

New Canadians Often Underestimated

Program aims to get professional immigrants working

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A mechanical engineer by profession, Yung-Chang Lai is ecstatic about landing a job at Home Depot in Edmonton.

But unlike many professionally trained, new Canadians, he really does want to work in the retail trade.

Since giving up his job as an engineer with the state-owned Taiwan Power Company to come to Canada in 1995, he has worked in a muffler shop, a paint store and as an apprentice mechanic at a service station. But the Home Depot position is his dream job.

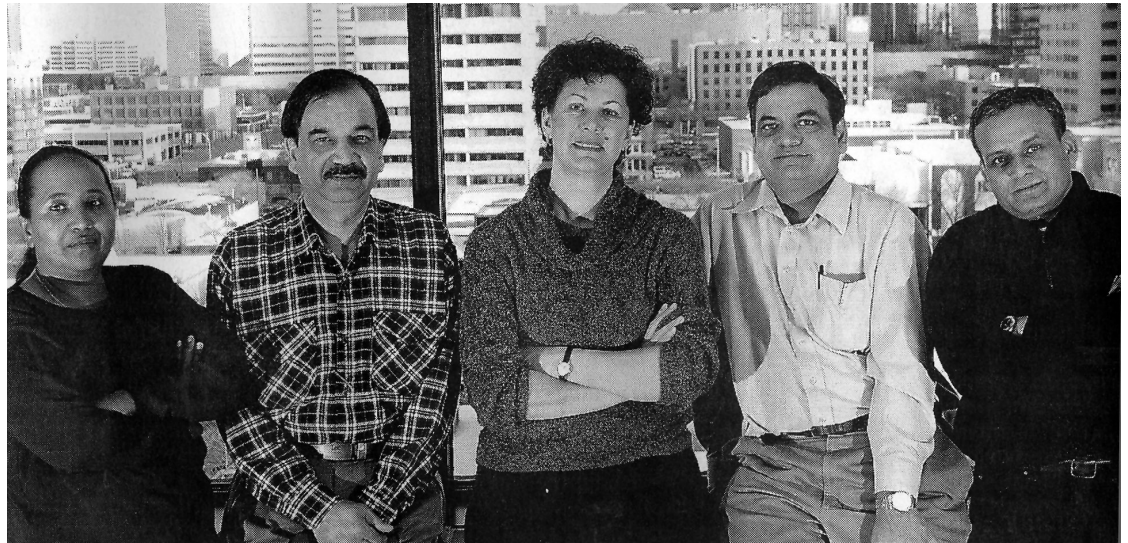
"It relates to my hobby," he explains. "I like doing home renovations and making furniture."

For every story like his, however, there are dozens others about qualified immigrant doctors and engineers working below their skill levels at convenience stores or fast-food restaurants because their qualifications aren't recognized here.

A new program offered by NorQuest College is aimed at changing that. Started in September, Career Options for New Canadians gives immigrant professionals work experience and a chance to improve their communications skills to help them get jobs.

Lai, who landed the Home Depot position through the program, says he was ready for a career change. But others are frustrated. Even with the program, they are having difficulty finding work in their chosen professions.

"Everyone asks: Do you have Canadian experience?" says Virender Mehandru, a mechanical engineer from India. "Unless



LARRY WONG, THE JOURNAL

These professionally trained, new Canadians, from left, Aster Obsi, Virender Mehandru, Mihaela Popa, Rajnish Kumar and Girish Garge, are having a difficult time finding work in their respective fields. To help themselves, they are taking a course at NorQuest College that lets them gain work experience and improve their communication skills.

I can get a job here, how do I get Canadian experience?"

Rajnish Kumar, also from India, shares his frustration.

"My English isn't a problem," says Kumar, an electrical engineer with 15 years of experience in the petroleum business. "I've worked on projects in the Persian Gulf and all over the world with the world's largest engineering companies.

"We have credentials from our own countries. Nobody wants to try us."

The NorQuest program, which provides three months of in-class instruction and seven months of on-the-job training with participating employers, is experiencing a shortage of placements in the engineering and medical fields. It has placed eight of the 13 students who started in September in temporary jobs, some of whom may end up being permanent. Another 13 are to begin in February. It is financed by tuition fees and government grants.

Mihaela Popa, a laboratory technician from Romania, is still waiting for placement in the medical field. She volunteered to work at the lab at the University

of Alberta Hospital last year, but the closest she got was a volunteer position in the gift shop.

"I'm very flexible but I would like a chance to work in my profession," she says.

But some immigrants are getting closer to working in their professions, thanks to the NorQuest program.

Yeounbong Jeong, a pharmacist from Korea, is training as a pharmacy technician.

Mihrije Pllana, a high school teacher from Kosovo, is working as a teaching assistant. Svetlana Usova, a mechanical and heating engineer from Belarus, is training as a recreational facilities manager.

"It's difficult to connect with employers," Usova says. "This program helps."

The Mennonite Centre for Newcomers estimates there are thousands of professionally trained, new Canadians in Alberta working at menial tasks because they don't qualify for jobs in their fields of expertise.

"There is a sad joke that the best place to have a heart attack is in a taxi because the driver is likely to be a foreign-trained doctor," says

Jim Gurnett, executive director. "The real tragedy is it is a gigantic loss for the country that these people are underemployed and not being allowed to contribute to their full potential."

He blames conflicting federal and provincial regulations governing immigration and professional credentials.

To immigrate to Canada, professionals from other countries have to convince federal officials they have job skills in demand here. But once they get here, they have to convince provincially regulated professional bodies the qualifications from their home countries are equivalent to Canadian requirements.

"There are 40 different professional associations in the province, and all have different rules," he says.

The Mennonite Centre for Newcomers recently started a 10-month program through the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology to upgrade skills of immigrant engineers to meet Canadian standards. Gurnett said more than 200 applied for the 50 spaces.

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