

Immigrants welcome, roadblocks ahead

Canadian governments are trying to smooth the way for a more diverse work force, but many employers still reject applicants with foreign training despite their credentials

By Wallace Immen

Weiling Qian worked for 12 years in China as a systems engineer responsible for upgrading software in the computers of 1,400 employees of a petrochemical company. But that time and knowledge became irrelevant when she came to Canada with her husband in 2002. Her path to a new job was blocked by an invisible but formidable barrier well known to newcomers to the country. "I began to look for a job, but employment agents who saw my résumé said I needed Canadian experience," Ms. Qian said.

For the next few months, she will be wearing a badge identifying her as a member of "Team Motorola" as one of the first interns in the Career Bridge program in Toronto. It's one of dozens of new initiatives across the country that are helping foreign-trained doctors get accredited, upgrading skills so pharmacists and nurses can pass their qualifying exams and finding jobs for engineers and other professionals. In fact, if the mounds of bulky studies and worthy reports issued by programs launched in the past year alone could be used as building material, they could be assembled into a superhighway to jobs for foreign-trained workers.

But even with all the initiatives and a newly formed national consensus that Canada must depend on using the skills of immigrants for future economic growth, potholes and pitfalls continue to abound. An award-winning Chinese rocket scientist works making cinnamon buns in a Toronto subway station. Potential employers still

routinely ignore résumés from those with overseas educations. Even the most successful bridging and training programs are struggling to keep their momentum.

"I call it project-itis," says Ratna Omidvar, executive director of the Maytree Foundation, a Toronto-based immigrant assistance organization. "We've got a number of really exciting pilots, but the problem is that these are funded for only limited times and in danger of disappearing."

Most programs to date have placed only a few people at a time in a few professions, while thousands of highly skilled immigrants are still underemployed. That's particular the case in non-regulated fields, such as management, finance or journalism, Ms. Omidvar adds.

But there has been a lot of change in just the past year, says Mr. Owens, whose not-for-profit group recently

expanded into Canada with seed money from the Ontario government. For a fee of \$100, paid by the job seeker, WES will search to verify that the degree is authentic, and that the course programs and the school that granted the diploma are the academic equivalents of schools in Canada.

Credentials have not been enough for Ivy Zheng, a guest speaker at a symposium on immigrant skills organized in December by the Canadian Technology Human Resources Board. Ms. Zheng had been an engineer with the Chinese space program and she won a citation for designing a rocket component that helped launch a Chinese



Weiling Qian, a systems engineer from China, left, and Agnes van Haeren, the human resources manager for Motorola Canada, which hired Ms. Qian as an intern under the Career Bridge program.

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astronaut into space. In the two years since she immigrated to Toronto, though, she has searched in vain for an engineering position and, needing to support herself, she took a job making cinnamon buns in a shop. "I was so disappointed. I have work experience in my own professional field. I also have other different skills, but I cannot persuade anyone to take me seriously in Canada," Ms. Zheng says. "I never stop job searching. I spend almost all my spare time on job searching. I know it is my only hope. If give up, I will suffer in labour forever."

Ms. Qian says she has many friends with impressive skills who have met the same fate, and that is why she is proud to have a cubicle at the modern Toronto Design Centre of Motorola Canada, part of a 200-member group in Markham that designs computer-based communication and safety systems. She explains that computer software design is such a fast-changing field that if you are out of the field for even a short time, "you can become obsolete. If you don't have a job, you can't upgrade your skills." She was one of almost 2,000 people who applied for 50 intern positions in the Career Bridge program set up last fall by the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council and the national non-profit organization Career Edge.

"The response has been overwhelming," says **Career Bridge** director Barbara Nowers. While the companies pay the employees' salaries, Career Bridge does the initial interviews, credential screening and language evaluations before employees choose candidates to get four-month Canadian work experiences. "It's early days, but Motorola is enthusiastic," says Agnes van Haeren, the human resources manager for Motorola, which hired Ms. Qian. She reviewed 24 résumés for two available positions and "they were all very impressive."

"It's only a four-month commitment," Ms Nowers adds, "but if the employee does very well, the best result would be that the Career Bridge intern could become a permanent employee." The second-best outcome is that the interns come out of the four months with great experience they can

put on their résumé and have a company such as Bell Canada or Procter & Gamble Co. to vouch for them when they apply for their next job, she adds.

The Ontario government, which provided funding for the pilot project, is so pleased with the results that in January it pledged three years' support for bridging programs in engineering and technology and an 18-month commitment for a similar program for training teachers. In addition, the province, which receives almost 60 per cent of all immigration to Canada, pledged \$4-million to support skills improvement programs for internationally trained health care workers, pharmacists and technicians.

Growth projections indicate Ontario will need hundreds of thousands of skilled workers in the next decade to replace retiring workers and promote expansion of the economy.

Unfortunately, attitudes of some Canadians don't seem to be changing as readily as government commitments.

Rezaur Rahman, who trained as a

computer engineer in Bangladesh and China and finally found a job after having more than 500 résumés rejected, said he was shocked when he attended a recent community meeting in Toronto.

He says one audience member commented that "immigrants are here to do the jobs that local Canadians do not want to do, for example cleaning floors and toilets. "I could not protest because it is happening -- wherever you go, you would find immigrants are cleaning floors, driving taxis or selling in shops no matter what their skills are. If this is the attitude of the local people, I wonder if we are going backwards in history, where all the good jobs and positions were not accessible to non-white people.

"This is ridiculous. Everything we import comes from the countries that train the people immigrating to Canada. It's a contradiction to say we trust the things they make and not the people who make them. We have the skills to be most self-reliant and productive if we are given a chance."

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