

Government as Employer of Skilled Immigrants – Research Brief

This summary highlights findings from the report Government as Employer of Skilled Immigrants, written by Sarah Wayland and Dan Sheffield. To read the full report, please visit hireimmigrants.ca.

Governments are Canada’s major employers

Governments are Canada’s largest employers. Federal, provincial and municipal administrations together employ 3.6 million people. In some provinces and territories, the public sector employs more than 25% of the total labour force.¹

Employment in government is highly desirable among job seekers, including immigrants. However, immigrants are about half as less likely than their Canadian-born peers to get into public administration.² In 2006, 6.5% of Canadian-born workers were employed in public administration compared to just 3.3% of immigrants.³

Immigrants face challenges gaining employment in public service

While immigrants face challenges gaining suitable, skills-commensurate employment in general, employment in the public sector presents a specific set of challenges.

The research identifies six challenges:

1. Lack of data on immigrants employed in the public sector;
2. Retrenchment trends in the civil service;
3. Seniority and collective agreements with unions;
4. Lack of political leadership and policy imperatives;

1 Statistics Canada, *Public Sector Statistics 2007/2008*, Cat. No 680213-X, pp. 42-43. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/120530/dq120530c-eng.htm>

2 Statistics Canada, *Established Immigrants in the Labour Force*, 2006 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/71-606-x/2007001/findings-resultats/4129554-eng.htm>

3 2006 Census; Table 97-564-XCB2006006.IVT.

5. Requirements around citizenship, bilingualism, and credentials that adversely impact skilled immigrants; and
6. Lack of supports for immigrants in smaller communities.

Public sector must show leadership on immigrant employment

Ample evidence shows us that future labour force growth will come from immigration, but governments do not appear to be actively or effectively tapping into this highly skilled talent pool.

Governments should be leaders in reducing employment barriers and be model employers rather than trailing sectors that are already innovators in their search for talented employees.

1. By employing immigrants, governments can better:
2. Reflect the populations served;
3. Proactively address demographic trends;
4. Incorporate innovative and diverse perspectives; and
5. Acquire employees with the needed skills, experience, and international connections.

The public sector appears to vary widely in its thinking about diversity in its workforce. Some jurisdictions are very intentional in targeting immigrant communities for government hiring, whereas others do not appear to be thinking about it. In some cases, key individuals are driving change towards more inclusive policies and practices. Indeed, many civil servants are passionate about providing opportunities for immigrants, and individual initiatives do exist amid the dearth of formal programs.

Many governments speak the language of diversity but, even among the few that are tracking diversity in hiring and employment, they are not focused on immigrants per se. Any understanding of immigrant employment in the public service must begin with benchmarking and measurement over time. In the absence of systematic data collection, our knowledge is based on anecdotal evidence alone.

Practical Recommendations for Public Sector Employers

1. *Recognize the benefits of diversity and the assets that immigrant employees bring to public service.* Governments must move beyond thinking about diversity as something that must be accommodated, to something that should be promoted to improve service delivery.
2. *Designate immigrants as a target group.* By designating immigrants (or recent immigrants) alongside other target demographic groups, governments make immigrant employment a priority. They can modify existing initiatives aimed at other demographic groups such as youth to target immigrants.
3. *Simplify and centralize the application process for public service positions.* This would benefit all applicants, including immigrants, who might be unfamiliar with the complex application systems used by different governments.
4. *Set targets, measure and report on progress.* “What gets measured gets done” – this is as true in government as it is in other sectors. By setting targets and measuring progress, governments commit to improving their immigrant employment practices. Moreover, these targets should encompass all stages of the human resources life cycle, including recruiting, hiring, orienting, retaining and promoting immigrant employees. Public reporting enhances accountability and public trust.
5. *Evaluate initiatives aimed at hiring, retaining and promoting immigrant employees.* Invest in successful strategies and tactics; modify those that are found to be less effective.
6. *Learn from employer practices in other governments, as well as other sectors.* Many employers in the public and private sectors have effective immigrant employment practices that can be adapted and used by other government employers. Look within and outside of Canada for promising practices.
7. *Back up intentions with policies or legislation.* These provide the authority and tools to act to improve immigrant employment. Legislation such as Employment Equity and policies such as official bilingualism requirements have led to measurable changes in the composition of public service employees.

8. *Support human resources staff and hiring managers with the training and resources needed to implement effective immigrant employment practices.* Implementation of any strategy will ultimately rest on whether staff and management have the capacity to act.
9. *Form “communities of learning” among diversity and inclusion practitioners.* While informal groups exist, coordinating communities of learning that use conferences, webinars and other formats to share experiences could help spread promising practices and enhance the capacity of diversity and inclusion professionals.
10. *Use workplace orientation and wraparound supports for immigrant hires, especially in smaller communities.* Hiring is only the first step. To retain immigrant employees, government employers must orient and integrate new employees into the culture of the workplace, and families must be welcomed into the community.

Government as Employer of Skilled Immigrants - Research Brief

© 2014 hireimmigrants.ca

The Global Diversity Exchange, Ted Rogers School of Management,
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street (Room YDI-1153) | Toronto, ON | M5B 2K3 | CANADA