

CAREER BRIDGE

Foreign interns get a leg up

Program helps skilled workers land valuable placements

June 18, 2004

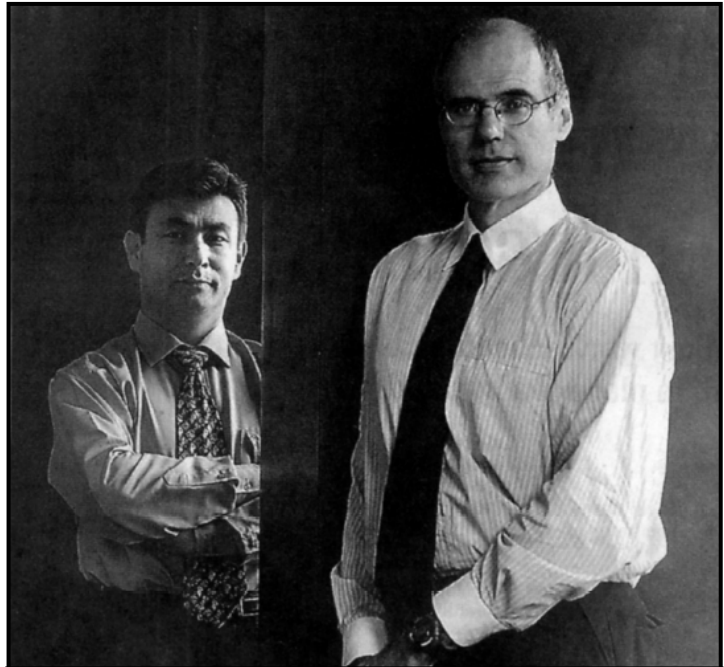
By WALLACE IMMEN

Don Drummond, chief economist at Toronto-Dominion Bank, thought "it was the right thing to do" but he was unsure about the advantages when he agreed to give a four-month internship to a recent immigrant to Toronto who had a degree from a Chinese university.

But he had no idea how impressed he would be by the intern's performance. The experience led the bank this week to make a commitment to take 15 more foreign-trained interns this year.

TD is one of the 41 companies in finance, management, computers and education that will be taking a total of 153 foreign-educated interns under the Toronto-based Career Bridge program.

The program helps foreign-trained professionals get the work experience they need to apply for full-time employment in their specialties. It was so successful in a pilot project last year that it is now a permanent program that is expected to spread across Canada, its organizers said yesterday. The program will be managed as part of the national non-profit Career Edge internship program for Canadian-trained graduates.



Don Drummond, right, chief economist at Toronto-Dominion Bank, hired Chinese immigrant Parhat Zunun under the Career Bridge internship program. TD needed someone to analyze Chinese financial data.

"The response has been overwhelming," both from employers and potential interns, says David Pecault, chairman of the Toronto City Summit Alliance, a task force of business and community leaders that last year recommended the formation of Career Bridge.

Bell Canada and Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce have joined TD in making commitments of 15 interns each from Career Bridge. The City of Toronto and Royal Bank of Canada have agreed to 10 interns each. More than 1,600 foreign-trained immigrants have registered as potential interns.



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The program was set up last year after the City Summit Alliance published a study called Enough Talk. It indicated that recent skilled immigrants are having more difficulty getting into the labour market than those in previous decades because employers don't recognize their training and work experience in foreign countries, Mr. Pecault explained.

"Employers have a hard time evaluating work experience. An immigrant who comes with an advanced degree and 10 years experience in their profession gets treated the same as someone who has no experience," Mr. Pecault says. Many employers continue to require Canadian work experience before they will hire anyone and it becomes "a chicken and egg situation," he adds. Other barriers cited by employers were language skills and difficulty in evaluating the equivalency of educational credentials.

To break the barriers, Career Bridge got startup money from the Ontario government to screen educational credentials and experience and test for language proficiency before offering interns to potential employers. In co-operation with the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, the bridge program last fall got a dozen companies to agree to give four-month internships to recent immigrants.

"The advantage for the employers is that it's like a free trial of the candidate; they don't have to take them on the payroll," Mr. Pecault explains. Companies pay Career Bridge, which is the employer of record. "They get a chance to see the employee in action and at the end of the internship the employer can say 'you're terrific, we have a place for you,' or 'you're terrific but we

don't have a spot for you but I will give you a reference and a recommendation.' "

Mr. Pecault says he has had discussions with Judy Sgro, the federal minister of immigration, as well as the Prime Minister's Office about expanding the program. He has also had discussions with the Board of Trade

of Metropolitan Montreal and civic officials in Vancouver about setting up similar programs for those cities.

Mr. Drummond says intern Parhat Zunun

helped fill a gap for TD, which needed an experienced person to analyze financial information from China.

Mr. Zunun, who has a master's degree in economics and finance and had been an associate professor at a university in China, did four excellent studies for the bank analyzing Chinese economic reports, Mr. Drummond says.

Unfortunately, now that the four-month internship is over, Mr. Drummond says his division does not have a full-time position available. However, he is trying to find a placement for Mr. Zunun within the organization. He adds he would certainly recommend him to another employer.

Mr. Drummond says he has spoken to several of the other interns in Career Bridge's pilot program who also have not turned their internships into permanent positions, but they all told him they were enthusiastic about the program. "They believe having the experience in their CV is a huge positive in their search for a career."

*Reprinted from the Globe & Mail
June 18, 2004*

For information on becoming a host organization, please visit www.careerbridge.ca.