

NO ROOM FOR TALENT?

Immigrants face a “sticky floor” rather than a glass ceiling, but change is fast approaching

PHOTO: Stephen Coburn

TEN YEARS AGO, A CANADIAN magazine hired Nick Noorani for an entry-level position. Within a year, he became its director of advertising. By the end of his second year, he was the vice president of sales and marketing.

Was he a child prodigy? An advertising wunderkind? Neither. He was a recent Indian immigrant with 23 years of experience—but none of it in Canada. He had ad agencies all over Vancouver turning him away, despite telling him he was “overqualified.” When Noorani finally got a chance to demonstrate his abilities, his employer was, to say the least, impressed.

Noorani’s quick rise is actually unique. Statistics Canada tells us that it takes ten years for university-educated immigrants to reach an employment rate comparable to their Canadian-born peers. In the meantime, these recent immigrants are more than twice as likely to experience low income and poverty as are other Canadians.

Today, Noorani is founder and publisher of *Canadian Immigrant* magazine, and has made it his life’s work to shorten those ten years.

Canada needs immigrants. By 2011, immigration is expected to account for all of our net labour market growth, and in five years, immigrants will represent 21 per cent of Canada’s population.

“This means that in a globally competitive marketplace, Canadian businesses can’t afford to underutilize this important segment of the talent pool,” says Deborah Gillis of diversity research firm Catalyst. “And secondly, there’s the opportunity to really create competitive advantage by understanding the market that you’re serving both here in Canada and globally.”

The immigrants that are coming bring skills with them. In 2007, 37 per cent of immigrants aged 25 to 54 had a university degree, compared with only 22 per cent of Canadian-born of the same age group.

In other words, there is a business case for immigration.

“Employers are starting to actually feel the labour shortage that’s been talked

about for the last ten years,” says Manjeet Dhiman, director of services at ACCES Employment Services, a Toronto-based job search firm for newcomers.

But this need does not always translate into more satisfactory employment for newcomers. One in four male immigrants admitted under the business or skilled

Nick Noorani’s seven success secrets for immigrants

1. Learn the language
2. Stay positive
3. Embrace Canada
4. Have a Plan B
5. Stay clear of ethnic silos
6. Take risks
7. Volunteer, find a mentor

classes leaves within ten years, according to Statistics Canada.

“These people are highly skilled and they have the qualifications, so we would assume that they would have no problems getting into the labour market,” says Oliver Schmidtke, a political science professor at the University of Victoria. “But it seems that this highly qualified group, often with language skills, still faces severe challenges in finding appropriate employment to their level of qualification.”

These challenges begin with the immi-

gration system that brought newcomers here in the first place.

Canada uses a point system to assess all skilled worker or independent applicants, awarding points for education, language skill in English or French, work experience, being of an employable age, pre-arranged employment in Canada, and adaptability.

The system is meant to be fair in that it does not assign value to country of origin or cultural background, but Noorani believes other flaws exist.

"I think our immigration policy is built upside down," he says, citing ten years of experience in working with immigrants. "We go around the world and we harvest the world's best brains. We select the best people from every part of the globe, and we

The Origin of the CEO Species

Our in-house detective anthropologists tracked down the birthplace of 58 of the 60 chief executives of the TSX 60 companies

15.1 %

were born outside of North America

Hungary, United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Austria, Italy, Macedonia, and Germany

bring them here and we get them to flip burgers"—or enter their fields at lower-than-expected levels of pay and responsibility.

Indeed, immigrants are finding that their Canadian experience doesn't match their dreams of a comfortable new life.

"The newer cohort of immigrants takes much longer to catch up in terms of its income levels," Schmidtke says, in comparison to the 1970s when the point system was introduced. "[This is a] warning sign

that something doesn't work the way it was expected to with carefully selected immigrants."

Noorani feels the point system is misleading. "We don't manage expectations," he says.

Dhiman agrees. "I think that the point system leads people to believe that since they have been granted immigration to Canada that they will get a job in the field that they're in," she says.

And when newcomers do get employed, the position is often far below what the immigrant was used to.

Linda Manning, an economics professor at the University of Ottawa, is leading a research project on immigrant advancement in the workplace called Diversity for Growth. She calls this phenomenon the "sticky floor."

"An immigrant might get hired, but they often don't get their credentials and experience recognized, so they don't get into the jobs that they really deserve or that would best serve the organization," says Manning. "If you start from there, that already shortchanges your possibility for advancement."

Schmidtke says that employers' understanding of international credentials has not kept pace with the influx of immigrants from different backgrounds.

"Many employers simply aren't aware of degrees from certain countries," he says. "They're very hesitant because there's no good source of information for them, so they say, 'Why run the risk of employing [an immigrant?]'"

As well, Schmidtke points out, "The professional organizations are very powerful in determining access to jobs." These organizations include the licensing bodies for engineers, doctors, accountants, and nurses. But often, internationally trained professionals must navigate through a sea of license-related paperwork while trying to get settled in Canada, adding to their frustration at not being immediately employed.

"The most important thing for an immigrant coming to a new country is giving them the information," says Noorani. Many immigrants end up settling down with their families, and then settling for a lesser job, just to pay the bills.

It appears that these concerns are being heard.

January 2007 marked the launch of the

Last year marked our first-ever **CK Leadership Diversity Index**, where we looked at how visible minorities and women fared in the boardroom.

Here are this year's results. An updated methodology* shows that Canadian companies have made strides at including women and visible minorities in boardrooms and C-suites, but 37 of the 151 companies we examined have only white males in their top-level teams. Forty-one of the companies have no females, and 112 have no visible minorities.

This year we investigate more diversity issues: immigration policy and how it translates in the workplace, opportunities for the aboriginal population in the business world, and the barriers that disabled persons face in the workforce.

*Methodology:

Source is Corporate Citizen Database. Data is from fiscal 2007. CK looked at the percentage of board and top three C-suite members that are women and/or a visible minority, and found this percentage based on the total number of directors and executives assessed.

For the top companies by sector, please see www.corporateknights.ca

2008 SURVEY RESULTS DIVERSITY TOP 10 (out of 151)

COMPANY NAME	SECTOR	2008 SCORE
BRITISH COLUMBIA HYDRO AND POWER AUTHORITY	UTILITIES	72.7%
VANCOUVER CITY SAVINGS C.U.	FINANCIALS	72.7%
CANADA POST	TRANSPORT AND LOGISTICS	60.0%
CANADIAN BROADCASTING CORP.	COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA	54.5%
HUSKY ENERGY INC.	OIL AND GAS	53.3%
HYDRO ONE	UTILITIES	45.5%
WESTPORT INNOVATIONS INC.	INDUSTRIALS	45.5%
CORUS ENTERTAINMENT INC.	COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA	45.5%
IBM	IT	37.5%
MCKESSON	HEALTHCARE	36.4%



PHOTOS (L to R): Canada Post; Vancity; BC Hydro

Moya Greene,
President and CEO, Canada Post

ON DIVERSITY BEST PRACTICES:

I think the days are over when you can think that you are going to have the talent that you need by just looking to a single segment in the labour force. Now, the reality is that we have to take that realization and turn it into an operational strategy to actively go out and get those people—there’s a huge contest for talent in the labour market these days, and that’s what you definitely have to do.

ON BEING A CROWN CORPORATION:

Our government is for all Canadians, regardless of their gender or ethnic origin. I believe you have a greater responsibility to do everything you can to reflect the diversity of the country.

ON WOMEN AS ROLE MODELS:

I think that having women in senior and very visible roles makes it possible for young women to ... climb forward, knowing that [no one is] going to hold them back. Women can look and say, “There is opportunity, and if I keep going, and if I prepare myself, if I get the right education, and if I have the right experience, then I can occupy these roles of importance in my society.”

Ellen Pekeles,
Senior Vice-President, Strategy,
Vancouver City Savings

ON DIVERSITY BEST PRACTICES:

It’s been a year of looking at research and processes and saying: “How do we support managers in their hiring and consult leaders if someone with a specific diversity background—whatever it is—is having trouble surviving in the workplace? How do you support that individual and that leader to make it work?” I think the culture of supporting people to be successful is so important—rather than setting targets and quotas. The best advice is not setting quotas, but making diversity a very important strategy for the organization, and supporting managers to be successful in their hiring practices.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MONITORING PROGRESS:

If it doesn’t go smoothly to start with, you don’t give up. It takes ongoing commitment and strategic support to make it successful.

Bob Elton,
President and CEO,
BC Hydro

ON DIVERSITY BEST PRACTICES:

Organizations are made better by people who think differently. There’s an operational heart to any company and if you want diversity to take hold, it’s got to take hold there. Don’t ask, “Why do we hire diverse people?” Ask, “Why don’t we have diverse people on this team or that team?” That’s a fair question, and it’s worth an explanation of the answer.

ON WHAT BC HYDRO IS DOING:

Our basic goal, and it’s not a quota, is that we end up representing the population that we serve. We have to have the best team. I’m never going to say to anyone: you have to hire a diverse candidate for this role, but I might say to them: “Do you think your team, those ten people—do you think that’s the right group? Do you think that there’s anything you need in that team that you don’t have?”

Canadian Immigration Integration Project (CIIP), managed by the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and funded by the federal government. Serving over 3,000 immigrants since its inception, the project helps immigrants under the Federal Skilled Worker Program prepare for integration while they are still in their country of origin. It currently has field offices in China, India, and the Philippines that provide labour market information sessions

top 10 countries of origin for immigrants, 2001-2006

1. China (14%)
2. India (11.6%)
3. Philippines (7%)
4. Pakistan (5.2%)
5. USA (3.5%)
6. South Korea (3.2%)
7. Romania (2.5%)
8. Iran (2.3%)
9. United Kingdom (2.3%)
10. Colombia (1.9%)

Source: Statistics Canada

and one-on-one counselling.

“Ensuring they have a realistic labour market understanding and providing access to online tools and resources allows them to prepare effectively before leaving home,” says Katrina Murray, CIIP Project Director. “[It] gives them the confidence and know-how to take the right steps upon their arrival in Canada.”

CIIP also connects immigrants with organizations that assist them with acquiring language skills, credential assessment and recognition, and finding employment—all of which is important to research before

coming to Canada.

The Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons is dealing with the Ontario doctor shortage by making it easier for doctors practicing outside of the province but within North America to become registered in Ontario. The College is also considering ways to expedite the process for internationally-trained doctors, and the province introduced a bill in June 2008 that, if passed, would speed up the licensing process through faster assessments of international credentials.

Engineers Canada, the national organization of provincial and territorial bodies that license Canadian engineers, has undertaken a Human Resources and Social Development Canada-funded project entitled “From Consideration to Integration” to look at improving the ways for international engineering graduates (IEGs) to obtain engineering licenses.

“It’s a part of our societal responsibility to ensure that people that the government is bringing in have the opportunity to work in the profession for which they’re educated,” says project director Deborah Wolfe.

Both Dhiman and Wolfe cite the Professional Engineers of Ontario (PEO) as a good example of a licensing body who is addressing the needs of IEGs.

Kim Allen, CEO and registrar of PEO, explains that PEO has implemented a peer review system, and will provide guidance to applicants who fall short of the requirements.

“What we try to do is be very inclusive, and what we really work hard at is recognizing people’s credentials however they achieve them,” he says.

PEO has also introduced a financial credit program. If an Ontario engineering graduate or newcomer applies within six months of graduation or arrival for their engineering license, PEO will waive all application fees.

But PEO will not compromise on standards.

“When I talk with our committee members (over half of whom are internationally trained), they find it insulting that you would actually think about lowering the standards,” Allen says. “It’s not about lowering the standards. It’s about clearly and transparently communicating what is the standard, and then providing guidance and direction on supporting people to meet the standard.”

It remains to be seen how long it will take for these initiatives to keep immigrants in Canada. PEO reports that fewer than ten per cent of eligible international engineering graduates have taken advantage of their financial credit program.

Also, a September 2008 report by the Montreal-based Institute for Research on Public Policy points out that the establishment of these programs can lead to the perception that the sticky floor has been cleaned up, when it’s clear that work still needs to be done to better manage expectations and smooth the transition.

Employer adaptation is a large part of that. “The big difference right now is that the immigrants have always known they had to change,” says Manning. “And employers are just now starting to realize that they can improve their own performance by changing.”

For instance, employers are looking for ways to retain immigrants and ensure that their internal policies foster a sense of belonging.

“Employers are just thrilled,” says Manning of her immigrant advancement research project. “We can get more companies to come to our focus groups than immigrants.”

However, it is up to the employer to convey opportunities properly, and for immigrants to seize these opportunities.

“We did see in our research a bit of a disconnect between what organizations said that they were doing [to promote diversity], and visible minorities’ perceptions of the commitment of their organization to diversity,” says Gillis. “That really speaks to the importance of regular and consistent communication throughout the organization.”

As for Noorani, he takes a pragmatic view of how immigrants should view their situation.

“I’m not a victim. I chose to come here. I’m very clear on that and I say that to immigrants—stop behaving like victims,” he emphasizes. “Don’t like it? Catch a flight, get out of here.”

And though many of them have, it’s clear that desire, resources, and understanding are falling into place. It’s time for all parties to take the responsibility to reduce that ten-year gap and give immigrants a reason to stay. **CK**

Melissa Shin is Managing Editor of Corporate Knights.