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Contributing Team

Deloitte Canada

Shannon Kot, Partner, Canadian Immigration Leader

Dan Markham, Partner, Canadian Immigration and Economics Leader

Wiam Ben Karroum, Consultant

Kareem El-Assal, Advisor, Immigration

Institute for Canadian Citizenship

Daniel Bernhard, CEO

George Carothers, Senior Director, Ideas & Insights

Tarun Tripathi

Executive Summary

Though immigration remains Canada's primary growth and renewal strategy, underemployment often prevents immigrants from contributing to their full potential. The underutilization of immigrant talent exacerbates labour shortages, especially in critical fields like construction, healthcare, and cybersecurity, costing the Canadian economy billions annually and hindering national prosperity.

The Institute for Canadian Citizenship (ICC) and Deloitte engaged business, government, and civil society leaders in a series of roundtables across Canada to explore the economic imperative to address this issue, the barriers faced, and the strategies to overcome them. Discussions revealed several challenges beyond systemic discrimination, including lack of ambition in business culture, inadequate onboarding and mentoring practices, gaps in DEI frameworks, and a lack of support to navigate the complex immigration system – especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Participating employers provided innovative examples of how to overcome these challenges – strategies that any employer can seize upon to attract and retain immigrant talent – not just to remedy immediate labour shortages, but to gain a competitive advantage within Canada and beyond.

This paper does not consider the pros and cons of current and projected immigration levels. Instead, it focuses on how employers can better meet business goals by engaging, employing, and retaining immigrants who are, for the most part, already in Canada.

Introduction

Canada will confer permanent residency status to 1.5 million people over the next three years. Roughly 60% will be economic class immigrants, selected for their predicted ability to integrate into the workforce. The policy strives to address talent shortages in critical sectors, compensate for low birthrates, and build robust economic supports for an aging population.

Yet current labour market conditions suggest that the skills of immigrants who are already in Canada are vastly underutilized. This is detrimental not just to immigrants, but also to Canadian businesses and public bodies struggling to find skilled labour, and to the whole country, whose tax base and economy are undermined when immigrants' earnings are suppressed.

Research from Deloitte estimates that labour shortages reduced Canada's GDP potential by \$54 billion in 2022 and predicts these shortages, and their associated economic drag, will persist until Canada's existing human talent is more effectively utilized. Though the most acute pandemic-era labour shortages have abated, job vacancy rates remain above pre-pandemic averages, suggesting that employment demand remains strong. This is especially true in critical fields like construction, healthcare, and cybersecurity. So, while increased population is currently being blamed for declining productivity and unattainable housing prices, the labour market, and therefore the economy, still need more people.

However, integration into the labour market is uneven across the available talent pool. Despite gradual gains between 2010 and 2023, immigrants continue to face higher unemployment rates and also tend to be underemployed, earning some 10% less than their Canadian-born counterparts. An ICC survey of roughly 2,000 new Canadians revealed that 30% of immigrants under 35 are likely to leave the country within two years. Frustration with underemployment was the most common reason.

Immigrant underemployment depresses GDP and is therefore a drag on prosperity for all Canadians, but research on the subject tends to focus on immigrant wellbeing. A 2022 literature review identified two common diagnoses for immigrant underemployment: shortcomings of immigrants (i.e. language ability, soft skills, upskilling, etc.) and systemic discrimination (i.e., lack of credential recognition, overemphasis on Canadian experience, biased HR technologies and practices, racism, etc.). Researchers and policy makers tend to call for improvements, grounded in an equity-oriented human rights framework, to reduce economic disparities between immigrants and the rest of the population.

Knowledge of these challenges has existed since at least the 1970s, yet the research approach to the problem and recommendations to address it have remained remarkably similar in the intervening period. A 2023 ICC report established that “Canadian employers have a vested interest in putting underutilized immigrant talent to full, productive use” amidst “high, unmet demand for labour and higher productivity – especially in high skill roles.” Indeed, with ongoing challenges to fill positions in key sectors across the economy, employers have a direct interest in solving this issue.

By centring the economic imperative to address the challenge, this research seeks not only to reenergize efforts to improve immigrant labour market integration, for the benefit of immigrants themselves and for Canadian prosperity overall, but also to enhance the competitive advantage of Canadian employers and businesses.

Drawing from the perspectives of employers from across Canada, operating in different regions and sectors, and at different scales, this paper explores the obstacles, challenges, and risks perceived by leaders in business, government and civil society when it comes to hiring and developing immigrant talent. It also uncovers some of the innovative strategies being used to secure the talent needed to win, regardless of where it originates.



Creating safe spaces for honest perspectives

Between May 2023 and June 2024, Deloitte and the ICC engaged over 40 leaders in conversations held under Chatham House Rule to candidly discuss and capture their experiences, concerns, and perspectives on hiring and retaining immigrants. These conversations were held in seven locations across Canada and included participants from all regions and diverse sectors such as financial services, energy, mining, technology, CPG, higher education, public service, not-for-profit, among others. Organizations ranged in scale from 25 staff to nearly 100 thousand. In addition to speaking about the challenges faced and obstacles to hiring newcomer talent, some participants shared promising practices that allowed them to assess, develop and harness immigrant talent more quickly and effectively, leading to better business performance and outcomes for immigrant employees. Finally, employers used these sessions to flag outstanding challenges that keep them from realizing their intention to make full use of newcomers' abilities.





Top 10 challenges

Regardless of size, sector, or location, all participating employers reported significant difficulties in attracting, retaining, and developing qualified labour, not only in low-wage roles but also in lucrative positions in IT and natural resources. Asked to explain the key challenges preventing them from making full use of immigrants' talents, participants relayed several common themes that hardly negate but certainly transcend ever-present racism and discrimination. In some instances, participating employers also developed several highly creative and beneficial solutions to these challenges. Salient findings are enumerated below:

1. Canada's economic culture lacks ambition

Corporate sector participants attributed widespread challenges to recognize and integrate immigrant talent to a broader "culture of non-ambition" animating Canada's workplaces. They readily recognized that immigrant talent not only alleviates workforce shortages, but also delivers significant competitive advantages in domestic and global markets. Yet building globally diverse teams is difficult; policies, tools, training, recruitment practices, internal support systems and company culture must all be upgraded before the benefits can be realized.

Leaders were frustrated that even their own firms were often unwilling to invest in this hard work, placing this intransigence within a broader pattern of low innovation, evidenced by anemic business investment, innovation-killing oligopolies, and a healthcare system that still communicates by fax. "We know we're not as innovative as we need to be – not even close", said one senior participant from Atlantic Canada with extensive private and public sector experience. "I think Canada is being left in the dust. We haven't decided that we want to be ambitious."

Canadian complacency doesn't just prevent employers from doing the hard work to hire and integrate newcomers. It also creates barriers to embracing the new ideas newcomers bring once hired, hindering promotions and retention. Participants described a "smug Canadian superiority complex", causing immigrants' ideas and suggestions gained through experiences in other markets to be categorically rejected as "not the way we do things."

One participant from a professional services firm said that immigrants' tendency to work harder and longer than Canadian-born workers can prove controversial and can even be discouraged, citing the need to promote work-life balance. Participants conceded that this might be another symptom of the larger lack of ambition within Canada's work culture, which stands to reason in an economy increasingly defined by declining productivity.



Some participants observed that managers can get offended when immigrants point out opportunities for improvement, especially when they come from countries perceived (albeit often falsely) as economically less developed than Canada. According to a seasoned investor, Canada's business leaders "don't grasp how so much of the world is beating us", causing employers to dismiss and suppress immigrant contributions that could prove lucrative.

2. Poor onboarding, training, and mentoring

Participants pointed to another systemic shortcoming of Canadian employers – the lack of proper onboarding, training, and mentoring – as a key challenge for retaining immigrants and helping them succeed and advance within a new workplace. A senior corporate leader from Western Canada lamented that "companies are just not willing to invest in this anymore."

While a dearth of in-job training affects all employees, participants perceived a disproportionately negative impact for immigrants, who have greater need for a clear and structured initiation into Canadian professional culture and straightforward instruction about how they are expected to perform, behave and communicate at work.

3. DEI gaps

A senior HR leader from a major financial services company, themselves an immigrant to Canada, noted that immigrant hiring slips through the cracks because country of origin or immigration background are not commonly considered within DEI frameworks, which tend to prioritize gender identity, sexual orientation and racialized people or groups. Suspecting that newcomers faced disadvantages in the hiring process, the company began collecting data and found that despite the visual diversity of their workforce, new immigrants were underrepresented in their workplace; newcomers make up 25% of the population but represented just 20% of applicants and only 6% of hires.

Employers highlighted the need for improvements grounded in economic imperatives. Participants questioned equity-oriented exhortations to hire more newcomers. One corporate leader summed it up: "We have tonnes of data showing that teams with more global experience perform better and make more money. Moralizing makes people switch off, and it sends the incorrect message that hiring immigrants is an added cost we must bear to be nice. If we want more companies to wise up to the value of hiring immigrants, we need to speak the language of business. The good news is, we can."



4. Experience and skill “translation”

Many participating employers say they struggle to “translate” skills and experiences from other countries into Canadian equivalents they understand. Employers often prefer alumni from prestigious firms or universities, but even the most open-minded Canadian hiring manager will understandably have trouble assessing the prestige of a Senegalese bank or Malaysian university. “Reputation means a lot in hiring,” said one participant. “Is this graduate from their country’s leading school? It’s next to impossible for us to know.”

This is a challenge for large and small firms alike, albeit for different reasons. Large firms can access services and technology to draw these equivalencies, but struggle to diffuse these capabilities across the many divisions and layers of a complex conglomerate.

Large employers that hire directly from other countries also consider credential or experience uncertainty to be a significant risk. It is expensive and time-consuming to find candidates and support them through the immigration process, which often requires jumping through myriad regulatory hoops every year. When a domestic hire doesn’t work out, employers reportedly feel less impact because they’ve invested less in them. This may not be an accurate assessment of reality, but the feeling is said to be real, and perhaps reflects the perceived cost and effort of having to help immigrant employees navigate the immigration system.

Alternatively, SMEs often have limited HR capacity, leaving the job of credential and experience translation to individual hiring managers without the time, skill, budget, incentive or motivation to do this difficult work, no matter how advantageous it may prove.

One post-secondary education leader further observed that many newcomers seem unfamiliar with the concept of transferable skills, a sentiment echoed by others. This causes immigrants to apply for the exact same job they had in their country of origin, skipping over other valuable roles they might secure.

5. Applying lessons learned across large organizations

Executives at larger firms expressed considerable frustration about their failures to change hiring practices many layers and divisions away.



A leader in a large national finance organization conducted rigorous internal research, finding that teams which hired more newcomers performed better and earned higher bonuses. But that still hasn't been enough to inspire widespread changes to their hiring philosophy. An immigrant executive made it clear that while top leadership accept and champion the data and understand the commercial advantages of hiring newcomers, it is difficult to convince thousands of individual local managers to heed these lessons and change their outlook.

A major natural resources firm spoke of a hiring manager who challenged their own thinking regarding previous experience and "took a leap of faith" to hire immigrants for trucking jobs that had previously required Canadian winter driving experience. "We used to hire people who had experience driving in snow. But it turned out that people who had no experience in snow were more careful, and therefore had fewer accidents." While this revelation was beneficial to the trucking team that had suffered labour shortages, it was difficult to disseminate this lesson to other parts of the organization.

6. Cultural disconnects

Though Canada's big cities have given the country a reputation as an immigrant society, many parts of the country like Atlantic Canada are still getting used to the arrival of highly skilled immigrant professionals. Cultural fit within teams was deemed to be particularly challenging in these places.

Employers were quite adamant that this mindset needs to change – quickly. One participant put it succinctly: "We still think immigrants need to adapt to us. But to bring in new ideas and win, we actually need to adapt to them. Until we figure this out at scale, immigrants who find work in Canada will continue to be disappointed and the incidents of culture misfit will only grow."

7. A narrow definition of who counts as an immigrant

Many participants viewed hiring immigrants as a proxy for global recruitment. One characteristic statement was: "as an SME of 300 to 350 people, we lack the infrastructure to recruit internationally". Though true, this reveals an overly restrictive definition of immigrants, excluding people who already live in Canada but may not have been able to find work commensurate with their talent, or who may currently reside in another province or region.

Participants highlighted that programs like the Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP), while extremely valuable and effective, also reflect this narrow view by focusing exclusively on international recruitment. They perceive opportunities to expand programs like AIP to support a broader



definition of “immigrant” and provide additional encouragement to employers to avail themselves of the wealth of underutilized immigrant talent that is already here.

8. Administration and regulatory compliance

Many participants emphasized the challenge of internal administration and regulatory compliance. SMEs – which represent most businesses in Canada – have limited HR capacity, and often lack the knowledge and resources to hire internationally or navigate the work permit process for non-permanent immigrants already in Canada.

But larger employers also cited a lack of understanding of the immigration system as a key barrier to hiring immigrants. Even government support programs like AIP, that employers deem very successful, still penalize employers for making small mistakes in the application and compliance processes, which discourages some participants from applying through the scheme.

For other employers, slow hiring processes often caused them to miss out on immigrant talent. For example, participants shared that 70% of immigrants to Atlantic Canada have a job offer secured before landing. The inability to hire quickly becomes a significant barrier to hiring immigrants, who will accept other job offers – even below their capabilities or expectations – to keep their preferred immigration journeys on track.

9. Immigrant selection policy

Many participants observed a mismatch between the skills federal and provincial governments privilege when selecting permanent residents and those the economy needs most. Several took issue with prioritizing entry for people with more advanced degrees while devaluing blue collar experience that is not just badly needed, but also highly remunerative. In other words, immigrant underemployment may be attributable in some significant respect to government selection policy, which cannot keep up with fast-moving labour market shifts.

To compensate, many participants turn to the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), which allows them to recruit for specific skills directly from abroad, not just for low-wage work, but also high-skill, high-salary roles like software developers and insurance underwriters. This program has increasingly become a topic of public discussion, with mounting concerns about a perceived overreliance on low-wage immigrant labour that suppresses wages and breeds conditions for exploitation of immigrants themselves.

Despite the need for greater protections against abuse, participating employers emphasized the importance of maintaining immigration pathways for recruiting the skills they need directly and on a reasonable timescale.

Participants also shared that TFWP favours large employers who can afford the hefty fees and compliance obligations the program imposes, like the need to constantly renew work permits. This adds not only to the cost for employers but also risk, since the possibility of a work permit not being renewed means that the employer's investment in a worker and their accumulated experience can evaporate. Nevertheless, participants who were able to make use of the program were generally satisfied with the quality of talent they were able to secure.

10. Lack of employer supports

Very few participants had experience interacting or partnering with traditional settlement services, which are the main pathway through which the Government of Canada finances employment supports for permanent residents, refugees, and asylum seekers. Those who did had initiated contact themselves, seeking to form relationships that might allow them to recruit the settlement agency's clients. However, these agencies were unable to provide employers with the support and training they sought to become better at identifying and onboarding immigrant talent. There was also a recognition that new capabilities are required within these agencies to enable more effective employer supports.

The AIP is an exception that proves the rule. Participating employers were very grateful for the dedicated training and support it provides.





Promising practices

Despite these significant challenges, participating employers found great success in expanding the number of immigrants on their teams – at all skill levels. They were generous and forthright in sharing promising practices, many of which are sector agnostic and highly replicable:

Building buy-in

Companies that successfully recruited immigrants were also most convinced of the benefits of doing so, and they worked hard to generate widespread buy-in for this strategy. Tactics included conducting internal research proving the superior performance of teams featuring recent immigrants, consistently sharing and celebrating successes, and trusting newcomers with positions of leadership to demonstrate their suitability for high-skill roles.

Other employers set the tone with their actions, giving immigrant employees recruited internationally a warm welcome to their team from the get-go: helping them with the immigration system, finding them initial housing, picking them up at the airport, filling the fridge with food, and arranging social and recreational activities for the whole family.

Other participants implemented upstream solutions in their hiring flows, such as automating the removal of applicant names from resumés to reduce the risk of bias or discrimination by hiring managers, making new immigrants more likely to get shortlisted for jobs.

One participant summed it up: “[Hiring immigrants] is about executing a mind shift within the company.” Another took pride in having cultivated “a culture of international recruitment” within a very large and diversified firm. Participating leaders worked hard to enact that mind shift and the results spoke for themselves.

Cluster hiring

Many employers use cluster hiring to diversify their workforces. These cohorts help employees build confidence and networks and create efficient conditions for training, development, and the provision of targeted supports.

Some large employers are considering cluster hiring for immigrants, mirroring existing programs focused on cultivating and supporting their Indigenous labour force.



One particularly innovative model used cluster hiring to bypass language challenges. A mid-sized construction company used to require employees to speak and read English fluently for safety reasons. As the participating executive explained: “When someone yells out that ‘a beam is about to fall on you’, it’s important that every employee understand right away. There’s no time to check Google Translate.” But this company discovered that crews can operate safely without speaking English, so long as everyone on the crew speaks the same language. This insight allowed them to hire single language Ukrainian- and Hindi-speaking crews, utilizing underemployed labour already present in the area. The result was a huge competitive advantage: labour supply grew, lead times plummeted, and growth soared.

Employer supports

Employers repeatedly asked for more supports around immigrant hiring. The AIP has mandatory intercultural training for participating employers, which participants spoke highly of. It also has a hotline employers can call if they have questions about the program or require advice about how to best integrate newcomer staff. A real person with specialized training answers these calls right away.

Some industry associations and chambers of commerce have also begun to support employers with training on international recruitment and expert advice about navigating the immigration system, especially the high-wage stream of the TFWP.

Immigration centres of excellence

One large financial services provider has created a dedicated centre of excellence for immigrant hiring, retention and success. This team includes HR leaders, business leaders, immigration lawyers, and an employee support group. This highly specialized team has successfully recruited over 2,000 immigrants, mostly to high-paying, high-skill jobs. They have found creative ways to bypass the challenges and complexities of the immigration system and created widespread buy-in across the firm. Moreover, they actively support immigrant employees and their families. They also collect vital data that proves the business case for globalizing the talent pool.

From credentials to skills

An ongoing shift from credential-based hiring to skills-based hiring has benefitted newcomers in job applications. Skills-based hiring levels the playing field somewhat, by reducing emphasis on educational attainment and prior workplaces. Canadian companies have been pioneering this practice across the world, incidentally resulting in workforces that are more diverse and successful.

A holistic, full-family approach

Some employers are training hiring managers to actively support newcomer employees' holistic wellbeing, including the wellbeing of their family. Others have forged relationships with civil society organizations like the YMCA to ensure newcomer employees can access recreation and support services that improve retention.

These employers made it easy for immigrant employees to access a variety of supports like school placement for children, accessible childcare, language training, and employment supports for the employee's spouse where applicable.

The ICC's Canoo Access Pass, which gives newcomers free access to over 2,000 of Canada's best culture and nature experiences, was also considered to be a valuable asset, as happy employees with happy families are more likely to stay and succeed.



Strategic Opportunities

A considerable amount of insight and optimism emerged from each discussion. Canada may be stuck in its ways, but as a public sector leader in Toronto observed, corporate Canada has proven its ability to quickly enact sweeping changes when they feel inspired. “We’ve seen willingness to kick the doors open when the Syrians came and again for the Ukrainians,” they said. “We’ve shown we can do it. We just need to adopt that same level of urgency across the board.”

We conclude with a few recommendations and that any employer could (and hopefully will) adopt:

- 1. Collect the data.** Immigrant underemployment will never be understood, let alone addressed, until country of origin and year of arrival are factored into DEI frameworks, which come with strong, built-in accountability mechanisms. Once these data are collected routinely, senior leaders can make changes that improve performance.
- 2. Spread success.** Bias and racism still exist. Moral exhortations may prove ineffective in changing perspectives, but proof of profit seems to work. Participants’ evidence shows that teams which hire more immigrants perform better. Participating employers who made deliberate efforts to disseminate these success stories across their organizations inspired colleagues to follow suit, creating a culture that covets immigrants as valuable employees bringing unique advantages that solve business problems and support hiring managers’ personal incentives.
- 3. Cultivate ambition.** Participating employers were consistent about how much work it takes to properly identify and integrate immigrant talent, but also agreed that this work is well worth it. A workplace characterized by a pervasive hunger to innovate and improve is one where immigrants will fit in best, and which will do the work necessary to find and make use of immigrant talent as a core competitive advantage. It should go without saying that adopting a must-do attitude will generate myriad other enterprise benefits too.

Newcomers can be particularly valuable in supporting international expansion. One participant implored us to view immigrants as “global navigators” with the power to create game-changing opportunities. Their language and cultural skills can help Canadian employers forge effective connections with partners, suppliers and customers worldwide.

4. Cultivate humility. Canada's oft-bemoaned predilection for positioning Canadian experience as inherently superior to global experience is ultimately costly hubris. Many immigrants come from the upper/professional classes of societies and economies that are developing much more quickly than Canada. These countries have surpassed Canada in many domains. Instead of limiting ourselves to assurances that immigrant employees meet Canadian standards, we would do well to learn from immigrants about how our standards can improve. Let's open our minds to the reality that immigrants have plenty to teach us.

5. Create specialized immigrant hiring teams. Individual hiring managers cannot be expected to understand the intricacies of the immigration system, fairly and accurately interpret foreign CVs, or properly support immigrant employees toward success. For large enterprises, it is very advantageous to create a specialized team responsible for recruitment, navigating the immigration and work permit systems, training hiring managers, and supporting immigrant employees across the enterprise. Industry associations and chambers of commerce could develop similar central services for SMEs that are too small to develop this capacity themselves.

6. Get creative. The construction firm that broke its labour shortage by creating single language teams blew past its competitors. It's a great example of creative thinking that unlocks a vast supply of immigrant talent that was previously prevented from building enterprise value. Hiring managers and senior executives grappling with labour shortages should ask themselves a simple question: how can we change our workplace so that this large population of ambitious and underemployed people will be able to join our team and support our success? In the case of the construction crew, it was the English language requirement which changed, unlocking vast opportunity. For the natural resources firm, it was the requirement to have experience driving in snow. These small changes delivered big value.

7. Remember the whole person. Hiring newcomers is one thing. Retaining them and ensuring their successful contribution is another challenge. Remember that an immigrant's ability to contribute often depends on personal factors like whether their spouse finds skills-commensurate employment, whether their kids are doing well, and whether the whole family is happy with life in their new community. Free programs like the ICC's Canoo Pass are proven to help, but employers adopting a more hands-on approach to full family success greatly increase the probability of successful and long-lasting workforce integration.

8. Advocate for immigration reform. The immigration system has grown far too complex and slow. It shouldn't be so hard for companies to bring in the talent they need or to keep immigrants in the country on a permanent basis when they are successfully employed in industries with established shortages. A more agile and nimble immigrant selection policy, which more closely aligns with and adjusts to real needs in the economy, will also prove highly beneficial to employers and immigrants alike.



Conclusion

Employers looking to improve performance and acquire competitive advantages would do well to invest in the know-how and infrastructure for recruiting and integrating immigrant talent. While racism and discrimination will not vanish, employers participating in this research have shown that many of the key challenges to immigrant labour force integration are indeed soluble. Sometimes it takes only minor adjustments to hiring methods or mentality.

While much of the contemporary conversation about immigration pertains to the number of people entering Canada each year, we cannot lose sight of supporting employers to make better use of this talent, which can improve Canada's overall economic productivity.

We hope that leaders reading this report found it not just inspiring but practically instructive, and we look forward to opportunities to work with employers to put Canada's immense reservoir of immigrant talent to its fullest, most productive use. Making space for the world's best on our teams is not just the right thing to do. It's how we win.

ⁱ When Canada adopted universal healthcare in the late 1960s, there were about 15 seniors per 100 working age people. By 2056, there will be 50 seniors per 100 working age people, placing already strained public services under even greater pressure as usage swells far faster than the tax base which supports them. See Statistics Canada. "Dependency ratio". <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-229-x/2009001/demo/dep-eng.htm>

ⁱⁱ Deloitte, 2022: "Understanding Canada's Labour Shortage."

ⁱⁱⁱ Hou, Feng (2024), The improvement in the labour market outcomes of recent immigrants since the mid-2010s, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2024002/article/00004-eng.htm>

^{iv} Institute for Canadian Citizenship, (2022): "Immigrants to Canada facing crisis of confidence." <https://inclusion.ca/article/immigrants-to-canada-facing-crisis-of-confidence/>

^v Banerjee, Rupa (2022): Time to change focus? A review of immigrant labour market barriers, outcomes and the role of employers in Canada. https://inclusion.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TimeToChangeFocus_ICC.pdf

^{vi} Banerjee, Rupa (2023): A two-way street: the role of employers in immigrant labour market integration in Canada. https://inclusion.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/TwoWayStreet_ICC.pdf

Contact

Institute for Canadian Citizenship

George Carothers, Senior Director, Ideas & Insights
gcarothers@inclusion.ca