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WELLINGTON COUNTY

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WINTER EDITION 2018



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Newcomers to Canada: filling labour market gaps

BY JAIME MYSLIK



AHMAD TAJO AND MELODY ESFAHANI, DANBY APPLIANCES

GUELPH-ERAMOSA - When Ahmad Tajo arrived in Canada more than a year ago he didn't know how to open a bank account or get a cellphone SIM card or register with a family doctor. Now he does.

Tajo is one of many Syrian refugees who came to Canada after fleeing their war-torn home country and, as many other refugees, he wanted to find work.

Tajo and his family arrived in Canada on Dec. 19, 2016 and he was employed by the Danby Appliances IT department by the end of January 2017.

"I started working immediately," he said. "The good thing when I started here, I didn't need to train.

"Of course, every day you will know new things, but it was easy."

Tajo had been working for 10 years in IT in Syria and he earned all his certifications in English. He explained that there is no option to learn IT in Arabic - English is the only possibility. So, starting work in the IT department as a help desk analyst at Danby was a natural transition.

However, not all refugees and newcomers to Canada are able to speak English upon arrival.

"They don't practice it so it will be a shock in language, culture, work environment - yeah, everything," Tajo said.

Sandra Cocco, executive director of Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington, said a common challenge for newcomers is the debate about whether they should try to get a job immediately or take English classes so they can increase their chances to find their desired employment.

Danby, a Guelph-Eramosa Township refrigeration and specialty appliance company, has taken this struggle in stride and has tried to make employment opportunities available to any newcomer, whatever their English proficiency and whatever their skill level.

Currently the company has at least 10 full-time employees who are newcomers to Canada, but it has had up to 24 at one time on contract.

Director of human resources Melody Esfahani explained Danby's intake process for newcomers is different from other job postings.

"We try to make it very simple for them," she said.

Once Danby is contacted by a sponsorship family, sponsorship group or the newcomer, Esfahani said she tries to get an idea of what they're looking for in Canada and what



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- MELODY ESFAHANI, DIRECTOR OF HUMAN RESOURCES DANBY APPLIANCES

they did back home. Then she explains the opportunities available at Danby.

"I like them to come in and have a look, especially if they're going to be working in the warehouse," Esfahani said. "I want them to understand what the work environment is because I'd say that has also been a bit of a challenge for the newcomer, where maybe they were in an office setting back home and now they're expected to wear safety shoes and a bright neon vest and clean units.

"So, it's helping them to kind of get to that understanding that maybe this isn't long term, but perhaps this is something you need to do in the short term to get to where you want to get to."

Once a schedule is agreed upon, Esfahani said the newcomer usually signs a three-month contract with Danby.

"There's no background checks, there's no references, there's no interview," Esfahani said. "It's just really understanding what are they looking for and them understanding what we do and what the opportunity is."

Sohrab Rahmaty, employment coordinator at Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington, says more employers may want to consider a similar intake process.

He said within the current economic environment manufacturing businesses are going to need to rely heavily on newcomers to fill vacant positions.

"We can't use an HR hiring practice that was meant for the 90s or for a different demographic for a newcomer," Rahmaty said.

"I've been to some of these mock hiring processes where I've met the HR managers and they say 'okay this is what they go through' and it's a six-hour behavioural interview exam and testing and it's just for ... a labour position that anybody could more or less perfect or master in a month's time.

"So I tell them you're having a challenge hiring people, maybe we need to look at the hiring process."

Cocco said Immigrant Services encourages employers hiring for lower-skilled work to make the hiring process more accessible.

"The question is, do we really need them to go through this rigorous process to do something that really ... after a month's time they're going to be either a good operator or not," she said. "And so you have that three-month probationary period.

"Why make the assessment thing so difficult that you're not even going to get to the real skill that's needed?"

The unemployment rate in Wellington County and Guelph is relatively low, but Cocco explained this sometimes presents challenges for employers who are hiring.

She suggested companies having difficulty filling labour needs look at newcomers as a potential source because 11 per cent of Wellington County residents are immigrants and 21% of Guelph residents are immigrants.

"A lot of them are coming at a specific age and with family," Rahmaty said. "So when you're in those circumstances ... you tend to want to get into a company and stick with it ... because you have to find a means to an income ...

"So, what newcomers do is they bring that stability ... a very desired aspect right now in the manufacturing world is someone that can come in, work, you know put in overtime, and also be able to do shift work, but also be consistent to come into work."



"People are friendly. They are supportive, cooperative; they are very nice and this is Canadian people, not only in Danby."

- AHMAD TAJO,
NEWCOMER FROM SYRIA

Danby has a program called Ease into Canada that is designed so newcomers get the most out of their three month-contract.

"You're setting them up with the basics of working so that when they go into another company they now know what someone means by checking your pay stub," Esfahani.

The Ease into Canada program also helps to explain T4s, benefit plans and how to submit taxes.

The program also makes translators available to newcomers, both in the warehouse and office, and offers English as a second language lessons on site once a week.

"What we're trying to also do is encourage conversation groups," Esfahani. "That is coming along slowly so it's finding the volunteers within the Danby group of people and then finding interested Ease into Canada participants who want to practice their English."

She said employees are also encouraged to attend employment and newcomer programs at Lutherwood and Immigration Services Guelph-Wellington, even if it's during company time, as long as business needs are not affected.

"We'd love it if we could hire everyone, but realistically that's not possible," Esfahani said.

"The goal is to just give them the foundation they need so they can be successful in other companies."

Danby recently received a grant from Immigration Services Guelph-Wellington to work on an Ease into Canada Manufacturing Toolkit along with Immigrant Services and the Wellington County economic development department.

Esfahani said they'll be looking at the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis and tweaking the toolkit in the first half of 2018 and then trying to replicate it in another company in the second half of the year. The idea is to have it ready for use by 2019 or 2020.

"The goal is make this replicable, make it easy for other companies to incorporate because there is value in drawing from this candidate pool," she said.

"They are hard-working people who are eager to work, who need the opportunity and I know that there are companies out there who struggle to find candidates.

"I see them doing job fairs, I see them reaching out to me asking if we have anyone, so I think it's a matter of tapping into that resource and it's a win-win situation if we can get good at that."

One of the key challenges for newcomers trying to find work in Wellington County is transportation.

"There are employers in the county and the population isn't growing out there, they need people and they're here," Cocco said. "So how do we get them from A to B?"

Not all newcomers want to move to smaller towns so Cocco suggested a transportation strategy. Because it's often difficult for newcomers to purchase a car until they have a job, she said a community transportation strategy is necessary.

"We can't have city transit so companies need to be thinking about a small investment that could lead to a big solution for a labour market gap," Cocco said. "How much would it cost to run a bus?

"And if you have enough people that you could make stops, maybe companies have to work together ... where they share the costs of something like that and you do a drop off here and a drop off there."

Tajo said his experience in Canada and at Danby is the best work environment he's ever experienced.

"People are friendly. They are supportive, cooperative; they are very nice and this is Canadian people, not only in Danby," he said.

"They appreciate your work and this is one of the most encouraging things.

"But I come here every day and I'm happy."

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