto are best served by a public service which reflects the diversity of the community it serves," the City has not established specific targets for hiring members of disadvantaged groups. In other words, the city has vowed to "remove barriers and monitor outcomes" but has stopped short of establishing "requirements to precisely reflect the percentage of designated groups in the community."

Statements of principle are not enough to give us a more representative municipal staff. Rather, there is a need to implement specific targets and concrete strategies to integrate marginalized groups into the workforce. We applaud plans to conduct a municipal workforce survey this coming fall. Ensuring a high rate of response will be critical to generating an accurate picture of the current workforce, informing next steps towards employment equity. There is also a need to review systems and identify barriers, to train

managers and hold them accountable to their equity mandate, and to consult, educate and engage with the community. Such functions should have a dedicated and adequately resourced department, such as the former Access and Equity Department. In this regard, we welcome City Council's January decision to bring together staff working on equity in the diverse areas of human resources, human rights and community engagement into a single unit reporting directly to the City Manager's Office.

Recognizing the magnitude of the task, we would like to call on the City of Toronto to expand its current employment equity policy and embrace more concrete objectives.

**Recommendations:**

- The City of Toronto should develop an employment equity plan, outlining specific and concrete measures to ensure that the municipal workforce reflects, at every level and in each job category, the representation of designated groups in the community, as determined by periodic community surveys. The City should conduct periodic workforce surveys and report outcomes to the public.
- Drawing best practices from existing employment equity legislation, the City of Toronto should take proactive measures to recruit, hire, retain, treat fairly and promote members of the designated groups, recognizing that these measures will also benefit the workforce as a whole. Employment policies and practices should be subject to regular review.
- The City of Toronto should recognize the specific and unique challenges faced by newcomers. Given Toronto's rapidly increasing immigrant population, we believe that the municipal employment equity plan ought to explicitly outline how human resource processes for resume assessment, interviews and reference checks would ensure fair and transparent assessment of international expertise.
- The City of Toronto should inform employees about employment equity, and ensure that there is a simple, fair and transparent complaints procedure that is accessible to everyone.
- The City of Toronto should establish an external review procedure to objectively assess the effectiveness of the employment equity policy and suggest improvements.
- The City of Toronto should encourage other employers to embrace employment equity. Through its procurement system, the City can

encourage employers to have fair and equitable hiring practices by positively rewarding such behaviour through access to city contracts. The former contract compliance program, whereby employers awarded city contracts were required to sign a commitment to employment equity, is one such measure that could be reinstated, but one that must be supported by appropriate monitoring and enforcement.

Finally, we call on the City of Toronto to call on the Province of Ontario to bring back provincial employment equity legislation. Since most employers fall under provincial jurisdiction, this is the most effective route to broad based change in employment practices.

In support of this goal, we invite the City to work with employment equity supporters in order to educate the public, mitigating newly reawakened fears of so-called “reverse discrimination” and promoting understanding of the role of employment equity in redressing historical inequities, while mobilizing untapped skills and expertise to the benefit of society as a whole. We understand that employment equity continues to provoke controversy, especially in the aftermath of an economic recession. However, the disproportionate impact of the recession on immigrant communities makes it a critical time to work for employment equity, in order to ensure that the benefits of recovery are shared across a diverse population, and inequities narrowed, rather than made wider. Engaging in dialogue and collaboration with the community is critical to advancing the employment equity agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Our research suggests that marginalized groups, including newcomers, still face discrimination and systemic barriers in accessing fair and meaningful employment. We therefore call on the City of Toronto to take a leadership role by reviewing, strengthening and enforcing municipal employment equity policies, and by calling on the provincial government to bring back employment equity legislation in Ontario.

In addition, we call on the City of Toronto to lead by example, working to extend the range and number of paid internship opportunities available to internationally trained workers, within and beyond the municipal workforce. These internships will help newcomers gain the experience they need in order to find stable employment commensurate with their skills and experience. By implementing employment equity policies along with paid internship opportunities, the City will allow immigrants to more fully contribute their skills and experience to the labour market. In turn, this immigrant contribution will allow the City to thrive and achieve its full potential as a multicultural leader within the global marketplace.