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**Internationally Trained Workers Partnership  
and Hire Immigrants Ottawa:  
Strategies for Integration of Internationally Trained Workers**

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The Internationally Trained Workers Partnership (ITWP) is a coordinated approach to addressing immigrant labour market integration in Ottawa. It dates to 2002, making it one of the oldest initiatives of this nature in Canada. This paper describes the local context in which ITWP was created and developed. It outlines its structure and evolution and presents a list of success factors and “lessons learned” by participants in the project.

### **Local context**

Overall, there are 185,000 people born outside Canada (including those who immigrated over 10 years ago) residing in Ottawa. They make up almost 18% of our metropolitan population. Many of these immigrants are highly skilled. Just over half of new immigrants in 2001 held a university degree, and another 15% had some other post-secondary credential such as a diploma or trade certificate. Among new immigrants to Canada in 2001, 3.3% expressed their intention to settle in Ottawa. Among those with a PhD, the figure was 6.3%. In brief, newcomers are supplementing Ottawa’s highly educated workforce.

Immigrants to Ottawa seek employment within a unique and challenging labour market context. As capital of the federal government, Ottawa’s employment opportunities have typically been concentrated within the public sector as well as in information and communication technology sectors. Ottawa has experienced limited economic diversification. In addition to the usual foreign credential recognition barriers experienced by immigrants, immigrant job-seekers in Ottawa face additional hurdles in the form of language (bilingualism), citizenship and security requirements.

Despite high levels of education and experience, recent immigrants to Ottawa with university degrees were four times more likely than their Canadian-born counterparts to be unemployed, according to the 1996 Census. Immigrants are much more likely to be underemployed as well. In its *Ottawa 20/20* report, the City of Ottawa noted that Canada loses an estimated \$5.9 billion annually by underemploying internationally trained workers. According to the report, the Ottawa area is significantly affected by this loss.

## **A coordinated approach: Internationally Trained Workers Partnership**

Concerned about the challenges outlined above, six community partners came together in 2002 to develop a more coordinated approach to facilitating the labour market integration of internationally trained workers. Calling themselves the Internationally Trained Workers Partnership, the partners are

- United Way/Centraide Ottawa;
- Ottawa Chamber of Commerce;
- Le Regroupement des gens d'affaires de la Capitale nationale (RGA);
- LASI/World Skills (a coalition of eight Local Agencies Serving Immigrants);
- City of Ottawa; and
- Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation (OCRI).

Thus, ITWP brings together employers, business associations, labour, governments, educational institutions and immigrant-serving organizations from across Ottawa. They work collaboratively to

- Foster solutions to barriers to hiring immigrants;
- Increase the number of employers who hire and recruit immigrants in Ottawa; and
- Increase the number of immigrants hired into skills-appropriate professions.

A Steering Committee governs ITWP. It is comprised of representatives of each of the six founding partners, along with other community stakeholders. The purpose of this committee is to develop a city-wide framework for the integration of skilled immigrants into the labour market; provide strategic advice and guidance in support of project development and communications planning; stay apprised of relevant projects in other regions; and identify opportunities for partnership.

ITWP also has an Advisory Committee that provides advice, guidance and information related to local labour market issues and trends in the Ottawa area. The Advisory Committee contains representation from three orders of government, policy, labour, educational institutions, and immigrant service delivery organizations.

The work of ITWP can be divided into three distinct phases, each of which is described below.

### **Phase 1 (2002-2004): Research and stakeholder consultations**

In 2002, the federal Voluntary Sector Initiative funded ITWP's first research initiative, the purpose of which was to develop a community-based strategy to support the integration of internationally trained workers. This initiative was consistent with ITWP's longstanding goal of finding skills matches among newcomer populations for sectors experiencing shortages. Five individual employment sectors were identified that met two criteria: the sector faced significant labour shortages, and there was a population of immigrants in Ottawa who were qualified to fill these shortages. The latter was determined by examining the LASI World Skills database of immigrants seeking employment in the area. The sectors identified were teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses and masons.

Separate multi-stakeholder roundtables were held for each sector. Subsequently, a forum was held in 2004 with over 120 community representatives who refined and strengthened the findings from the roundtables. Findings were published in the report *Moving Forward: A Strategy for the Integration of Internationally Trained Workers in Ottawa*, prepared by ITWP in April 2004.

The findings from the roundtables suggested that internationally trained workers faced a variety of barriers to accessing their professions. There was no single most important barrier identified across the five sectors. As such, there was no single, universal solution that could be designed to overcome the barriers. Thus, the recommendations in the report were quite specific, with each applying to only one or two of the five sectors.

Recognizing the complex and fragmented nature of the immigrant integration process, most participants agreed that a comprehensive community-based strategy would be the most effective way to address barriers to employment. To effectively engage employers, ITWP first had to understand the barriers from the employers' perspective. At this point, partners and stakeholders decided to explore the feasibility of creating an employer leadership council as the cornerstone of a local strategy for integration. This would be similar to TRIEC's Intergovernmental Relations Committee in that the council would comprise a single stakeholder group. The council would serve as an employer counterpart to the ITWP Steering and Advisory Committees.

### **Phase 2 (2004 – 2005): Understanding employer needs**

To better understand employer needs, as well as to create a firm foundation for the proposed employment leadership council, ITWP partners developed a plan to interview a range of Ottawa-area employers. They secured funding from United Way/Centraide Ottawa and from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to undertake this initiative.

ITWP engaged the TalentWorks program of the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation (OCRI) to conduct in-person interviews with 25 of the largest employers (1,000 + employees) in Ottawa. The approach was modified for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to assess their awareness of the labour market realities and explore their views on how immigrants could participate in the labour market. Twelve local SMEs were interviewed, each representing a sector in which Ottawa-area immigrants were deemed qualified to work.

When asked about hiring immigrants, employers spoke of their desire to be socially responsible. They also acknowledged that hiring immigrants made good business sense. Most employers interviewed were not aware that Ottawa's future labour market will depend heavily on immigrants, and many were not familiar with the many barriers to workforce integration faced by newcomers. The research identified a number of challenges employers faced in hiring skilled immigrants and solicited suggestions regarding supports and solutions employers would find helpful in this regard. Research results were published in *Ottawa@Work: Large Employers Workforce Needs Analysis* (available at [www.itwp.ca](http://www.itwp.ca)).

Every employer interviewed for the project agreed to consider participating in a future leadership council for internationally trained workers. Coupled with the knowledge of challenges facing immigrants that had been identified in the *Moving Forward* report, this positive feedback compelled the ITWP leadership to push for the development of an employer engagement strategy. Employer engagement comprised the subsequent, and current, phase of ITWP.

### **Phase 3 (2006 - 2009): Employer engagement**

In 2006, ITWP received three-year funding from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration to develop an employer engagement strategy. This project, called Hire Immigrants Ottawa (HIO), recognizes that employers play a key role in developing solutions and establishes a structure for employer leadership, the need for which was identified in earlier ITWP research.

The objectives of Hire Immigrants Ottawa will be achieved through a multi-pronged approach that includes three key elements: the Employer Council of Champions, working groups of diverse stakeholders, and a local awareness campaign to promote greater understanding of the social and economic value immigrants bring to Ottawa.

### **1. *The Employer Council of Champions***

The Employer Council of Champions (ECC) features approximately 25 public sector and private sector employers that have committed to championing the integration of skilled immigrants into Ottawa's workplaces. In addition to acting as local spokespeople on the issue, the members of the ECC are creating an environment of cross-sector collaboration, stimulating strategic partnerships and acting as catalysts for ideas and innovation in their own organizations and throughout their networks.

The inaugural ECC was launched in April 2007, and its first meeting was held in May 2007. The co-chairs of the ECC are CGI Senior Vice-President Hicham Adra and President and CEO of Hydro Ottawa Rosemarie Leclair. The Council members represent a broad cross-section of employers, including large employers Scotiabank and Calian, public sector employers such as the City of Ottawa and Public Service Human Resource Management Agency of Canada (PSHRMAC), and SMEs such as GEM Health Care Services Inc.

### **2. *Working groups***

Four multi-stakeholder working groups have been created to identify common barriers and develop specific solutions in the following employment sectors: health, finance/accounting, information technology/knowledge, and public. The working groups are comprised of human resource managers from organizations on the ECC along with representatives of immigrant-serving agencies, unions, government, and educational institutions. Facilitated by Hire Immigrants Ottawa, members meet monthly as of May 2007 to share information and work towards making better links between qualified immigrants and local employers.

These two elements of HIO were designed in response to learnings from similar initiatives by TRIEC. ITWP participants wanted to keep the Council small and also wanted to create something distinct from their existing Steering and Advisory Committees. It was decided that employer executives would form the Council and lower management and staff who are involved in day-to-day hiring practices would sit on multi-stakeholder working groups.

In the spring of 2008, the Employer Council of Champions will host a summit to showcase the work of the working groups and the ECC. This networking and workshop-based event will highlight promising practices and generate increased momentum around the issue in Ottawa. Everyone who participates in Hire Immigrants Ottawa, and anyone else working on skilled immigrant employment issues in Ottawa, will be invited. The objective will be to evaluate the work done by HIO thus far and to develop a road map for future actions.

### **3. *Public awareness campaign***

The third element of this project is building awareness of the social and economic value immigrants bring to Ottawa. This campaign will be aimed at employers and the general public. To this end, ITWP has created the Hire Immigrants Ottawa project website ([www.hireimmigrantsottawa.ca](http://www.hireimmigrantsottawa.ca)). The website provides local employment resources and links with a large database of free tools and resources for employers. These resources have been provided by hireimmigrants.ca, a similar website administered by TRIEC.

## **Host organization for ITWP and HIO**

ITWP is managed as a "Community Wide Initiative" within United Way/Centraide Ottawa (UW/CO). Community Wide Initiatives (CWI) extend UW/CO's reach into the community by convening strategic partnerships and programs. ITWP activity is coordinated as a CWI on a part-time basis by members of UW/CO's community services department. UW/CO's accounting department administers project funds for ITWP, and the organization provides HR supports as well.

When ITWP's partners decided to pursue funding for the Hire Immigrants Ottawa project, UW/CO was selected as the host organization. This organization was well suited for the role: it was politically neutral, enjoyed a leadership position and name recognition in the community, had communications experience,

and could provide administrative support. Its existing support for ITWP made it a natural choice for to host HIO.

UW/CO's intimate involvement has benefited the project in other ways as well. UW/CO has identified immigrants as one of its six primary "impact areas" for community investment, so it is already a strong advocate for work in this area. Through UW/CO's strong corporate ties and wide community reach, Hire Immigrants Ottawa has been able to engage a wide range of stakeholders. The work of UW/CO's resource development team was instrumental to the recruitment of the Employer Council of Champions.

## **Evaluation**

Evaluation within ITWP has mainly focused on evaluation of its specific projects. At present, all of its efforts are focused on HIO.

Evaluation of the HIO project is still relatively premature as it is only now entering its second year of operations. However, several tools have been put in place to monitor the achievement of project goals and deliverables. Deliverables were established at the outset as part of the funding agreement. These include having 25 immigrants hired in the public sector and 30 immigrants hired in the private sector by 2009 as a result of employers' involvement in Hire Immigrants Ottawa.

Pre- and post-benchmark research will be conducted with all employers involved in the Employer Council of Champions and the four sector-based working groups. These surveys will measure changes in hiring practices as well as the impact of employers' involvement in the project.

The project also established an evaluation framework at the outset. It includes measures related to the operational plan, team work plans, individual performance plans and monthly performance indicator reports.

These methods of evaluation are essential to measuring the project's success, but it is important to note that the overall objective is significant social change within the employment sector in Ottawa. Movement of this nature is often difficult to quantify in specific terms. Efforts will be made to assess progress by maintaining relationships with those on the front lines, and by monitoring the "chatter" that occurs around the issue in the community and in Ottawa's workplaces.

## **Success factors and lessons learned**

### ***Strategic framework and communications***

A rigorous strategic and communications planning approach was undertaken at the project's outset. It was a priority to get the strategic "insides" right before engaging "outsiders".

The project undertook a marketing planning process that outlined the target audiences, key messages and communications objectives for the three-year duration of the project. Some tactics include the website, communiqués, media-friendly events and employer success stories. Building relationships with local media help ensure that the broader community is engaged in this important issue.

### ***Focus on solutions***

The early work of the ITWP focused on research and identifying barriers, but the thrust of HIO is to identify and implement solutions. This focus has helped attract and retain the interest of employers who need assurance that their involvement will measurably impact their businesses or organizations.

### ***Collaborative approach***

The project is built on the input and support from each of the partner organizations as well as from employers and other community organizations. Each member makes a unique contribution, and efforts are made to maximize the value and expertise of the individuals involved. UW/CO has taken the administrative lead, but all major decisions pass through the ITWP Steering Committee and, where relevant, the Employer Council of Champions.

When developing their own organization's strategic plans, partners often consult with Steering Committee members in the process. In doing so, partners are demonstrating their commitment to aligning their own goals and activities towards common outcomes.

Relationship building is one of the key success factors for the project. In the spring of 2007, project staff brought the immigrant-serving employment agencies in Ottawa together to discuss strategies for improving the connections between employment-ready skilled immigrant candidates and Ottawa's employers. This group of agencies has since decided on an unprecedented alignment of services that ensures the recruitment process is as streamlined and effective as possible for employers.

In addition, ITWP's partners maintain close relationships with current and prospective government funders. This has allowed for collaboration on the strategic direction of the project and has stimulated strategic investment into other opportunities in the community.

### ***Committed stakeholders***

The project has close ties with the major stakeholders of the issue in Ottawa, including the immigrant-serving community, government, education and regulatory bodies. Consistent contact is maintained through the Advisory and Steering Committee meetings. It has been important for the project to clearly communicate its desired outcomes, including demonstrating that it is not "competing" with any of the service-delivery organizations but it is complementing and provided a "value added" to existing programs.

By involving the Public Sector Human Resources Management Agency of Canada in the public sector working group, Hire Immigrants Ottawa has established strong ties with the hiring arm of the federal public service. Engaging this agency as an employer is a critical step towards influencing hiring practices within the federal government.

Employers were engaged from the outset through interviews about their workforce needs regarding immigrants. Many of these same employers remain engaged, and their commitment has enabled them to recruit others from their own sectors.

### ***Openness to partnership opportunities***

In an effort to learn from those already working on similar issues – as well as to maximize efficiency and keep costs down – Hire Immigrants Ottawa has developed relationships with other organizations with complementary interests. One fruitful partnership has been with [hireimmigrants.ca](http://hireimmigrants.ca), a website for employers that was created as a project of TRIEC. TRIEC has shared its online resource base with Hire Immigrants Ottawa and provided integrated web space at [hireimmigrantsottawa.ca](http://hireimmigrantsottawa.ca). The two organizations have also shared learnings and strategic advice.

### ***Role of the municipality***

The City of Ottawa has been an important partner in the initiative since the creation of ITWP. With regards to HIO, two representatives from the City of Ottawa are members of the ECC.

The City of Ottawa's commitment to immigrant labour market integration is visible in other ways. First, it produced its own report on the labour market situation of immigrants in Ottawa and employers' perspectives. Entitled *Faces of Ottawa: a Snapshot of Immigrant Labour Market Integration*, the report summarized information from existing sources such as reports, surveys, and Statistics Canada data in order to develop benchmarks for Ottawa-area plans.

Second, on April 25, 2007, the City Council passed a motion to endorse the establishment of an Immigration Ottawa Initiative (IOI) to facilitate the development of a community-led, city-wide labour market integration strategy for immigrants. Staff were directed to report back with a proposed governance structure and detailed Terms of Reference within six months. As part of this initiative, the City will work with ITWP with the goal of creating a coordinated community-based strategy for the successful labour market integration of immigrants in Ottawa. It will also develop a framework to improve the coordination and provision of municipal services related to immigrants.

Third, the City received \$200,000 from the province to develop an Ottawa Immigration Web Portal within Ottawa.ca. The portal will provide an Ottawa-specific one-stop, bilingual immigration website containing settlement and labour market information for immigrants, as well as information aimed at attracting potential immigrants with the skill sets reflective of employers' needs within the region. The Ottawa Immigration Portal will go live in early June 2007.

In brief, the City has recognized immigration as an economic and social priority in Ottawa. These municipal initiatives build upon and complement the work of ITWP and HIO. Most importantly, instead of putting together a new advisory board for the Immigration Ottawa Initiative, the City is directly engaging the ITWP Steering Committee. This decision increases the efficiency of the process, and it also gives the Steering Committee a more formal status for its city-wide scope. The partnership between the City and ITWP may lead to new opportunities in other areas beyond immigrant employment.

### ***Administrative/staff challenges***

The planning and execution of a project such as ITWP requires an enormous range of skills. In the initial stage of the project, it was challenging to accurately determine what skills and competencies were required. Job descriptions were not clear-cut and required adjustments as the project evolved. Consequently, we advise project leaders to incorporate flexibility into job descriptions, management of resources, and assessments of project outcomes. It is challenging to attract staff who have knowledge of the issues, experience working with the private, public, and non-profit sectors, and are willing to work within salary ranges offered. Participants must be willing to work within these constraints.

### **Moving forward**

Thousands of immigrants arrive in Ottawa each year, and an increasing number of employers are feeling the strain of labour shortages. As such, there is urgent need to improve labour market integration for newcomers. The Internationally Trained Workers Partnership and Hire Immigrants Ottawa project have provided coordinating functions for skilled immigrant employment issues on a community level for the past five years. Partners will continue to promote integrated, comprehensive solutions for internationally trained workers in this city. Despite significant progress, there is much more that can, and must, be done to facilitate the integration of immigrants into the labour market. Every skilled immigrant should have an equal opportunity to contribute to the future growth and vibrancy of Ottawa, and our work will continue until this goal is attained.

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by Carole Gagnon and Ginny Adey

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