

Are Current Employment Services Meeting the Needs of Immigrants?

A Recent Look*

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Abstract

Based on recently collected data on labour market experiences of immigrants in a region of the Greater Toronto Area, this article explores the findings relating to employment service provision. Findings are presented by education level, gender, immigration category and age. Results show uniformly low job search satisfaction levels, but strategies, knowledge of employment services and unmet needs differ between most comparison groups.

Keywords: Immigrant • employment services • diversity

Quality of employment is a vital determinant of settlement and career experiences of immigrants (Canadian Council of Refugees, 1998). Employment services can provide immigrants with tools and advice that may help individuals identify and successfully apply for positions that match their skills and experience. By doing so, employment service providers can act as an important link between potential employers and individuals looking for employment, especially those who are new entrants to the Canadian labour market. The challenge today is in finding ways to provide services to immigrant populations whose employment needs are as varied as their demographic characteristics and individual backgrounds.

The objective of this article is to share the findings of a recently conducted immigrant labour market survey related to employment service provision. Findings are presented by education level, gender, immigration category and age.

Employment experiences of immigrants in Canada today

Since the 1990s, an overall shift in immigration policy in Canada has occurred. Where multiculturalism and family reunification used to dominate immigration discourses, today they seek to meet the goals of immigrant self-sufficiency and integration (Abu-Laban, 1998). However, most studies report that, despite increasing levels of education and experience, immigrants today are facing more barriers to employment, especially employment that offers financial stability and the opportunity to use and benefit from their acquired skills (Gilmore, 2009; Galarneau & Morrisette 2004; Aydemir & Skuterud, 2005; Wilkinson, Peter and Chaturvedi, 2006).

For many immigrants, finding and maintaining employment after immigration is a crucial component in establishing stability and security for oneself and one's family (Canadian Council for Refugees, 1998; George & Chaze,

2009). The literature on immigrant employment experiences in Canada has demonstrated the effects of gender (George & Ramkissoon, 1998; Ng, 2009; Mojab, 1999; Wilkinson, Peter and Chaturvedi, 2006; Man, 2004), immigration application category (Shields et al., 2010; Lamba, 2003; Wilkinson, 2008) and education level (Li, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2008), as well as age, although to a lesser extent (Wilkinson, 2008; Lamba 2003). This literature often emphasizes questions of employment and underemployment rates. Given the diverse challenges faced by immigrants in the job market today, the importance of timely, informed employment service provision is heightened for immigrants (George & Chaze, 2009). Studies examining the job search experiences of immigrants reveal that while some immigrants experience more challenges than others, searching for work in Canada is a process fraught with barriers on the individual, structural and systemic levels (Oreopoulos, 2009; Bauder, 2003; Geddie 2002), resulting in inequitable labour market outcomes. Shields et al. (2010) report that men and principal applicants in the skilled worker category spent less time looking for work, whereas women and refugees experience longer search times. They also found, however, that jobs were only modestly matched with the individual's training and experience, regardless of immigration category, even as the individual spent more time in Canada.

While the provision of employment-related services is of vital importance for immigrants searching for employment in Canada and immigrant integration and settlement is the focus of interest for many academic, government and community organizations, the literature indicates that structural and systemic factors impede the delivery of these services and the potential benefits they could deliver to individuals. One issue with current employment services is that employment counselling and assistance geared specifically towards immigrants is often structured, along with other settlement services, to assist immigrants in the

initial phases of settlement without addressing medium- or long-term settlement needs (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003; Lee, 1999). Other issues include the need for culturally appropriate or competent service provision (Bernard & Moriah, 2007; Graham, Bradshaw & Trew, 2009), although this body of research has been critiqued for the ways in which it assumes that the social worker is part of the dominant culture (Sakamoto, 2007).

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Another challenge of contemporary service provision to immigrants is the prevalence of stereotypes and cultural assumptions leading to misinformation among service providers, their funders and employers who recruit through agencies (Bauder, 2003; Graham, Bradshaw & Trew, 2009; Donkor, 2004; Ng 1996; Oreopoulos, 2009; Lee, 1999). These perceptions had implications for the kind of assistance provided, thereby potentially limiting an individual's opportunities based on their ascribed characteristics. A one-size-fits-all approach to employment services leaves many labour market requirements unmet (Lee, 1999).

Other studies identify the pressures brought on by recent funding models that prioritize shortening periods of unemployment regardless of the quality or suitability of the position. Sometimes termed "survival" employment (Geddie 2002; Creese & Wiebe, 2009), this strategy can lead to underemployment and

gendered and racialized labour segmentation (Creese & Wiebe, 2009), with negative or limiting effects on long-term labour market experiences (Wilkenson, Peter & Chaturvedi, 2006; Li, Gervais & Duval, 2006; Mitchell, Lightman & Herd, 2007).

In summary, employment services play an important role in generating labour market success, especially for immigrants. However, for a variety of reasons, the provision of employment services to immigrants has not been able to fully address the needs of this group, resulting in higher levels of unemployment and underemployment. It is hoped that the findings presented below will begin to illuminate areas where further consideration is needed.

Methodology

Our data was collected between January and April 2009 in Peel, a region in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). A total of 1,425 surveys were completed by respondents living in the region, aged 15 and older, who had worked or searched for work in the previous 10 years. Surveys were completed in both paper and electronic format, with the majority being completed electronically. Peel's population is composed of a high percentage of immigrants

(48.6%), many of whom arrived in Canada within the last 20 years (Region of Peel, 2009). Of the most recently arrived immigrants (those who immigrated between 2001 and 2006), 60.5% were born in South or Southeast Asia. (Social Planning Council of Peel, 2009).

Our study took place during the height of the recent economic recession. Between October 2008 and October 2009, the employment rate in Canada declined by 2.3%, while the unemployment rate rose from 6.3% to 8.6% (Statistics Canada, 2009). Research shows that young people, low-income workers, families with young children and recent immigrants of core working age were among those who experienced the highest rate of employment loss during this time (Statistics Canada, 2009). During the recessionary period, the employment rate of recent immigrants dropped rapidly by 12.9%, compared with a much smaller decline (2.2%) among Canadian-born workers (Statistics Canada, 2009).

Sample description

Of the 1,425 survey respondents, 795 were immigrant respondents who provided information on their gender, age, education level and immigration category. See Table 1

Table 1
Sample characteristics (n=795)

		n	% of sample
Gender	Male	485	61.0
	Female	310	39.0
Age	< 30 years old	229	28.8
	≥ 30 years old	566	71.2
Education	Less than bachelor's degree	139	17.5
	Bachelor's degree and above	656	82.5
Immigration category	Principal applicant skilled worker	297	37.4
	All others	498	62.6

for a sample description. Of these 795 respondents, 61.0% identified as female and 17.5% being less than 30 years old (“youth” is defined by the Government of Canada (2009) as individuals under 30 years of age). Most respondents (62.6%) had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 28.8% identified immigrating under the principal applicant skilled worker category.

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Findings

Overall satisfaction with job search

To measure overall job search satisfaction, a scale out of 100 was created from four Likert scale items (Cronbach’s Alpha=0.789). Sample items included: “I am satisfied with my job searching experiences in Canada” and “I am satisfied with the quality of support that I have received from community organizations in finding a job.” All sample groupings reported low job search satisfaction levels, ranging from 45 to 50 out of 100 on the scale. There were no statistically significant differences between groups in our sample.

Job search strategies

Respondents were asked to select all of the job search strategies they had used from a comprehensive list. Findings relevant to this article focused on the use of service agencies and other formal employment services. Men

were only slightly more likely than women to use these strategies, with differences especially apparent in the use of recruitment firms and employment agencies by men (33% of men vs. 25% of women). Findings also indicate that respondents aged 30 years or older are much more likely to use these strategies, when compared to respondents under the age of 30. For instance, only 28% of the younger group reported visiting government or community agencies and 22% reported attending courses or seminars on finding a job, compared with 43% and 49 % of the older group, respectively. Furthermore, immigrants with a university degree reported using these strategies more than immigrants without a university degree. Specifically, 46% of immigrants with at least a university degree visited government or community agencies, while only 30% of immigrants without a bachelor’s degree used this strategy. Also, individuals who immigrated under the principal applicant skilled worker category were much more likely to use employment service strategies, compared with individuals immigrating under all other categories. The greatest difference (23%) in use of an individual strategy was seen for the strategy “Attended courses or seminars on finding a job.” A total of 61% of principal applicant skilled workers identified using this strategy, compared with 37% of all other immigrants.

Knowing where to go

Pearson chi-square tests of significance were performed within the categories of respondents with respect to the question, “Do you know where to go for help for job services in the Region of Peel?” A majority of men (66.3%) and women (60.7%) identified knowing where to go, and there were no significant differences ($\chi^2=2.479$, d.f. =1) between gender groupings. Similar numbers were reported for the those with less than a bachelor’s degree (65.4%) and those with a bachelor’s degree and above (63.4%), again with no significant difference ($\chi^2=0.303$, d.f.=1). However, when grouped by immigration status category, responses

Table 2
Employment help needed but not received,
by gender, education level, immigrant category and age (%*)

		Advice/counselling	Job search	Information	Financial help	Legal help	Transportation	Child care	Language help (e.g., translation, interpretation)	Other
Gender	Male	29.6	35.9	33.1	33.1	9.2	11.3	7.7	7.0	20.4
	Female	32.0	31.1	27.2	30.6	4.9	14.1	11.7	6.8	19.4
Education	Less than Bachelor's degree	29.2	35.4	22.1	46.9	6.2	23.0	10.6	8.8	6.2
	Bachelors degree and above	31.9	31.9	33.2	24.3	6.8	8.1	9.8	6.0	26.4
Immigration category	Principal applicant skilled worker	31.7	34.2	35.0	27.5	3.3	6.7	12.5	4.2	30.0
	All others	30.7	32.5	26.8	33.8	8.3	16.2	8.8	8.3	14.5
Age	< 30 years old	26.0	42.0	32.0	34.0	6.0	28.0	8.0	6.0	2.0
	≥ 30 years old	31.9	31.5	29.2	31.2	6.7	10.4	10.4	7.0	22.8

*Percentages based on only those who identified not having received help they needed.

showed a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2=4.247$, d.f.=1, $p\leq 0.05$): a higher percentages of principal applicants in the skilled worker category (69.6%) reported knowing where to go, compared with 61.8% of all other immigrants. A greater difference was found between respondents grouped by age: only 51.5% of respondents under the age of 30 said they knew where to go for job services in Peel, while 66.7% of those 30 years of age and over acknowledged they knew where to go ($\chi^2=10.975$, d.f.=1, $p\leq 0.001$).

Help needed but not received

Pearson chi-square tests of significance were also performed within the categories of respondents for the question, “Was there any kind of help you needed but did not receive?” There proved to be no significant difference ($\chi^2=0.379$, d.f.=1) between the genders: 48.0% of males and 45.7% of females responded “Yes.” However, there was a small

but significant difference within the education category ($\chi^2=4.085$, d.f.=1, $p\leq 0.05$): 41.7% of respondents with below a bachelor’s degree said they needed help but did not receive it, while 49.4% of respondents with a bachelor’s degree or higher responded in the affirmative. The greatest difference occurred within the immigration status grouping ($\chi^2=6.670$, d.f.=1, $p\leq 0.01$): 53.8% of principal applicant skilled workers said they needed help but did not receive it, while only 43.5% of all other immigrants responded this way. The difference found between age groupings (39.4% of those under 30 years of age and 48.1% of those 30 years of age or older reported needing but not receiving help) was not significant ($\chi^2=3.202$, d.f.=1).

Respondents who identified needing but not receiving help were then asked, “What kind of help did you need but not receive?,” with the respondents being asked to check all items that applied to them (See Table 2).

The most common kinds of job search help needed but not received were advice/counselling, job search, information and financial help. The greatest differences (over 10%) were seen in the area of “transportation” requirements when comparing between education levels, immigration category and age groups; in the area of “information” needs when comparing between education groups and in the area of “job search” assistance when comparing between age groups. Differences between gender groups were consistently small.

using employment services as a job search strategy more often than immigrant women. This is reflected in the literature that identifies the need for improving both access to (Donkor, 1998) and content of (Lee, 1999) employment services for immigrant women. Addressing the unmet needs of immigrant men and women will necessitate taking into consideration the differences in strategies used by each group and conducting further exploration of the structural and systemic reasons behind these differences.

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Education level

Results indicate that immigrants with bachelor’s degrees or higher are more likely to make use of employment services than those without; however, also significantly, they more likely to report that they did not receive the help they needed. Specifically, they were more likely to identify “information” assistance as help they needed but did not receive. These findings suggest that the employment needs of immigrants with higher levels of education are not being met by employment services despite increased levels of use. This pattern mirrors the well-documented challenges experienced by immigrants with higher levels of education seeking employment (Mojab, 1999; Geddie, 2002). This has implications for those interested in decreasing the rates of under-employment of immigrants in the Canadian labour market.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to examine the job-search satisfaction levels of immigrants and some of their experiences using employment services. Findings considered relevant to employment service provision were reported based on groupings by gender, age, education level and immigrant category.

Immigration category

Principal applicants in the skilled worker category are much more likely than immigrants in all other categories to know where to go for job search services and to use employment services when searching for a job. However, they are also significantly more likely to report not receiving the help they need. The lack of adequate employment services geared specifically to the needs of this skilled group may be part of the reason for the under-employment and barriers to

Gender

Overall, there was no significant difference between men and women in job search satisfaction nor in respondents needing but not receiving help. Furthermore, while both groups reported similar levels of knowledge of available services, immigrant men reported

integration faced by many immigrants brought to Canada for their skills and experience.

Age

Once again, while levels of job search satisfaction were similarly low, results for immigrants under 30 years of age and those 30 years of age or more show that experiences are quite distinct between these groups. Older immigrants in our sample were much more likely to use employment services, perhaps because they were also more likely to report knowing where to go for assistance. Furthermore, areas of unmet needs were different. High levels of unemployment faced by youth in recent years (Statistics Canada, 2009) indicate the pressing need for greater dissemination of information on employment services to younger labour market participants.

Immigrants with bachelor's degrees or higher are more likely to make use of employment services than those without; however, also significantly, they more likely to report that they did not receive the help the needed.



Conclusion

This article was intended to share the recently collected data on key immigrant labour market experiences relating to employment service provision. Overall, the study was limited due to sampling methods, which did not procure a sample representative of the regional population. Furthermore, the data did not permit analysis of how experiences differ with the passage of time in Canada. Finally, a larger

sample would have enabled an analysis of the relationship between service provision and employment outcomes. However, the findings do provide recent data on immigrant job search satisfaction levels, collected during a time of economic recession in a region where nearly half the population is composed of immigrants.

Results suggest that there is an opportunity for employment services to begin to mediate the high unemployment and under-employment rates of immigrants in a more specific and accountable way. The unmet need of those with higher levels of education and younger immigrants reinforces the call for a more targeted approach to employment services for immigrants. The low levels of satisfaction with services provided suggest unmet needs. Other qualitative research (the Region of Peel and the Diversity Institute, 2009) associated with the project, highlighted the challenges associated with finding appropriate services, fragmentation of services and availability of customized services. As unemployment and underemployment among immigrants is associated with a host of other forms of social exclusion and often results in greater demand for other health and social services, the benefits of an integrated, cross-sectoral approach would seem obvious.

As well, our findings are consistent with other studies suggesting that more integration and cross-referencing of services are needed. Social workers in a range of service areas may be dealing with one symptom of a problem that affects the whole family and, regardless of their specific agency and service area, ought to be aware of employment-related programs in their region. Recently, the United Way of Peel Region has launched a coordinated newcomer strategy cutting across 12 different service providers, and the Region of Peel has launched a new portal in an effort to provide one-stop shopping, at least for those who have English and Internet literacy skills (www.immigration.peel.ca/index.asp). Among the services provided are job search workshops, career planning programs for internationally trained

professionals, the job-connect program, a mentoring program, bridging skills training programs, internship-career bridging programs, enhanced language training and specialty ESL classes and volunteer opportunities. More research is needed to assess the impact of these specific programs as well as user satisfaction levels in order to provide new immigrants with a full range of opportunities.

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Biographical notes

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Note

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