

## Capitalize on immigrants' promise

*An open letter from Dominic D'Alessandro, President and CEO of Manulife Financial*

Dear Prime Minister:

As you begin to implement your platform, many priorities will emerge. The choices you make will have a profound impact on our nation. A key concern that I want to bring to your attention is the urgent need for Canada to do a better job of integrating skilled immigrants into the work force.

When I came to Canada with my family in 1950, things were very different. My parents saw Canada as a place where their children would have opportunities they did not have; they were investing in the next generation. Most of that era's immigrants were working-class people eager to take advantage of opportunities a rapidly industrializing Canada offered.

Immigrants who come to Canada today expect very different things – and they should. Canada recruits highly educated and experienced professionals who leave meaningful careers behind, and expect to find the same here.

The Conference Board of Canada calculates that not recognizing immigrants' learning and credentials costs our economy somewhere

between \$3-billion and \$5-billion annually. As a businessman, a private citizen and an immigrant, I see this as a critical issue both for maximizing the economic potential of Canada and for successful nation-building.

This is why I am chairing the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, an initiative focused on ensuring that the region is better able to benefit from the skills of immigrants.



Although your government has worked well to build some of the foundations needed to address the barriers skilled immigrants face, more is required. We need all the players and all orders of government to work together to achieve meaningful and sustainable results.

Here are six recommendations for your government that I think would help it fulfil its promise to immigrants, and the promise that immigrants bring with them to Canada.

- **Revise Canada's settlement policy so that it includes programs that help immigrants enter the labour market at an appropriate level.**

Employment is a key element of successful immigrant settlement. The education and skill level of many immigrants is higher than ever, and the types of programs that are needed have changed. Instead of focusing solely on shelter, orientation, and basic-level language instruction, we also need to invest in programs such as employment-related language training, internships and mentoring.

- **Work with immigrants overseas so they can better prepare themselves and hit the ground running when they arrive in Canada.**

Canada can work with educational partners to provide language, skill assessment and training overseas to potential immigrants before they arrive.

As well, immigrants need better access to relevant, in-depth labour-market information, which can be key in helping an immigrant decide where to settle in Canada, and in suggesting the kinds of preparation to undertake before arriving.

- **Update and expand language training programs in order to meet the needs of industry and the new profile of skilled immigrants.**

Many immigrants have the technical skills necessary to practise an occupation but may lack the occupation-specific terminology and communication skills required. Canada's current language training provides basic language skills and is not oriented to the labour market. Employers know that workplace communication skills are critically important, and immigrants also identify this as one of the most significant challenges they face.

- **Expand successful labour-market integration programs, such as internships and mentoring, by working with employers and other partners.**

Ottawa needs to work closely with employers, employer associations and labour to identify opportunities to support them in being more effective in bringing skilled immigrants into their workplaces. As one of the country's largest employers, the Government of Canada also needs to be a leader on this issue and participate directly in internship and mentoring opportunities for immigrants.

In Toronto, our council has introduced a program of paid internships for skilled immigrants, Career Bridge. Even in its pilot phase, more than 80 per cent of the internships have resulted in permanent employment, including one at Manulife in our Investments Division. This is a good-news story that can be easily replicated and expanded across Canada, especially in large urban centres.

- **Recognize the special role of Canada's largest metropolitan areas as key partners in immigrant settlement and implement a "bottom up" approach.**

Like most Canadians, immigrants live and work primarily in cities. It is at the local level that services, training, and jobs exist. Local governments are therefore most likely to understand the specific labour needs of their communities and are most likely to leverage local partnerships that can create change.

**"Not recognizing newcomers' learning and credentials costs our economy as much as \$5-billion annually."**

In order for there to be a seamless and systemic approach to labour-market integration for immigrants, all stakeholders – employers, labour, educational institutions, occupational regulatory bodies, community agencies, immigrant organizations, and governments – need to work together at the local level.

- **Develop regional strategies, in collaboration with provincial, regional and municipal governments, to expedite the labour-market integration of immigrants.**

Because this issue cuts across a number of departments and ministries, at both the federal and provincial level, coherent and co-ordinated strategies are a challenge. But it is time to find new ways of ensuring federal-provincial collaboration on this issue. The inclusion of regional and municipal governments in this conversation is absolutely essential.

Mr. Martin, each of these points has merit on its own, but combined they present a robust plan that has the promise of creating meaningful and lasting change for immigrants. I urge you as Prime Minister to champion this effort so that Canada gains maximum benefit from the skills and experience of the newest members of its society, and immigrants are given a fair opportunity to realize their potential.

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*Dominic D'Alessandro, president and CEO of Manulife Financial, is chairman of the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council. He immigrated to Canada from Italy in 1950.*

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For more information on Career Bridge, please visit [www.careerbridge.ca](http://www.careerbridge.ca) or e-mail [info@careerbridge.ca](mailto:info@careerbridge.ca)