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## Overlooked talent pool



A program to connect immigrant professionals with talent-hungry small businesses has given Wasif Ali Raja new hope after five years of job hunting. J.P. Moczulski/National Post

**Mary Teresa Bitti, Financial Post** Monday, Jun. 21, 2010

Wasif Ali Raja immigrated to Canada from Pakistan in 2005. He had a post-graduate degree in information technology and had set up shop as a software developer, but the would-be entrepreneur decided Canada held more opportunity.

"I applied as a skilled worker," Mr. Raja says. "I thought with my educational and work background I would get a job in my sector, maybe not at the same level, but definitely in IT." But that isn't what happened.

His story is one many internationally educated professionals who move to Canada share. According to Statistics Canada, only 24% of foreign-educated professionals find a job in their field. At the same time a demographic shift will see more people leave the workforce than enter it, resulting in a significant labour shortage, an irony not lost on Mr. Raja.

"I applied for many positions in IT but they wanted Canadian experience and a Canadian education," Mr. Raja says. "I was educated in English and I used the same textbooks used here, but it didn't matter." He took a job in retail but he was not using his training.

"Each year, I was moving further from my goal because I wasn't getting experience in my field. Why did I come here if Canada doesn't want me? I want to service my new country in the best way I can by working in my field of study. At the same time, I have to take care of my family, pay my rent. I have to work."

To help these professionals and also benefit small businesses, Toronto's York University launched a Bridging Program for Internationally Educated Professionals this May.

"We reached out to businesses and advisory groups to develop a program to identify the issues that needed to be addressed to facilitate the inclusion of internationally educated professionals in their businesses," says Kelly Thomson, faculty lead of York's program.

They identified language, an appreciation of the business culture in which organizations operate in Ontario, and needing to feel a level of comfort about what the background credentials were and what those credentials meant in the Canadian context.

"On a basic human level, it's terrible to think of MBAs driving taxis," Ms. Thomson says. "Then there is the macro-economic context. Here are all these skilled immigrants coming into the country. Here are employers who have both immediate and long-term needs. You realize there has to be something that connects these two sides."

The program, funded by the Ministry of Citizenship, focuses on IT and eight professional areas: accounting, auditing, finance, emergency management, logistics, public administration, marketing and management.

The program is divided into language training; Canadian foundation courses that provide Canadian context to the participants' professional areas of expertise; and specialized industry-specific skills to help participants gain their Canadian designation. "The last part of the program is focused on promoting entry into a professional network in Canada," Ms. Thomson says.

"Participants will encounter members of their profession who come in as guest speakers. Then we will set them up with a professional mentor, who will help them translate their international experience into Canadian terms so employers can recognize and understand it. It's a significant barrier especially for small businesses that don't know all of the international designations."

Small business is one of the targets of the program, says Anita Patel, a member of the the advisory board and founder of nPerspective, which offers research consulting services in IT governance, risk-management and compliance.

"It's incredibly difficult for professionals who arrive in Canada to transition and to adapt to a Canadian context and business environment," says Ms. Patel who emigrated to Canada more than 10 years ago.

"The program helps these professionals do that. At the same time, it gives small businesses the ability to tap into a talent market they otherwise could not access. If you think about it, it does the work the business would have to do: assessing credentials, teaching them about Canadian corporate culture and how things work here. This program helps you move much further ahead in the hiring process, saving time and money.

"With global trends and harmonization of regulations, there is definitely a need to make strategic alliances across borders. These participants bring their own networks to the table. If we can help through this bridging program to get over some of the initial hurdles, then I think it's going to benefit business long term. As a small business, this is one way to create diversity of skills and experiences."

One of 60 inaugural participants, Mr. Raja is feeling more confident about the future and he is already seeing benefits. "I am learning how to communicate effectively in the Canadian business culture, and getting positive results at my current job," he says.

"After this program, I know how to use my networks in India and Pakistan to help Canadian companies move into these countries. I can link the two cultures. I have more to offer."

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