



MAKING WORKPLACES NEWCOMER INCLUSIVE:

RESEARCH INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Newcomers to Canada possess rich international experience, valuable transferable skills and other assets, which can help them become strong contributors in the workplace. However, when many newcomers look for jobs, they encounter a variety of barriers. Challenges such as costly and complicated credential recognition processes, a lack of professional networks, and biases in recruitment can impede their ability to obtain positions that match their qualifications.

Once newcomers secure jobs, they may also face difficulties integrating into Canadian work environments. This can be the result of issues like language barriers or a lack of orientation to the unwritten rules in the workplace. Unconscious bias, discrimination and lack of inclusion can also inhibit successful integration. These challenges affect individual newcomers, but they may also have consequences for employers, like poor engagement and underutilization of employees' skills.

To better harness the potential of newcomer talent, employers must commit to creating diverse, equitable and inclusive workplaces. This requires addressing structural barriers and actively fostering environments where all employees can thrive.

This report presents key findings from the Inclusive and Equitable Workplace for Newcomers (IEWN) project's research with over 500 Ottawa-area newcomers. It explores employment outcomes, hiring barriers, challenges in the workplace, and most

importantly, it includes newcomers' recommendations for employers. In sharing these results, we hope to shed light on newcomers' experiences in the labour market and offer practical strategies that employers can implement to foster more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

While this report focuses on challenges and recommendations, it is important to highlight that we also heard about positive experiences. Furthermore, many of these accounts involved employers proactively implementing the strategies that are included in this report.

The IEWN project, funded by Canadian Heritage, was conducted by World Skills Employment Centre, a non-profit organization based in Ottawa that has supported newcomer integration into the Canadian labor market for over 27 years. As a leading provider of employment support services, World Skills offers a comprehensive suite of programs to prepare newcomers for employment. We also collaborate with employers to provide them with opportunities to attract and engage highly qualified newcomers.

The IEWN project's goal was to identify systemic barriers to employment and challenges that newcomers face in the workplace and provide support to employers to foster more equitable and inclusive workplaces. In addition to our research, we also developed a set of resources for employers and their newcomer employees which are available at ottawa-worldskills.org/employer-resources/.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Inclusive and Equitable Workplace for Newcomers (IEWN) project, funded by Canadian Heritage, conducted research with over 500 Ottawa-area newcomers about their experiences during job search and in the workplace. The project also gathered newcomers' recommendations for employers. The results shed light on the barriers newcomers face and offer practical strategies that employers can implement to foster more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

KEY FINDINGS

1

Newcomers who had been in the country for over four years and had Canadian work experience were still facing significant difficulties in the labor market.

Of these newcomers:

- Just over half had obtained a job in their desired field;
- Only about one-third had secured a position at the same position level they were in before coming to Canada; and
- Over three-quarters experienced difficulties with career advancement.

2

Newcomers experienced a variety of challenges during job search and in the workplace. The most common issues are summarized below.

Job Search Challenges

- Lack of Canadian work experience
- Lack of professional networks
- Lack of Canadian education
- Professional licensing and credential recognition challenges
- Lack of support networks of family and friends nearby
- Having to undersell yourself in the labour market
- Lack of responses from employers
- Slow hiring processes
- Lack of references

Workplace Challenges

- Lack of sufficient onboarding
- Being overworked
- Low pay
- Difficulties navigating Canadian workplace culture
- Lack of performance feedback
- Lack of professional development opportunities
- Lack of advancement opportunities
- Challenges navigating personal and professional boundaries
- Feelings of exclusion
- Fear of losing their jobs

3

Thirty-eight percent of respondents with Canadian work experience had experienced discrimination in the workplace. The most common type of discrimination was related to newcomers' racial or ethnic backgrounds.

4

Newcomers who felt included in their workplaces highlighted individual support, training and welcoming environments as key contributors.

5

Newcomers offered recommendations for employers and managers to help reduce hiring barriers and create more inclusive and equitable workplaces. These suggestions are summarized below.

Recommendations for Reducing Hiring Barriers

- Consider newcomers for jobs
- Value international experience
- Partner with immigrant-serving organizations
- Simplify application processes
- Provide feedback to candidates
- Make changes to hiring processes to remove invisible barriers that newcomers experience
- Allow flexibility in position requirements (e.g. regarding bilingualism)
- Provide internships and job shadowing opportunities

Recommendations to Improve Workplace Experiences

- Provide comprehensive onboarding programs
- Organize social events to improve workplace inclusion
- Offer mentorship programs
- Create opportunities for open communication
- Offer on-the-job training opportunities
- Provide more performance feedback
- Discuss career exploration and internal career advancement opportunities as part of the performance management process
- Maintain healthy boundaries within teams

CONCLUSION

Research conducted by the Inclusive and Equitable Workplace for Newcomers project identified significant barriers that newcomers face as they seek to integrate into the workforce. However, the findings also reveals a clear path forward. Through targeted, intentional actions, employers can play a pivotal role in dismantling these barriers.

For additional resources that are designed to support employers and their newcomer employees, visit ottawa-worldskills.org/employer-resources/. Ottawa-based employers can also reach out to World Skills Employment Centre for support by contacting ws@ottawa-worldskills.org.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report reflect the results of a survey of World Skills' clients and a series of six focus groups. The survey was distributed in June 2024 to clients who had participated in intakes or re-assessments in the previous three years, and it was made available in seven languages. The survey gathered information on employment outcomes, job search barriers, discrimination and micro-aggressions in the workplace, experiences of inclusion, and demographics. We received complete responses from 519 newcomers, whose demographic characteristics are described in the next section.

A total of 36 newcomers participated in focus groups, which were conducted online and in-person in June and July 2024. One focus group was completed with participants from Capital Rainbow Refuge, an organization that serves LGBTQ+ refugees and newcomers. The other focus groups were organized based on key demographics in the World Skills client base (e.g. permanent residents and convention refugees, women from the Empowering Racialized Newcomer Women Program, temporary residents and foreign-born Canadian citizens, and francophones). The focus groups helped us gain a deeper understanding of the newcomers' experiences and recommendations.

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

The newcomers who responded to our survey were highly diverse. Most respondents were permanent residents (61%), while others were refugee claimants (12%), other temporary residents (12%), and foreign-born Canadian citizens (9%). Close to half of respondents (45%) had been in Canada for one to three years. Another third had arrived in the last year.

The newcomers who answered the survey were also highly educated. Notably, close to half (48%) had Master's degrees. The next largest groups were people with Bachelor's degrees (33%) and those with Doctorates (9%).

A high percentage of clients (68%) had paid Canadian work experience. Of those, over half (54%) were working full-time when they completed the survey.

The majority (54%) of respondents were between 35 and 50 years old, followed by those aged 25 to 34 (30%).

More than half (56%) identified as women, 35% identified as men, and one person was non-binary. The remaining 8% chose not to respond to the gender question.

Additionally, over half of respondents (54%) were parents of children under the age of 18.

The newcomers who responded to our survey represented a diverse array of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The largest population groups were Black (30%), Arab (20%), and White (15%) newcomers. Other identities included South Asian (11%), Chinese (6%), and Latin American (5%), along with smaller percentages from various other backgrounds.

Finally, the majority of clients (56%) answered the survey in English and about a quarter (27%) responded in French. The other languages were Ukrainian (5%), Arabic (4%), Mandarin (3%), Farsi (3%), and Spanish (2%).

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES

To get a sense of newcomers' labour market outcomes, we asked three questions to survey respondents who had Canadian work experience. These questions were about the positions they had obtained in Canada and their experiences with career advancement.

The survey found that:

- 44% of respondents had obtained a job in their desired industry;
- Less than 1 in 4 had obtained a job at the same level as their previous work experience; and
- Two-thirds experienced difficulties with career advancement.

These results suggested that survey

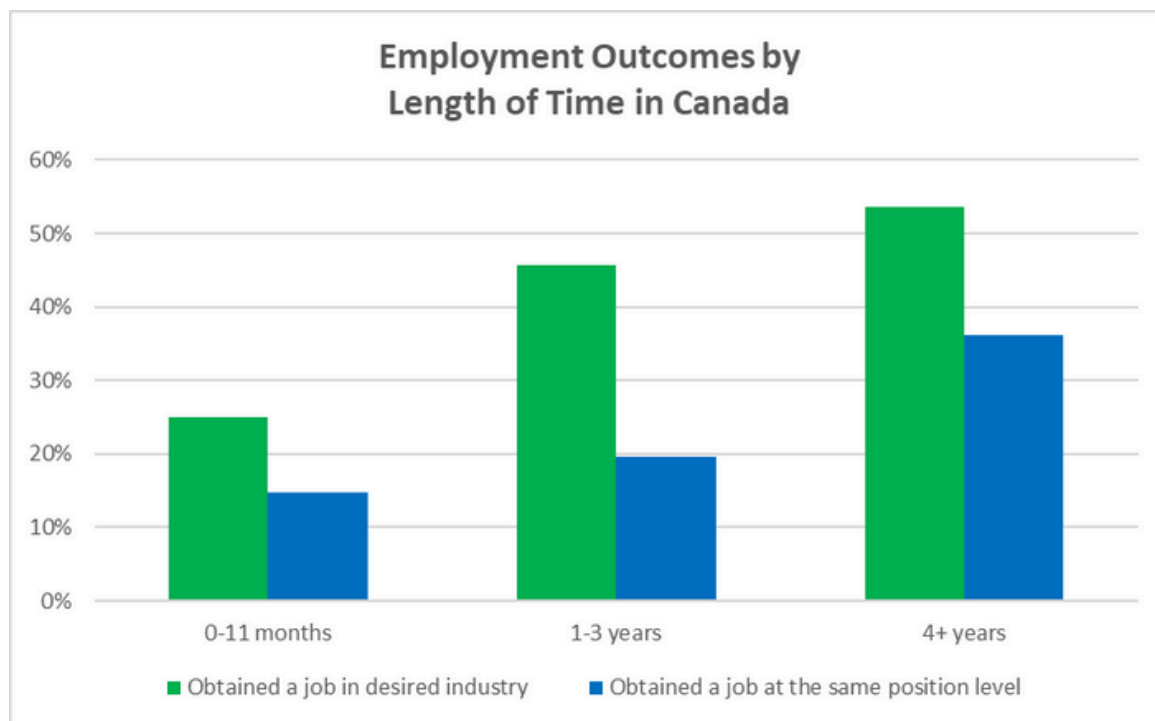
respondents were facing multiple layers of challenges. Not only were newcomers having difficulty obtaining jobs that were commensurate with their experience, but the majority were unable to enter the fields they were targeting. Meanwhile, newcomers were also facing difficulties progressing their careers.

We also found that while the first two outcomes improved as tenure in Canada increased, the percentages were still surprisingly low for clients who had been here for over four years (see Figure 1). Just over half of these clients had obtained a job in their desired field and close to one third had reached their same position level.

Difficulties with career advancement were also the highest (76%) among clients who had been in Canada for over four years. In the focus groups, we heard from one client who said that there were no opportunities for advancement in the organization where she worked, so if she wanted to progress, she would need to move to a new employer. Another client said that his status as a temporary resident was preventing him from being considered for a promotion. These results highlight the importance of providing support to newcomers to help them navigate building their careers in Canada.

The employment outcomes we gathered provide a snapshot of these newcomers' experiences. The IEWN research also explored the challenges clients experienced during job search and in the workplace, which may be contributing to these outcomes.

FIGURE 1



JOB SEARCH CHALLENGES

Newcomers face a variety of systemic and personal barriers that impact their ability to obtain employment in Canada. Through our newcomer survey, we were able to identify the most commonly experienced challenges among the respondents, and we found that many personal barriers (e.g. difficulties creating a Canadian resume, lack of skills that are in demand in the job market, low English language skills) had the lowest frequencies. Focus group discussions also surfaced common job search challenges, including some that were not explored in the survey.

The most frequently highlighted barrier was a lack of Canadian work experience, noted by 68% of survey respondents and five of the six focus groups. Newcomers described this situation as frustrating because they cannot secure jobs without Canadian experience, yet they cannot gain that experience without getting a job here. This barrier often forces highly skilled professionals to accept entry-level jobs that significantly underutilize their skills, leading to wasted potential and possibly inhibiting newcomers' long-term employment outcomes (Dinç, 2020).

"I have 19 years of experience back home, but because it's not the Canadian experience no one is giving me a chance. So instead I'm working in retail."
-Focus group participant

Newcomers also reported significant struggles due to a lack of professional networks in Canada. This challenge impacted 60% of survey respondents and came up in four focus groups. Participants emphasized the critical importance of networking in Canada, which is often considered more vital than simply applying to jobs online. Without local contacts to connect them with jobs or serve as references, newcomers felt disadvantaged and isolated in their job searches.

The next barrier was a lack of Canadian education, which was identified by 46% of survey respondents and two focus groups. Even though many newcomers validate their international academic credentials during the immigration process, employers may not place the same value on these studies because they are uncertain how to assess them. This challenge often leads newcomers to invest large amounts of time and financial resources to obtain Canadian certificates and degrees which duplicate their previous studies. When we looked at other research, we found additional evidence related to the impact of study location on newcomers' employment outcomes. According to Statistics Canada (2022), immigrants with post-secondary education obtained outside of Canada have overqualification rates that are over twice that of the Canadian-born population.

Four in ten clients cited professional licensing requirements and credential recognition challenges as a barrier. This issue also came up in four focus groups, where newcomer

professionals described the re-credentialing process as expensive, lengthy, and sometimes impossible due to structural barriers. We heard about this problem from newcomers in a variety of regulated professions including Engineering, Nursing, Social Work and Education. One participant said, "I think one of the hardest things that I had to do was wrap my head around the idea that licenses and registrations and certifications are taken very seriously in Canada. And that means that if I wanted....to do exactly what...I had experience for about four years in before coming here, then I would need to spend four years of my life gaining a license." Others talked about having to apply for jobs that were far below their qualifications due to their credentials not being recognized in Canada (e.g. a nurse applying to be a Personal Support Worker).

Closing out the top five challenges identified in the survey was a lack of support networks of family and friends nearby. One third of respondents reported being affected by this challenge. We also heard from one focus group client, who described how being alone in a new country with children to take care of and no family support is difficult. This issue, coupled with the high cost of living, made the client want to accept any job, even if that led to a feeling of being stuck.

When we explored the focus groups results, we found that some of the most frequently mentioned challenges were not included in the survey. For example, all six groups brought up the need to undersell yourself in the job

market. Participants described removing qualifications from their resumes and editing their LinkedIn profiles so they would not be perceived as overqualified. One client said, “I was working in the banking industry, like I've worked for over 10 years and getting to Canada, I realized that people were like, “Ohh, you need to remove [the] MBA qualification from your resume. If not, you're not gonna get a job.” So, I removed that and eventually I got it.” Another client said this challenge hurt a lot. We also heard that people are getting the message that no matter what your background is, you need to start in an entry level job when you come to Canada.

Lack of responses from employers also came up in every group. One client said, “I often wonder if anybody actually read my application because I sent out so many of them and never got responses.” Another client talked about how she participated in an interview and never received notification that she was not selected for the position. Not hearing back can cause newcomers to question what they are doing wrong in their job searches, especially after they put lots of effort into tailoring their resumes to the positions they are applying for.

Five groups brought up the challenge of slow hiring processes. Newcomers said they did not expect these processes take months or years, and they learned to be very careful in tracking their applications so they can be prepared to respond if they got contacted months after applying. One newcomer said that employers are likely to lose out on strong talent because

it's hard for people to wait that long to move through the process.

Finally, five groups brought up the issue of not having enough references to provide to employers. One newcomer talked about being unable to use international references because of language and time differences. Another newcomer talked about how an employer would not accept a reference from the mentor the client had been connected with through World Skills. We also heard from a former international student who talked about how it took time to build a list of references, and how she was able to start by listing one of her professors.

The IEWN research highlighted an array of challenges that newcomers face in the job market. Many of the barriers that came across most strongly were systemic, meaning that they cannot be solved by individual jobseekers. Instead, employers, credentialing bodies and other institutions must step up to remove these barriers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

Focus group participants offered multiple recommendations to help reduce barriers in the hiring process. The top piece of advice, which came up in all groups, was to consider newcomers for jobs. One participant said, “Well, I would say, to any employer, even if there's too much hesitation about employing

the person, at least call that person for an interview, get to know the person. Give them a chance, give yourself a chance to meet the person who's applying for that position." Several newcomers talked about this idea of keeping an open mind and giving newcomers opportunities to show they are a good fit.

"For newcomers who've just arrived and are qualified, sometimes you need to trust them even if they don't have Canadian experience. Okay, we can go through a process, see that they're qualified, but there's a fear that holds the employer back, wondering if they should commit to this person, wondering if they are the best fit, and whether it will be complicated since they don't know the culture and so on. And then they miss out on competent, amazing people. It's true that there's an adjustment period, but sometimes it's really about having an equitable process that gives a chance to people..."

-Focus group participant

Five groups suggested that employers should value newcomers' international experience. One client talked about the importance of recognizing this experience and added, "I find that a lot of immigrants, they're adaptable because it takes a certain kind of pizzazz to move a whole country, right, a certain type of personality to do that. So, I'm thinking just being open to even just have an interview, you know, to hear what the person is saying, I think that could be helpful."

FOLLOWING THE LAW

In our research, we found that "Requiring "Canadian experience" could violate the Ontario Human Rights Code (the Code), which protects people from discrimination based on grounds such as race, ancestry, colour, place of origin and ethnic origin" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013). According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2013), this practice is only permitted in limited cases where there is a "bona fide" rationale.

Half of the groups recommended that employers reach out to organizations like World Skills and develop partnerships that allow them to access talent pools of highly qualified newcomers. One client highlighted that newcomers who have completed employment readiness programs are well prepared to engage in the hiring process and transition into the workplace, so it makes sense for employers to engage these organizations. The same client noted, "I would say because we don't have referrals and we don't know people yet, at least these NGO's with which we're working know that we are committed, know more about our background and they can a bridge the gap. They can be this link between us and the and the companies and organizations."

Simplifying application processes also came up

in half of the groups. Some newcomers highlighted this especially for entry level jobs. Others talked about reducing the length of the process and the number of screening questions that are asked.

We also heard from half of the groups that employers should offer feedback to candidates, especially those who participate in interviews. One newcomer said that it is important to give positive feedback to candidates who were well qualified, but ultimately not selected. This will provide that person with encouragement which will help them to persevere in their job search. Newcomers also understood that employers receive a high volume of applications, which makes it difficult to provide personalized feedback. In this case, newcomers suggested that employers respond to individual candidates who reach out to them.

Other recommendations included making changes to hiring processes to remove invisible barriers that newcomers experience, allowing flexibility in position requirements (e.g. regarding bilingualism) and providing internships and job shadowing opportunities. Additional guidance related to improving hiring processes can be found at [Immigrant Employment Councils of Canada's Recruitment Resources](#) webpage.

WORKPLACE CHALLENGES

Focus group participants described a variety of challenges that impacted their experiences in Canadian workplaces. Four groups described a lack of sufficient onboarding, which left newcomers feeling inadequately prepared for their roles. One client said that even after nine months in her position, she still felt like the lack of onboarding was affecting her confidence. She said that she had been learning by doing and she felt like she was still catching up. Clients also talked about not receiving enough information about Human Resource policies, benefits and taxes.

Another issue highlighted by four groups was language barriers. One newcomer talked about having difficulty understanding Canadian accents, even though her English proficiency was strong. Another client said that she felt like she was unable to demonstrate her technical knowledge because of her language skills. We also heard from one participant who was unable to access her benefits due to her low English proficiency.

In half of the groups, participants expressed concerns about feeling overworked and underpaid. One person talked about being in a team where two colleagues left, which resulted in him being expected to take on extra responsibilities for an extended period of time. Another person talked about having difficulties setting boundaries about workload because

she comes from a culture where it is not acceptable to say no to your boss. One newcomer talked about feeling undercompensated for his skills, and two people talked about having to accept survival jobs with low pay due to the barriers to finding jobs in their fields.

Navigating Canadian workplace culture also came up in half the groups. One newcomer said “The biggest hurdle that I think newcomers face and I face in particular, was the workplace culture. It's very different and there is no training. There is no resource. There's no one to tell you what to do, what not to do. And you make those mistakes.” Because the IEWN team was planning to create new curriculum about workplace culture, we asked participants which topics would be most important to learn about. The most common responses were behavioural expectations, employee rights, workplace diversity, and self-advocacy.

Other workplace challenges that were highlighted by two groups included a lack of performance feedback, as well as limited professional development and advancement opportunities. The issue of navigating personal and professional boundaries also surfaced, with several participants stating that they felt uncomfortable when these lines were crossed. Finally, some newcomers reported feelings of exclusion and fear of losing their jobs.

INCLUSION AND DISCRIMINATION

The newcomer survey gathered data on inclusion, discrimination and micro-aggressions in the workplace. The results demonstrated a mix of experiences, further reinforcing the importance of employers taking deliberate actions to reduce discrimination and foster inclusion.

Newcomers who felt included in their workplaces highlighted individual support, training and welcoming environments as key contributors. One participant shared, “I was very well received by everyone, and the team manager invited me for breakfast to welcome me. I also had a whole series of training to integrate myself.” Such experiences highlight how small gestures and intentional actions significantly impact newcomers’ sense of belonging at work. Another newcomer said, “They were very supportive. [They] ensured that I understood the processes and tools needed to perform my role and were always ready to answer questions.” The recurring theme around training as a tool for inclusion supports the case for employers to invest in better onboarding and professional development programs.

At the other end of the spectrum, we found that 38% of respondents had experienced discrimination in the workplace. The most common type of discrimination was related to newcomers’ racial or ethnic backgrounds. The

survey also found that 31% of respondents had experienced micro-aggressions at work, indicating that subtle forms of exclusion and bias were also occurring.

The percentage of respondents who experienced discrimination was somewhat lower than the finding from the most recent Canadian Social Survey, where 44% of immigrants and non-permanent residents had been discriminated against at work in the previous five years (Statistics Canada, 2024). Even though the percentage from the IEWN project's research was lower, it is still concerningly high.

We heard a few examples from newcomers in the focus groups who had witnessed or experienced discrimination. One client described hearing colleagues making comments about a newcomer who applied for a job that involved stereotypes related to the person's country of origin. Other newcomers described favouritism in their workplaces that was based on being from the same racial or ethnic background.

Taken together, these findings indicate that there is more work to be done to create inclusive workplaces where all employees can thrive. There is also evidence that some organizations are performing well in this area by offering training and support to newcomers and creating welcoming environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS AND MANAGERS

Focus group participants offered a variety of strategies that employers and managers can implement to support newcomer integration and make workplaces more inclusive. The top recommendation was to provide comprehensive onboarding programs that include information about workplace culture, employee benefits and employee rights. Newcomers also spoke about the importance of explaining opportunities for overtime and special pay rates for working holidays, if available. They also suggested that employers provide a basic explanation of the tax system so they would know what to expect when they received their first paycheck. The value of comprehensive onboarding was summarized by a newcomer who said, "This can help the person be more at ease in their job and be more confident."

Four groups suggested that employers organize social events to improve workplace inclusion. Ideas included coffee hours, potlucks, team-building activities, and events outside the office. Participants said that these activities create a friendly atmosphere and help them get to know their colleagues and learn about other cultures.

Half of the groups suggested that employers offer mentorship programs, especially for new employees. Newcomers said that mentors could provide additional training, orient them to workplace norms and answer questions. This support could help newcomers feel more confident in their roles and support better integration into the organization.

Three groups also suggested that employers create opportunities for open communication. Several participants said that it was important to have space to talk about things that are not going well. Someone also said that managers should let newcomers know that they will not lose their jobs if they talk about the issues they are facing. Another newcomer highlighted the need to foster good communication within teams.

Newcomers also suggested that employers offer on-the-job training opportunities to fill skill gaps. One newcomer recommended having online training modules available, so new hires do not have to ask as many questions to busy colleagues. Another client talked about the need to receive training on the specific software that the organization uses. Cultural competence training was also highlighted.

Additionally, focus group participants gave some more recommendations for managers. Participants said they wanted managers to provide more performance feedback. They also wanted managers to discuss career exploration and internal career advancement opportunities

as part of the advancement opportunities as part of the performance management process. Lastly, newcomers recommended that managers maintain healthy boundaries within the team.

CONCLUSION

Research conducted by the Inclusive and Equitable Workplace for Newcomers project identified significant barriers that newcomers face as they seek to integrate into the workforce. Systemic challenges—such as employer preferences for candidates with Canadian experience, a lack of professional networks, and complicated credential recognition processes—inhibit newcomers' abilities to obtain jobs that match their qualifications. We also found that newcomers face a variety of challenges that impact their experiences in the workplace.

However, the research reveals a clear path forward. Through targeted, intentional actions, employers can play a pivotal role in dismantling these barriers. The recommendations shared by newcomers—such as valuing international experience, partnering with immigrant-serving organizations, offering comprehensive onboarding, and creating inclusive workplace cultures—are highly actionable.

By listening to and acting upon the insights of newcomers, organizations can better harness the full potential of an increasingly diverse workforce. The strategies in this report could

also lead to stronger engagement, better retention and more innovative workplaces. As such, fostering equity and inclusion is not only the right thing to do—it is a strategic imperative.

Ultimately, creating newcomer-inclusive workplaces requires a collective commitment. Employers, policymakers, service providers, and communities must work together to ensure that all individuals, regardless of where they come from, have the opportunity to thrive and contribute fully to Canada's economic and social fabric.

Ottawa-based employers who are interesting in engaging newcomer jobseekers or improving their ability to hire and retain this segment of the talent pool can reach out to ws@ottawa-worldskills.org for support. Employers can also visit ottawa-worldskills.org/employer-resources/ to find free resources that were developed for employers, managers and newcomers.

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