



Lending a hand to skilled immigrants

By **MEVAN DELWITA**

Several years ago, shortly after I immigrated to Canada from Sri Lanka, I took a taxi to attend a friend's wedding. On the way, I started chatting with the taxi driver, a well-groomed middle-aged man who spoke perfect English. He told me he was an engineer from Pakistan and he had been driving taxis in Toronto since he immigrated to Canada over 20 years ago. That conversation made me wonder why so many skilled immigrants end up underemployed.

What is undesirable about this situation is that the nations from which many of these skilled immigrants come are developing countries that have invested in these people's education and training for decades and can ill afford to lose those skilled immigrants; so neither the home country nor the host country wins.

I migrated to Canada 10 years ago. I was fortunate to find work in my profession as a chartered

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business valuator within a short time of arriving here. I got involved in recruiting activities for my employer, Ernst & Young, and over time began to make some observations about the current job market as it pertains to new immigrants. I realized that one of the reasons new immigrants fail to find work in their field is because they do not have insights into how to navigate the recruiting system — from applying for the right jobs, preparing resumes, preparing for interviews and dealing with interview questions.

The Mentoring Partnership is a program of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council

(www.triec.ca) and it brings together recent skilled immigrants and established professionals in occupation-specific mentoring relationships. Skilled immigrants entering the program have the education, experience, and language skills they need to succeed in the labour market, but lack the local insights and access to professional networks. Mentees are matched with mentors from the same field of work and each mentoring relationship lasts four months. Over that period the mentors help the mentees:

- Gain a better understanding of the Canadian workplace and industry trends;

- Develop more effective job search strategies;
- Build a local professional network; and
- Identify ways to leverage experience and skills.

The program is a collaboration of corporate and community partners. The government of Ontario, the Maytree Foundation and several private corporations fund it. The Mentoring Partnership manages the program and supports the efforts of corporate partners and community partner organizations. Corporate partners support the program by engaging identified employee groups to become men-



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tors, marketing The Mentoring Partnership internally to employees, and hosting orientation events for their mentors. Community partner organizations administer the program by identifying skilled immigrants and matching

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Interview process is a mystery to some

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them with volunteer mentors.

Each match starts with sending the resume of the potential mentee to the mentor, who reviews it and decides if he or she would like be a mentor for that person. Once the mentor and mentee are introduced, they together decide on the goals of the mentoring relationship, frequency of meetings and the means to communicate with each other.

I first heard about the Mentoring Partnerships program when Ernst & Young became one of the corporate partners of the program. I decided to volunteer as a mentor because I felt that with my own experiences as a skilled immigrant and the recruiting work that I did, I would be able to contribute to what the program was trying to achieve.

I have been fortunate to have an employer who supports employees who volunteer for community programs, from being flexible with work schedules to use of meeting rooms. One of the benefits working in a large organization with a diverse workplace such as



Ernst & Young is that you can always find someone who has come from the same country or has had similar experiences as the mentee before they came to Canada. They can share experiences and insights with the mentees. These connections also help the mentees expand their professional networks.

Each mentoring relationship is

different. Some mentees want to meet once a week during the four-month period, while others prefer to meet less frequently. Some have specific goals for each meeting while others just need the encouragement and support to be motivated through the process of trying to find work.

The greatest challenges are making the mentee understand that

it may take a lot longer than they anticipated to find a job in their field, and encouraging them to stay focused on the process rather than to get comfortable with a survival job.

The other big challenge is making people understand the interview process and why certain interview questions — such as ‘behavioural questions’ — are asked and how to deal with them.

The other area that I spend most of my time with the mentees is providing insights into potential jobs, tailoring resumes and practicing interview questions and skills.

One of the most challenging mentoring relationships I had was with a mentee who grew up and worked in the government sector of a former Soviet republic. Our interview process was a complete mystery to her. She could not understand why interview questions had to be anything other than those relating her technical skills. So every meeting we had we practiced an interview, starting right from the walk in and introduction to closing the interview.

Over the past four years, I have worked with six skilled immigrants and five have gone on to find work in their respective area of expertise (one had to stop participating in the program due to family commitments). Just over a month ago I started working with my seventh mentee. My mentees have come from places as diverse as Venezuela, Russia, India, China and Moldova. They all came to Canada, as every immigrant does, with hopes and dreams of success.

The personal rewards of the program is the experience of being able to contribute in some small way towards helping skilled immigrants get started on the path to achieving their hopes and dreams.

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