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Introduction

Between \$2 and \$5.9 billion CAD is the amount thought to be lost by the Canadian economy from the underutilization of immigrant talent every year. 1 In the next six years one million jobs are expected to go unfilled across Canada, with 114,000 of these in Alberta alone.2 Without the right people to fill them, our potential as a nation will go unrealized. More specifically to the Calgary context, Ben Brunnen, Chief Economist at the Calgary Chamber of Commerce has stated that labor shortages will be the biggest roadblock to economic growth in Alberta, because jobs are being created that cannot be filled with the existing labor supply; it follows that people must enter from other countries to fill this demand if we want to prosper as a province and a country.3

Despite these needs Canada is staying at the same levels of immigration although under pressure from businesses and the provinces.⁴ Immigration Minister Jason Kenney hopes to first address the issues immigrants face that lead to their higher unemployment rates and wage gaps before increasing the levels of immigration.⁵ There is a disconnect in the way that the Canadian government puts perspective entrants through rigorous screening and assessment using a point system based largely on their capacity to be valuable members of Canadian society, then limits their potential upon arrival both systematically and through by-product of job market norms.

This paper seeks to understand the barriers faced by immigrant women looking for employment that goes beyond subsistence and is meaningful to the individual, as well as the role social programs play in their journey. First literature surrounding meaningful employment will be reviewed. Then challenges faced by immigrant women entering

the workforce will be discussed. Following these challenges a brief case study of a Calgary charity will be used to demonstrate how the barriers can be addressed through immigrant services effectively. Finally suggestions will be made as to how to better the job attainment process for immigrants on an organization and systematic

Methods

The primary mode of research in this report was to interview immigrant women that have transitioned or are transitioning into the workforce in Calgary. Seven interviewees from this demographic were sourced from Making Changes, a Calgary charity that works with immigrant women. After the interviews, followup emails were sent to retrieve participants' written comments on what seemed to be the most common themes. Finally, the interviews were analyzed, compared, and interpreted then verified with existing literature.

Seven immigrant women participated in the study, each with different countries of origin and career backgrounds (appendix 1). All the participants immigrated under the skilled labor class in the last 10 years, were highly educated and well employed in their countries of origin, and were over the age of 18. Making Changes will be used as a case study to demonstrate an example of best practices in immigrant employment services for women, and the role these organizations can play in helping their participants find meaningful employment.

An in depth analysis of Making Changes was conducted using an existing case study and the program design for their employment and life skills program in addition to testaments from

the interviewees about their experience with Making Changes. Because of the small sample size this paper will be primarily a literature review, supplemented with anecdotal evidence from the interview participants.

Meaningful Employment

Different definitions have been put forth about meaningful employment. The original, by Hackman and Oldham, defines meaningful work as, "The degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile."6 Other literature suggests that, "Employees consider jobs that are more interesting, emit feelings of accomplishment, promote helpfulness and contribute to people's lives to be critical in achieving meaningful work."7 Finally, psychological meaningfulness is defined as, "The value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideals or standards."8

Each participant was also asked to define the term, the commonalities among the women's definitions include, some sort of emotional tie or happiness (5/7), contribution of value to the work place (4/7), and alignment to educational background or usage of previous skills (5/7) (appendix 2). Only three of the women mentioned security or wages in their definitions and one specifically excluded it as criteria. For the purpose of this study meaningful employment will be defined as, "a job that promotes feelings of happiness and accomplishment where the individual can leverage their skills, experience, and education, to make a contribution to the work place."

Factors that drive work engagement are skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy,

and feedback on results.9 These factors are unlikely to be found in entry level service jobs and would probably be more commonly found in jobs that require higher education or experience. It is important to note, however, that "meaningful work" is subjective. Some individuals may experience meaningful work while carrying out tasks that are routine with less autonomy, etc.

Although the purpose of this review is to discover the benefits of meaningful employment for society and the individual, it is important to note that the studies reviewed are primarily approaching the topic from an organizational improvement point of view. The motivation behind the increase in research on this subject stems from overwhelming evidence that employee engagement has significant impact on organizational performance. 10 Consequently the benefits of meaningful work on the individual have not been widely explored by academia. However, the benefits can be inferred by the definitions previously stated and the participant's definitions. They employ terms such as: worthwhile, valuable, interesting, and feelings of accomplishment, all of which have positive connotations. Meaningful work will be used as a positive term for an individual that experiences it, and will be look upon as the desired outcome for all individuals seeking employment.

Challenges

Literature presents an extensive list of barriers that contribute to the epidemic of immigrants being unable to find jobs in the field in which they were previously employed or were educated in. The percentage of those individuals not employed in their desired field has been coined as "the mismatched rate." In 2001, 38% of educated immigrant women were employed

in low education jobs compared to 25% of educated immigrant men and 13% of Canadian born women.¹² This translates into a 40% wage difference from those employed in jobs requiring post-secondary.13

Five out of seven interview participants are currently employed in their field of education but only three are currently employed in the same field and at the same level. One of these took several years to reach the same level. It should be noted that meaningful employment can be obtained in a field outside a person's experience and education areas but it is assumed that being employed in that field would contribute to a sense of meaningfulness. Moreover, for one participant the definition of meaningful employment had nothing to do with the job itself:

It used to mean what I want to do, now it means security. It's hard here, so I need to adapt my definition. - Hannah

After obtaining a secure position that she enjoys, Hannah has stopped trying to find a job aligned with her career in her home country.

Language

In immigrant populations official language skills positively affect employment levels and other indicators of economic integration.14 This finding was demonstrated in the study as language proficiency was noted as a barrier to employment:

Sometimes you feel that English, even for the accent is not easy, but you need to leave that away from you otherwise you can feel frustrated and depressed and don't want to try...you have to be very strong. 11 - Paula

More so than actual language barriers such as communication or understanding, several of the participants felt discrimination because of their accents and language capabilities.

Discrimination

A further challenge was anticipated and perceived negativity. One woman was told that Canadians don't like immigrants because they take Canadian jobs. Hearing this sentiment increased apprehension in the job search and when communicating with Canadians. After a while she came to the realization that if felt by the general population it was not communicated during their interactions. This was echoed by other participants as well and in other studies.15 Discrimination based on visible minority status was not felt by any of the participants, this may be because of Calgary's social composition including 22% visible minorities. 16 One participant noted "[Canada is] diverse, which makes it unique. So it's not stereotyped, everyone is welcome" (Jessica).

Lack of Social Support

The lack of support networks, more specifically related to childcare, can pose a huge challenge in finding employment. It can also be a barrier in partaking in programs that lead to employment like volunteering and social programs. Moreover, finding childcare providers that they trust in an unfamiliar city with the same cultural values, something generally sought by the participants, was even more of a challenge.

Another study conducted with past participants of Making Changes observed that it is the women that are making sacrifices in their careers for the benefit of their families.¹⁷ They also found that some women had to quit their jobs all together because of the high cost and inflexible schedules

that are common with daycares.18 Contrarily to this observation, in this study it was noted that the women who immigrated while married may have had the added challenge of taking care of their children, but at the same time it was their husbands that sacrificed meaningful employment for "bread and butter," as one participant put it. She continued on to say, "He didn't want to work in the security position definitely but he turned out to be brave" (Ashley). This gave her the opportunity to take the time to find a job that was aligned with her education instead of taking the first job she could find to pay the bills. She used this time to volunteer and take classes, and is now employed in a job in her field. This situation was similar to at least one other participant.

Job Attainment

Most of the participants expressed their frustration with the job attainment process in Canada because of the importance placed on networking. Without friends or family already in the job market to make connections, it can be frustrating to find employment:

None of my family lives here, none of the family friends, no one lives here...Everyone was telling me you would never be called for an interview on your resume. This was something that de-motivated me, there is a lot of corruption [back home] but people get jobs on their resume, nobody knows them, you send a resume they go through it and they call you for an interview if they find you a deserving candidate. 11 - Ashley

Another noted that recruiters were looking for the whole package, someone who could do the job but also had an engaging personality. Showcasing personality is made more difficult for those with language barriers or cultural differences. For example those from countries where hierarchy is more important in the workplace may demonstrate respect by using titles and waiting to be addressed by superiors first which could be seen as standoffish in an interview:

In [my country of origin] finding jobs is based on education and marks and previous jobs, but here it is people skills and personality.)) - Rochelle

One participant also felt it was hard to know exactly what the recruiters were looking for but recognized that it was important to understand what was expected and present that in your cover letter and resume:

> Applying for jobs is different here because you have to understand what the employer wants then put it on your resume in that exact way. You can have the skills but you have to put it more detailed on your resume.

- Jessica

Lack of Canadian Experience/ **Unrecognized Credentials**

Lacking Canadian experience and education was a factor addressed by several participants. This finding is reaffirmed by Girard and Smith who state that although 47% of immigrants have postsecondary education compared to only 38% of Canadian born people, it is immigrants that face an ongoing disadvantage in the labour market. 19 Despite education, immigrants have a three times higher unemployment rate due to issues relating to quality and recognition of foreign credentials, and a lack of Canadian work experience.20

Of the immigrants admitted to Canada in 2004, 133,746 of 235,824 were of the economic class, which comprises of skilled workers and professionals.²¹ The stringent processes required for entry favours those that are highly educated and have the capacity to work in regulated professions.²² These regulations are designed to ensure that those admitted will, "Successfully establish in Canada."23 This process seems superfluous in light of the sobering realization that many of them are unable to reach their potential.24

"

- Ashley

I thought skilled worker class meant that they acknowledged that my husband was an engineer and I was a teacher, it was a very scary reality. Since we applied in the skilled worker class, what I understand as an education person, since I was labelled a skilled worker and I qualify for it. Qualifying means that they are accepting my qualifications. Then you realize, Oh my God my Masters is not a Masters.... then we realized we were skilled workers only in papers. 11

Often immigrants aren't aware of the strict regulation of the Canadian work force before their arrival, this was the case of one participant who learned this reality after her move, "Almost every profession is licenced, we didn't know this, even for my husbands security job...people who are doctors [in my country of origin] are working as taxi drivers and I didn't know that" (Ashley). As many as 20% of Canadians are employed in regulated professions that require licences to practice which can be expensive and time consuming to obtain.25

Canadian Work Place Culture

Differences in workplace culture can pose a huge challenge when both acquiring and keeping employment. An example stated by one participant was that pace differences from country to country can vary:

The pace here is slower here than [at homel; there you have to be on top of things and there is always something to do and a process, here there is a bottleneck and strict regulation so the pace is slower.

- Theresa

Another articulated the reverse, saying, "[It's] more fast paced here, on your toes, get work done and know your deadlines, [where I came from] it's slower" (Ashley). These conflicting responses demonstrate the challenges of adapting to basic workplace culture and the different ways these challenges are presented depending on the individual's country of origin.

Differences in communication styles can lead to misunderstandings in the work place for immigrants from countries that are more direct in their approach to communication. One participant felt that she was receiving dishonest feedback when it was not direct. She's since learned that in Canadian culture it is seen as rude to be to direct or blunt. Other differences in workplace culture include a less formal social structure and hierarchy, power distance, and differences in teamwork mentality.

Social Program Issues

Many of the issues discussed by the woman and found in literature can be addressed through immigrant services. Often finding these agencies can be another challenge all on it's own. Most

immigrant services attract users by word of mouth rather than actively advertising to the public, making it difficult for many to find out about the programs that could fill their knowledge gaps and help them in the job search. This was the case for several of the study participants:

You need to find out how to find it, I suppose if you don't have any friends, then who will suggest it to you... all these immigrant services don't advertise, its hard to find them in the beginning, once you go to one they will refer to everything... there is a communication lag.

- Rochelle

The access to services related to employment was not easy too. While my husband was doing a survival job in Ontario, someone told him about these services. If that guy had not told us about this we would never know perhaps. 11 - Ashley

Secondary sources also found that immigrants have a hard time figuring out where to go for what service because of a fragmented and confusing social services sector.²⁶ This is aligned with the confusion felt by the participant who felt that even after finding services, the information received was too general and frustrating. This may be in part because she was not connecting with the specific services she needed. The general information may have been beneficial for many new immigrants, but was not the type of service she was looking for. The participants were not referring negatively to any one organization, but the whole process of finding and using all the services collectively.

[There is] almost too much info, there needs to be a consolidated information source... It took a time to do filtering by myself to catch the most updated and useful... there are some organizations out there which exists only for themselves providing aimless & meaningless services to immigrants, not listening to immigrant needs in depth. - Maria

Once the appropriate services are found even then it can be a challenge as many newcomers feel like a number in the system. This was a common thread with the participants as demonstrated by the women's statements.

The first question that they just ask to the newcomer is the resident card number. and so the non-profit organizations can get funding from the government, and the newcomers just received some printed papers or information that it can be found on Internet, which is free. I believe that government should give funding just to organizations where the newcomers have been mentoring properly.

- Theresa

I know that most of the organizations try working hard with enthusiasm but, there are some organizations out there which exists only for themselves providing aimless & meaningless services to immigrants, not listening to immigrant needs in depth.

- Hannah

One participant cited the negative mindset of organizations around immigrants finding meaningful work to be an obstacle. "If I would have listened to the messages that everyone was telling me I would have lowered my expectations and taken any job even if it wasn't in my field" (Maria). Organizations make the job situation seem hopeless which can negatively impact the confidence of immigrants.

For the reasons behind these inefficiencies in social programs it is important to turn back to the literature to determine the underlying problems. A study conducted with policy makers across Canada, sheds light on these issues.²⁷ Their findings include narrow mandates, lack of integration of policies and programs, and limited resources.²⁸ Although the study was conducted in Toronto, Vancouver, and Edmonton, the inefficiencies in the city are similar across different cities.²⁹ Narrow mandates hinder organizations from providing holistic assistance to immigrants, one policy maker interviewed in the study stated, "There is a huge crack, lots of people are falling through . . . It seems we are pushing people away."30

This statement is reaffirmed by the frustration felt by many of the immigrant women's comments discussed so far. What was perceived as not listening may in fact have been due to the organizations restrictive service mandates and as a result the women fell through the cracks and did not receive the help they needed. Lack of integration of policies and programs refers to government budget cuts in programs while at the same time the expectation is that there will be quick results.31 At the same time there are multiple layers of policies that inhibit integration of constituent groups and policies.³² One woman interviewed held a Bachelors and two Masters, all completed at English Universities. After arrival in Canada she volunteered as a translator where she assisted immigrants with her knowledge of 9

languages. When it came time for the job search she was asked to take a fully funded English course, a clear waste of resources in light of her fluency and education in the language. She ended up taking the course as a way to put Canadian education on her resume:

I was thinking someone else can do it, it was a funded program at Bow Valley. They said do it you are getting funding. I thought someone else could have got that funding, it was a waste of time and waste of money. I told them I studied all my life in English.))

- Rochelle

This statement demonstrates a clear lack of integration of policy and practice. Although no overarching statement can be made based on this response it shows that this is an area that requires further investigation. Limited resources are the final and perhaps the most serious issue facing the immigrant services sector. Budget cuts lead to a decreasing number of staff members, an inability to adapt to new language groups, and the organizations dealing with narrower mandates rather than a full spectrum of services.³³ Ultimately this results in fewer newcomers served and these individuals being helped less thoroughly.³⁴ A by-product of reduced funding is increased competition for resources and a decrease in collaborative working relationships among immigrant service providers.35

The culmination of these factors seems to be that there are many organizations in the immigrant services market that target a very specific subsection of newcomers. These specific services can be difficult for immigrants to utilize because of the program's lack of advertisement. This may be a result of lack of funding or a desire to keep operations small as their funding can only accommodate so many. The newcomers that are helped may not be given the help they need because of the narrow service mandates and limited resources. Fortunately, in Calgary there seems to be good communication among organizations as several of the study participants were referred to Making Changes by other organizations.

Making Changes

One organization that has been touted at a best practice in the industry is Making Changes.³⁶ Their Employment and Life Skills (ELS) program offers a comprehensive program that tackles many of the challenges brought up by the women. This program is delivered over a minimum 36 hours to class sizes of about 15 – 20 women, most often the classes are conducted for six hours a week for six weeks.³⁷ Although the program does not directly focus on English language training, it provides a social setting for women to practice English while discussing a variety of different topics in a place where there are other minorities so they can be free of discrimination. In terms of social support Making Changes is a place where women can share concerns, anxieties, and the difficulties they experience as immigrants in Canada. This is a psychosocial need not often met in programs that focus solely on skill development.38 Further when asked about the positive impacts of the program 49% of participants surveyed said they were able to establish a supportive social network.³⁹

The length of the program may be a contributing factor to establishing a social network, because participants are in a class setting with the same women over the course of the program they are able to bond. Four of the seven key areas

addressed by the program have to do with job attainment:40

- 1. Canadian (Calgary) employment and labour context
- 2. Canadian (Calgary) business culture
- 3. Conducting job searches
- 4. Preparation of documents

After learning about these areas 65% percent of participants found part or full time employment; of these 58% were employed in their chosen field and 74% were happy with their employment because of factors such as pleasant and supportive work environments, financial stability, and regular and stable hours. 41 Although inconsistent with the definition put forth at the beginning of this paper, the factors lead to the participants being "happy" with their employment, which was a criteria for meaningful employment. The program also offers free childcare and bus tickets to make the program more accessible.⁴² At the end of the program participants in Bragg's study were asked the impact that Making Changes had on their life. The top responses included:

- Knowledge of the Canadian work place (81%)
- Knowledge of job search skills (77%)
- Confidence (74%)
- Self esteem (68%)
- Knowledge of community resources (64%)
- Built a social network (49%)

Those that had been a part of the Employment and Life Skills program of the seven women interviewed for this study had this to say about their experience:

The most valuable thing I have learnt from Making Changes is the Canadian culture. - Jessica

Making Changes was the first program I attended after coming to Canada. It is a very good program for new immigrants. They actually empower women by providing all the resources so they are ready for the job or at least know the right direction... I had a job on the last day of the program. 11 -Rochelle

The program of Making Changes was more practical than others. The most valuable thing they provide us was the time for lots of discussion and sharing with immigrant women who are in same boat. - Hannah

These responses reinforce Bragg's finding that knowledge of the Canadian workplace and job search skills were among the most important aspects addressed by the program.

Opportunities and Conclusions

Although none of the participants in this study were fleeing violence or oppression in their home countries, there are still significant benefits that were expressed about their move to Canada:

There is nothing better than your life security, that you are given your rights, you have accident here someone is there to help you out. These very small things do not happen in our own countries so we are happy. - Ashley

The aspect of safety and economic opportunity are the two of the biggest reasons that immigrants move to Canada. As a society we have made it extremely difficult for immigrants to have both. These seven participants were well employed in their home countries but saw the opportunity to leave and come to a place renowned for economic prosperity and safety. Their testaments show that although their safety needs are met the road to economic prosperity is difficult.

The collective response from the participants is that it is necessary to be connected to relevant programs and services immediately after arriving to ensure the best chance of efficient and successful integration into the workplace and society:

A guide that says the different services, can help us ...[and] more communication, you need to advertise all the programs the government has in order to know which is the best way to do things. - Paula

Almost all of the participants suggested that right from the airport, a package with city specific information like numbers and addresses for health services, immigrant programs, and SIN information should be available. One out of the seven described her experience with Making Changes as "so so." This statement was not a result of the programming, but a comparison to another program in a different province she had completed immediately after arrival in Canada. This other program was more intensive and ended with job placements for the participants. The comparison is another demonstration of the need for a consolidated program resource so newcomers can find services that are as intensive/ casual as they want and cater to their specific needs.

It was recognized that it is the dual responsibility of both the individual and the government to look for and connect the immigrant to relevant services respectively:

It is government's responsibility for they are inviting immigrants to their country under the category of skilled worker class. So they should make sure that a professional could easily bridge the gap between himself and the prospective employer. 11

- Ashley

Others said that it was the responsibility of the immigrant to do research; something that none of the participants did before arrival, perhaps because of the perception that North America is the land of opportunity. If the message portrayed to those interested in entering Canada is overwhelmingly positive then newcomers will not see the value in extensive research. These first two recommendations of a consolidated information source and realistic messaging may help to ease the transition but will do nothing to address systematic issues.

The government needs to address the competitive atmosphere in the immigrant services sector and align their policies with their desired outcomes. If billions of dollars are being lost each year from under utilization of immigrant talent, investment in services that allow them to realize their full potential will only add to the country's prosperity.

Even if further funding is not possible or realistic to advise further analysis into whether government funding to immigrant services is being allocated in the most efficient way is necessary. Using funds more effectively, or mandating that organizations with similar

mandates work together will allow more immigrants to benefit. These programs should be focused on Canadian business culture and job attainment skills, areas that were viewed as the most valuable leanings from the Making Changes Program. It seems that funding programs that focus on these will be the most effective use of resources in terms of employment programs for immigrant women.

In Calgary an organization called Calgary Local Immigrant Partnership (CLIP) has been working to positively affect the integration of newcomers in Calgary over the last few years.⁴³ In their strategic plan CLIP lists, "All newcomers in Calgary will have access to meaningful employment."44 This among other strategic areas demonstrates a holistic strategy in creating a better city for immigrants. Over the next few years this organization may prove to be a model for best practices in integrating policy and practice in the immigrant services sector. Although some or all of the strategies mentioned may already be utilized to some degree, it is clear that they need to be more widely utilized to ensure a better transition for all immigrants. A better future is possible for Canada if we can better use the talent at our disposal, and a better, more meaningful life is possible for immigrants if they are empowered to contribute to Canada's prosperity.

Appendix 1 – Participant Profiles: Education and Employment

Participant*	Arrived in Canada	Employment in Home Country	Education	Current Employment	Match from Home Country to Current Employment in Canada
Theresa	2009	System analyst	5 yr. BCS	Between contracts; Last position in her field but not her desired position	No
Jessica	2015	Help desk analyst	BSc - Math	Unemployed	No
Ashley	2013	Teacher, Counselling Psychologist, Principal	MA – Eng. MSc - Psych	Teaching Assistant	No
Rochelle	2009	Partner in a recruiting firm	BSc MBA-HR LLM- HR	HR Manager	Yes
Paula	2011	Accountant	BBA – Acct	Accountant	Yes
Maria	2010	HR, training and development	BSc – Psych	Senior Learning Advisor	Yes
Hannah	2008	Marketing Manager	BA Philosophy	Internal Auditor	No

^{*} Names have been changed and countries of origin withheld to protect identities of participants

Appendix 2 – Participant Definitions of Meaningful Employment

Theresa	"Having the opportunity to improve yourself, keep busy, utilize your skills and share what you learn with other people."				
	"It is a workplace where the employees find equal opportunities to utilize their skills, to raise their opinions and where they can feel respected, secure, happy sharing the daily activities at work."				
Jessica	"Finding a career that gives you fulfillment that you love to do, where you can add value to society and also add value to yourself."				
	"Meaningful employment is when an individual is employed in his/her field of study and the individual finds fulfillment in the work and can give back to the society also the family must be financially stable. The individual must be motivated by the job. The individual must find inner satisfaction and joy doing the job."				
Ashley	"It's not in terms of money, meaningful means since I've been in the field of education for long and this is my area and this is what I'm good at, so I wanted to stay connected to my field. Even if I had been in security or been a taxi driver in my country then perhaps that would have been meaningful to me because that was my profession."				
	"I define meaningful employment as a career that is in line with your interest, experience and also your qualification."				
Rochelle	"An employment which gives you a job satisfaction at the end of the day is a meaningful employment. Which also gives you financial and emotional stability."				
Paula	"A place where you can develop your dreams and show your skills, at the same time you are working and have fun at the same time, work with passion and work what you want to do."				
	"If you woke up everyday in which is your passion you can be happy and develop different skills and you can show through your team and through your boss you are happy and do things in different ways.				
Maria	"Doing something that you enjoy doing, that you are passionate about that you feel you are able to leverage your skills and knowledge to do the job."				
	"Work on your study field doing something you enjoy and you are passionate about where you can leverage your skills and knowledge and contribute to others."				
Hannah	"It used to mean what I want to do, now it means security. It's hard here so I need to adapt my definition."				

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