

A Two-Way Street

The Role of Employers in Immigrant Labour Market Integration in Canada



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Executive summary

Immigrants are expected to play a major role in Canada's post-pandemic economic recovery. Immigration targets have been increased, and the selection system has been revised to admit a more diverse range of newcomers to address labour market shortages. However, serious questions remain about whether immigrants will be able to find skills-appropriate employment once they arrive. Given high, unmet demand for labour and higher productivity – especially in high skill roles – Canadian employers have a vested interest in putting underutilized immigrant talent to full, productive use.



Although the Canadian public report positive attitudes towards immigration, and employers claim that foreign talent is crucial for filling labour gaps, the evidence shows that organizations are hesitant to hire permanent immigrants into high skill, well-paid positions. Many newcomers are instead forced to accept low skill, survival jobs that do not match their skills and qualifications. Foreign credentials are devalued, occupational licensing requirements are often onerous, and many immigrants report that the lack of professional networks in Canada pose major barriers when they are looking for skills-appropriate employment. Moreover, the requirement to have “Canadian experience”, and a perceived dearth of “soft skills” significantly disadvantage immigrant job seekers.

Our November 2022 report, [Time to Change Focus](#), summarized and revealed how the research on immigrant labour market barriers to date has focused mostly on how immigrants’ individual characteristics and endowments influence their labour market outcomes. There has been very little emphasis

on the role that employers’ policies and practices play on newcomers’ disparities. However, issues such as credential devaluation, the requirement to have “Canadian experience”, and the perceived lack of “soft skills” are fundamentally influenced by employers’ attitudes, expectations and actions. Therefore, in this report, we turn our focus to the role that employers play in immigrant labour market integration. We analyze qualitative data from employers in a range of industries around the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to shed light on their policies, practices, attitudes and behaviours towards immigrant job seekers and workers. We find that most employers view themselves to be inclusive and impartial, but do not generally have specialized recruitment and selection strategies for hiring newcomers. Organizations tend to favour Canadian education, experience, and workplace behaviour. Our findings support the view that employers treat immigrants differently for two overlapping reasons: (1) they are unsure of immigrants’ productivity potential; and (2) implicit bias based on stereotypical views of immigrants.

Recommendations for employers

To address the differential treatment of immigrants and leverage their talent to its fullest potential, employers should:

1. Recognize that integrating underutilized talent can help to alleviate labour market shortages, and the process is a “two-way street”. Foster a culture of inclusion which acknowledges that both employers and immigrant workers must adjust and adapt;
2. Develop partnerships with immigrant-serving agencies to connect immigrant professionals in the community with sector-specific associations and networks;
3. Revise job postings to ensure that they do not present systemic barriers for newcomer applicants;
4. Ensure that job openings are posted widely for at least 30 days and circulate postings to immigrant-serving agency partners;
5. Consider using ‘name-blind’ recruitment practices in which applicant names are obscured during the initial resume screening process;
6. Provide hiring managers with resources to assess foreign credentials and experience;
7. Conduct interviews in panels and ensure that selection criteria are consistent and transparent. Focus on competencies rather than experiences and avoid using organizational ‘fit’ as a criterion for selection;
8. Offer newcomer-specific orientation programs and ensure that workplace norms and expectations are clearly communicated;
9. Formalize mentorship programs and incentivize managers and long-term employees (both Canadian-born and immigrant) to act as mentors;
10. Provide opportunities for intercultural exchange and interaction by organizing informal events and celebrations that bring together employees from different ethno-cultural backgrounds.

Recommendations for further research

We recommend that additional research be conducted into the behaviours, practices and challenges of employers across Canada to better understand their role in immigrant labour market integration.

The research should also explore and identify opportunities and interventions to address employer concerns or hesitations about hiring immigrant talent. A national scope is required to capture nuances across sectors, industries, company scales and jurisdictions.

Introduction

With more than 1.4 million new immigrants scheduled to be admitted by 2025¹, the Government of Canada has signalled that immigration will play a dominant role in its post-pandemic economic recovery plan². Canadians appear to be quite supportive of this strategy. Even with the uncertainty and challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the increases in immigration targets recently announced, Canadians continue to be remarkably positive about the number of newcomers being accepted, and the benefits of immigration (Environics 2022). Canadians' support for immigration is based primarily on the belief that it is an economic boon for the country. However, there is a distinct disconnect between the often-touted economic benefits of immigration and the actual economic outcomes of many skilled newcomers who continue to struggle to find appropriate employment in line with their qualifications (Banerjee, Verma, & Zhang 2019).

Compared to their Canadian-born peers, immigrants, particularly those from racialized backgrounds, face a myriad of labour market obstacles in Canada despite being highly educated, including the devaluation of foreign credentials, barriers to obtaining occupational licensing, the requirement to have "Canadian experience", a lack of professional networks, and a perceived dearth of "soft skills" (Banerjee 2022).

Researchers and policymakers studying immigrant labour market disparities have focused primarily on the importance of selection policy (e.g., Sweetman and Warman 2013), immigrant characteristics and human capital (e.g., Fortin, Lemieux, & Torres 2016), and competition within the labour market (e.g., Hou, Lu, & Schimmele 2020). However, even after controlling for human capital factors such as education and considering labour supply and demand by industry, significant disparities in labour market outcomes remain for many newcomers. This suggests that the conceptual framework used by researchers and policymakers to analyze immigrant employment integration may need to be adjusted. Although the process by which immigrants integrate into host societies is often referred to as a "two-way street" where both newcomers and the community must adjust and adapt to "meet in the middle", the current lens through which immigrant integration is viewed is decidedly asymmetrical. Evidence shows that immigrants are expected to bear a disproportionate brunt of the responsibility of successful integration (Griffith A, 2016). However, we know from research over the past four decades that the "warmth of the welcome" matters (see Reitz 1998). To develop

effective interventions for improving immigrant outcomes, it is therefore essential to move beyond the importance of individual immigrant characteristics to incorporate the institutional policies of the host country, as well as the practices, actions and behaviours of various stakeholders, including employers.

Employers have a vested interest in leveraging the skills and talents of newcomers, particularly in the current economic reality of labour shortages. Employers rely on immigrants for labour and, in recent years, have openly advocated for higher rates of immigration (see Business Council of Canada 2022). However, the evidence shows that when it comes to hiring permanent immigrants into high skill jobs, employers remain hesitant (Banerjee, Reitz & Oreopoulos 2018). The few studies that have examined the role of employer policies and practices in the Canadian context have found that employers' definitions of 'skills', ideas of 'cultural fit' and screening processes play a significant role in how they assess immigrant applicants (see e.g., Elrick 2016).

To explore the attitudes and behaviours of employers towards skilled immigrants in greater depth and detail, we collected qualitative data from organizations in a range of industries in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The goal was to understand whether and how employers facilitate or hinder immigrants' employment outcomes in order to develop actionable recommendations that can help employers better utilize immigrant talent and allow newcomers to contribute their skills and expertise.

1 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2023-2025.html>

2 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/02/new-immigration-plan-to-fill-labour-market-shortages-and-grow-canadas-economy.html>

Methodology

The data for this analysis was collected from GTA employers through individual interviews and focus groups between December 2018 and February 2020 as part of a larger research project aimed at understanding the experiences of employers and newcomers within the Canadian immigration system.³ The data collection was conducted prior to the pandemic and therefore does not reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employers' attitudes or behaviours. However, Lamb, Banerjee, & Emanuel (2022) show that the pandemic did not change the relative labour market position of newcomers significantly. Therefore, we believe that the findings are still relevant in the post-pandemic era.



Human resources (HR) professionals and managers with HR facing responsibilities were contacted through regional employer associations, professional networks, and university alumni networks. 157 HR professionals and managers from various public and private sector organizations in the GTA were contacted, and a total of 41 individuals participated in interviews. A mix of one-on-one interviews and focus groups were employed based on the availability of participants. The participants represented diverse industries such as community services, marketing,

utilities, public service, professional services, finance, insurance, education, engineering, and construction. The size of the employers varied from less than 10 to more than 500. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person, and five were by phone. The one-on-one interviews lasted between 28 minutes and 66 minutes, while the focus group discussions included 8-9 participants and lasted 120 minutes. All quotes provided convey the words of the participants but may be lightly edited for clarity.

³ As part of the larger project, interviews were conducted with newcomer participants, along with the HR professionals/manager interviews discussed in the current report. The data was gathered with the intention of exploring employer and newcomer perspectives on integration within the current Canadian immigration context. See Banerjee, Zhang, & Amarshi (2022) for an additional analysis using this dataset.

Employer attitudes and behaviours towards immigrant employment candidates

There are several significant findings that can be gleaned from our data with regard to employers' views and actions towards skilled immigrants. We identify four thematic areas in which employers affected immigrant inclusion. While these four areas are presented separately, they are overlapping and intersecting.

1. Recruitment and selection
2. Credentials and competency
3. Support and inclusion
4. Culture and fit

Recruitment and selection

In terms of recruitment and selection, many employers stated that they held new immigrants in high regard with respect to their work ethic, higher educational attainment, and qualifications. Despite concerns about skills shortages, apart from a few employers who spoke of specific measures to attract newcomers (for example, through job fairs), the majority stated that they did not look specifically to hire immigrants. As a public sector employer shared, ***"Our recruitment is quite active, but I would not go and seek out ways to specifically only hire recent immigrants or to people that are abroad."***

Employers stressed, however, that they were equally open to selecting a newcomer candidate as they are a domestic one. Employers felt that they were fair and unbiased in their selection because they asked candidates behavioural type questions during interviews, administered proficiency tests, and placed more weight on past work experience rather than on credentials.

"If a newcomer comes and goes through the association to validate educational requirements, validate experience, it can take up to two years for them and you know that's very, very difficult because what are you going to do in those two years?"

An exception to this latter point was with regard to employment in regulated fields. In these instances, employers stated that they were hesitant to hire newcomers for fear of the time it would take for them to be accredited in Canada. As one employer from an engineering firm recounted, ***"If a newcomer comes and goes through the association to validate educational requirements, validate experience, it can take up to two years for them and you know that's very, very difficult because what are you going to do in those two years?"*** Several other employers noted that accreditation was a major barrier to the successful recruitment and selection of newcomer candidates.

"Our recruitment is quite active, but I would not go and seek out ways to specifically only hire recent immigrants or to people that are abroad."



A few employers expressed explicit bias against newcomer applicants. As one manager from a science and technology organization described,

“I have generally avoided lists sent to me from agencies helping to settle newcomers as our past experience has been very poor. People join and leave just as soon as they get something better. Very expensive for a small company to absorb.”



Some employers held certain beliefs about newcomers that they felt made them less attractive candidates. An example from the education sector was as follows,

“Most newcomers have so many family crises that absences and ultimately leaving jobs becomes necessary for dealing with extended family- especially for women who need permission to work from the husband and family overrides any job responsibility, thus, it makes it hard to hire them as they leave within a few months or less.”

Credentials and competency

Although employers stated that they hired equally and on the basis of merit, they believed that ‘merit’ was based primarily on educational credentials and work experience. Many employers conveyed that education was secondary to having relevant experience.

“Education can be a bit of a problem, trying to ascertain what does this actually mean over here and does it offer any value?”

In fields that required particular educational qualifications, employers expressed a lack of knowledge around how to interpret and translate foreign credentials and whether it was meritorious. As one manager from an insurance company described, **“Education can be a bit of a problem, trying to ascertain what does this actually mean over here and does it offer any value?”** A manufacturing employer similarly shared that, **“In terms of their foreign education, the curriculum is different in different countries, even for a similar field.”** For some employers, it was the name and status of a university that mattered in determining whether to accept a candidate’s foreign credentials. As a manager at an engineering firm stated, **“When we don’t recognize the school, unfortunately, honestly as an employer we get a little bit worried. I don’t know anything about this school, how far should we take it before we dig into more about this university?”**



With respect to foreign work experience, employers also expressed hesitations. As one employer in an engineering and manufacturing company asserted, **“I think work experience and responsibilities of positions are very different overseas compared to Canada. So sometimes we see someone has 10 years of experience from overseas in a certain field, we hire them, and they are not capable of doing the job.”** Many employers shared that foreign candidates were lacking the specific skills and experience needed in the Canadian context. One employer, this time in construction, stated that **“Newcomers have construction background but the tools, materials they used back home could be very different. Unfortunately, some newcomers have no knowledge of materials and tools in Canada.”** Similarly, a manager at an engineering company shared that, **“The biggest issue we had was that [newcomer] skills and experience are not translated to North America needs / standards.”**

For other employers, the country of origin was relevant, as certain foreign contexts were deemed to have standards and practices that were more similar to that of Canada.

“The biggest issue we had was that [newcomer] skills and experience are not translated to North America needs / standards.”

Support and inclusion

We asked employers about their experiences with onboarding, training, as well as workplace support and inclusion. In terms of onboarding and training, most employers told us that they had no special policies or practices in place that were specifically developed for newcomers. An employer from the IT sector, told us:

“No specific programs. Everyone has the same opportunity. We do not differentiate immigrants.”



In terms of workplace support and inclusion, some employers spoke to us about the informal and formal coaching and mentoring offered by their organizations. A manager at a construction firm explained that

“I usually have informal conversations with them to teach them about Canadian work culture, because this is so important, especially because we go to people’s homes.”

Other participants described more structured mentorship programs for all new employees. A few employers shared that while they did not have support structures in place for newcomers, they did provide resources and mentorship for people of colour who worked at their organizations. As a public sector HR professional explained,

“If people are part of minority groups, there are some [resources], but that has nothing to do [with] whether they are a recent immigrant.”

Culture and fit

In general, employers described their organizations as supportive and inclusive. There were many instances in which employers emphasized the importance of employee “fit” in terms of both workplace culture and the work itself. For example, an employer at an engineering company shared that newcomers must,

“Dress in a sense that you think this interview is worthwhile. Respect employers’ time. Most importantly, learn about Canadian workplace norms – that really determines newcomers’ success in the workplace, and of course retention.”



An employer from an insurance firm suggested that newcomer applicants adapt to Canadian culture in the following way,

“I find a lot of immigrants when they come in for interviews are very, very well polished. Like maybe just crack a joke or maybe just have conversations outside the interview. Instead, it’s, ‘you ask the question, I’m going to just answer it’. But, maybe before the interview just saying, “Hey, how was your weekend?” Or talk about something outside of work. I think managers are looking for that personality and so however they can showcase that...you definitely want to come in polished, but not to the point where it’s kind of memorized or rehearsed.”

Employers also noted a mismatch in expectations between the jobs newcomers were applying for and their backgrounds. As one manager from the financial sector described,

“Most of them have very high expectations, because they used to have high level jobs in their home country. The reality is, it is hard to get to that same level, they have to start from lower-level positions.”

Furthermore, employers shared that they frequently encountered overqualified immigrant employees who used the positions they offered them as stepping-stones to better employment. A manager in the hospitality sector told us that

“They usually leave because they’ve found other employment opportunities more suitable to their prior experience or education.”



Another employer in the service industry similarly conveyed that,

“When people are new to the country, they take on any role since they need employment. Once they get some experience, they are very quick to jump ship to another job. It’s a big loss for us because we already provided many types of training for them. It is understandable because other firms offer higher wages since they did not invest for training. This is the biggest frustration, but hard to do anything about it. I wish people had more loyalty to the company.”

Employers, thus, often shared that they felt newcomer employees to be lacking in terms of cultural fit as well as being overqualified for the positions they were applying for. Some employers felt that immigrant employees displayed cultural behaviours around authority and hierarchy that were problematic in the Canadian cultural context. The following quote provides an example from an HR manager in the insurance industry,



“Understanding cultural differences between Canada and their home country is very important. For example, in Canadian work culture everyone is equal and acting subservient is a strange behaviour - newcomers need to understand that. Get familiar with the business culture in Canada, especially if you are dealing with customers, newcomers need to learn how to communicate with customers.”

Discussion

Our data suggest that employers largely did not provide specific supports and accommodations for newcomer jobseekers and workers. However, they believed themselves to be welcoming and inclusive and strongly believed that their organizations were meritocratic. A dominant finding that emerged from our data was a preference for Canadian education, experience, and workplace behaviour on the part of employers. Our findings support the view that employers treat immigrants differently for two potential reasons:

1. They are unsure of immigrants' productivity potential
2. Implicit bias based on stereotypical views of immigrants

We conclude that employers' differential treatment of immigrants is partially due to "information asymmetries". Signalling theory examines the ways in which hiring managers utilize 'signals' such as educational credentials and work experience to overcome a lack of information during the hiring process (Spence 2002). Domestic educational credentials and experience allow the jobseeker to communicate otherwise unobservable characteristics about themselves such as competency, skill, and future productivity. Familiar universities, previous employers and job titles are often a proxy for competency or skill. For immigrant jobseekers, however, employers may be hesitant to make an offer because they have difficulty verifying the quality and understanding the value of foreign educational credentials or work experience. The managers we spoke to were worried that immigrants were a risky population to hire since it was difficult to assess the relevance and quality of their credentials and experience. They were also concerned about investing in overqualified newcomers who may leave the role at the earliest opportunity.

While it may be rational for hiring managers to be concerned about the productivity potential of immigrants, stereotyping and implicit bias also play important roles in shaping employers' attitudes. Employers appear to stereotype immigrants based on their race/ethnicity, culture, religion, language/ accent, or simply for being foreign-born. Immigrants' various overlapping identities also intersect to shape employer perceptions. For example, one interviewee felt that racial minority immigrant women were unable

to perform appropriately at work due to cultural expectations and gender roles at home. These results confirm numerous audit studies in which researchers submitted simulated applications to real job postings and found clear evidence of employer preferences for native-born, white candidates over racial minority immigrants, even when human capital characteristics are identical (e.g., Banerjee, Reitz, & Oreopoulos 2018; Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun 2016).

Employers utilized organizational "fit" and soft skills to justify and rationalize discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. Interviewees offered glaring examples of cultural expectations such as small talk, clothing and attitudes towards authority figures that had little to do with job performance. It was clear that many employers expected immigrants to assimilate into "Canadian culture" in order to be accepted in the workplace. Interestingly, the interviewees did not feel that international students and graduates were much more acculturated to the Canadian context than other immigrants. Several participants discussed challenges they had faced with incorporating international students and graduates into their organizational culture. This challenges the notion that two-step migration will be the magic bullet for overcoming immigrants' labour market difficulties. Lack of information, perception of risk and implicit bias intertwine to disadvantage newcomers in the Canadian labour market. So, it is crucial for employers to take concrete steps to better understand immigrants' skills and competencies and acknowledge and address bias to foster an inclusive workplace that draws on the talents of all workers.

Recommendations for employers

Although other stakeholders such as policymakers, settlement service providers, occupational regulatory bodies, and immigrants themselves have crucial roles to play in improving newcomers' employment outcomes, the recommendations in this report are focused on employer-side actions. Given current labour market conditions, there is a strong economic imperative for employers to integrate and leverage newcomer talent more effectively. Based on our interview data, we recommend that employers take the following actions:

1. Recognize that integrating underutilized immigrant talent can help to alleviate labour market shortages. Foster a culture of inclusion which acknowledges that both employers and immigrant workers must adjust and adapt. Senior leadership should champion a 'two-way street' model of newcomer inclusion and emphasize the business case for leveraging immigrant talent.
2. Develop partnerships with immigrant-serving agencies to connect immigrant professionals in the community with sector-specific associations and networks. Even before engaging in recruitment activities, employers should play a pro-active role in cultivating newcomer talent in collaboration with local immigrant-serving agencies. This will position the organization as an employer of choice for talented newcomers and allow managers to develop professional relationships with new immigrants in the field.
3. Revise job postings to ensure that they do not present systemic barriers for newcomer applicants. For example, Canadian experience should not be required for applicants to be eligible for a position. Engage an HR advisor or consultant with expertise in immigrant hiring to support the recruitment process.
4. Ensure that job openings are posted widely for at least 30 days and circulate postings to immigrant-serving agency partners. Industry-specific job fairs and post-secondary institutions are also valuable resources for recruiting immigrant talent.
5. Consider using 'name-blind' recruitment practices in which applicant names are obscured during the initial resume screening process.
6. Provide hiring managers with resources to assess foreign credentials and experience. If possible, utilize the applicant's Educational Credential Assessment (ECA), which is often required for immigration purposes, rather than requiring additional documentation. Partner with agencies such as World Education Services to evaluate the quality of human capital acquired abroad. Develop a database of industry-specific foreign credentials so that hiring managers can accumulate knowledge over time.
7. Conduct interviews in panels and ensure that selection criteria are consistent and transparent. Focus on competencies rather than experiences. Organizational 'fit' should not be used as a criterion for selection. Be wary of how "soft skills" are being evaluated and used to judge immigrants.
8. Offer newcomer-specific orientation programs to help immigrant hires adjust to the workplace faster. These orientations should clearly communicate performance expectations and workplace norms. On-going training and development are also crucial for newcomer employees to bolster their professional language and other 'soft skills' over time.
9. Formalize mentorship programs and incentivize managers and long-term employees (both Canadian-born and immigrant) to act as mentors. It is crucial that mentors are provided with training and support to ensure that the relationship is productive and helpful.
10. Provide opportunities for intercultural exchange and interaction by organizing informal events and celebrations that bring together employees from different ethno-cultural backgrounds. This will not only enable newcomers to feel a sense of inclusion, but it will also allow all employees to get to know their colleagues better and may therefore reduce stereotyping and implicit bias against immigrants.



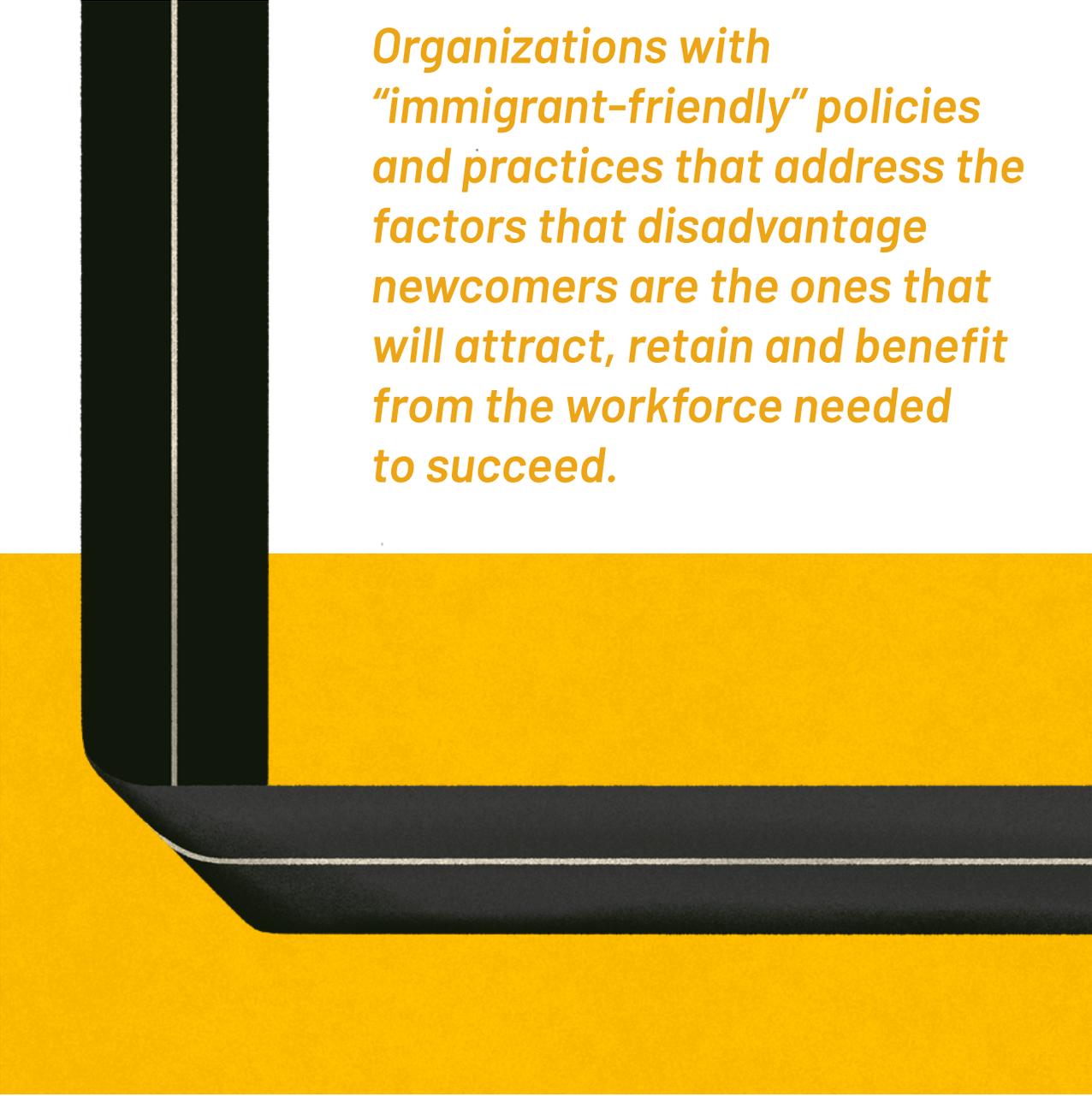
Recommendations for further research

The findings and recommendations within this report will help employers more effectively leverage newcomer talent while also addressing some of the pernicious barriers preventing their labour market integration. While the evidence from the GTA is compelling and the insights are instructive, we recommend that additional research be conducted into the behaviours, practices and challenges of employers across Canada. The research should aim to identify specific interventions that can address employer concerns or hesitations about hiring immigrant job seekers. A national scope is required to capture nuances across sectors, industries, company scales and jurisdictions.



Conclusion

Five million Canadians are set to retire by 2030 (IRCC 2022), and immigration will play an even bigger economic role over the next decade than it does today. But immigration can only be an effective economic tool if the skilled immigrants Canada selects can succeed in the labour market. Organizations with “immigrant-friendly” policies and practices that address the factors that disadvantage newcomers are the ones that will attract, retain and benefit from the workforce needed to succeed. It is therefore imperative for Canadian businesses to utilize the resources available in the community and implement common sense changes to allow immigrants to fully contribute their skills and talent.



Organizations with “immigrant-friendly” policies and practices that address the factors that disadvantage newcomers are the ones that will attract, retain and benefit from the workforce needed to succeed.

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