



Vitality

An EFAP Article for Human Resource and Occupational Health Professionals, Program Administrators, Supervisors, and Key Personnel



Immigrant Employees Settling in North America

There are many reasons why someone may emigrate from their home country. Most often, they are attracted to the idea of enjoying a better life with the prospect of obtaining improved living conditions, accessing high-quality education, finding safety from violence and persecution, and discovering enriched earning potential through a broader range of work and career opportunities. Canada and The United States are known worldwide as countries that support immigration.

Many employers recognize that there is tremendous potential to diversify their workforce's talent and increase their institutional skills and knowledge by hiring immigrants to fill vacancies. However, they should also remember that for their organizations to realize the most benefit, they must appreciate some of the difficulties internationally trained workers encounter as they resettle. Employers with a better understanding of these challenges can offer more tangible support to help immigrant workers integrate into their organizations, succeed in their roles, and settle into their new country. Often, immigrant employees will have an easier transition if they also learn about some of the typical practices and nuances they will experience in North American workplaces. It is important to remember that there is not just 'one' immigrant experience.

Immigration is good business

In Canada, internationally trained workers could include "immigrants, refugees, international students and Canadians who trained or worked outside of the country."¹

Immigration generally has a positive effect on a country's economy. In Canada, immigration is essential because of its aging population and low birth rate. Further, there are many workforce labour shortages for specialized and temporary roles.

Attending programs at accredited educational institutions is one way that immigrants can build necessary skills that will allow them to enter the workforce successfully. It's equally important to consider that previous job experiences may reflect different norms and ethics that North American workplaces would not be accustomed to. Again, helping immigrants understand how North American workplaces operate, especially regarding worker rights and protections, is critical.

What role does culture play in settling into the workplace?

Workplace culture in North America can differ significantly from an immigrant worker's country of origin. There are differences in labour laws; length of workdays; workplace norms and customs; aspirations and career expectations, and ethical practices and beliefs. The influence of social traditions and culture can also make it difficult to settle in. Immigrant workers may observe or experience situations that conflict with their beliefs and create intercultural challenges. There could be reactions to people's choices of clothing and food. Self-expression and social patterns, including forms of non-verbal communication, may be unfamiliar. For example, most North Americans would indicate agreement with something by nodding their head up and down. Other cultures, however, communicate the same gesture by moving their heads from side to side.

There are also differences between collective and individualistic cultures. In collective cultures, people attribute more importance to being part of a group, and their individual needs are secondary. People who socialize this way support or collaborate comfortably in public, using gestures such as hugging, hand-holding, and other forms of touch to show that connection. In individualistic cultures, those behaviours tend to be reserved for smaller, private gatherings or personal moments. North American workplaces tend to be aligned with an individualistic culture. Employee interactions are less animated, more verbal, muted, and focused on individual contributions to the work group.

Social exclusion of immigrant workers

Employers should also know that immigrant workers sometimes feel excluded from social situations. It could be self-imposed because they may be feeling self-conscious or lacking self-confidence.

Still, there are also times when social segregation can occur because of prejudices, racism, marginalization, and micro-aggressions from other employees. For recently settled immigrant employees, everything is still very new. They may need to learn about resources that are available to help them. Remember that these issues may affect fundamental things like health care, transportation, or housing. Feeling excluded for not knowing where to turn can be daunting.

When loneliness and isolation continue to build, it can present people with mental health challenges. Immigrant employee experiences are each unique, and finding empathetic people to speak with can be difficult. They often arrive alone, leaving spouses, children, or extended family members in their original country. As a result, immigrant workers can often feel immense pressure to become successful quickly, motivated by being able to sponsor others to join them once they have re-established themselves and are stable. When there are opportunities to get a sense of some

of the comforts of home or even share traditions, holidays and celebrations, it can help tremendously.

One of the most significant things for employers to remember is that some immigrant employees are starting over and there is not just 'one' immigrant experience.

What can you do as an employer to ensure a smooth transition in a North American workforce?

You can do several things to help immigrant employees have a positive workplace experience.


1. Develop a list of tips to help develop organizational awareness and establish supportive policies. For example, you could streamline the process of checking references and validating qualifications to help immigrant workers feel more valued for their contributions, credentials, and experience. One practice that Human Resources is incorporating more is blind reviewing of resumes. This is where the employee's name is hidden to reduce unconscious bias in hiring.
2. Ensure complete clarity around zero-tolerance for racism, marginalization, or micro-aggressions in the workplace.
3. Be aware of how language is used in your workplace. Ensure that job postings are free of slang and jargon and use plain language principles to help increase comprehension. The same practices should be encouraged in everyday operations.
4. Consider sponsoring conversations or networking circles over lunch hours or set aside one hour each week so that people can learn from each other. It is an excellent way for all employees to become accustomed to developing better language skills and social interactions. It also promotes meaningful learning, such as how informal conversations are structured. Hearing different accents and learning dialectical differences in language will build cross-cultural communication skills and empathy.
5. Encourage inclusivity and make seeking clarification part of everyday organizational behaviours. It reduces exclusionary feelings and ensures that people know getting more information before completing a task is safe.
6. When using video conferencing technology, turn on live transcription capabilities so that everyone can have an easier time with lexical differences and accents. Also, consider recording the sessions and posting them so that employees can go back and review the discussion and not feel they missed some crucial parts of the conversation.
7. Consider creating a standard glossary of terms that includes acronyms, slang, and jargon. It should be accessible to everyone so they can build their shared understanding. Consider having an anonymous place to post questions about terminology or expressions they have heard to be answered in the glossary.



8. Have documented policies and practices that clearly outline performance expectations and work norms. Explain what the workload and tasks include and job responsibilities. Document how to handle conflicts. Ensure that immigrant employees are fully aware of how they can ask for and obtain training. This approach will reduce misunderstandings and prevent exploitation. It can also help immigrant workers feel valued for their abilities and experiences.
9. Promote intercultural education by celebrating and recognizing significant events and holidays for everyone in the workplace.
10. Consider sponsoring a mentor/protégé program with long-term employees matched to immigrant employees.
11. Provide education about local culture and around how things in the community function. Immigrant employees may not be familiar with courses that may be available for help them settle in, or even how to approach finding child care. There are many resources and groups available that can offer support. For example, local working centres have a breadth and depth of resources in their expanded networks. Your endorsement is a vote of confidence that they can trust the aid that's offered.
12. Embrace multiculturalism rather than assimilation. Demonstrating that you have an appreciation for different needs of all employees in your workplace helps promote this practice. It could mean that instead of worrying, immigrant employees feel comfortable whether they need to request time off for religious observances or to support their children. When you develop policies that show flexibility and better accommodate cultural or religious needs, you begin to develop a great sense of a community where everyone is welcome.

References:

1. Government of Canada. (n.d). The Employer's Roadmap to hiring and retaining internationally trained workers. Government of Canada, Canada.ca. Retrieved February 22, 2023 from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/employer-roadmap-hiring-retaining-internationally-trained-workers.html>

 Send us your questions, comments, and suggestions — vitality@homewoodhealth.com

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Contact Us

1-866-565-4903

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