

# WHAT WORKS:

## Career-building strategies for people from diverse groups A COUNSELLOR RESOURCE

### Immigrants

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Alberta Employment and Immigration  
Career and Workplace Resources  
Telephone: 780-422-1794  
Fax: 780-422-5319  
Email: [info@alis.gov.ab.ca](mailto:info@alis.gov.ab.ca)

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## Statistics

Immigrants who came to Alberta in 2006	13.4% from People's Republic of China 10.7% from Philippines 10.6% from India 5.9% from Pakistan <sup>1</sup>
Foreign-born population in Canada with a mother tongue other than English or French	57.5% in 2001 70.2% in 2006 <sup>2</sup>
Alberta working population that completed a university degree in 2008	21.6% of total working population <sup>3</sup> 30.0% of immigrants <sup>4</sup>
Alberta unemployment rate in 2008	3.6 % for total working-age population 3.7 % for immigrants <sup>5</sup>
Comparison of unemployment rate in Alberta for very recent immigrants with established immigrants	+2.7 % higher for very recent immigrants <sup>6</sup>
Comparison of wages earned by immigrants in Alberta with other Alberta workers	-\$1.41 less per hour earned by immigrants <sup>7</sup>

## Context

### What do I wish I had known when I first started working with immigrants and refugees?

"I wish I had been more aware of the barriers and challenges they face. I am still dismayed at how little recognition of their education and experience they receive when they come to Canada."

Karen Berg

Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

Counsellors working to help immigrant clients may be prone to difficulties if they inadequately understand the basis of clients' beliefs and values. Recent immigrants to Canada are adapting to life in a new environment, as well as having to adjust their career goals to unfamiliar cultural, economic and political situations.

### Immigrants or refugees?

"It is important to understand the situation where newcomers are coming from—are they independent immigrants or refugees? Some may have been in camps for years living through horrific circumstances. It's important to consider how we can best work with people who are trying to adjust to our society and our workplaces."

Karol Adamowicz

Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

## Terminology and definitions

*Refugees* are persons who need protection from persecution or whose removal from Canada would subject them to a danger of torture, a risk to their life or a risk of cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. Most often they have fled their countries involuntarily, and they have had little time to prepare for moving to Canada. Refugees may travel directly to Canada, but they may also spent time in temporary camps.<sup>8</sup>

*Family class immigrants* are sponsored relatives who join family members who are Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada. The relative who is the original immigrant is financially responsible for family class immigrants.<sup>9</sup>

*Economic class immigrants* includes those immigrants who are skilled workers, provincial/territorial nominees and business immigrants who have demonstrated their capacity for financial independence. Business immigrants are investors, entrepreneurs and self-employed people who plan to make substantial investments or to own and manage businesses in Canada. Economic class immigrants may be accompanied by their spouses and dependants.<sup>10</sup>

In general, *immigrants* to Canada

- choose to leave their birth country<sup>11</sup>
- have consciously chosen Canada as their destination<sup>12</sup>
- have time to prepare for their departure, bringing relevant documents<sup>13</sup>
- have high levels of health, education and self-sufficiency<sup>14</sup>
- may have been chosen on a points system, where points are given for educational level, training, work experience and knowledge of French or English<sup>15</sup>
- are given immigrant status upon arrival, meaning they can apply for citizenship in three years<sup>16</sup>
- may be rejoining family members already in Canada who may be legally responsible for them for a certain number of years<sup>17</sup>

In comparison, *refugees* in Canada

- have fled their homeland for humanitarian or political reasons<sup>18</sup>
- have not necessarily made a conscious choice to come to Canada<sup>19</sup>
- may have left quickly, leaving behind papers, credentials and other documents<sup>20</sup>
- may have spent months or years in refugee or detention camps<sup>21</sup>
- may have left family behind<sup>22</sup>
- often arrive in Canada traumatized<sup>23</sup>
- tend to have lower levels of education and to depend upon the Canadian social system<sup>24</sup>

Although these comparisons are generalized, it is important to note that both categories of newcomers to Canada experience periods of adjustment.

### Special supports for refugees

“It’s important to know about the various referral agencies that are available to give people further assistance. Many times there is emotional trauma. We need to be aware of what our clients can do to deal with torture, abuse or other problems so that they can move forward and get into the labour market.”

Dick Bellamy

Alberta Employment and Immigration

## Cultural transitions

### Hope for a new life

“Sometimes people arrive with false or unrealistic expectations of what they are going to be able to do. This can be a huge issue with teens and young adults. We try to help them to look realistically at where they’re at, help them adjust and be able to take positive steps forward.”

Frank Bessai  
Catholic Social Services

### Time to adjust

“Canada is seen as a land of opportunity and hope. But then reality strikes and newcomers understand the severity of barriers facing them. They can become depressed very quickly. Canada may be a plentiful place, but it could take from two to fifteen years for newcomers to adjust.”

Frank Bessai  
Catholic Social Services

Dimensions of culture may include “age, gender, ability, race, religion, language, family values, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation.”<sup>25</sup>

Culture is considered to be “all those things people have learned to do, believe, value and enjoy. It is the totality of ideals, beliefs, skills, tools, customs and institutions into which each member of a society is born.”<sup>26</sup>

### Culture Shock

When people are immersed in a culture not their own, they experience an adjustment process. Sometimes, if this adjustment is severe, it is called *culture shock*. Culture shock occurs for immigrants for several reasons:

- Immigrants no longer get the usual response to their behaviours.
- Immigrants begin to realize they no longer know the cultural rules of the game.
- Immigrants no longer receive credit for their skills, ideas and accomplishments.<sup>27</sup>

Culture shock does not necessarily occur when people first arrive in a new and different country. It may take some time before newcomers are confronted with the deeper meanings and expectations that are so difficult to identify and understand. It helps when working with newcomers to remember that people have different ways of perceiving everything, from the nuances of language and gestures to different ideas about working.

Culture shock may negatively affect an individual’s ability to gather information, make decisions and solve problems. Adjustment difficulties may cluster around the client’s

- security, comfort and support
- self-worth and self-acceptance
- competence and autonomy
- identity and belonging
- fulfillment and meaning

Inner conflicts and emotional turmoil associated with culture shock and homesickness can scatter energy, reduce motivation, limit risk-taking behaviours and reduce openness to learning. Individuals may be grieving over the loss of their previous sources of support and validation. Family dynamics may be disturbed, which may directly and indirectly affect a client’s behaviour and mental health. Some people have family and psychological issues that require additional, specialized intervention before they secure employment.

### Role shock

In many cultures, a major portion of one’s identity is derived from work. Validation and meaning may depend on work role performance and role-based relationships. *Role shock* describes the experiences of an individual who moves from a more traditional or highly structured culture to one that has more loosely structured roles.

“It is very misleading for new immigrants to assume that they can behave in their usual role in the new culture and expect to have the same kind of satisfaction, social response and reward that they used to enjoy. Barriers to meaningful communication and career exploration can thus be created by the ethnic person’s habituated role behaviours and expectations, which may elicit undesirable reactions.”<sup>28</sup>

### Occupational identity

There is a loss of identity that occurs when people have had occupational competence in their country, but are not recognized in Canada for those qualifications.<sup>29</sup> Loss of a previous identity that used to act as an anchor for self-esteem may result in frustration, hopelessness and bitterness.

#### Career development as a new concept

“There may be many cultural factors at play that counsellors are not aware of. They need to listen and understand the implications of these. For example, career development may be a familiar concept to people in this part of the world, but in environments where doing whatever you can to survive is a primary objective, the notion of planning a career that suits your skills and talents may seem frivolous or unrealistic.”

Betty Benson  
University of Alberta

### Cultural identity and biculturalism

“After their arrival in Canadian society, immigrants and refugees are faced with two parallel decisions about their degree of emotional and behavioural investment in the home and host cultures:

- a decision about how much of their unique cultural identity they want to maintain, and
- a decision about their desired level of interaction with people who do not share their cultural heritage.”<sup>30</sup>

The results of these decisions by the newcomer range from isolation to assimilation. Numerous studies show that commitment to both cultures, or biculturalism, is the most positive strategy. It involves the integration of home and host cultures in ways that work best for newcomers.<sup>31</sup>

#### The value of settlement services

“Multicultural orientation sessions try to help people to realize that they will adjust to life in Canada easier if they can leave behind those parts of their former identities based on tribes and status. Group activities, field trips and other economic and cultural experiences seem to help.”

Frank Bessai  
Catholic Social Services

### Employment readiness

#### Obstacles to employment

“I didn’t know about the variety of barriers, including systemic ones. It seems we tend to undervalue their education and experience even though we don’t have a good understanding of it.”

Don Baergen  
Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

During cultural adjustment the “main factor that emerges in understanding the emotional reaction of immigrants looking for work is that it brings them face to face with harsh economic realities.”<sup>32</sup> Immigrants and refugees usually arrive with different expectations about Canada’s economic and employment conditions.

## Family and community expectations

The work search process typically undertaken by immigrants is usually characterized by their persistence and willingness to take any job because of

- financial necessity
- pressure of being judged negatively for being out of work
- pressure to regain the status and dignity of work as experienced in their home country
- fear about their ability to sponsor other immigrants
- the ability of their sponsors to sponsor other immigrants if the immigrant fails to find work
- pressure to send money to family or community in their home country<sup>33</sup>

## Employment challenges

The categories of challenges that immigrants may face with employability include environmental, systemic, social, and personal.<sup>34</sup>

*Environmental challenges* may include living in regions that

- lack support services
- lack access to educational programs and training

*Systemic challenges* may include

- culturally-biased counselling
- non-recognition of credentials
- low-paying, low-skill jobs for immigrants with higher education
- lack of promotions or opportunity to build seniority

*Social challenges* may include

- dealing with others' fears that newcomers are taking jobs away from Canadians
- stereotypes about traits, qualifications, competence and motivation
- racial discrimination
- verbal and/or physical abuse

*Personal challenges* may include

- lack of education and training
- minimal or no Canadian work experience
- lack of Canadian credentials
- low self-awareness
- lack of current or correct information
- low self-confidence
- different physical appearance, dress, habits

## English language skills

Lack of English language proficiency can be the major employability challenge. A survey of immigrants to Canada indicated that learning English or French was one of the challenges frequently cited by newcomers, second only to finding an adequate job.<sup>35</sup>

Immigrants who have difficulty learning and speaking English may experience anxiety. Those who experience second-language anxiety may be “technically well qualified and competent but may be given a lower level task. Or, they may avoid anxiety-provoking situations that are potentially rewarding and could enhance their employment and career progress.”<sup>36</sup>

Second-language anxiety can create a vicious cycle where

- clients do not present themselves well
- others may respond impatiently or underestimate the client's abilities
- clients may begin to avoid verbal and written interaction
- clients seek jobs that require little verbal and written communication

Sometimes newcomers find jobs where others from their homeland are working and they can then speak their own language. Often they will remain in these jobs because they are comfortable and they don't have to learn English.

Counselling interactions may also be more difficult due to a greater likelihood of misunderstandings, incorrect information provided from the client and invalid assessments of peoples' goals and abilities.

## Responding to Challenges: Strategies and Practices

Before focusing on career and employment planning activities, counsellors will benefit by considering multicultural strategies and practices. Counsellors need to become aware of their own cultural assumptions and to seek out knowledge of other world views. Immigrant clients need to be assessed for their level of supports, which may range from special supports for traumatized refugees to qualification assessments of highly educated immigrants. Finally, counsellors need to adapt their communications strategies according to the client's skills and to select counselling resources appropriate for immigrant clients.

Counsellors need to be aware that their cultural background may, at times, result in their beliefs and world views contrasting with those of their clients. The process of professional reflection about personal culture supports the development of self-awareness, identified as a core competency in the domain of multicultural counselling.<sup>37</sup>

Cross-cultural awareness, skills and knowledge can affect all aspects of the career counselling process from “relationship establishment to knowing which are the most culturally appropriate interventions or approaches for particular clients.”<sup>38</sup>

### First develop a relationship

“Be supportive, respectful, collaborative and work towards understanding their situation before you jump to interventions. Develop a relationship with people first and find out their main priority. Many of them need your help to develop coping mechanisms.”

Janet Hammel

Alberta Employment and Immigration

## Multicultural counselling approach

Multicultural counselling theory identifies the importance of counsellor competence in three dimensions: counsellor's self-awareness, knowledge of other world views, and counselling skills.<sup>39</sup>

### Counsellors' personal beliefs

Counsellors who work effectively with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds begin by becoming aware of their own cultural origins, traditions and beliefs. This process enables them to understand the role of culture in their own lives and to be more

- appreciative of cultural differences
- flexible in meeting client needs
- open to learning about other cultures
- sensitive to clients' needs<sup>40</sup>

### Knowledge of other world views

Culturally aware counsellors broaden their own world views by

- attempting to understand the world view of culturally different clients without making negative judgments
- respecting and appreciating the world views of culturally different clients
- accepting client world views as a legitimate perspective<sup>41</sup>

There are many ways to gain knowledge of other world views. Counsellors may

- be open to clients and learn from them
- talk to other counsellors who are experienced with a specific culture
- seek out and learn about resources in the community
- attend workshops or training events
- read books, journal articles and information on websites



## Counselling skills

Culturally aware counsellors seek skill development by

- practicing appropriate, relevant and sensitive intervention strategies and skills
- acknowledging the cultural values and life experiences of clients
- incorporating the values of clients into the counselling process, as appropriate<sup>42</sup>

### Seeing the whole person

“Be understanding of people’s needs, all their needs, including mental and physical health as these could be very important. There may be invisible barriers. Ask probing but sensitive questions.”

Dick Bellamy

Alberta Employment and Immigration

## Multicultural client assessment model

A multicultural career counselling model presented by John Stewart identifies four assessment levels for counsellors to use when working with a heterogeneous population.<sup>43</sup>

Counsellors are encouraged to start any new interaction by allowing enough time to establish a relationship and to teach clients their role in this process. Counsellors are encouraged to

- know the client’s home country’s norms on personal space, eye contact and privacy
- ask direct and indirect questions appropriately, as some cultures consider directness as intrusive
- be aware that some clients may appear to be unwilling to share their emotions because such expressions are considered a sign of weakness in their home country’s cultural context

## Level 1: Cultural variables and world view

This first level of assessment involves determining a client’s world view in order to identify barriers to be addressed. World view is a vital and complex system that includes these elements:

- *Locus of control.* A client’s decision making is influenced by whether a client comes from an individualistic or collectivist culture.
- *Time orientation.* A client’s view of meetings, appointments and other time-specific events is impacted by time orientation.
- *Perceptions of human nature.* A client’s view of others as basically good or a combination of good and bad affects work relationships.
- *Family roles and relationships with others.* Career choices are impacted by a client’s view of family relationships and work roles that are acceptable for men and women.
- *Work values.* Work values, such as self-reliance as opposed to group decision making, may affect work performance.<sup>44</sup>

Once this first level of assessment has been carried out, counsellors will have a much better understanding of clients’ values and beliefs and how these may or may not fit in the Canadian workplace.

## Level 2: Personal career issues

The second level of assessment examines the immigrant’s personal adjustment. Counsellors are encouraged to find out about clients’ experiences before immigration and the circumstances of their leaving. Counsellors are encouraged to carry out research to understand more of the following issues:

- traumas associated with refugees
- expectations of immigrants and refugees
- the experience of culture shock, with feelings of loss, isolation, loneliness and lack of support
- the stress accompanying clients’ experiences of acculturation<sup>45</sup>

Counsellors may also want to keep in mind that immigrants may acculturate faster than refugees, and younger immigrants usually integrate faster than older immigrants.

### Level 3: Employability

The major goal of this level is to help clients identify and understand employment barriers that limit their career choices and to develop a plan to overcome them. Employment barriers may include

- English language proficiency
- self-sufficiency
- recognition of prior learning
- discrimination
- knowledge of labour markets
- labour market expectations<sup>46</sup>

Addressing these issues will deal with the perceived and real barriers facing these clients.

### Level 4: Goal setting

The last level of assessment involves working in a collaborative manner to help clients set pragmatic goals. Most clients need to start work or prepare for work as soon as possible. Examples of activities that will help people in their work search include

- “language training
- resume writing
- interviewing skills
- finding Canadian work-related experience
- learning about the Canadian labour market and workplace expectations”<sup>47</sup>

## Cross-cultural approaches

Knowledge of cultural diversity, while important, provides very little information about individual clients. The more critical piece is the importance of culture in the experience of clients within their families, groups and communities.

Counsellors need to be flexible in their approaches to determining the experience of clients and in working in ways that are meaningful to clients. This includes incorporating cultural inquiry into career counselling practice. In fact, it means realizing that “culture must be seen as a reciprocal process that is ever present in the career counselling relationship.”<sup>48</sup>

“Cross-cultural preparation is a life work that depends on personal development and reflective professional practice.”<sup>49</sup>

Here are ways to enhance cross-cultural counselling expertise:

- Read literature by writers from different cultures.
- Attend related conferences or workshops.
- Become more familiar with settlement services in your community.
- Stay informed about world affairs, including migration patterns.
- Explore services to multicultural groups that are evolving in other disciplines (for example, mental health services).
- Stay up to date about relevant programs in your community.
- Advocate for immigrant and refugee community groups

### Cultural empathy

Understanding how the world of work is viewed and experienced by racially or ethnically diverse groups is an important skill for career counsellors. Cultural empathy is achieved by “gaining an understanding about the ways that culture has influenced a client’s life and communicating that understanding back to clients in a meaningful way.”<sup>50</sup>

Demonstrating cultural empathy allows counsellors to validate the strengths and accomplishments that they hear. Clients benefit by hearing what the career counsellor perceives as the cultural influences in their life.

Some examples of useful topics include

- clients’ beliefs about careers
- values related to work roles
- role models
- gender roles
- beliefs about where the client should be in life
- how the family views different jobs<sup>51</sup>

“Skillful career counsellors may never have to ask directly about culture; rather they are able to guide individual clients through an assessment process that incorporates cultural inquiry.”<sup>52</sup>

### Listening with understanding

“Set the tone of acceptance and understanding. Somehow indicate to clients that they have a great deal to teach you. If you listen and you respect the individual’s understanding of their own problems and issues, then you’re well on your way to developing some sort of collaborative solution.”

Betty Benson  
University of Alberta

### Staying current with world affairs

“We need to be careful not to make assumptions about immigrants or refugees and their backgrounds. Take time to find out a bit about their immigration status and the circumstances leading up to their coming to Canada. You may be surprised to learn about the various countries they’ve lived in or the places they’ve received their education. If you keep current on world politics and issues, you’ll be better able to understand some of the circumstances that prompt people to seek refugee status or to immigrate.”

Julia Melnyk  
Springboard Consulting Inc.

## Other theories and approaches

### Strength-based approach

The strength-based approach, also known as solution-focused counselling, builds upon the premise that everyone, no matter what their level of functioning, has strengths and resources that they can contribute. They may not be using their strengths and resources, they may be underusing them or they may have forgotten about them. The counsellor’s role is to help clients identify their own strengths and attributes by focusing on times when clients handled change well and by finding clues in their clients’ past roles and accomplishments that would help identify strategies that are more likely to be successful.

Important to any empowerment-based approach is ensuring clients are mutually involved in determining goals, solutions and the pace and kinds of changes they will work toward. Client-driven implies client ownership in the career-building process.

An effective strength-based approach involves asking questions to prompt client identification of strengths. Asking the following questions may be helpful:

- *Survival questions.* Given what you have gone through in your life, how have you managed to survive so far?
- *Support questions.* What people have given you special understanding, support, guidance?
- *Possibility questions.* What are your hopes, visions, aspirations?
- *Esteem questions.* When people say good things about you, what are they likely to say?
- *Exception questions.* When things were going well in your life, what was different?<sup>53</sup>

These questions can be woven throughout the career-building process to help clients focus on the positive aspects of their lives as they move forward.

### Systems theory

The systems theory framework “contains three interconnected systems of content influences: the individual system, the social system and the environmental/societal system... Clients are able to define themselves within their culture and elaborate the meaning of their culture<sup>54</sup> and how it influences their career development.

Systems theory allows counsellors to focus on those aspects of culture that clients themselves consider to be most relevant in their lives. Therefore, any action plans or interventions that are considered will also be culturally relevant for clients. The advantage of systems theory is that it helps counsellors understand that cultural influences are woven into clients' needs.

Systems theory emphasizes the importance of working “towards improving the environmental and societal systems that impact people’s career development.”<sup>55</sup> This focus on social advocacy reminds counsellors that the barriers faced by clients are not within the client, but they are systemic roadblocks that can be changed.

### Constructivist theory

Constructivist theory suggests that the social group defines “objective reality” about experiences and phenomena, such as healing, human behaviour and employment.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, knowledge is socially constructed and varies from culture to culture.

Constructivism encourages counsellors to refrain from making assumptions about what goals would be best for clients or what solutions would help them with their problems. This is not a prescriptive approach but rather one that helps clients to learn more about themselves and what kind of work is available for them in their community.

## Communicating with immigrant clients

Every client is unique, and every interaction with a client is a cross-cultural one. Working with clients from other cultures simply makes this statement more obvious. A communication, cultural, or language barrier between a counsellor and a client will hinder the counselling process in obvious ways.

No matter which approach is used, counsellors need to:

- quickly assess the client’s communication skills
- adapt their communication style accordingly
- alter how they engage clients in the career-building process

There are three communication skill areas that are important when working with individuals whose first language is not English:

- *Written skills.* Clearly written notes may be used by clients with their friends and family. Writing notes for clients also helps them keep track of what they are exploring or doing next. New and unfamiliar names and places should be written down.
- *Spoken skills.* Clients have varying levels of formality and directness in their speaking style. Many people learning English are able to make social conversation but may not be able to express their feelings well or speak theoretically.
- *Nonverbal skills.* Culturally determined, nonverbal communication is open to misinterpretation. Eye contact and personal distancing vary among cultures and may indicate respect or shyness. Ask clients to explain gestures or expressions that are unclear as this will be a chance to clarify the Canadian equivalent.<sup>57</sup>

Assist clients with building communication skills by

- teaching the importance of good first impressions
- providing technical vocabulary related to work search and training
- teaching the conventions of small talk and politeness

## Selecting counselling resources

Counsellors need to evaluate resources to identify cultural bias and to consider the impact of inappropriate resources on clients.

The following questions may help to determine if career-related and labour market materials are free of cultural bias:

- Are the names in examples from a variety of multicultural backgrounds?
- Do the photos feature visible minorities in appreciable numbers?
- Are analogies drawn appropriately across socioeconomic levels?
- Do the values presented represent values other than those of the dominant culture?

- Do the stories and pictures portray a range of behaviours or do they show cultural stereotypes?
- Is the reading level appropriate?<sup>58</sup>

Often, common assessment tools, such as tests of intelligence, interests and aptitudes, lack validity for immigrants due to

- client's unfamiliarity with activities listed
- lack of appropriate norms
- difficulty to create validity of constructs across cultures
- clients' level of understanding of various test items<sup>59</sup>

When selecting appropriate career resources to use with clients, counsellors are encouraged to consider the following questions:

- Is the client familiar with the activities discussed or surveyed?
- Is the view of a job the same from one culture to another?
- Are the assumptions in the interest inventory valid across cultures?
- Is the language appropriate?
- Is the job or profession itself culture-specific?
- To what degree is this client free to make career decisions as opposed to deciding on the basis of family or societal pressure?<sup>60</sup>

## Focusing on Employment

Here are some strategies to help immigrant job seekers and workers to begin the process for finding work and thriving in the new job. These strategies will help clients gather employment information, seek qualifications assessments and search for work. Counsellors also may want to consider providing additional supports to clients after they become employed.

### Giving hope

“People do so many interesting things and they have so many skills to build upon. We help people focus on language first and then move forward, not backward. We teach them about their rights and we help them understand the work opportunities out there. We have them networking and feeling good about themselves. There are lots of grey areas and we know it. But counsellors can give hope or take it away.”

Sonia Bitar

Changing Together: A Centre for Immigrant Women

### Helping immigrants gather information

In general, one of the consequences of having a language and communication barrier is “not being fully and accurately informed about the world of work and its related areas [including] not knowing what career choices and opportunities are available and how to access them.”<sup>61</sup>

A lack of information may become a barrier to successful work search. In general, immigrants may need help gathering information because they have

- inaccurate information from embassy staff in their home countries
- misunderstandings about the role of government institutions and settlement agencies
- limited knowledge about where and how to obtain employment information
- misleading expectations of labour markets
- misunderstandings about educational and funding opportunities to improve English, continue their education or upgrade their skills
- limited familiarity with career progression and career ladders<sup>62</sup>

### Making community connections

“Help them to connect with others who are adapting. We’re working with people to support them and help them move on to wherever it is they think they want to go. It’s also giving people information about programs when it is appropriate and making good referrals.”

Janet Hammel  
Alberta Employment and Immigration

In some countries, the citizens are wary of government officials and only share information with officials when necessary. This reluctance to share information may carry into counselling sessions, making it difficult for the counsellor to be fully informed about the client.

### Helping immigrants with qualifications assessments

One of the most frequently cited barriers is the lack of recognition for overseas qualifications. Even when qualifications are recognized, it is difficult for many immigrants to compete for mainstream positions that require near-native language proficiency.

Help clients who possess foreign credentials and experience by:

- explaining the foreign qualifications assessment process
- directing them to translation assistance, if required
- referring them to qualifications assessment services
- providing the timelines and expenses (if any) for getting their foreign credentials assessed

### Helping immigrants with work search

As newcomers search for work, they may become frustrated because their previously successful work search strategies are not effective in the Canadian context. There are a variety of job search strategies that can be appropriate based on your client’s needs.

Job search strategies include the following:

- *Job clubs.* Group programs, such as job clubs, can be the most supportive for people from collectivist cultures.
- *Family support.* Family members are also important supports to include in clients’ work search.
- *Workplace experiences.* Job shadowing, work experience, mentoring and on-the-job training opportunities are effective for helping newcomers adjust to the labour market.
- *Language resources.* Current print and digital resources are useful to instruct clients in work search skills, as well as English language skills.
- *Portfolios.* Portfolio building is common because the focus is on all the formal and informal learning experiences they have had that could translate into personal strengths, such as transferable skills.
- *Resumés.* Clients may need support for writing resumés to help them transfer their past experiences into skills and knowledge that will be meaningful to Canadian employers.
- *Employment resources.* Clients need to use every resource available to connect them to opportunities that will give them work experience in their field, sector, trade or profession. People, publications, websites, associations, government programs and volunteer opportunities are all examples of employment resources.
- *Employment and training programs.* Refer clients to programs that will prepare them to enter the labour market or return to training.
- *Job interviews.* Practise the communication skills required to help them become comfortable and competent before they interact with employers.
- *Cultural coaching.* Provide the written and unwritten rules of the culturally-specific process of finding work. Explain workplace expectations and cultures.<sup>63</sup>

### Dreams of the future

“People will be successful if they see that they belong. They need their past experiences to be recognized, to find meaningful work and to be part of a community. They have dreams and they’ve come here to make better lives.”

Sonia Bitar

Changing Together: A Centre for Immigrant Women

## Helping immigrants with discrimination

“The attitudes of employers have an important impact on the employment prospects and earnings of immigrants.”<sup>64</sup> These clients may face

- subjective job interview and employee assessment
- exploitation
- racism
- social alienation
- misattribution of technical and social problems to racial or cultural traits of groups of newcomers

When clients do not understand the language well enough or are not aware of human rights legislation, they may be unaware of their mistreatment and their rights. As a result, they may experience externalized or internalized anger, helplessness, and reverse ethnic or racial prejudice toward the mainstream cultural group.

Counsellors are encouraged to “help culturally different individuals understand that although they may encounter discrimination, they cannot be discouraged by it or consider themselves perpetual victims of it. They can be taught to deal with it and to use the resources available to surmount it.”<sup>65</sup>

Counsellors can help them deal with both covert and open discrimination by

- assisting them with appropriate, assertive but polite responses to discriminatory behaviour

- role playing with them to practise responding in a socially acceptable way
- making them become aware of human rights legislation and the steps they can take to be protected

## Providing employment supports

Clients may unexpectedly find themselves running into problems on the job because of culture shock, establishing a new occupational identity, understanding Canadian workplace norms or dealing with discrimination. Your continued support may involve facilitating discussions or referrals, implementing problem solving techniques, explaining cultural norms and debriefing.

### Job orientations

Counsellors can help new employees by making them aware of the importance and benefits of orientations that clarify workplace policies and procedures. Some smaller organizations may not have formal orientations to the job. In that case, it is helpful when employees are aware of questions they can ask to find out about the organization.

Orientations also provide valuable information on workplace safety. For example, if a worker has an injury, coverage in Alberta might be available through Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB). The WCB supports injured workers with compensation and rehabilitative services to help them to return to work. Employees should be aware of their responsibility to report any injury, no matter how insignificant, to their employer and WCB. Counsellors may want to locate worker safety information to provide to their clients.

### Worker rights and responsibilities

Some immigrants may have little or no exposure to the world of work. In fact, they may be entering the workforce for the first time. Some immigrants, such as those who have limited decision-making skills, may lack the confidence to challenge employers and are at risk of exploitation.

It will be helpful for these workers to be aware that their rights are protected by provincial legislation.<sup>66</sup> Some of the provincial employment standards include

- wages and deductions
- overtime, vacations and general holidays
- maternity, parental and reservist leave
- layoffs and termination
- special rules for workers under 18 years of age

Counsellors are in a position to assist clients who believe their rights have been infringed upon and who lack confidence to deal directly with situations.

### Job loss

Immigrants who lose a job in Canada also experience a loss of culture, undergoing an emotionally-laden set of experiences including

- loss of cultural expertise (a knowing of the written and unwritten rules of gaining employment)
- loss of support groups in the former cultural setting
- loss of a network of family and friends<sup>67</sup>

Job losses for new workers in Canada may only add to the other losses that immigrants face when adjusting to their new country. Counsellors should be sensitive to their clients' needs regarding the grieving process.

## In Conclusion

Alberta will continue to become home to immigrants from various countries, depending on migration patterns and world events. Counsellors need to continue educating themselves about various cultures. As our workforce continues to diversify, more employers are developing inclusive communities for their employees. The cultural dynamics will continue to change and raise different challenges and opportunities for workers who are new to the Canadian workplace.

### Telling the story

“Newcomers know that their grandchildren will be born here and will tell the story of them coming to Canada.”

Frank Bessai

Catholic Social Services

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