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HR North: An Analysis of HR Practices of SMEs in Northeastern Ontario

A Research Report Prepared for
the North Bay Newcomer Network

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Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The economic future of Northern Ontario relies on the growth and development of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). More than 98% of employers in the region have fewer than 100 employees making SMEs absolutely vital to the overall development and prosperity of the local economy. However, research suggests that SMEs in Northern Ontario are not reaching their full potential compared to similarly situated businesses in Southern Ontario. A number of factors contribute to this, most notably relating to issues of recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining a skilled workforce. Local SMEs often face difficulties in meeting their labour force needs due to increasing pressures on the local labour markets.

A lack of human resource management (HRM) practices is an increasingly significant obstacle for small employers, specifically in Northern Ontario and other rural regions of Canada. As the local workforce shrinks, competition for talent increases, and SMEs are usually not able to compete with the larger employers. Recruiting and hiring new employees can be an intensive and costly process, and is a process that employers without HR staff often cannot engage equally in.

At the same time, there is a wealth of skilled talent to be found among new and recent immigrants to Canada. This valuable pool of skilled labour is often untapped by SMEs as many small employers are unaware of the increasing business imperative for hiring skilled immigrants. Considering the looming demographic and economic challenges across Canada, this talent pool is not only an important resource for SMEs in Northern Ontario, it is becoming increasingly vital. Therefore, in order for small businesses to grow in a region that already has a reduced

workforce, it is essential for employers to turn to non-traditional sources of labour and take advantage of the available global talent on their doorstep.

And while the benefits of hiring internationally trained individuals are substantial, employers have noted that they need resources and support in order to recruit, hire, and retain newcomers. Informal discussions with SMEs in Northeastern Ontario have suggested that they are willing to hire newcomers who possess the skills and experience needed, but they do not know where to focus their recruitment efforts or how to assess international experience and credentials. In other words, a lack of human resource management and support prevents many small employers from discovering new and valuable sources of talent.

This report summarizes the findings of research conducted in several districts in Northeastern Ontario, specifically Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming, and Cochrane, that surveys the accessibility and use of human resource services by SMEs and analyzes whether HR gaps may be preventing local employers from meeting their labour force needs. It also looks at what key HR supports are required in order to increase employers' capacity to hire and retain skilled newcomers. Input from SMEs across the region, Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), key participants in the communities, and earlier related local research guides the findings of this report.

Key Findings

The findings indicate that small and medium sized employers across the selected northeastern Ontario region do not have the HR capacity or support to meet their increasing workforce needs. Specifically, the research found that:

- More than 90% of local SMEs do not have dedicated on-site HR support.
- Very small employers are most likely to conduct HR on their own.
- Many SMEs use online websites to source HR-related information.
- There are few external sources of comprehensive human resource support available to SMEs.
- Very few SMEs use external HR services.
- Recruitment, hiring and training are the most *accessed* HR areas.
- Recruitment, hiring, and training are key services *required* by SMEs.
- Employers want to access a comprehensive suite of HR support.
- Employers feel they do not have the tools needed to hire and retain newcomers.
- In order to successfully hire and integrate newcomers, employers need several key HR services: recruitment tools, candidate screening, mentorship or internship programs, language training, workplace diversity training, funding and support for skills upgrading, retention tools, succession planning and community integration support.

Recommendations

In order to address the human resource management concerns of small and medium-sized employers in the North Bay – Timmins corridor and increase employers' capacity to hire and retain skilled newcomers, the following recommendation is proposed:

- Development of a single source (one-stop) support centre for SMEs across the region that provides resources, tools, and “live” assistance with human resource management issues.

The support centre would respond to employers' needs by offering a comprehensive suite of HR services that focus on supporting local SMEs with recruitment, selection and hiring, integration, and retention of qualified employees, foregrounding tools and resources specific to the inclusion of skilled immigrants.

Based on research into successful practices in hiring and retaining newcomers, the following HR services are recommended for inclusion in the HR support centre:

1. Recruitment tools
2. Candidate selection and hiring tools
3. Language and communication training
4. Retention tools, including succession planning resources
5. Workplace diversity training
6. Licensing and skills upgrading, including funding for training
7. Community integration support
8. Mentorship or internship programs

INTRODUCTION

That Canada is facing looming demographic and economic challenges in the near future is a fact that hardly bears repeating. The realities of the negative impact that an ageing population and a low birth rate will have on the Canadian economy are well researched and extensively documented¹.

“We are entering the era of unparalleled talent scarcity, which, if left unaddressed, will put a brake on economic growth around the world, and will fundamentally change the way we approach the workforce challenges.”

–World Economic Forum (2011). *Global Talent Risk – Seven Responses*.

Northern Ontario is no exception to this. In fact, recent trends indicate that these economic challenges loom even larger and are more pressing for the region. Youth out-migration and a small pool of skilled and technical talent add to the pressures on the local economies and the employers who operate within them. In particular, many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) struggle to maintain their operations without access to the right talent pool and the resources necessary to maintain and retain a skilled workforce.

Small and medium-sized businesses are essential to economic recovery and growth. They are, as noted in a recent ALLIES report, the “engines of the Canadian economy”², and comprise 98% of the business in Canada. The

¹ Miner, Rick. (2010). *People without jobs: Jobs without people*.

² ALLIES. (2012). *Global Talent for SMEs: Building Bridges and Making Connections*.

same is true of SMEs in Northern Ontario, and research has emphasized the critical importance that the growth of SMEs has to the economic prosperity of the region³.

Growth of small business in Northern Ontario is vital; yet, as noted in a 2007 Industry Canada report on the state of SMEs in Northern Ontario, generally speaking these businesses “are not reaching their full revenue potential in comparison to similarly sized businesses in Southern Ontario”⁴. A number of factors contribute to this, most notably relating to issues of recruiting, hiring, training, and retaining a skilled workforce. In other words, a lack of effective human resource management presents a barrier to the growth of SMEs in Northern Ontario.

This is an increasingly significant obstacle for small employers, specifically in Northern Ontario and other rural regions of Canada. As the local workforce shrinks, competition for talent increases, and SMEs are usually not able to compete with the larger employers. Recruiting and hiring new employees can be an intensive and costly process, and is a process that employers without HR staff often cannot engage equally in.

At the same time, there is a sizeable, and increasing, pool of skilled talent in Canada that is largely untapped. Newcomers to Canada often come with significant skilled or professional work experience in international settings and high levels of education. In fact, according to the 2006 Census, over half of the recent immigrants had a university degree compared with only 20% of the Canadian-born⁵. This “brain waste” has an estimated

³ Mulholland, Ron. (2007) *State of SMEs in Northern Ontario*.

⁴ Mulholland, Ron. (2007). *State of SMEs in Northern Ontario*.

⁵ Statistics Canada. (2006). *2006 Census Analysis Series: Educational portrait of Canada*.

economic impact of approximately \$3 billion annually⁶. Yet, employers' continue to overlook or remain unaware of the considerable potential that lies in hiring skilled newcomers.

This talent pool is not only an important resource for SMEs in Northern Ontario, it is becoming increasingly vital. Indications are that Canada's economic growth will be, as of 2013, 100% reliant on immigration. Therefore, in order for small businesses to grow in a region that already has a reduced workforce, it will be essential for employers to turn to non-traditional sources of labour and take advantage of the available global talent on their doorstep.

And while the benefits of hiring internationally trained individuals are substantial, employers have noted that they need resources and support in order to recruit, hire, and retain newcomers. Informal discussions with SMEs in Northeastern Ontario have suggested that they are willing to hire newcomers who possess the skills and experience needed, but they do not know where to focus their recruitment efforts or how to assess international experience and credentials. In other words, a lack of human resource management and support prevents many small employers from discovering new and valuable sources of talent.

“Small and medium sized organizations are often not engaged in human resource planning and may not be familiar with the business case for immigration”

-Canadian Federation of Independent Business, 2006

With that in mind, this report looks at small and medium-sized employers (under 100 employees) and the availability and use of

Human Resources services in a selected geographic area of Northeastern Ontario, specifically the North Bay – Timmins corridor. This includes the districts of Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming, and Cochrane. Recent and ongoing conversations with local employers and other anecdotal evidence have suggested that SMEs in these areas are grappling with the realities of inadequate HR support in maintaining and growing their businesses. In fact, our findings indicate that over 90% of local SMEs do not have dedicated, in-house HR support.

This study was undertaken by the North Bay Newcomer Network to explore the ways in which HR services are currently being utilized by SMEs in the North Bay, Timmins, and Parry Sound areas and to consider whether local employers would benefit from the provision of dedicated, integrated, and centralized HR support services as part of an overall economic development and immigration strategy for the region. This report details the results of that research and proposes recommendations in light of the key findings.

⁶ Reitz, Jeffery. (2011). “Taxi Driver Syndrome”. Literary Review of Canada.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This initiative, HR North, grew out of the North Bay Newcomer Network (NNN), a multi-faceted group of more than 50 community partners who seek to develop and implement innovative strategies to attract, integrate, and retain newcomers to the North Bay area. The NNN was created in 2005 as part of the City of North Bay's immigration attraction and retention strategy.

Since its inception, NNN has developed a number of successful initiatives relating to local immigration, including immigrant settlement services through the creation of the North Bay and District Multicultural Centre, a networking program which matches professional newcomers with local professionals in the same field called the Connector program, and many other valuable tools and programs. The NNN has been acknowledged for its success, both locally and across Canada, and received provincial recognition in 2010 when the group was awarded with a Newcomer Champion Award from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration. The NNN received ongoing funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) in 2009 when CIC created Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP). The North Bay & District Multicultural Centre administers the LIP agreement.

An important element of the NNN has been the engagement of local employers in developing employer-based strategies for immigrant recruitment and workforce retention. In 2010, the NNN Employer Council was created to support local employers with the attraction, hiring, and integration of internationally trained individuals into the workforce. This group of local employers, supported by the larger NNN framework, has initiated many important discussions with the employer base in North Bay, raising awareness of the critical need for

ongoing dialogue with, and support for, employers. The group has also developed tools for local employers, including an Employers' Guide and a Relocation Package, both available for free download on the City of North Bay's immigration portal (www.northbayimmigration.ca).

The HR North project grew out of these employer discussions as it became increasingly apparent that there is a disconnect between the qualified local labour force and employers across northeastern Ontario. Anticipated development and expansion of local businesses across the districts means that there will be increasing labour force demands. According to local research, close to 60% of surveyed employers in the North Bay area expect the size of their workforce to increase in the next three years⁷. Yet few understood the extent of the impending labour force challenges and the necessity of non-traditional hiring practices.

The HR North pilot project is designed to respond proactively to the current and increasing labour force needs of local small and medium-sized employers in the North Bay – Timmins corridor by focusing on the provision of essential human resource support. Based on consultations with employers and extensive understanding of the labour market and business environment in the region, the HR North project intends to provide a single source of HR support for SMEs in attraction and retention of employees.

This initiative has two primary features: 1) an online database and matching tool, and 2) a one-stop HR support centre. The online tool has received funding from FedNor (Industry Canada) and is currently in development through a partnership with Skills International.

⁷ Jones, Karen. (2011). Skilled Immigrants and the Workforce.

This element of the project is intended to be a single source of matching qualified labour to the labour requirements in the target area, which responds to employers' observations that there is no *single source* to which they can turn to access the existing local labour force.

The second element of the HR North project is the proposed creation of an HR support centre that would offer "live" HR support to SMEs across the districts. This research study was undertaken in support of this initiative, with the intention of providing timely and fact-based evidence of the need for HR support and the benefit to both SMEs and the larger economic growth of the northeast Ontario region. Specifically, this study looks at:

1. the number of SMEs in the Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming and Cochrane districts that do not have on-site HR services;
2. the availability of independent HR services and their utilization by local SMEs; and
3. the identification of key HR services required to increase employers' capacity to successfully hire and retain newcomers; and

Funding for this research was generously provided by ALLIES (Assisting Local Leaders with Immigrant Employment Strategies). ALLIES, a joint project of the Maytree Foundation and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, supports local efforts in Canadian cities to successfully adapt and implement programs that further the suitable employment of skilled immigrants.

DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

This section is provided to contextualize the research and provide a snapshot of the relevant geographic and demographic features of the research area. As noted, this study focuses on four districts in northeastern Ontario: Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming, and Cochrane. It includes both North Bay and Timmins as the two largest centres. This specific area was chosen as this is a service corridor for such programs as immigrant settlement services, RDEE-North (a community economic development leader in francophone communities), and GetTrainedWorkers (a project of the Social Services Administration Boards in the four districts). There is also a strong history of effective collaboration with partners in this corridor. The North Bay & District Multicultural Centre also operates the Timmins & District Multicultural Centre.

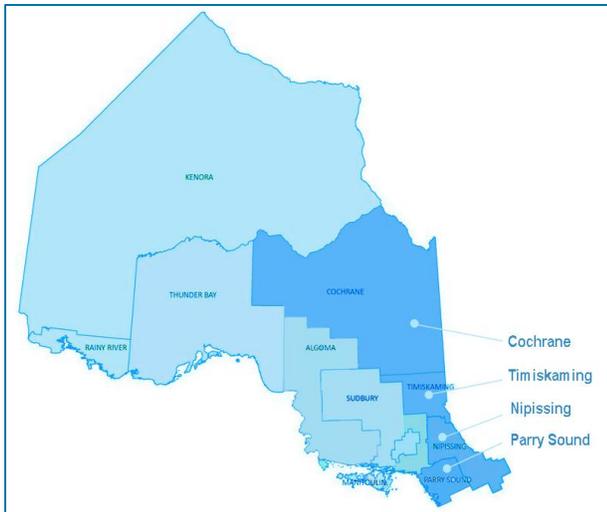


Figure 1: District Map of Northern Ontario

A total population of 240,654 is spread across these four districts, which encompasses close to 181,000 square kilometres (almost 20% of Ontario's total land area). More than 44% of the population is centred in the two main hubs, with the populations of North Bay and Timmins

being 64,043 and 43,165 respectively, as of the 2011 Census⁸.

As a whole, the area experienced a slight population decline between 2006 and 2011, falling by just over 0.3%. However, the decline was not experienced equally, with the two southern districts of Parry Sound and Nipissing each demonstrating growth in their population. The district of Parry Sound experienced the greatest overall population change, with modest growth of 3%. Both the Timiskaming and Cochrane districts saw their population fall by just less than 2%. Timmins, however, while located in the Cochrane district, did grow slightly in the census period. With the current price of gold and new mines opening in the Timmins, Kirkland Lake, and Cochrane areas, all three centres are poised for rapid growth.

Profile of SMEs in Region

Small and medium-sized enterprises, those with fewer than 100 employees, account for more than 98% of the total employers in the region. To say that SMEs are important to the northeastern Ontario economy would be an understatement; rather, they are absolutely *vital* to the growth and prosperity of the region.

Significantly, very small employers, those with 0-4 employees, comprise over 72% of total SMEs in the region, while 94% have fewer than 20 employees. In the context of this research, it would be safe to assume that many, if not the majority, of these SMEs do not have dedicated, in-house HR support. This assumption framed the starting point of this study and was tested for accuracy in the data collection.

Overall, the number of SMEs in the region remained relatively stable during the last four years. However, empirically, there would appear to be a positive growth trend in the

⁸ Statistics Canada. (2011). 2011 Census Profiles (Nipissing, Parry Sound, Timiskaming, Cochrane).

data, showing that while the number of very small employers (with 1-4 employees) has decreased since 2008, there is a parallel increase in the number of employers with 5 – 9 and 10 – 19 employees. This may suggest that SMEs have been expanding their operations and may continue to do so if the appropriate labour force conditions are in place.

Conversely, there is an observed decrease across the region in the number of SMEs with more than 20 employees. While no conclusions can be drawn from the limited data, it may be suggested that this decrease has some linkages to the overburdened local labour force and the difficulty in retaining qualified talent. In fact, recent research demonstrates that SMEs in Northern Ontario rank the retention of employees as the most important factor to the success of their business, with the larger SMEs assigning higher levels of importance to this factor⁹.

Change in Number of SMEs (2008-2011)

All Districts (Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming, Cochrane)

	0	1-4	5-9	10-19	20-49	50-99	Total
2008	6053	3828	1847	1094	634	201	13657
2011	6100	3700	1867	1136	615	193	13611
% Change	0.78	-3.34	1.08	3.83	-2.99	-3.98	-0.34

Sources: LMG. (2012). Local Labour Market Plan Report
FNETB. (2012). Working Together: 2012 Update

There is some similarity with regard to the industries that are creating employment among small and medium sized employers across the four districts, with Specialty Trade Contractors (NAICS 238) and Food Service and Drinking Places (NAICS 722) occupying the top positions. Additionally, in the District of Nipissing, Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (NAICS 541) rounded out the top three industries, while in Parry Sound, Construction of Buildings (NAICS 236) was a

⁹ Decima Research. (2007) Qualitative Survey on the State of SMEs in Northern Ontario.

significant industry creating employment in the district.

Top Three Industries Creating Employment

Parry Sound	Nipissing	Timiskaming	Cochrane
Specialty Trade Contractors	Food Service & Drinking Places	Food Service & Drinking Places	Food Service & Drinking Places
Food & Beverage Stores	Specialty Trade Contractors	Specialty Trade Contractors	Specialty Trade Contractors
Construction of Buildings	Professional Scientific Technical Services	Nursing & Residential Care	Food & Beverage Stores

Overall, in the Northeast Ontario region, there was considerable growth in the Professional, Scientific and Technical Services (NAICS 541) during the last five years, with an increase of approximately 1600 jobs (up by 18.2%). This is a positive trend for the region as this sector, in particular, is showing considerable promise and is projected to be a growth leader in Ontario, creating an estimated 169,000 new jobs by 2020¹⁰. High knowledge-based industries are a source of economic growth that cannot be ignored¹¹; however, as noted by Industry Canada, Northern Ontario faces challenges in cultivating this sector since these businesses have specific workforce, technology and infrastructure requirements that must be in place for growth and development¹². Recent employer consultations in this sector carried out by The Labour Market Group suggest that access to a highly skilled and qualified workforce may be a primary issue for those in knowledge industries in the Nipissing region¹³. This echoes the findings of a recent

¹⁰ LMG. (2010). Workforce Focus. Vol 2 (Issue 3).

¹¹ Miner, Rick. (2010). People without jobs: Jobs without people.

¹² Mulholland, Ron. (2007). State of SMEs in Northern Ontario.

¹³ LMG. (2012). Local Labour Market Plan Report.

ALLIES report on SMEs across Canada that suggests positions requiring highly specialized skills are much more difficult for employers to fill¹⁴.

Across the Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming, and Cochrane districts, small and medium-sized employers drive the economy and investment in their growth is critical to the future of the region. This growth can be supported in various ways and the engagement of local employers is a key factor to the development of support initiatives. Observable trends and statistical data may be useful in pointing to possible areas of concern or potential; however, engagement on the ground provides insight and expertise that cannot be captured in data sets.

This research study proposes that one way to support the growth of local SMEs is to ensure that employers have access to human resource management tools which will aid in the recruitment, hiring, integration, and retention of qualified employees. This proposal stems from the observation that over 90% of local SMEs do not have access to HR support, leaving business owners or other management staff to

“SMEs do not have the capacity and slack to retain employees and practices that do not contribute to performance, cannot afford to underutilize human capital, and have to rely on staff for learning, innovation and creativity” -Burke, 2011,p.17

handle the ongoing human resource needs of the business. This limits the effectiveness of recruitment, hiring, and retention practices

since these practices are labour- and time-intensive and most business owners are unable to commit the necessary resources or

time to ensuring successful workforce expansion and development.

Additionally, given the increasing need for non-traditional HR practices in order to tap into and retain the wealth of talent brought by skilled immigrants, small business owners are being increasingly left behind by larger organizations with dedicated HR management teams. Research undertaken by ALLIES and others has found that SMEs may not be as aware of the strong business case for hiring skilled newcomers, may consider human resource management to be peripheral to their operations, and may not be recruiting or hiring strategically¹⁵.

“The potential impact of engaging SMEs in immigrant employment is tremendous and can have significant positive outcomes for local labour markets across different sectors and regions”.

– ALLIES, 2012.

¹⁴ ALLIES. (2012). Global Talent for SMEs: Building Bridges and Making Connections.

¹⁵ ALLIES. (2012). Global Talent for SMEs: Building Bridges and Making Connections.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODS

This study looks at SMEs in the districts of Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming, and Cochrane, and limits its definition of SME to those employers with fewer than 100 employees. The research was carried out over a four month period, from January to May 2012. Supported by the North Bay Newcomer Network, the City of North Bay, and the North Bay & District Multicultural Centre, a researcher with a professional background in Human Resource management was hired to engage and survey local SMEs regarding their current human resource practices and requirements.

The sheer geography of the research area made data collection a challenge, so several methods were used to garner employer participation and input and to collect information on the availability and use of local HR services.

Online Survey

The main source of data collection was a short online questionnaire designed to elicit direct response from employers regarding their human resource capacity and requirements. The questionnaire was circulated to SMEs via the local Chambers of Commerce in all four districts. More than 100 employers who fit the research definition responded and that information is detailed below in the Key Findings.

Engagement of Local Immigration Partnerships and Employer Councils

Key partners in this research are the local immigration partnerships (LIPs) in North Bay and Timmins. The North Bay Newcomer Network, as highlighted above, is the initiator of

this study and so direct consultations with the relevant employers who are represented on the NNN were conducted. Specifically, in North Bay, 18 local employers, who comprise the NNN Employer Council, were directly engaged in this study. Their feedback is included in the findings, as well as their recommendations.

Likewise, in Timmins, through collaboration with the Timmins Local Immigration Partnership (TLIP), employers were directly contacted for their input. Key figures in the TLIP also provided insight based on their comprehensive knowledge of the labour market and specific issues facing local employers.

Direct Consultation with Employers

Several employer-focused events, facilitated by community partners, afforded direct consultation with local employers regarding their HR needs. These events included an employer focus group organized by The Labour Market Group in North Bay, an Employers' Dinner in the Cochrane district, job fairs in both Timmins and North Bay, and employer sessions at the Business Centre Nipissing Parry Sound. Totalled together, approximately 300 employers were in attendance at these events.

Email Survey of Local HR Providers

Internet research was conducted to identify current local HR service providers in the region. More than ten organizations were identified and contacted to gather information on the types of services they provide to SMEs. Four of those contacted responded in detail regarding their services.

Other Sources of Relevant Information

This study also relies on research conducted by partner organizations, such as the two local training boards that serve the target districts, the Labour Market Group in Nipissing-Parry Sound districts and the Far Northeast Training Board in Timiskaming-Cochrane districts.

Previous research conducted by the North Bay Newcomer Network and related to this study also provided key information. Additionally, discussions with several key individuals who are knowledgeable on the local labour markets and availability of human resource services assisted in confirming information retrieved online.

Very small employers are most likely to conduct HR on their own

Business owners who employ between 1 and 7 employees tend to conduct their own human resource management. More than 60% of very small employers indicated that, as the owner of the business, they handle all of the HR-related needs of the business, including hiring, orientation, and training. Research has demonstrated that “these informal approaches to HRM (human resource management) may lead to business failure and low productivity”¹⁶. Fewer than 5% of very small employers surveyed utilize the services of external HR providers, noting instead the use of online resources to fill knowledge gaps.

Many SMEs use online websites to source HR-related information.

Survey results show that more than 60% of local employers who conduct their own HR management are turning to the internet for human resource materials and support. Given the overwhelming array of web-based information, searching for specific, relevant, and useful HR information online may be an ineffective use of time for small business owners who often do not have the time to search out the best resources or tools to meet their HR needs.

There are few external sources of comprehensive human resource support available to SMEs.

Research into the availability of independent HR services in the region demonstrates that while there are local human resource providers, such as consultants and recruiters, few focus on providing services specific to SMEs and only one organization provides service related to internationally trained

¹⁶ Burke, Ronald. (2011). “Human Resource Management in Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises: Benefits and Challenges.”

KEY FINDINGS

More than 90% of local SMEs do not have dedicated on-site HR support.

Survey results show that the vast majority (92%) of small and medium sized businesses in the region do not have in-house human resource staff. This result is not surprising and is consistent with the anecdotal evidence heard from employers in recent years and during the employer consultations. Close to half (48%) of the employers surveyed indicated that their human resource requirements are managed directly by the business owner, including recruiting, hiring, and training new staff. An additional 32% provide human resources through a (non-HR) manager. In total, 80% of local SMEs currently attempt to directly provide for their HR needs without dedicated or trained HR staff. Only 2% said that they use outside HR sources, and another 10% use a mixture of in-house and external sources.

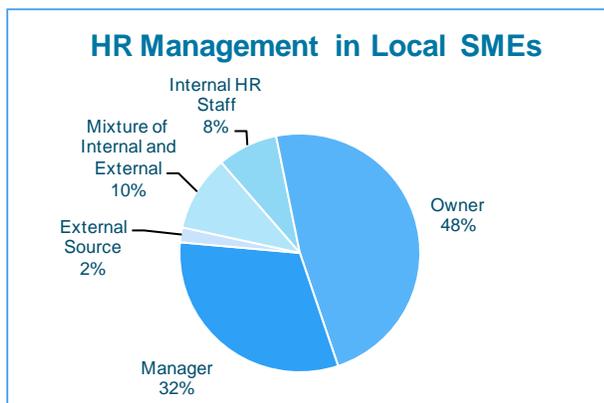


Figure 2: Provision of HR Management in Local SMEs

professionals (see Appendix A). Additionally, many of these providers specialize in certain areas of human resource management, such as recruitment or health and safety issues, rather than offering a comprehensive suite of HR related services. Given that the HR needs of SMEs tend to be multi-faceted and multi-levelled, it is probable that smaller employers are less likely to retain external piecemeal HR services.

Very few SMEs use external HR services.

Only 2% of those surveyed indicated that they use external independent HR services to provide HR support for their business. It is worth noting that discussions with key participants suggest that many SMEs are either unaware of local independent HR providers or are unable or unwilling to afford the professional services they provide. In any case, external HR services are significantly underutilized by SMEs.

Recruitment, hiring and training are the most accessed HR areas.

Regardless of whether SMEs are conducting their own HR management or use external providers, the most frequently accessed human resource related areas are related to labour management. Specifically, both employers and independent HR providers note that recruitment and hiring (86%), and ongoing employee training (77%) are significant areas of focus.

Recruitment, hiring, and training are key services required by SMEs.

It is little surprise that the HR areas that employers spend most of their time engaged in are also the areas that have been highlighted by employers as key ongoing concerns. Employer consultations and survey results indicate that employers struggle to meet their workforce needs and that sourcing and hiring qualified employees is a challenge.

This finding was also echoed in recent reports published by the two training boards that serve the districts¹⁷.

“I’m thinking of hiring because I’m getting busier, but I need to have someone who has the skills I need and is ready to come right in and do the job... I don’t have time to train” -Local employer

Employers want to access a comprehensive suite of HR support.

While recruitment, training, and retention needs are key HR issues for SMEs, survey data and consultations with employers suggest that SMEs would be interested in having a range of HR services available to them. Many employers indicated a need for support with legislative requirements (38%), health and safety training (36%), team building (36%), and retention strategies (27%). Additionally, employee management, including policy development and performance plans, was noted as an area that employers would like to have available to them.

Employers feel they do not have the tools needed to hire and retain newcomers.

A recent NNN report found that while most employers were willing to hire newcomers, 100% of the study participants indicated that they do not have the tools needed to successfully hire and retain newcomer employees¹⁸. The same report found that 95% of employers in the focus group felt that there were barriers to hiring skilled immigrants. These perceived barriers include language competency, lack of understanding of how to assess foreign credentials, experience, or education, difficulties in retraining for Canadian

¹⁷ LMG. “Local Labour Market Plan Report”. April 2012; FNETB. “Working Together: A local labour market plan for the Far Northeast Training Board Region”. 2012 Update.

¹⁸ Jones, Karen. (2011). “Skilled Immigrants and the Workforce”

practices, and cultural differences in the workplace.

In order to successfully hire and integrate newcomers, employers need key HR services.

Based on focus group findings and input from key participants, SMEs in northeastern Ontario require a specific set of HR-related services in order to increase their capacity to hire and retain newcomers into their workforce. Overwhelmingly, employers note that they are open to hiring skilled newcomers if there are supports in place to overcome the perceived barriers associated with hiring newcomers. These key services are highlighted in more detail below.

Recruitment Tools

Across the region, employers indicate that they face increasing challenges with finding the right people for the job. This finding echoes previous research, employer consultations, and general local knowledge regarding labour force demands in the area. Particularly, employers have expressed difficulties using traditional means of recruiting, such as newspaper ads, job bank, and others. Given the increasing need for employers to turn to non-traditional means of sourcing talent, SMEs require access to recruitment tools to assist them in finding qualified labour to fill workforce gaps.

Specifically, SMEs require access to a single source of skilled talent to reduce the investment of time and money in unsuccessful recruitment strategies. The NNN is currently developing an online database to centralize access to the local labour force for SMEs as part of the overall HR North project. Other recruitment tools and support specific to recruiting skilled immigrants are also necessary, including assistance with understanding and navigating immigration processes and

support “selling” northern Ontario as an immigrant destination.

Candidate Screening

Employers cite concerns around selection, screening and hiring skilled newcomers. Specifically, unfamiliarity with immigration processes, foreign credentials, education, and experience and how to appropriately assess a candidate’s portfolio are key barriers for employers. Close to 80% of employers in the NNN study indicated that accurate translation and certification of foreign credentials is a must if they are to consider hiring a newcomer¹⁹. And while the same employers note that foreign experience is equivalent to Canadian experience, they largely feel that international experience and references are too difficult to verify.

To support local SMEs in successfully hiring newcomers, it is essential that employers have access to HR tools and resources related to the selection, screening, and hiring of skilled immigrants. Assistance with credential recognition, evaluation of foreign experience and skills, and verification of foreign references are key HR services required by local employers.

Language Training

One of the primary issues that employers perceive as a barrier to hiring newcomers or other skilled immigrants is related to language proficiency. In fact, in the recent NNN study on local employers’ perceptions of hiring skilled immigrants, a lack of language skills was the number one concern with hiring newcomers. More than 85% of those surveyed indicated that high language proficiency is a must.

¹⁹ Jones, Karen. (2011). “Skilled immigrants and the workforce”

SMEs require access to appropriate language assessment tools and job-specific language training programs if they are to successfully hire and integrate newcomers into the local workforce.

Workplace Diversity Training

Surveyed employers rank cultural differences in the workplace as one of the top four challenges to integrating newcomers into the workforce²⁰. This concern was particularly salient in those sectors where sensitivity to cultural difference is essential to the work being done, such as health care. Half of the employers in the focus group session agreed that diverse beliefs and practices make it difficult to achieve or maintain a harmonious work environment and close to 40% felt that immigrants do not fit easily into the Canadian workplace culture. Employers also noted that a willingness on the part of the newcomer hire to adapt to Canadian workplace culture is important to ensure successful integration.

This finding highlights a need for diversity training in the workplace and assistance with policy or program development with regards to diversity management in order to support employers in integrating newcomers into their workforce. This could include workplace culture orientation programs for skilled immigrants as well as training for current staff and management.

Some progress has already begun in North Bay to address this need, including the development of workplace diversity training materials to be distributed via the North Bay Immigration Portal and an Intercultural Communication in the Canadian Workplace course offered through Professions

North/Nord. This presents opportunities for community collaboration and expansion through the rest of the northeast Ontario region.

Licensing, Training and Skills Upgrading

SMEs are unfamiliar or frustrated with the licensing and accreditation processes for internationally trained newcomers. Additionally, ongoing consultations with employers suggest that training and skills upgrading (including accreditation and licensing) is important to retain valuable employees and to ensure the continued growth and development of the business. Many small employers are unaware of how to access funding for training and skills development and have acknowledged a need for assistance in this regard. An Industry Canada report on employee training and SMEs indicates that employers cite lack of information on training opportunities and cost of training as key barriers to training for small businesses²¹.

To assist with the integration and retention of skilled newcomers, employers require access to funding for skills upgrading and training programs in addition to assistance navigating accreditation and licensing processes.

Mentorship or Internship Programs

SMEs have indicated that mentorship, internship, or placement programs may assist them in hiring, integrating, and retaining skilled newcomers. Employers noted that internship or co-op opportunities allow for a mutual familiarization phase before any long term commitments are made by either the employer or potential employee. Mentorship programs, both

²⁰ Jones, Karen. "Skilled Immigrants and the Workforce".

²¹ Industry Canada. (2006) Employee Training Decisions, Business Strategies and Human Resource Management Practices: A Study by Size of Business.

internal and community-based, are also cited as important tools to assist with both workplace and community integration and in supporting the long term retention of employees.

The development of mentorship or internship programs is an important resource for employers who wish to better integrate skilled newcomers into their workplace. The NNN is launching a mentorship program in the summer of 2012 as a way to address this important component of newcomer integration and retention.

Retention Tools

Retention strategies are a crucial factor to business growth and retaining skilled workers is a challenge for SMEs in the region. In some sectors, competition among employers for talent makes it very difficult for smaller employers to retain valuable staff. Employers also expressed frustrations with a perceived transient mentality among a more inexperienced or younger workforce²². In particular, retention of skilled newcomers has been cited as a challenge due to limited cultural and linguistic supports. Employers note that community integration for the entire family is very important in order to retain immigrant employees. This is a particularly salient issue in northern Ontario where the size and structure of the communities largely differs from that of major urban centres. Given the increasing demands on the labour force in Northeastern Ontario, retention becomes ever the more vital.

SMEs have highlighted a need for effective retention strategies and support. This includes support for the entire family unit (such as job prospects for spouses,

networking, etc) in addition to employee-specific retention strategies. While some of these supports are already in place through programs offered by the NNN, NBDMC, and TDMC, research suggests that employers are unaware of the community supports available to them.²³ Enhancement of current programs and development of additional retention tools, such as succession planning, is important for local SMEs to maintain their valuable workforce.

Community Integration Support

As a part of both integration and retention of skilled newcomers, there is a need among local SMEs for innovative partnerships with community groups to support community integration. Since the vast majority of employees must live where they work, communities have a large role to play in supporting the larger integration of newcomers into the area. This not only aids in overall integration but also with the long term retention of skilled labour. While supports specific to newcomers do exist in the region, research has shown that many SMEs are unfamiliar with the community resources that are available or the potential for partnerships to increase their capacity to hire, integrate and retain newcomers. Particularly, the development or enhancement of partnerships with the North Bay & District Multicultural Centre and the Timmins & District Multicultural Centre, as well as the two Local Immigration Partnerships in the region, could have a significant impact on how SMEs hire, integrate, and retain newcomers.

Succession Planning

Consultations with small and medium-sized employers have revealed a need for assistance and support with succession

²² LMG. (2012). Local Labour Market Plan Report.

²³ Jones, Karen. (2011). Skilled Immigrants and the Workforce.

planning. Effective succession planning involves strategic talent management and local SMEs face challenges both with identifying and maintaining potential leaders within their workforce and with strategizing for succession management. Succession planning can also be a key retention tool to retain valuable employees, including skilled immigrants. Tools and resources related to succession planning are a key service required by local employers to develop and grow their workforce.

Consultations with employers confirm that such a response is welcome and will assist them with both their labour force challenges and with overcoming barriers to hiring and retaining newcomers. Additionally, a recent ALLIES report identified such a response as a promising practice to encourage SMEs to hire skilled newcomers²⁵.

“Thanks for thinking of us small business owners. It sounds like a great idea to have a place we could call for help. I have to do everything myself and I don’t have time to worry about all the legislative stuff” – local employer

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research has demonstrated that employers who place emphasis on human resource management practices tend to experience more rapid growth than businesses that have minimal HR capacity²⁴. This local study has found that the majority of SMEs in northeastern Ontario do not have in-house dedicated HR support and have limited resources to effectively recruit and retain employees. This highlights a need for effective and responsive human resource services designed for SMEs to address increasing challenges with recruitment, hiring, training, and retaining a skilled workforce and to support the growth and development of their operations.

In order to address the human resource management concerns of small and medium-sized employers in the North Bay – Timmins corridor, [the development of a “one-stop” HR support centre for SMEs is recommended](#). This is an innovative and localized response to an identified need in the region and is one that will effectively support local employers, skilled newcomers, and the economy overall.

The concept of a “one-stop” HR support centre is designed to centralize HR services for SMEs, creating a single source of HR support that can respond to the diverse needs and challenges of small and medium-sized employers in the region. This HR support centre would provide SMEs with “live” HR tools, support, and resources, including referrals to existing local HR providers or direct assistance with HR needs.

The support centre would respond to employers’ needs by offering a comprehensive suite of HR services that focus on supporting local SMEs with recruitment, selection and hiring, integration, and retention of qualified employees, foregrounding tools and resources specific to the inclusion of skilled immigrants. The provision of HR support would be based on the key services identified by employers and the two local immigration partnerships (outlined in the previous section). Importantly, these key services correspond not only to the needs of local employers but also to current successful practices among employers across Canada for hiring and retaining newcomers.

²⁴ Mulholland, Ron. (2008). “Fast Growth SMEs in the Northern Ontario Economy”.

²⁵ ALLIES. (2012). Global Talent for SMES: Building Bridges and Making connections.

Successful Practices in Hiring and Integrating Skilled Newcomers

This list is based on research into successful practices currently being used by employers across Canada to recruit, hire, and retain newcomers. Research sources include the Conference Board of Canada, ALLIES, hireimmigrants.ca, and others. The following practices directly support the attraction, integration, and retention of skilled immigrants.

Recruiting Practices

- Expand beyond traditional advertising and recruiting methods
- Work with community/regional partners to advertise and access skilled talent
- Online job-matching tools, such as Skills International and the Engineering Matching and Placement Program (E-MAP)
- Make the recruitment and hiring of skilled immigrants a business imperative

Selection and Hiring Practices

- Cultural competency training for hiring managers to increase awareness of diverse modes of communication and how to review international resumes, cover letters, and portfolios
- Develop bias-free procedures to review and screen foreign resumes, such as screening for education but not country of education or verifying technical skills early on in screening process
- Develop effective processes and tools for assessing foreign credentials as part of the screening process, such as the use of professional credential assessment agencies like World Education Services (WES)
- Verify candidate's level of English or French proficiency prior to hiring if high proficiency is required for the position
- Create culturally appropriate interviewing practices, such as limiting telephone interviews, providing candidates with a list of interview questions in advance, or focusing on skills rather than on conversation

Language and Communication Training

- Address language and communication barriers by supporting language training initiatives for employees
- Partner with community organization to provide occupation-specific language training or general workplace communication skills
- Develop on-site language and communication training programs

Workplace Diversity Training

- Facilitate training programs for owners, managers and top-level employees on managing a culturally diverse workplace
- Provide training for all employees on cultural sensitivity
- Develop orientation programs for newcomers on Canadian workplace culture
- Adopt formal or informal processes to accommodate religious diversity
- Implement policies and procedures related to diversity in the workplace
- Support cultural affinity groups within an organization

Licensing and Skills Upgrading

- Provide financial support for education programs or licensing exams
- Assist newcomers with obtaining Canadian credentials
- Work with regulatory bodies to develop timely processes for licensing and accreditation
- Help newcomers work towards and achieve professional goals through external career development training, frequent performance feedback, encouragement of professional association and networking, and soft skills training.

Mentorship or Internship Programs

- Develop formal or informal workplace mentorship programs to assist with integration of newcomers
- Work with community organizations to develop community-based mentorship programs
- Implement internship or co-op opportunities for skilled immigrants

Community Partnership Practices

- Work with community settlement agencies to support integration of entire family and employment needs of spouse
- Develop local or regional partnerships to implement mentorship or internship programs

Retention Practices

- Build an organizational culture that respects and encourages diversity
- Recognize and/or reward contributions of skilled immigrants
- Develop talent management and succession strategies that identify key performers for expanded or senior positions. Ensure skilled newcomers are included in assessment of key performers

Sources:

1. Conference Board of Canada. (2009). *Immigrant Friendly Businesses: Effective Practices for Attracting, Integrating, and Retaining Immigrants in the Canadian Workplace*.
2. ALLIES. (2011). *Attracting, Retaining, and Integrating Skilled Immigrants: An Analysis of Canada's Leading Employers*.
3. Hireimmigrants.ca. (2011). *Best Employers for New Canadians 2011: Best Practices in Recruiting and Integrating Skilled Immigrants*.
4. BC Human Resources Management Association. *Hiring and Retaining Skilled Immigrants: A Cultural Competence Toolkit*.

Each of the key services recommended for inclusion in the HR North support centre (as identified in the previous section) have been highlighted in other research as important and successful practices for the recruitment, integration, and retention of skilled immigrants. While each service is relevant and essential to effective HR management relating to the inclusion of newcomers in the workforce, this study, along with other local research, recognizes that certain of the key services are priority issues for local SMEs. Specifically, supports relating to recruiting and hiring practices are an immediate requirement for employers, and as such, these HR services rank at the top of the list for inclusion in the support centre.

The development of a single source (“one-stop”) centre for HR support for SMEs in this region of northeastern Ontario is a valuable and timely initiative. Local employers are facing

increasing labour market pressures and they largely do not have the resources to effectively strategize for their workforce needs nor do they have the tools required to tap into the pool of skilled immigrants. Research has not only demonstrated the significant benefits of human resource management practices for small businesses, but has also made it clear that there is a business imperative for hiring newcomers. An HR support centre would bridge these two by providing essential HR management support to SMEs that focuses on integrating skilled immigrants into the local workforce.

CONCLUSION

In the book, *Human Resource Management in Small Business: Achieving Peak Performance*, Ronald Burke notes that “the economic performance of an economy is inextricably linked to the SME sector, and SMEs rely heavily on their people and on their HRM [human resource management] practices for their success” (p.10). He goes on to highlight that the failure to address human resource concerns for small businesses is a common reason for the failure of the business, while implementing human resource practices contributes to the success of small businesses.

In the northeastern Ontario districts of Parry Sound, Nipissing, Timiskaming, and Cochrane, small and medium sized employers are facing increasing labour force challenges due to economic and demographic pressures that limit access to skilled talent. These challenges are heightened by the fact that the vast majority of local SMEs do not have adequate human resource supports in place.

“There is an emerging body of compelling evidence that the effective management of an organization’s human resources is vital to its success”

–Burke, 2011, p.21

Given the growing need for employers to turn to non-traditional sources of talent and to adopt new strategies for labour management, it is ever the more essential that local SMEs have access to effective human resource services.

In turn, the implementation of human resource management supports for local SMEs will play a significant role in promoting the employment

of skilled immigrants in northeastern Ontario. Employers in the region have highlighted their need for resources and assistance with hiring immigrants. Providing employers with adequate tools and know-how to recruit, hire, and retain newcomers will encourage the inclusion of this valuable source of labour into the local workforce.

To this end, the development of an HR support centre for small and medium sized employers in the region is a proactive response to the looming skill shortage which can have an enormous positive impact both on the local economy and on immigrant employment outcomes. It proposes to bridge the current gap between SMEs and the growing, but underutilized talent pool of skilled newcomers, and in so doing, foster growth and prosperity for northeastern Ontario.

“The economic performance of an economy is inextricably linked to the SME sector, and SMEs rely heavily on their people and their HRM practices for their success”

–Burke, 2011, p.10

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APPENDIX A: List of Independent HR Providers in Northeastern Ontario

Provider / Organization	Location	Main Focus
Ashbourne Management Resources Ltd	North Bay (satellite location)	HR Management, Recruiting
Lever Personnel Resources	North Bay, Timmins	Recruitment, Selection, Training
Yes! Employment Services	North Bay	Recruitment, Hiring and Post-Hire Support
J&D Patterson Management Inc	North Bay	Health & Safety
Pettella Adaptive Solutions	North Bay	HR Administration
Workplace Safety North	North Bay	Health & Safety
Clear Logic Consulting Professionals	Timmins	HR Management
Toffanello Consultant Services	Timmins	Recruitment & Training
Trimeda Consulting Inc	Timmins	HR Management
Workforce: People at Work Workforce: International	Sudbury (serving Northeastern Ontario)	Recruitment (including foreign workers)
Ironside Consulting Services Inc	Sault Ste Marie (serving Northern Ontario)	HR Administration
Manage With Success	North Bay	HR Software for SMEs
GetTrainedWorkers.com	Northern Ontario	Labour supply (<i>labour pool is limited to individuals on social assistance</i>)

**This list is not exhaustive. There may be other independent HR consultants who do not appear on this list.*