



## New Canadian immigrants are bearing the brunt of the recession

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Dreams sometimes get a sharp reality check, and that's especially true for skilled immigrants hoping to start a new life in Canada. Just ask Ruby Bhasin.

She arrived in Canada with her husband and young son in 2010 seeking a more stable future than the life left behind in Dubai, where she was an assistant bank manager.

But 10 years' experience and a master's degree in commerce did not open any doors with Canadian employers, who routinely demanded "Canadian experience."

"I didn't know the job market would be so tough in Canada," says Bhasin, 38, of Toronto. "I started hunting for a job right away and sent out resumés, but got no calls back. After one year, I was very discouraged."

Unwittingly, Bhasin found herself as part of an emerging statistic: New immigrants are, indeed, bearing the brunt of the recession. **The jobless rate for newcomers runs at 8.4 per cent compared to 6 per cent for their Canadian-born counterparts, according to the Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative (TIEDI).**

Fortunately for the Indian-born Bhasin, a friend steered her towards Acces, an established immigrant employment agency.

After a month's counselling, Bhasin started to get interviews, then job offers from the banking industry, and she landed a position as a client relations officer.

"Thinking positively, I got a foot in the door, rather than sitting idle," she says. "I have enough time to prove myself and start my career. At least I got this opportunity, which is more than okay for me."

Bhasin's experience is not uncommon in the world of newly arrived skilled immigrants, according to **Joan Atlin, director of programs at the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC).**

**“What we have is a bit of mismatch,” she says. “There are sectors where there are significant skill shortages and jobs going unfilled. And, at the same time, we still have** higher unemployment rates for immigrants in general, especially in the Toronto region.”

Some medium and smaller companies are still not taking advantage of the skilled immigrant labour pool and Atlin blames that in part on a “certain unconscious level of bias” against immigrants.

But larger companies are leading the way with diverse cultural hiring practices and it's no coincidence that Bhasin finally landed a job in the banking and financial sector, one of the key areas of employment that is recruiting skilled immigrants.

**According to TIEDI statistics, notable job gains for hiring new immigrants in the GTA last year were in:**

- **Accommodation and food services (18,600 jobs)**
- **Professional, scientific and technical services (14,700 jobs)**
- **Construction (11,300 jobs).**

Mario Calla, executive director of Costi Immigrant Services, cautions that Canada's employment landscape coming out of a recession is definitely changing.

“What makes it more difficult is the shift in recovery is from mixed manufacturing to a knowledge economy,” says Calla. Last year, his agency helped 55,000 immigrants at its 18 GTA locations.

Even though the Canadian immigration quota has been cut by 25,000 people this year to 225,000, it will still “take some work” by new skilled immigrants to land a job, Calla says. “It doesn't mean that people will get a job as per their qualifications, but hopefully in their field.”

Experts in the immigrant employment field agree there are some positive signs.

Big corporations and professional licensing bodies are moving more quickly to confirm the credentials of foreign-trained immigrants, a major roadblock in the past.

More than 75 per cent of newly arrived immigrants have credentials confirmed within six months, according to an RBC Economics report, *Immigrant Labour Market Outcomes in Canada: The Benefits of Addressing Wage and Employment Gaps*.

“The Certified General Accountants used to insist on original transcripts from the home country, which was a real problem for some people. But now they will accept certified photocopies to speed up the process,” says Irene Sihvonen, senior director of Acces.

She says the formation of a new network of immigrant services and colleges, called Consortium of Agencies Serving Internationally-trained Persons ([CASIP](#)), has helped.

CASIP will work together to help 70,000 immigrants this year upgrade their skills and find jobs. “We have seen a lot of dips and cycles in economic terms, but there continues to be a high demand for the kind of programs we deliver as an agency,” Sihvonen says.

Acces, which serves 15,000 skilled immigrants each year in the GTA, says it is recording a 75- to 80-per-cent success rate in matching clients to jobs.

RBC’s Paul Sy sounds one note of caution: “As the economy starts to age, we have to fill the gap created by retirees with immigrant labour. Business leaders are starting to mention this, and we have also seen the Canadian government making note of this in their remarks. All the key stakeholders have a role to play in this.”

Sy says the new RBC Economics report draws one conclusion: “We are still not recognizing the skill level and talent that newcomers bring to Canada, and it’s as much the country’s loss as it is that of our immigrants. Canada was built on immigration, and that’s just as true today.”

### **Leaders of the pack**

In the high-stakes, real-life game of settling in Canada, the clear winners these days are Filipino immigrants, who first started settling in Canada as far back as 1951.

The Philippines has placed in the top four originating countries for the past several years, but Filipinos finally eclipsed both India and China last year as the largest immigrant group. Half of the 436,000 Filipinos in Canada live in Ontario.

**“What’s very distinctive about the Filipino community is the very high level of education and skill that people come with,” explains Dr. Philip Kelly, principal investigator of both the Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative and the Filipino Youth Transitions Project at York University.**

“The level of degree holders in that community is significantly higher than in other communities. And, of course, the level of English-language proficiency is very high as well.”

The Philippines produces 700,000 new college graduates every year but doesn't have the economy to create enough jobs for them.

“Traditionally, there was a heavy concentration of Filipinos in manufacturing, which is unfortunate because that sector has taken a hit,” Kelly adds. “But Filipino women do well in sectors like health care, social services, accommodation and food and retail.”

The current shift in Ontario's health-care delivery, placing more emphasis on home-care support services for patients, is expected to create even more job openings for this particular demographic.