

EXPLORING IMMIGRANT HIRING IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

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A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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Executive Summary

The goal of this research project was to investigate the role of employers and the private sector in supporting (or not supporting) the integration of immigrants in Canada, to assess the knowledge and practices of attracting, hiring and training immigrants by employers in our region, and to provide a much needed snapshot of business and private sector immigration practices or lack thereof in the region. The work conducted will help fill gaps in labour force knowledge regarding immigration in Northwestern Ontario and the Thunder Bay region. It will positively affect human resource practices and serve as a foundation to increase information and awareness of employers for hiring immigrants to solve labour force shortages.

We anticipated that, to some degree, employers who are knowledgeable and employ immigrant workers offer, in some form on some level, integration, training and settlement. We expected to find some correlation between knowledge and use of integration practices and the number of immigrants hired by industry, region and area. Northwestern Ontario and the Thunder Bay region are dramatically altering their social and economic landscapes in preparation for a large influx of mining in the Ring of Fire, an initiative that has identified and put an emphasis on drawing labour from strong mining countries to help fill the decreasing workforce available in the region.

Process - Interviews, Focus Groups, Forum

To encourage participation from as broad a group as possible, options were given to potential employers such as individual interviews in person or by telephone, group sessions, focus groups and one large employer forum with facilitated break out groups. The size of the region dictated that telephone interviews be used for most of the regional respondents as well as meeting with them when they were in Thunder Bay for other meetings and events. This required some investigation by the researchers into the local and regional political and economic events planned as well as who the appropriate contacts were for each community.

The researchers recognize and appreciate the openness and candid responses of the participants and respect their request of confidentiality. The willingness of employers to be open and to express their personal feelings, lack of understanding on certain topics and opinions about immigration and foreign workers was critical to the research study. We thank and commend the participants for their candor.

Focus group participants pointed out that immigration as an economic driver has been used successfully by Western regions particularly Northern Alberta (Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie) in the oil and gas industry. How can Northern Ontario do the same but learning what has and has not worked in Fort McMurray and Grand Prairie? The employers expressed an interest in connecting with the pool of potential employees that will be in the express entry approved group and wanted to know how to access those people. Employers asked, “how will it work, how fast will the process be from application to employee on site and what do HR staff have to do to make this happen?”

Methodology

The research project was implemented and conducted alongside Thunder Bay Multicultural Association's Employer Connection Pilot Project to save travel and communications funds and was conducted across Northwestern Ontario and the Thunder Bay region.

The literature reviewed to support the undertaking of this work was mainly connected to the transition of Northwestern Ontario's economy. Here in our region, through the Northwestern Ontario Economic Facilitator Initiative, a recommendation of an immigration working group to "review opportunities and identify actions needed for immigration to play a role in providing a skilled and entrepreneurial workforce to meet the future needs of diversifying the economy of Northwestern Ontario" was voiced (Rosehart, 2008). In addition, the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario recognizes the need for planning for "attracting and retaining skilled workers, including newcomers, to address areas of labour" (Government of Ontario, 2011). These two key documents are conduits of Northern Ontario residents, particularly here in the Northwest, to work towards building a sustainable economy with newcomers playing a significant role. Lastly, The Ontario Chamber of Commerce through their Think Fast report, demonstrates a need to employers to have help in navigating the immigration system and providing newcomers with clear pathways to gain employment in Canada.

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase was to understand employer's experiences, perceptions and attitudes pertaining to hiring immigrants. This phase included conducting surveys and focus groups to gather information on how much or how little employers' human resource departments understand and utilize the hiring of immigrants, what employers' perceptions are about immigrants and foreign trained workers, and how they employ and integrate immigrants in the workforce of their organization. The study also identified barriers (real and perceived) that employers encounter when considering hiring immigrants. Lastly, we gathered information on employers' workplace training and integration methods for immigrants and foreign trained workers.

The second phase was to research the opinions of employers who have identified utilizing immigrants and foreign trained labour in their workforce on their perception and attitudes towards the social and economic effects in both their organization and in the community at large. Each region and employer was interviewed to understand what, if any, settlement and integration strategies, training and services they provide and to what success. The interviews, focus groups and employer forum were conducted during the fall and winter of 2014.

Interview Procedure

Following the outreach to employers, economic development offices, municipalities and Chambers of Commerce, the main method of information collection was a series of 27 qualitative, semi-structured interviews, four focus group sessions of 4 to 7 participants, and

an employers' forum with 19 attending. The goal was to investigate the knowledge and practices of employers in our region around attracting, hiring, training and integrating immigrant employees. Small community immigrant attraction has become an economic development topic of conversation and a municipal issue at many of the meetings we have attended.

Deliverables

The aim of the research was to produce a snapshot of immigrant hiring in the Thunder Bay region and across Northwestern Ontario in order to shed light on which regional employers are utilizing immigrant and foreign trained labour and their human resource and business practices attracting, retaining and supporting immigrant workers. We also wanted to gain an understanding of what settlement resources and community programs are being utilized to support the integration of immigrants into the community and region by employers in an effort to increase receptivity.

The data and information produced in this study will serve as the foundation for improving settlement and integration strategies, aiding employers in hiring and training immigrant workers and being a resource to the city of Thunder Bay and the Northwestern Ontario municipalities for further Immigration Strategy discussions.

Results of the research have been and will be shared with Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) partners, federal and provincial partners as well as the cities, municipalities, employers and industries in the region.

Introduction

In Northwestern Ontario, much like in the rest of Canada, there is an ever increasing focus on immigration and nation/region building, and on the need for communities and employers to consider recruitment and attraction of immigrants for growth and economic stability. There is a growing awareness of immigration benefits among community economic development officers in smaller municipalities. Municipalities are beginning to consider immigration as an economic driver and a community growth strategy. Labour shortages, increased development and regional mining strategies are all affecting the need to consider immigration as a tool. Biomedical research, mining, manufacturing and medical services are driving highly skilled immigrants to the region.

Nowhere did I hear messages of lament or desire to turn back the clock. Instead, I heard from Northerners who recognized the economic transition that is underway in their region, with a readiness to engage that change to ensure a prosperous role for the Northwest in Ontario's economy. Bob Rosehart, Northwestern Ontario Economic Facilitator, 2008

While employment has been recognized as the main attraction and sustained employment as the primary reason for retention, the supporting factors and welcoming ability of the community is critical in retention. Communities are quite often involved in and pursue attraction and recruitment of immigrants without considering the need to welcome, integrate and retain them. The misconception or assumption that a job is the answer to all integration needs is quickly replaced by the reality that settlement and integration is critical and that it takes a whole community to do so. While governments, both federal and provincial, are concerned about settlement, and settlement agencies are primarily focused on providing settlement services, employers and small communities may not be fully aware of the importance of integration and welcoming immigrants.

Immigrant settlement is becoming a significant realization of social and economic development in hinterland regions across Canada, especially here in Northwestern Ontario. Change is constant in an ever changing world and global forces are all too well-known in resource-dependent communities as a result of market volatility. However, there is a new volatility that is seen as an asset for our communities—that is, people.

Immigration is a positive change for Northwestern Ontario. The region is embracing change, through the people that are coming to learn, live, work and be part of new business throughout the region. The impact of immigration is profoundly felt at the local level. Over the past number of years, the immigrant population has become visible and is leveraged through the many positive experiences of immigrants. Local officials are seeing immigration as a positive opportunity for growth in their communities.

In a 21st century economy, communities and employers see immigration as a positive approach to economic development, empowering people and industries to compete by building on what has been achieved locally by all community members. Communities and employers to some degree are knowledgeable of the importance of integrating immigrants; it is essential that the momentum to engage and welcome immigrants remain strong into the future here in Northwestern Ontario.

Background

Northwestern Ontario is in a period of transition of economic diversity and growth. There have been lingering concerns in regards to the regional economy's ability to respond to the change in demographics, restructuring in the natural resource sector, business retention and expansion, maintaining community services, and the forging of new pathways of research and entrepreneurship.

There is a slow rejuvenation taking place in the region as the natural resource sector restructures from a period of pulp and timber mill closures and an upswing in demand for mineral commodities; new forestry related activity is underway, mining operations are at various stages, along with research taking hold in the healthcare sector and an emergence of small business. In mining alone, the forecast for Northwestern Ontario is the creation of 10,000 full-time jobs with annual revenues of approximately \$1.7 billion over the next 10 years.¹ Furthermore, the region is noticing a number of entrepreneurs blazing new trails by providing new products and services for consumers and industry here and abroad. All of this activity is putting a new demand on our workforce – we need a strong and stable workforce to transition the economy.

As the region is building upon mining, research and business as its new building blocks, the region needs people. Employers are thinking strategically ahead, looking for the talent they need now and in the long-term. Communities are also focused on the long-term. Local councils and agencies across Northwestern Ontario recognize the economic and social benefits of immigration as a means towards transitioning our regional economy and communities.

Newcomer Initiatives

The Thunder Bay Multicultural Association (TBMA), the Northwestern Ontario Immigration portal, the Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Corporation (CEDC), the Multicultural Association of Kenora and District (MAKD), and various Local Immigration Partnership members have been at the forefront of leading the way of newcomer attraction to Northwestern Ontario. Over the past decade, through partnerships with communities and a variety of other agencies, TBMA has been able to frame a common commitment, a positive force of attracting immigrants and providing support at the local level for attraction and retention. This vision and the activity surrounding partnership activities has been picked up on by growing businesses, and by the CEDC mining readiness strategy and the immigration committee. There is an advantage to doing research with employers within small communities. Everyone knows everyone and can bring participants to the table. Also, these individuals are willing to discuss the issues candidly and openly when among familiar faces.

Thunder Bay Multicultural Association (TBMA) currently provides exceptional one-stop-shop service as a hub for the North in newcomer needs assessment, settlement,

¹ <http://www.thunderbay.ca/Assets/CEDC/docs/Mining+Readiness+Strategy+-+opens+a+new+window.pdf>

orientation and integration programs, interpretation/translation, language assessment and language training, community connections, employment connections, and mentorship for adults, youth, professionals and group opportunities, It also leads the Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) for both Thunder Bay and Northwestern Ontario, portal development, and the Welcoming Communities Initiative, as well as large scale anti-racism and community development projects for the region. Front line services have been delivered for over 30 years.

First and foremost among community collaborations is the Northwestern Ontario Immigration Partnership that came about in 2009. Communities wanted to meet and have a voice of their own with regards to attraction, retention, welcoming and other areas of immigration. The Local Immigration Partnership, and the committees and initiatives that grew out of it, have helped with the identification of services and best practices for the region to use and implement to strengthen the attraction and retention of immigrant employees. The mission of the immigration partnership is “to develop communities’ capacity, programs and services to attract and retain immigrants to the region of Northwestern Ontario; building partnerships with municipalities—engaging municipalities and communities in areas of immigration related to their interests.” As a result, all 37 municipalities in Northwestern Ontario are working together to maximize the ability to attract and retain immigrants together.

The next initiative that has become the region’s most longstanding, successful social and economic development partnership is the Northwestern Ontario Immigration Portal. Following the region coming together through the immigration partnership, local communities were eager to leverage their partnership and be a positive force to attract immigrants to the region. The City of Thunder Bay in partnership with the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association embraced this new vision of regional cooperation of the communities and led the way, securing funding from the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario. As simple as it may be, the portal is an effective approach to conveying information that directly supports the decision making from an immigrant perspective of living, working, learning and doing business here in Northwestern Ontario. This is a tool that has empowered all communities to have a voice as a cooperative force having impact on the region’s social and economic wellbeing. It has also opened the door for conversations among employers and service providers about immigration, the potential for hiring newcomers from within Canada and abroad, as well as the need to have integration policies and innovative practices to welcome and assist newcomer employees in their new roles.

Lastly, the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association has partnered with the North Superior Workforce Planning board and the Regional Chambers of Commerce to strengthen its efforts around the opportunities and challenges that immigration brings to developing a regional workforce. These partnerships, as well as the close work with the Economic Development Corporations and offices within the municipalities, provided the connections to employers for the interviews and research incorporated in this study. The LIP, TBMA, CEDC and portal partners are putting an emphasis on understanding the region’s workforce and the perspective of employers around the employment and

integration of immigrants here in Northwestern Ontario. It has been well-known that in a competitive global economy that influences regional economies, employers are at a crossroads to welcome and integrate immigrants into their workforce and the communities they operate in—it's about having people and harnessing their talent. So, the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association is part of an Employment Connections Pilot Project with two other regions in Ontario to assess the attraction, hiring and training of immigrants and newcomers in our regions.

Newcomers to the North

This past decade, Canada's immigration patterns have experienced an abundance of change. Between 2001 and 2006, Canada's foreign-born population increased by about 14%, the highest in 75 years compared to Canadian-born at 3% during the same time period. The past few census years have showed that more immigrants are coming from Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa. In 2006, for the first time in Canadian history, 58% of immigrants arrived from Asia and the Middle East.² Canada leads G8 countries with the highest proportion of foreign-born immigrants. Just over one out of five Canadians is foreign-born. In 2011, the foreign-born population for Canada was at 6,775,800 people, about 21% of the total population.³

There are a variety of reasons for people to come to Canada. Many push factors include personal motives, pressing social conditions and economic needs. Many immigrants are in the prime working age, 25 to 54 years of age. In 2006, 57% of immigrants were in the prime-working age group, followed by children under age of 14 at 21% and immigrants aged 15 to 24 at 15%.⁴ A well known notion among immigrants is that they feel they have no economic future in their home countries and often are looking to broaden their options for themselves and their families. Most immigrants come to Canada for a higher quality of life and employment opportunities. The interviews conducted with potential newcomers to Canada at the Immigration Expo in London, UK by the Northwestern Ontario Immigration Portal revealed that a better standard of living and freeing up more income were important factors in a decision to come to Canada. In many countries, housing and transportation account for over 50% of people's expenses, leaving little for living expenses and saving.

Most immigrants coming to Canada possess a formal level of education, more so each passing year. This is likely to increase with the new Express Entry approach. Immigrants were twice as likely to have a post-secondary degree compared to the Canadian-born population in 2006.⁵ Satisfied with their decision to come to Canada, immigrants with high levels of education face the difficulty of finding an adequate job. The traditional known barriers faced by immigrants include lack of: familiarity with English and or French, workplace understanding, work experience and/or education in Canada, as well

² <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-557/p1-eng.cfm>

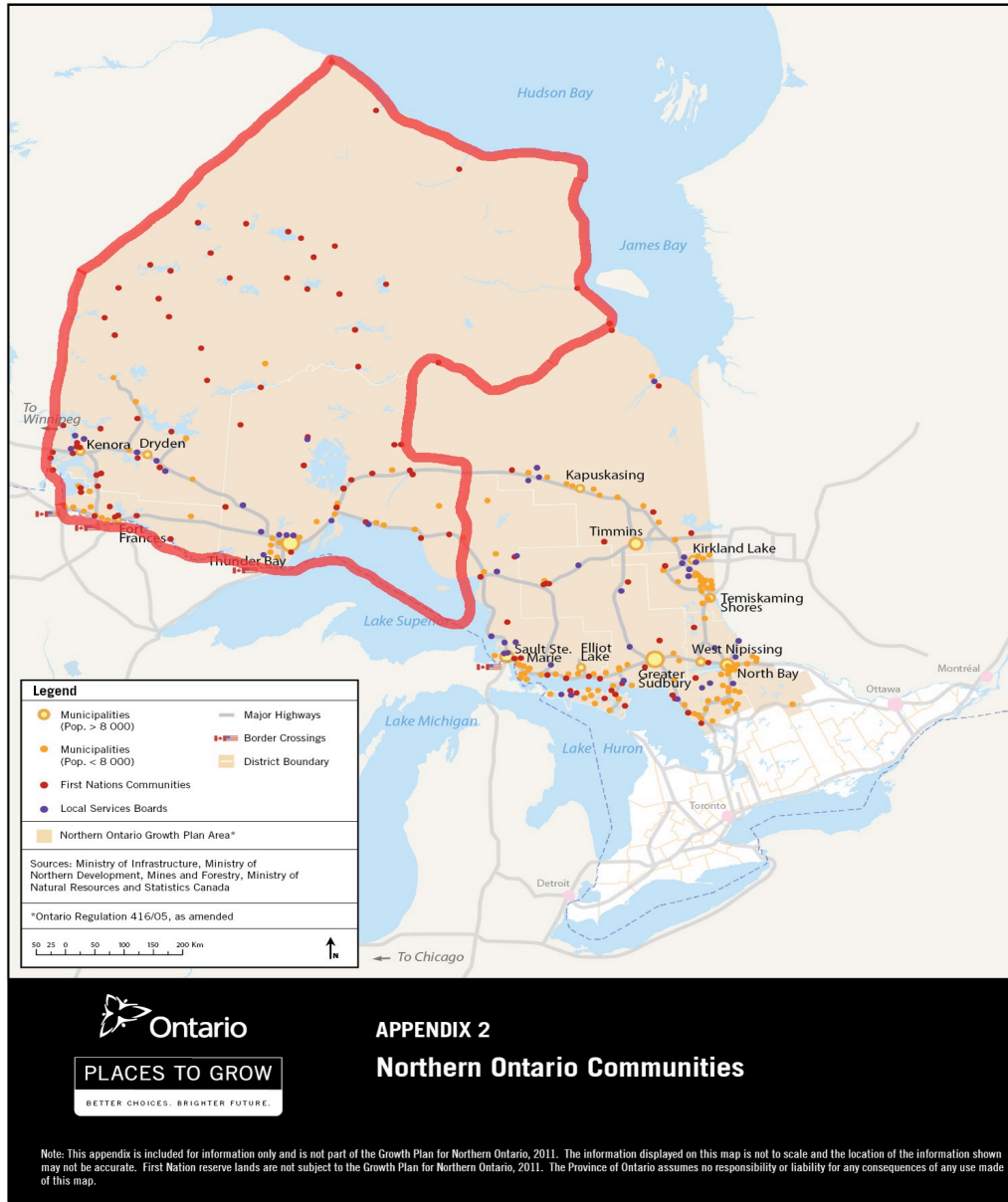
³ <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm>

⁴ <http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-557/p7-eng.cfm>

⁵ <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/Oct-30-08-More-education-less-emplment.pdf>

as the difficulty of getting credentials from country of origin recognized and accepted in Canada.⁶

Geographic Scope of Research



Map 1

Northwestern Ontario outlined in a red line in above map of Northern Ontario
Source: Government of Ontario, Growth Plan for Northern Ontario, 2011

As shown in Map 1, Northwestern Ontario is a vast and magnificent region in Ontario, Canada. The region lies north and west of Lake Superior, and west of Hudson Bay and

⁶ <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/Oct-30-08-More-education-less-employment.pdf>

James Bay. Its western boundary is the province of Manitoba, to the east the districts of Cochrane and Algoma. Northwestern Ontario consists of the districts of Kenora, Rainy River and Thunder Bay. In total, Northwestern Ontario is 526,371.87 km² with a population of 224,034.

Kenora District	Rainy River District	Thunder Bay District
Attawapiskat 91A	Agency 1	Aroland 83
Bearskin Lake	Alberton	Conmee
Cat Lake 63C	Atikokan	Dorion
Deer Lake	Big Grassy River 35G	Fort William 52
Dryden	Big Island Mainland 93	Gillies
Eagle Lake 27	Chapple	Ginoogaming First Nation
Ear Falls	Couchiching 16A	Greenstone
English River 21	Dawson	Gull River 55
Fort Albany (Part) 67	Emo	Lac des Mille Lacs 22A1
Fort Hope 64	Fort Frances	Lake Helen 53A
Fort Severn 89	Lake of the Woods	Lake Nipigon
Ignace	La Vallee	Long Lake 58
Kasabonika Lake	Long Sault 12	Manitouwadge
Kee-Way-Win	Manitou Rapids 11	Marathon
Kenora	Morley	Neebing
Kenora, Unorganized	Neguaguon Lake 25D	Nipigon
Kenora 38B	Rainy Lake 17A	O'Connor
Kingfisher Lake 1	Rainy Lake 17B	Ojibway Nation of Saugeen -
Kitchenuhmaykoosib Aaki -	Rainy Lake 18C	(Savant Lake)
84 (Big Trout Lake)	Rainy Lake 26A	Oliver Paipoonge
Lac Seul 28	Rainy River	Osnaburgh 63A
Lake Of The Woods 37	Rainy River, Unorganized	Pays Plat 51
Lansdowne House	Sabaskong Bay (Part) 35C	Pic Moberth North
MacDowell Lake	Saug-a-Gaw-Sing 1	Pic Moberth South
Machin	Seine River 23A	Pic River 50
Marten Falls 65	Seine River 23B	Red Rock
Muskrat Dam Lake		Rocky Bay 1
Neskantaga		Schreiber
North Spirit Lake		Seine River 22A2
Northwest Angle 33B		Shuniah
Osnaburgh 63B		Terrace Bay
Peawanuck		Thunder Bay
Pickle Lake		Thunder Bay, Unorganized
Pikangikum 14		Whitesand
Poplar Hill		
Rat Portage 38A		
Red Lake		
Sabaskong Bay (Part) 35C		
Sabaskong Bay 35D		
Sachigo Lake 1		

Sandy Lake 88		
Shoal Lake (Part) 39A		
Shoal Lake (Part) 40		
Shoal Lake 34B2		
Sioux Lookout		
Sioux Narrows-Nestor Falls		
Slate Falls		
Summer Beaver		
The Dalles 38C		
Wabaseemoong		
Wabauskang 21		
Wabigoon Lake 27		
Wapekeka 2		
Wawakapewin (Long Dog Lake)		
Weagamow Lake 87		
Webequie		
Whitefish Bay 32A		
Whitefish Bay 33A		
Whitefish Bay 34A		
Wunnumin 1		

Table 1
First Nation and Municipal Communities of Northwestern Ontario

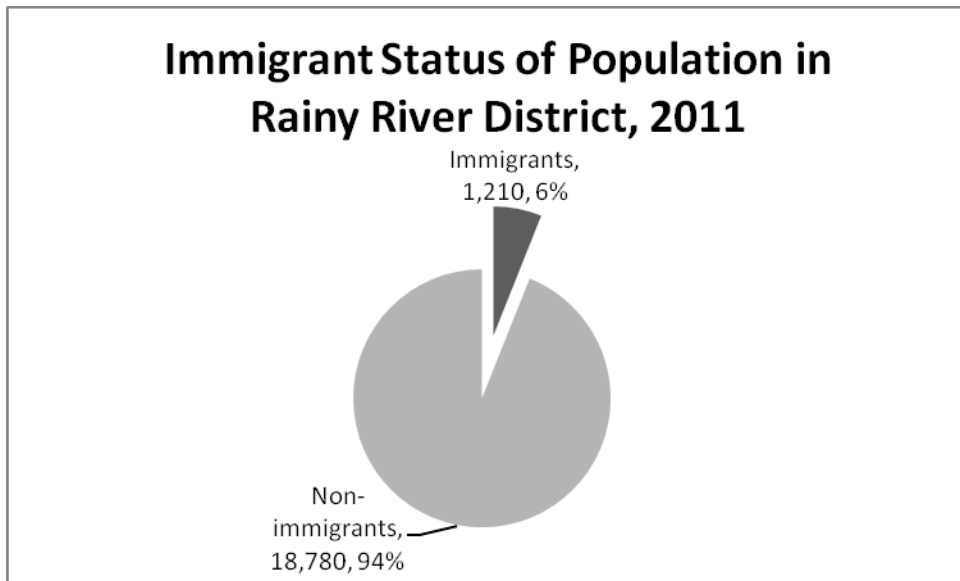
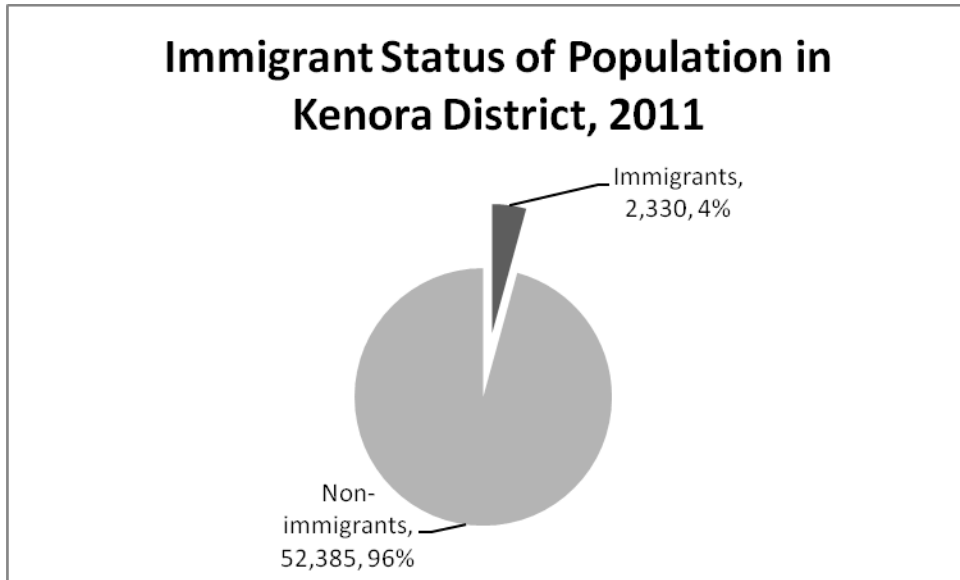
The major municipal communities in the region are Kenora, Red Lake, Sioux Lookout, Dryden, Fort Frances, Atikokan, Thunder Bay, Greenstone and Marathon.

Population of Northwestern Ontario							
District	2011	±	2006	±	2001	±	1996
Northwestern Ontario	224,034	-5%	235,046	0%	234,771	-4%	244,117
Kenora District	57,607	-11%	64,419	4%	61,802	-3%	63,360
Rainy River District	20,370	-6%	21,564	-3%	22,109	-4%	23,138
Thunder Bay District	146,057	-2%	149,063	-1%	150,860	-4%	157,619

Table 2
Population of Northwestern Ontario
Source: National Household Survey, Statistics Canada, 2011

Immigration Status of Populations

Throughout the three districts we can see that immigrants are a small proportion of the population. This demonstrates that newcomers to Northwestern Ontario are settling across the region, but in small numbers. The Thunder Bay district has the largest population as a whole as a result of the City of Thunder Bay. For the Northwest region, the total population of immigrants is significant at 15,820 or 9% of the whole region's population.



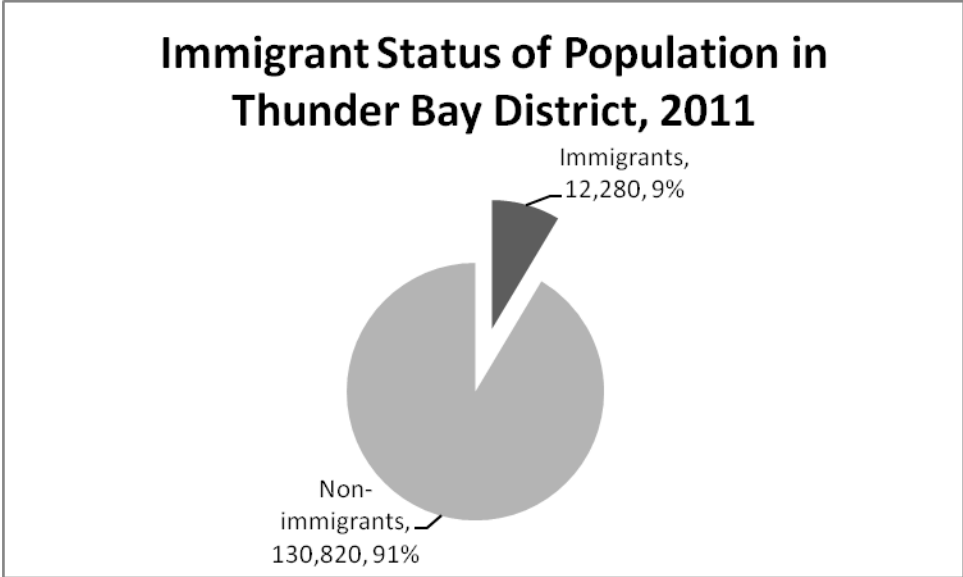
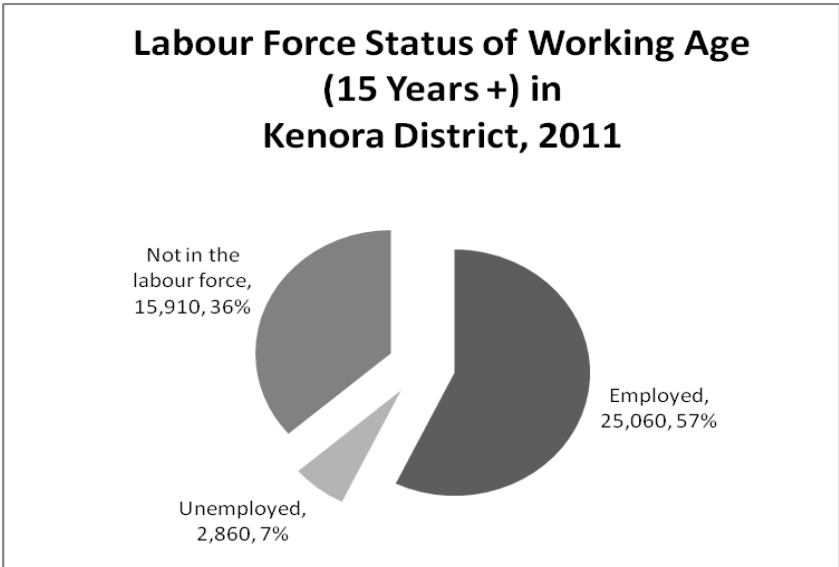


Figure 1
 Immigrant Status of Population in Northwestern Ontario’s Districts
 Source: National Household Survey, Statistics Canada, 2011

Labour Force Status of Population

Looking at the districts’ labour force statistics, the proportion of those 15 years of age or older who are employed is slightly greater than those not employed or who are not in the labour force. All three districts are consistent in the proportion of those employed, at an average of 56% and a regional total of 101,970. Overall, proportions of the labour force statuses are consistent across districts. These numbers demonstrate that employment is strong, with some challenges faced by individuals unemployed because of the region’s economic transition.



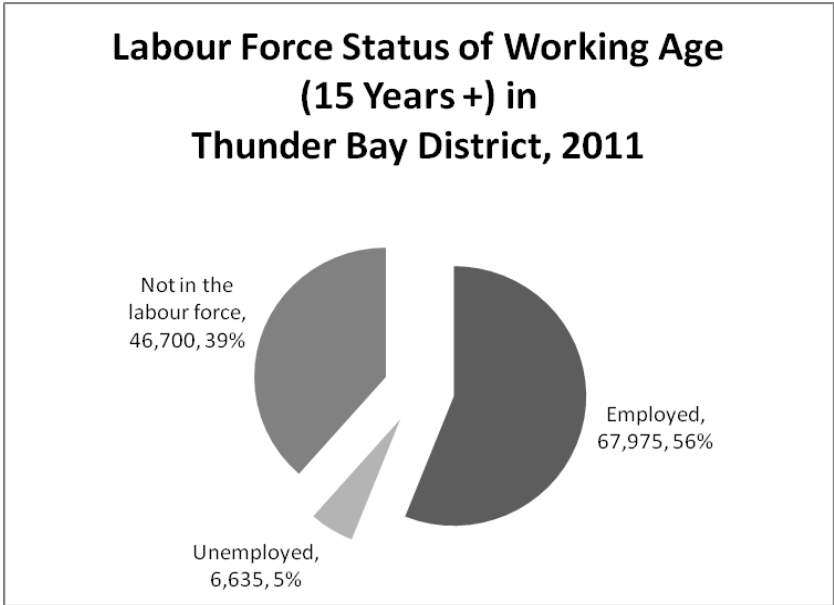
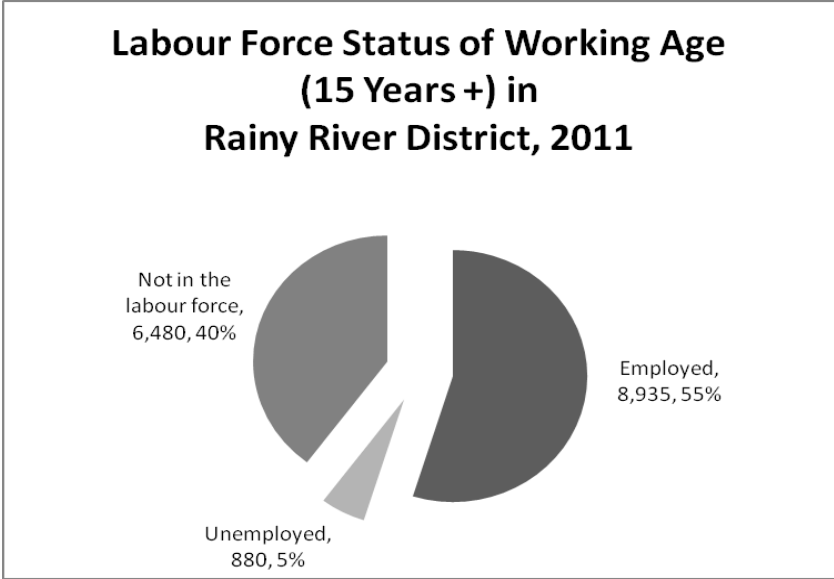
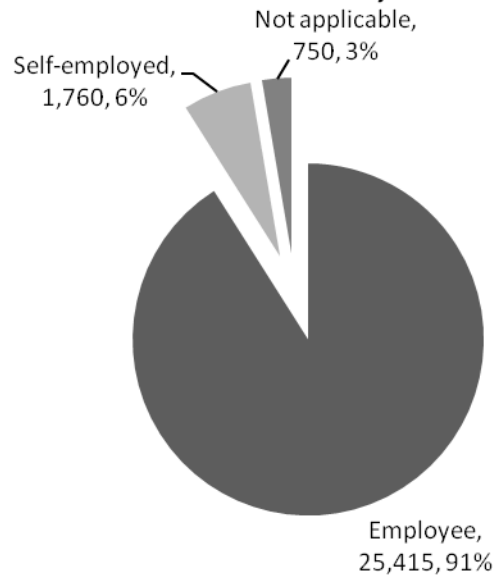


Figure 2
Labour Force Status of Working Age in Northwestern Ontario's Districts
Source: National Household Survey, Statistics Canada, 2011

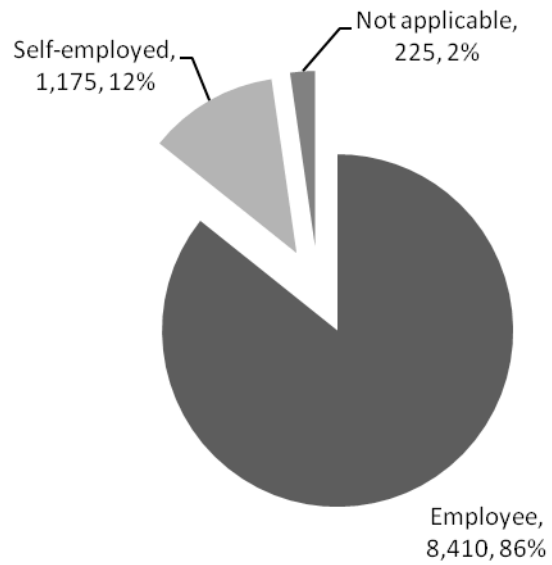
Working Class Status of Population

For the most part, across the three districts, people are employees, that is, they work for others. Each district does have a recognizable proportion of self-employed people, however, with the Rainy River district having the largest proportion, at 12% of total status of working class. There are opportunities for individuals to work in the region through self-employment as demonstrated.

Class of Worker (Age 15 Years +) in Kenora District, 2011



Class of Worker (Age 15 Years +) in Rainy River District, 2011



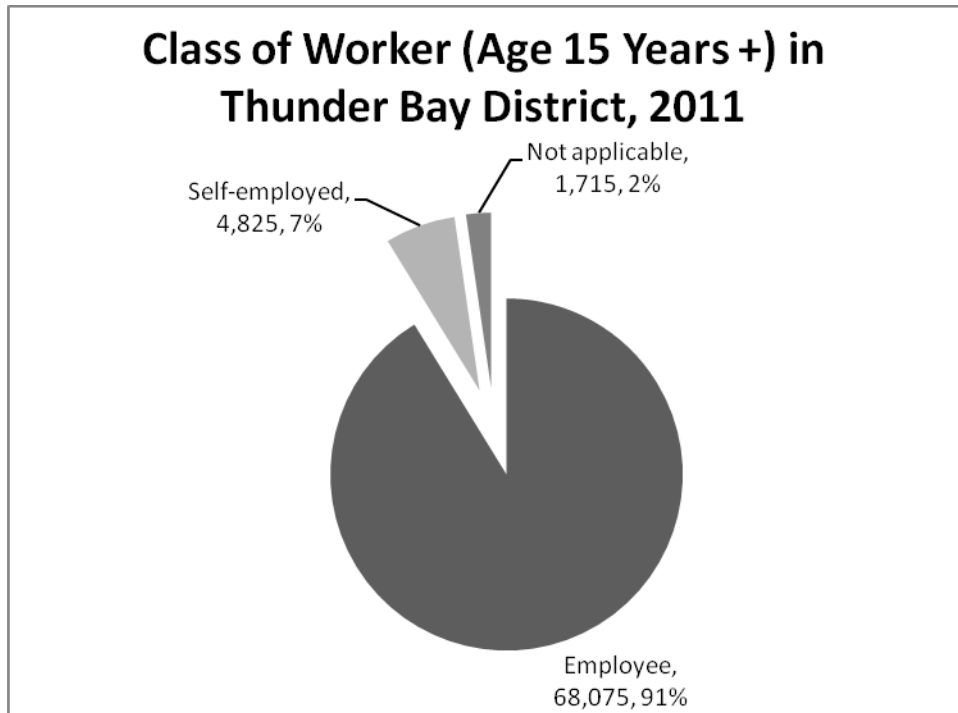
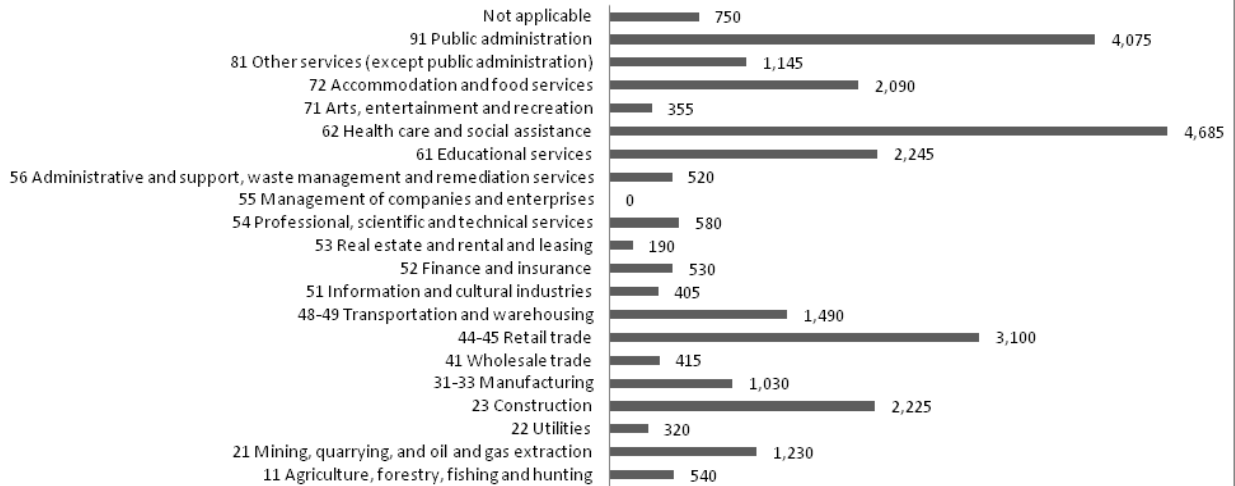


Figure 3
 Class of Worker in Northwestern Ontario's Districts
 Source: National Household Survey, Statistics Canada, 2011

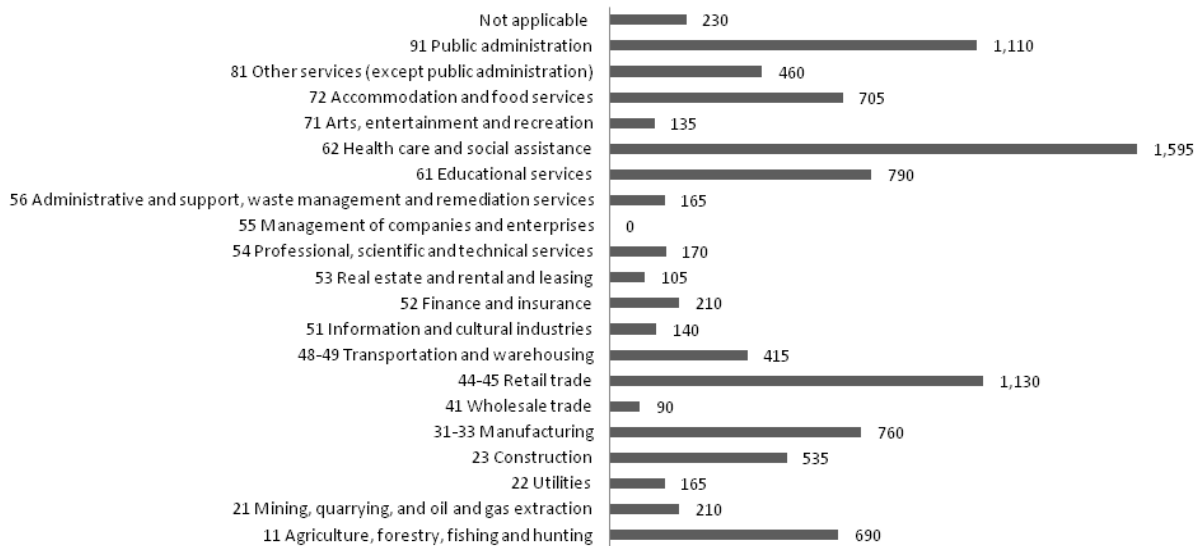
Total Labour Force of Population by Industry

Looking at the industries across the three districts, public administration, health care and social assistance, and retail and trade are the main industries, followed by education, transportation, construction and natural resource related. Thunder Bay also has significant manufacturing and food and accommodation industries. To remain competitive and strong, the main industries will require a global and skilled element, which immigrants could leverage through their experience and expertise.

Total Labour Force Population Aged 15 years + By Industry (NAICS) in Kenora District, 2011



Total Labour Force Population Aged 15 years + By Industry (NAICS) in Rainy River District, 2011



Total Labour Force Population Aged 15 years + By Industry (NAICS) in Thunder Bay District, 2011

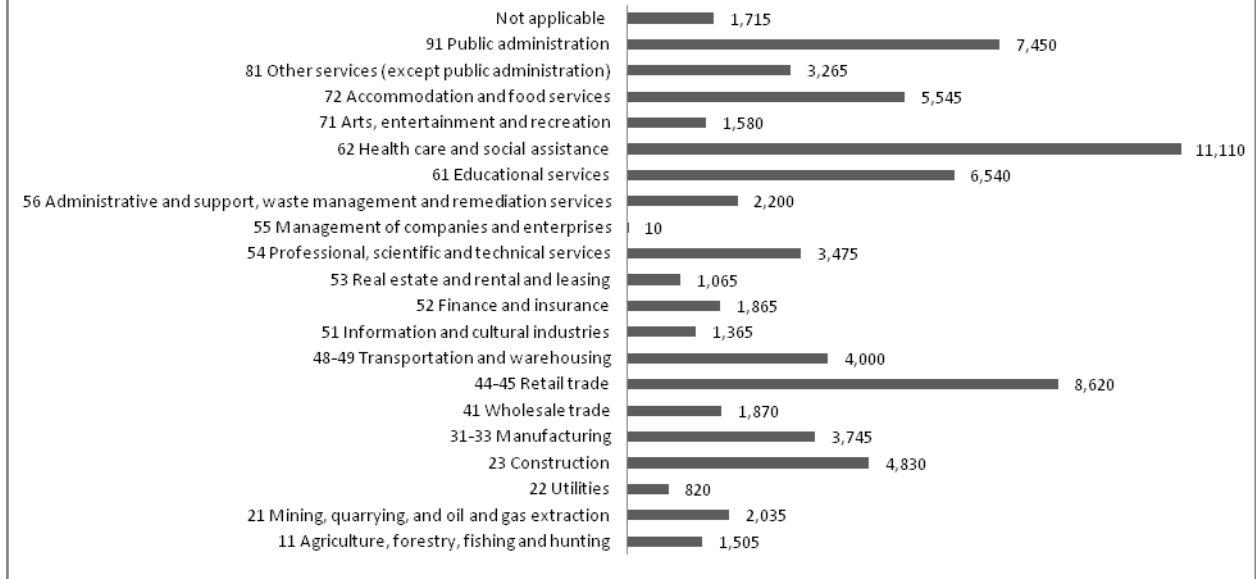


Figure 4
 Total Labour Force Population in Northwestern Ontario's Districts
 Source: National Household Survey, Statistics Canada, 2011

Research

Phase One

Over the course of six months in 2014-2015, research was conducted in focus groups, an employer forum and individual interviews with employers, small business owners and economic development officers from the larger municipalities in Northwestern Ontario to gather information on what they knew about hiring immigrants and what their perceptions were of immigrants. Human resource departments, individual business owners, managers and staff responsible for hiring in an informal, smaller setting were contacted across the region. Participants ranged from representatives of large multinational companies to small, two or three employee businesses. Interest was minimal at first but participation was encouraged by the addition of training sessions on hiring immigrants and the express entry model. Some employers preferred to be contacted individually by phone while others wanted to participate in groups to connect with other employers.

In the focus group sessions and the employer forum breakout groups, discussion group leaders engaged employers in formal and informal conversations around immigrant/newcomer hiring, perceptions about immigration, foreign trained workers and temporary workers, as well as about integration programs and their willingness to hire immigrants. Those who had programs and established integration methods were asked to describe them to the group and to provide documentation for sharing. Only the largest employers had formal integration processes and spent a great deal of time discussing and explaining what they do to assist foreign trained workers and immigrants to Canada.

Employers were very candid about their concern over current employees' reactions and backlash against hiring immigrants. The comment made was, "Why does my son not have a job but all these immigrants do?" Discussions grew out of this focus group session, and an information session on the myths about immigration was developed.

Issues of credential assessment and misconceptions by employers about the value and credibility of immigrant documentation and experience came up in several interviews and the forum. Some of the employers who participated in the focus groups were immigrants themselves and responded to the doubting participants. They revealed that for many immigrants, an alternate profession "feels like a demotion, a downgrade of position, status or job title."

The research provided insight into the attitudes and perspectives of employers, and reveals the barriers that communities are facing when promoting immigrant employment and how we need to work around these barriers. An understanding of these perspectives gives agencies insight into how to approach employers, and educate and assist them with hiring and settling immigrant employees. The labour market integration of immigrants will become a combined effort of agencies, settlement providers, employers, communities, and immigrants themselves.

Businesses for sale came up in both focus groups and the forum and a plan for succession and sale of businesses to immigrant entrepreneurs was suggested. The Community Economic Development Corporation (CEDC) in Thunder Bay offered to create a portal in partnership with the chartered accountants for the region listing the available businesses for sale. This has been marketed to immigrant entrepreneurs through the portal. This includes a confidential disclosure for business owners who are contemplating retirement to contact the CEDC to market the business anonymously. This initiative aims to retain businesses in the region and to assist both owners and immigrant entrepreneurs.

High level conversations about racism took place in several of the focus groups. Employers were very enlightened and informed about systemic racism, subtle practices of racism in the workplace and society, as well as understanding their own identities and how they are constructed within the Canadian context. Economic development officers spoke of the municipality as the guardian of the public interest and the promoter of respect and human rights. Individual employers raised questions and recounted stories of their experiences with hiring, recruiting and the difficult search for qualified employees.

One of the most interesting discussions was about a recruiting firm that held an information and promotion session in Thunder Bay. Two of the employer participants in the focus group had been part of an earlier advertising symposium for a talent recruiter who specializes in bringing international employees to Canada. The experience left a very bad impression on them. They recounted the experience to the group in great detail. In the recruiter's sales pitch to the employer group, he said, "these people will work longer hours and 6 or 7 days a week without complaining". At that point, several of the employers in the recruiter's session got up and left the presentation. Many had just taken part in anti-racism and cultural awareness training where they had learned about systemic racism, and they were offended by the use of "us" and "them" and "these people". One employer voiced concern and told the recruiter that he/she was displeased with the attitude taken towards immigrant workers. Most of the employers in our focus group did not agree with the consideration of immigrants as a means to an end, a commodity, an economic driver only. One of them likened the comments to the "use of immigrant labour in the building of the railroad in Canada" and that "attitudes had not changed in all this time."

The process of conducting the interviews, holding focus groups and hosting a forum was educational for participants and became a deliverable. That is, not only did the researchers gain information that appears in this report, but the participants gained valuable knowledge about themselves and about the process of hiring immigrants. This was a win-win situation. The candid conversations became an awareness building exercise driven by the participants.

Have hired immigrants	29%
Are aware of settlement agency services	80%
Have integration programs for newcomer staff	14%

Table 3

Respondents who have hired immigrants and are aware of agency services and integration programs.

Quotations

Individual employer’s comments from the focus groups and interviews were as follows:

“Employers are not really interested in the greater good per say; we need workers and usually need them immediately. The process needs to be fast and easy.”

“We don’t care where our employees are from, only that they can do the job and have experience in the position we are hiring for.”

“Nation building discussions are for the higher level; small businesses want to survive in a competitive market and find someone to buy our businesses when we want to retire.”

“Employers are willing to take on a new hire, whether an immigrant or not, if they are interested in the long term. We will train them and teach them soft skills. We are willing to take a chance on hiring newcomers.”

“There should be an on-line tutorial about immigration and the process of hiring newcomers.”

A small business owner said, “I’m the one writing the cheques every two weeks. I have the right as an employer to know who I am hiring and to be sure that they are qualified.”

“How do I know that the Canadian standard has been met in their education?”

“There should be a co-op placement program so that employers could try out employees.”

“What we need is on-line information about hiring immigrants, diversity and anti-racism training and credential assessment.”

“I am willing to give anyone a chance, but what comes first is those applicants with Canadian experience.”

“We have to be very careful not to fuel the fire of using immigrants as a means to an economic end.”

“I have lived all over the world and have no problem hiring newcomers”.

“Hiring a newcomer, or for them the acquisition of a job, is just the first step on the ladder or the staircase. The rest of the stairs can be difficult to climb depending on the community and the level of welcoming. People need to realize that both sides need educating and that differences need to be celebrated.”

Participants in the interviews, focus groups and forum had many suggestions for future success such as: ways to help employees establish credit, creating a list or repository of qualified newcomer applicants that is easy to access, having on-line training on immigration processes for employers and having access to training about welcoming and integrating newcomer employees. Some of the focus group participants had attended Local Immigration Partnership meetings or were members of either the Northwestern Ontario or the Thunder Bay LIP and were much more informed and active in the discussion as well as being aware of 3rd party partners such as the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association and the Portal.

Collective Impact

The collective impact of this research on the community and employers in the region has been to develop an awareness of immigrant employee potential, information sessions on employment resources, human rights training, as well as tools to help integrate employees. The focus group sessions, research interviews and the employer forum generated an awareness and interest in hiring immigrants and making the effort to welcome them in order to retain them. Community development was an unintended result of the research. We also heard many success stories of immigrant hiring and how the process was smooth and the result very profitable for all involved. A newcomer from Yemen was hired by an IT company who then trained him to take over the Northwest region of their operations. His family has relocated and integrated very well on all levels. His spouse has found work locally as well as on-line, and the children have adapted very well into the school system and have become involved in summer and winter sports. Several nurses from the Philippines, Yugoslavia, Jamaica and Russia have found full time work in the North and are reporting a successful integration process into small town living. They had previously needed to combine several part-time positions to generate enough income to survive. Several of the nurses expressed their surprise with the low cost of housing and the surplus income that they now have to do things they have wanted to do.

Best Practices

Integration

One of the large corporations interviewed is a global company that blends the needs of the organization with the needs of the candidate. The company recruits and employs from Mexico, Germany, Austria, Poland, England, India, South Africa, France, USA and Czech Republic for operations at their location in Thunder Bay. They have used a variety of recruitment strategies from Global Graduate Programs to Immigration Portal

advertising. Their transfer and relocation management system is advanced and serves both the employer and the candidate well. After recruitment and selection, the company allows the employee and the family the opportunity to visit Thunder Bay and familiarize themselves with the city and workplace. They assist with the immigration process and connect them with local settlement agency programs and community connections. Corporate HR staff assist with required documentation for the family and provide links or personal tutors for language training if needed. They offer what they call “cross cultural training sessions,” which are really getting to know your community and Canada sessions. The settlement agency provides Orientation to Ontario sessions to the families and any life skills or soft skills training that they might require. Banking and taxation information is provided to the new arrivals with a special focus on opening bank accounts, transferring funds, establishing credit, purchasing homes or vehicles, and obtaining credit cards. An orientation to the workplace for the whole family is provided, along with a tour and a welcoming “meet and greet” session with management and staff.

In partnership with the local settlement agency and community partners, the human resources department provides and assists the employee and family with an extensive orientation package and process.

This includes:

Local history, regional geography, weather, cultural events and recreation

Federal and Provincial registration, licenses, cards and identification

Education for children or spouses (Public, Catholic, private, IB, College, University)

Health and wellness referrals to physicians, surgeons, clinics, hospital, supportive care

Banking

Legal

Real Estate

Utilities

Shopping (groceries and goods)

Places of worship, connections to local faith communities

This approach impressed the research team and led to an information session for employers at the Local Immigration Partnership forum on the welcoming program. Many employers present requested the slide deck and plan to implement a similar process. Models of what can work and what has worked serve to motivate others to make

the effort and to use the templates of integration strategies. This was one of the unexpected outcomes of the research and prompted the discussion and future development of a tool kit or employee integration template for employers based on the work of this employer.

Welcoming

Another example of an exemplary best practice is a small municipality which is coordinating an industry, community, municipality and business welcoming strategy for newcomer employees relocating to the area due to the development of a mill. The municipality has a population of just under 1,500 people and has made a conscious effort to grow that population in partnership with the larger employers in the town. The purchase of a former pulp and paper mill by a manufacturer that now makes pulp for the purpose of turning it into fabric for textiles has created population growth for the town. It is producing the pulp and exporting it to India for manufacturing of textiles. The company has recruited many employees from India to the region as well as keeping 250 of the original employees. The growth in the community has been mainly immigrant families originally from India who had previously landed elsewhere in Canada.

The company functions in a multilingual and multicultural manner with immigrant staff integrated into the workplace, the region and the community by others who are already working there. They have established a mentoring system and sharing of knowledge and expertise in both workplace information and community integration. The company hosted Diwali celebrations for the entire community to meet, greet and get to know the families and allow for familiarization with their company.

Newcomer families have been welcomed by the municipality, mayor and council and the community at large. The community economic development officer assisted with finding housing and referred them to the settlement service provider in the region. Education institutions worked together to make the children feel welcome and settled.

Economic Development staff worked with local businesses to start to bring in supplies and groceries that the families had requested and the community was starting to become interested in. This made the newcomer families feel welcomed and appreciated. The business community was responsive to their needs and wanted to make their transition into the community smooth and familiar.

The municipality partnered with the company to pave an old tennis court that was unused for years. Staff noticed that the families were using it to play cricket and sometimes tennis. Once paved the community was able to engage in the sport of cricket with the new families and the rest is history.

Phase Two

Barriers and Perceived Barriers

There is a lack of knowledge among small and medium enterprise owners of the immigration process, and of procedures and laws governing the hiring of immigrants from abroad.

Northern region employers face limited access to pools of immigrants already within Canada.

Employers expressed a fear of immigrant employees not “fitting in” or integrating smoothly.

The misconception that immigrant workers are “mostly temporary foreign workers or here on a work visa sending their money home but not planning to stay,” was a common comment in the research. On the other hand, some of the employers voiced the opinion that they “don’t really care about nation building or if the employees are temporary foreign workers.” There was at times no commitment to growing the population or impacting the greater good.

One employer mentioned “harassment policy legislation and the fear of human rights claims against employers by immigrant employees” as one of his main worries.

There is a lack of understanding of the Express Entry system and the immigration path. Employers are overwhelmed by the web of immigration policies across many of the programs and processes for bringing an employee to Canada and to their workplace.

There were no real statistics available for the region as to where immigrant employees had been hired. The researchers had to contact individual economic development officers in each of the municipalities to gather those statistics, community by community.

In some regions, immigrants are hired in strictly retail and service sectors, such as Tim Horton’s, Sears, Walmart and the service industry. In other areas it was mining, manufacturing, construction and research or medical fields.

Unexpected Outcomes

These barriers prompted the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association to respond with training and information sessions on Express Entry, guiding employers to the webinar on Express Entry, and sessions on “Canadian Experience and the Ontario Human Rights Code” in partnership with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

The requests for connecting with immigrants who are underemployed led to the development of an immigrant job fair at which many employers hired immigrant employees.

Participation in the focus groups and discussions with other employers who had hired immigrants gave some participants confidence in the process and encouraged them to give immigrants a chance. Conversations among employers raised questions that were answered by those who have been through the experience of hiring immigrants. The process of conducting this research and providing the follow-up presentations on topics of interest to employers who participated cultivated more visibility of immigration and integration in Northwestern Ontario. Employers had exposure to companies who had experience in hiring immigrants and had the opportunity to discuss the process with them. As a result, employers are talking about hiring immigrants more and are interested in marketing their businesses to immigrant investors and entrepreneurs. Retirement and succession planning now has the option of immigrants taking over the businesses, and a repository of businesses for sale is under development in Thunder Bay by the Community Economic Development Corporation and the chartered accountants of the region.

Employers were educated in human rights and know the do's and don'ts of hiring. They may not claim explicitly that an employee has no "Canadian experience" because they know that is not acceptable, but they might say, "they are not the right fit for our organization." This was examined in the training sessions and in the literature given out at the forum and job fair. As a result, many employers now have an enhanced understanding of the law, but also some baseline training in immigrant welcoming.

After hearing immigrant employees' stories and immigrant employer perspectives, employers now have an appreciation for their situations and the adjustments they need to make to integrate into the workplace. They are now much more aware of the success stories from other employers and have more confidence in the process of hiring an immigrant, albeit they would rather hire one already within Canada than go through the process of recruiting from abroad.

Without derailing the research and taking up too much time in the forum, we had a discussion around how racism is demonstrated subtly in the workplace. A skilled focus group leader caught on to the use of "them" and "us" in a session which led to a conversation around how we systemically differentiate and propagate racist attitudes in subtle ways. This resulted in requests for anti-racism and anti-oppression training at many of the employers' sites.

Next Steps and Suggestions

1. Develop an employer handbook or toolkit of resources to help them integrate employees. Include a checklist of things to think about and a list of resources or agencies to help them achieve successful integration.
2. Develop a “Champion Program” comprising employers who frequently hire immigrants to be a voice to other employers and business owners in the community on the numerous benefits of hiring immigrants, based on their experiences.
3. Create an Immigrant Employment Council to bring actors together to plan around attracting and retaining skilled newcomers to address labour needs. Such a council could also review opportunities and identify actions needed for immigration to play a role in diversifying the economy of Northwestern Ontario.
4. Develop workplace cultural training programs designed to bring awareness (employers/business owners/human resources) of cultural concepts and the necessary tools to gain cross- cultural competency regarding newcomer hires.
5. Continue to build up the Northwestern Ontario Immigration Portal, a flagship regional partnership, as a virtual gateway to attract and retain immigrants for Northwestern Ontario.

Conclusion

Our participants were able to reflect, explore and discover the way forward for immigration here in Northwestern Ontario. The project gave employers and representatives in the region an opportunity to be engaged on a very important element that will have an impact on the transition for economic growth and social wellbeing. The project is an impetus for change because we now have people thinking about the holistic contributions of immigration. There is a strong sense of further application to work on the suggested next steps by our partners as a result of our research engagement. The research experience illustrated for us not only the level of commitment by participants to provide information, but also understanding methods of engagement. The Thunder Bay Multicultural Association going forward will be engaging communities for further understanding to take initiatives forward as a result of this project. Overall, the project is a conduit to challenge ourselves to get selection and settlement immigration initiatives right in Northwestern Ontario.

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