

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Farhang and Iran Hessami. They sacrificed their careers, and everything they had to ensure that my brother and I could receive an education when they left Iran after the 1979 revolution, which brought a denial of basic human rights, including the right to education for Baha'is. Unlike most immigrants who have a choice and can go back, my parents were refugees and never returned to Iran.

On your shoulders I stand, and I am eternally grateful.

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Abstract

This research identifies the dimensions of Canadian experience from the perspective of recruiters in the financial industry. Lack of Canadian experience is a systemic barrier to successful economic adaptation of new immigrants to Canada. Using modified grounded theory, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen front line recruiters in the Canadian financial sector. Analysis reveals that employers seek communication and leadership skills that are expressed in a uniquely Canadian style. As well, they wish to minimize the risk of a bad hiring fit, and the costs of training and acclimatization, so they use prior experience as proof of competence. Due to the style requirements, this prior experience should be in a Canadian environment. These results are then analyzed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital theory as applied to the social concept of Canadian experience.

Key words: Immigrants, Economic Adaptation, Canadian Experience, Pierre Bourdieu, Communication, Culture

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Introduction

Concept of Canadian Experience

With a low birth rate and an aging population, Canada relies on immigration to provide more than eighty percent of labour force growth (Stats Canada, 2011). Skill and talent shortages are forecast to affect the entire economy and hurt Canada's competitive position in the world (Kukushkin & Watt, 2009). To address this issue Canada has adopted a human-capital focused immigration policy based on a points system, which selects highly skilled professionals (Liu, 2007; Schrijver, 2010). The process of economic adaptation and integration of immigrants, leading to their employment in Canada has received much attention from researchers in the fields of anthropology, psychology, geography, human resources, sociology and social sciences (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Creese & Weibe, 2009; Reitz, 2007a). Studies have explored barriers to employment and the factors that cause the devaluing of the skills of immigrants (Creese, 2010; Friesen, 2011; Girard & Bauder, 2007; Li, 2008; Man, 2004).

Despite the identified need, and Canada's ability to attract skilled immigrants, studies reveal a long established pattern of immigrants being disadvantaged in the labour-market (Galabuzi, 2006; Galarneau & Morissette, 2009). The main identified barriers causing unemployment or underemployment of immigrants are the lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experience, language and communication deficits, lack of Canadian work experience and lack of knowledge of Canadian culture (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Bauder, 2003; Liu, 2007). A Statistics Canada study identified the lack of Canadian work experience as the most common barrier to finding meaningful employment for immigrants in Canada (Kukushkin

& Watt, 2009). “Lack of Canadian experience” has become a catchall phrase used by employers, many immigrants and those who work in settlement agencies.

Tacit Dimension of Canadian Experience

Recently Sakamoto, Chin and Young (2010) explored what “Canadian experience” means in the context of skilled immigrant employment. After interviewing immigrants, service providers, mentors and Human Resources personnel the authors identified Canadian experience as including hard and soft skills, and “tacit knowledge” which they propose comprises “the tacit dimension of Canadian experience” (Sakamoto et al., 2010, p. 145). In another study for the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council (CTHRC, 2007), data were collected from key stakeholders to identify “minimum required competencies and other traits or conditions expected of new immigrants working in the tourism sector” (CTHRC, 2007, p. 2). Summarized in a brochure entitled *Canadian Workplace Essentials* (CTHRC, 2008), these competencies are “nine attitudes and skills necessary to succeed in the tourism sector: non-verbal communication, confidence, initiative, an ability to express personal opinions, a willingness to ask questions, general social skills, punctuality, a healthy personal regimen, and an understanding of organizational structure”(p. 3).

Liu (2007) asserts that Canadian experience is “actually used as a cultural parameter in the evaluation process and equated with proof of required language and communication skills and ability to function in the Canadian business culture” (p. 10). As a necessary first step to overcome this systemic barrier, there is a need to further define, articulate and communicate the cultural competencies, tacit dimensions, and soft skills embedded in the catchall phrase,

“Canadian experience”, especially from the employer’s perspective.

Canadian Immigration Policy

Canada has three main streams of immigrants: economic immigrants through programs such as the Federal Skilled Worker program which selects immigrants to accept based on points system, the family reunification program, and the refugee acceptance program (Reitz, 2011). During recent years there has been a great deal of attention given to the underemployment and unemployment of immigrants, a problem known as “brain waste” which economists estimate costs Canada at least \$3 billion on an annually (Reitz, 2011). To address this, the federal government has recently started to introduce reforms that are aimed at improving the selection and admission process in order to improve the economic adaptation of new immigrants.

A review of the content of the Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) website shows that the term “Canadian experience” is now part of the immigration discourse and policy reforms (CIC, 2013a). The website states that “employers have shown a preference for workers with Canadian study and work experience;” therefore, a “suite of improvements” are introduced to the way in which the applicants are evaluated based on a selection grid of 100 points (CIC, 2012). Compared to the past, new applicants will receive more points for previous work experience in Canada than for foreign work experience. The maximum points allocated to foreign work experience will be reduced from 21 to 15 and these points will be redirected to language ability and age of the candidate (CIC, 2012). As stated on the website, these improvements will “enable CIC to select younger skilled workers, proficient in English or French, who can integrate more rapidly and successfully into the Canadian labour market and be active members of the work

force for a longer period of time” (CIC, 2012).

Recently the Canadian Experience Class (CEC) was introduced to enable those who are already in Canada as a temporary foreign workers or students and who have Canadian work experience to move from temporary to permanent residence under CEC (CIC, 2013b).

The Journey

Background of the Researcher

My motivation to conduct this research is rooted in my personal and professional experiences. As an immigrant/refugee to Canada right after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, I observed my parents face many barriers to economic adaptation and securing employment in their field. We came to Canada to escape the post-revolution persecution of the Baha’is in Iran. My parents’ main motivation in making such a bold relocation was to preserve the right of their children to an education. Even today, the right to an education, among many other individual rights, are denied to Baha’is living in Iran. We entered Canada on student visas and my mother accompanied us as a visitor. Shortly after our arrival the US embassy in Tehran was overrun, the American hostages were taken, and the persecution of Bahai’s intensified. There was no way back for us, and life ahead was full of challenges. What was anticipated to be a trip of a few months, turned into a lifetime living in Canada, never returning to our country of birth. My parents’ struggle to re-establish their lives and make a living in Canada was very difficult. Their language skills, the lack of recognition of their Iranian qualifications, and especially their lack of Canadian experience caused them to be underemployed for many years. Our experience mirrors the experiences of many immigrants to Canada today.

Professionally, I help organizations plan their talent attraction and retention strategies. In recent years, I have seen an expansion in the number of organizations that want to increase the diversity of their workforce in order to be innovative and competitive in the global market and to be more representative of their customers in Canada. I have also participated in sector specific, government funded projects aimed at identifying the barriers to immigrants and visible minorities securing professionally relevant jobs. Yet despite years of policy reforms and resources aimed at removing barriers to the economic adaptation of immigrants, and a strong proactive policy for attracting skilled immigrants to Canada, some of these barriers continue to exist today. Recent immigrants face the same difficulties that my parents experienced years ago. Similar to immigrants today, my parents were rejected for jobs in their fields, even when they were clearly over qualified for some of the positions. The main reason given was *lack of Canadian experience*.

As a human resource professional with a specialty in talent management including attraction and recruitment of qualified candidates I wanted to explore and better understand what employers mean by *Canadian experience*. Therefore for the purpose of this research I framed my main questions as:

- What is Canadian experience?
- How is Canadian experience used in the recruitment process of new immigrants to the financial industry?

I also devised the following sub-questions to get a much better understanding of this term:

- What are the components of “Canadian” experience as perceived by recruiters?
- Are there specific competencies and/or soft skills that fall under this requirement?
- How are these competencies and/or soft skills assessed in new immigrants?

Purpose of Research

This research draws from and contributes to the body of social science studies on immigration (Creese & Wiebe, 2009; Sakamoto, Chin & Yong, 2010), public policy (Liu, 2007; Reitz, 2007a; 2007b) and the economic integration and adaptation processes of immigrants (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Bauder, 2003; Girard & Bauder 2007; Li, 2008). The purpose of this modified grounded theory study is to understand and define the skills and competencies that characterize the Canadian work experience for new immigrants within the financial industry, in four provinces: Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec.

The research is set in the financial industry, because it has reportedly made great inroads in the labour market integration of immigrants but has yet to “overcome hurdles such as the lack of Canadian experience” (Burke, 2008, p. 44).

The findings will be used to increase awareness of these cultural competencies and to provide new immigrants with the cultural knowledge required to satisfy the needs of employers. The findings will also be used to assist employers, specifically recruiters, to adjust their recruitment and orientation processes for internationally trained professionals. Both stakeholder groups can better define their needs and qualifications in terms of intercultural competency instead of *Canadian work experience*, which cannot be acquired before finding a job in Canada, thus creating a catch-22.

Methodology

Grounded theory is a systematic way to collect and analyze data in order “to move beyond description and to *generate or discover a theory*” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63). Glaser and Strauss, who developed this methodology, defined grounded theory “as a method of discovery, treated categories as emergent from the data, relied on direct and often, narrow empiricism, and analyzed a basic social process” (Charmaz, 2006, p.8). The main idea is to ensure that the general explanation and/or the theory development of a process, action or interaction is “grounded in data [collected] from participants who have experienced the process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For this research I used a “modified” grounded theory approach since contrary to a traditional assumption of grounded theory, I was familiar with the current literature (Tickner, Leman, & Woodcock, 2009). In addition, from the outset, the goal of the study was not to discover or construct a theory but rather to understand the research topic in the context of major theoretical concepts and current literature. As Strauss & Corbin (1998) suggest, the literature is not used as data but rather to stimulate the researcher’s thinking about properties and dimensions, which can be further used to examine the data (p.44).

Data Collection & Analysis

Participants

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Byrne, 2004) of thirteen recruiters (N = 13) who worked in the four provinces of Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec.. In most large organizations there are human resources departments with a subset of specialists who are responsible for recruiting staff. These are the frontline recruiters.

The rationale for selecting frontline recruiters was that they often play the role of a broker between the candidates and the hiring managers. Consequently they often have a unique perspective that includes a general overview of the staffing needs of the organization, the screening and recruitment process, the needs of the hiring managers and the reasons that candidates are hired or declined. They are in the best position to identify and define the soft skills or cultural competencies included in and referred to by hiring managers as *Canadian experience*. The recruiters who participated in this study (N = 13) either worked directly for financial organizations as corporate recruiters (n = 9) or worked for independent third party recruitment companies, which recruited for financial firms (n = 4). They were from accounting firms (n = 5), banks (n = 3), insurance companies (n = 1), and independent third party recruiting companies (n = 4). They worked in BC/Alberta (n = 2), the Greater Toronto Area (n = 8), and the Greater Montreal Area (n = 3). Their average experience was 13 years. Some were immigrants to Canada as internationally trained professionals (n = 6), and some were second or third generation Canadians (n = 7).

Individual participants were assured that they were not representing the organizations they worked in or provided services to, and that they could draw from the breadth of their professional recruitment experiences in the financial industry.

Profile of Participating Subjects

Table A1 shows the profiles of the research participants. First generation is a term I use to describe those who were not born in Canada, second and greater generation describes those recruiters who were born in Canada. Ethnicity is how the participants described their cultural

and national backgrounds. In cases where the participants chose not to disclose their ethnicity, I entered ‘not disclosed’ (ND).

Participant	Location	Ethnicity	Yrs In Canada	Yrs of exp	Type of org	Level of Position
1	Toronto	Italian	1st generation	14 yrs.	Insurance	Manager
2	Toronto	Scottish	2nd generation	10 yrs.	Recruitment company	Director
3	Burlington	Scottish	5th generation	12 yrs.	Recruitment company	Owner
4	Mississauga	Italian	2n generation	14 yrs.	Recruitment company	Sr. Recruiter
5	Toronto	Indian	1st gen. 11 yrs	15 yrs.	Accounting firm	Manager
6	Toronto	East Indian/ Pakistan	1st. gen. 10 yrs	9 yrs.	Bank	Manager
7	Vancouver	ND	Canadian born	15 yrs.	Accounting firm	Manager
8	Montreal	Spanish	1st generation	33 yrs.	Recruitment company	Manager
9	Mississauga	Indian	1st gen.-10 yrs.	20 yrs.	Bank	Manager
10	Montreal	French	1st gen.-10 yrs.	10 yrs	Accounting firm	Manager
11	Edmonton	ND	3rd generation	14 yrs.	Accounting firm	Manager
12	Montreal	Haitian	2nd generation	5 yrs.	Accounting firm	Manager
13	Toronto	Irish/Eng	4 th generation	23	Bank	Manager

Table A1: Profile of Participants

Processing and Synthesizing Data

An introductory email along with a consent form was emailed to all participants. Each participant consented by replying back to the email prior to the interview. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and imported into an Excel spreadsheet, one sentence per row. Using grounded theory guidelines all the statements and responses were analyzed and “open coding” was used to capture the meaning and the intent behind each statement (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). After this process, the open codes were broken down further into categories and sub-

categories. At the final stage axial coding was used to look at the relationships between these categories and sub-categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). To synthesize and integrate into identifiable themes, all interviews were put on one spreadsheet and analyzed further by comparing statements across interviews. This final comparative analysis led to six main themes which were used to organize the research results.

Evolution of Research

Initially I was going to use a mixed methods research framework. Simply defined, mixed methods research incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). There are various mixed methods research designs (Spicer, 2004). The one I intended for this research was an exploratory sequential design, in which a topic is studied in two phases, the first of which is qualitative research, the results of which are used to build a survey instrument to collect quantitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The data gathered through the first qualitative phase would have been generalized and confirmed through the quantitative survey method applied to a larger group. The research participants were meant to be from two major Canadian banks, one audit firm, and two employment agencies. To identify and recruit these participants I was going to use a gatekeeper such as the head of diversity for each these organizations, who was expected to act as an intermediary providing access to the survey participants (Walsh, 2004). For the first phase there were going to be twenty recruiters, four from each organization, selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. Data collected from these interviews would then be analyzed and the findings used to generate the survey questions. The survey participants were also meant to come from the same organizations. The

plan was infeasible because initial attempts to secure permission from organizations to contact their recruiters was a challenge. In one instance permission was not granted, and in two others there was no response from the gatekeepers. Since the initial organizations were chosen because the gatekeepers were in my personal network, it became evident that to gain access to other organizations through more formal channels would be hard. To overcome this I decided to seek out potential participants among recruiters who had experience recruiting for the financial industry as corporate recruiters or as independent/third party recruiters and who would not be representing their employers or clients.

Another change came about after the first few interviews and through further refinement of the research methods. It became obvious that a survey was unlikely to add new information to the data collected from the interviews. I realized that to get a good response rate on the survey and make the findings meaningful I needed to secure sponsorship of someone within the organizations. These realizations led to abandoning the idea of conducting a quantitative research second phase, which meant dropping the mixed methods approach. Since this decision was early in the process, I chose a modified grounded theory method for the collection and analysis of data. Additionally, due to data saturation, I reduced the number of interviewees from twenty to thirteen.

Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

Theoretical Framework & Concepts

In the context of grounded theory research, after the data is collected and analyzed, the findings are grounded in the literature (Charmaz, 2006). What emerges from the data is situated

within existing studies related to the topic. I chose to use a *modified* grounded theory methodology because of the fact that I was already familiar with some of the literature. I had chosen the theories of Pierre Bourdieu's to frame the study. After the analysis of data it was clear that some of the main concepts of Bourdieu's theory were relevant to this research and further grounded the findings.

Pierre Bourdieu

A twentieth century social philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) work covers extensive studies of education, art, culture, and language, and has been applied to a wide range of fields from philosophy to theology (Grenfell, 2008). Bourdieu's key concepts of habitus, field, and several different types of capital, which he called his "thinking tools," have been used as a framework by researchers from a wide variety of fields to study different social phenomena (Maton, 2008, p. 51).

Habitus, Field and Forms of Capital

Habitus is the way in which we act, feel, think and behave (Maton, 2008). As a concept it is used to explain regularities in comparison to rules in social practices; it provides the means by which the workings of the social world can be analyzed through empirical research (Maton, 2008). Bourdieu explains that all his thinking started from this point: "how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules" (as cited by Maton, 2008, p. 50). In his own words Bourdieu thus explains the concept of habitus:

The word *disposition* seems particularly suited to express what is covered by the concept of habitus (defined as a system of dispositions). It expresses first the *result of an*

organizing action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a *way of being*, a *habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination* (Bourdieu, 1977/1972, p. 214).

Habitus is a “system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class” resulting in a division of labour (Bourdieu, 1977/1972, p. 86). Becoming a member and/or gaining status in the group depends on the ability of the individual to understand and perform the group’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1984/1979).

In this way the concept of habitus is inter-connected to the concept of the field, a social space where social agents interact and secure positions within the fields that “best match their dispositions”, trying to avoid “field-habitus clash” and striving to find “field-habitus match” (Maton, 2008, p. 59). Habitus is so ingrained in the individuals and the group’s history that it cannot easily be explained and its processes can be invisible to those involved, as a “fish in water” is unaware “of the supporting, life-affirming water” (p. 59). Therefore, central to how habitus can be used as an explanatory tool is its relationship with the field (Maton, 2008).

For Bourdieu these two concepts are also closely related to the concept of capital (Maton, 2008). He explains “capital can present itself in three fundamental guises”: as *economic capital*, which can immediately and directly be converted to money and can be institutionalized as property rights; as *cultural capital*, which can be institutionalized in symbolic forms such as educational qualifications and converted to economic capital; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations (‘connections’) which can also be converted to economic capital and institutionalized in the forms of titles or social status (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 2). Bourdieu (1986) identifies these forms of capital as necessary requirements to achieve career success and mobility

and he further delineates three sub-categories of cultural capital: “institutionalized (e.g. university or college diploma, certificates), embodied (e.g. corporeal appearance and performance) and objectified (e.g. material status symbols such as art/fashion” (Luis & Bauder, 2010, p. 35).

Immigration Literature & Bourdieu’s Theory

Many social science scholars have extended Bourdieu’s forms of capital to an immigration context, examining the systemic barriers devaluing immigrants’ experience such as the non-recognition of foreign credentials (Bauder, 2003; Girard & Bauder, 2007), the linguistic competency of migrants (Creese, 2010), the lack of a social network and the lack of knowledge of Canadian culture (Creese & Weibe, 2009; Friesen, 2011; Li, 2008).

Bauder (2003) has extended Bourdieu’s theory of institutionalized cultural capital to an immigration context, examining the systemic barriers posed by the lack of recognition of foreign credentials and the way in which regulatory bodies in Canada evaluate foreign professional credentials. By examining the Ontario’s professional engineering regulatory system, Girard & Bauder (2007) show that “admission to the engineering profession is contingent upon possessing valorized institutional cultural capital in the form of academic credentials, as well as embracing the dominant habitus, in the form of workplace behaviour and business practices,” hence confirming Bourdieu’s theory “that institutional cultural capital and habitus interact to produce and reproduce the social division labour”(p. 21). The findings from this study clearly shows that the interplay between institutional cultural capital and habitus produces the existing labour market segmentation; and that agents involved in the process of evaluations of foreign-trained

engineers in addition to qualifications also consider *tacit criteria* including “habitus-related knowledge and practices associated with communication and presentation skills, as well as norms of work place behaviour, dress code and professional ethics” resulting in favouring “Canadian-trained engineers who have internalized the dominant habitus” (p. 21).

Friesen (2011) has used Bourdieu’s theory in a longitudinal study of internship employers and immigrant engineers who attended a university-based qualifications recognition program. She asserts, “successful professional integration of immigrant engineers can be interpreted as the acquisition of multiple forms of capital and habitus” (p.79). Friesen (2011) explains capital as what people *have*, and habitus as what people *do* in regular forms of behaviour, as a result of internalization of cultural and social structures. She concludes that the “acquisition of social and cultural capital and habitus [are] critical professional resources and knowledge” and that “it takes years to acquire”, implicating both the profession and the immigrant engineer (p. 99). She identifies that to remedy this situation both stakeholders need to take action; the profession to articulate the “character and practice of Canadian professional engineering” and develop holistic qualification evaluation and recognition processes for foreign-trained engineers, while the immigrant engineers need to “personally effect the significant cultural and intellectual transitions inherent in professional integration”(p. 99).

As these studies demonstrate and Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) emphasize, it is the relationships between these three key concepts of habitus, field and capital that allow the researcher to examine a social phenomena through a “*new gaze*, a sociological eye” (p. 251).

Summary of Findings

In this chapter, I present findings as they pertain to the purpose of this research. These findings emerged from the data collected and, through systematic data analysis, six themes emerged: (1) reported dimensions of Canadian experience, which I further divided into the sub-themes of general definition, technical knowledge, and soft skills which I further sub-divided into communication and leadership skills; (2) unique characteristics of Canadian business culture; (3) stereotypes and generalizations; (4) the hiring context; (5) skills assessment, highlighting the way in which the skills of immigrants are assessed; and (6) suggestions as to how immigrants can effectively demonstrate the skills needed for the jobs they apply for. This information can also assist recruiters and hiring managers to better understand what is meant by Canadian experience, so that they can take appropriate steps to reduce it as a systemic barrier to immigrants' ability to find suitable jobs in Canada.

Review of Participants Profile

As explained in the methodology section, the participants of this research are thirteen recruiters (N = 13) working in audit firms (n = 5), banks (n = 3), insurance (n = 1), and independent third party recruitment companies (n = 4). They living and recruite in BC/Alberta (n = 2), the Greater Toronto Area (n=8), and the Greater Montreal Area (n = 3). They are first generation Canadians (n = 6) who had immigrated to Canada as internationally trained professionals, or second or third generation Canadians (n = 7).

Dimensions of Canadian Work Experience

General Definition of Canadian Experience

In general, participants found it challenging to define the term “Canadian experience”. As one participant aptly put it: “I always have not liked that term because it is not something that can easily be defined” (Participant # 6). When the term was taken literally (n = 4), the simplest definition given was having worked in Canada anywhere from one to three years. One participant expanded on this by identifying two forms of Canadian experience: one in which “people that have been here for several years and have numerous jobs on their resumes that are Canadian”, and the other, individuals who are “born here and raised here and that’s all they know” (Participant, #4).

In addition to the literal meaning of Canadian experience, two main aspects of Canadian experience emerged; Canadian-specific technical knowledge, and soft skills that enable someone to function effectively and in a culturally appropriate manner in a Canadian work environment. These soft skills are communication and leadership.

Technical Knowledge

The recruiters identified several criteria they, and hiring managers use to specify Canadian experience. One criterion is any technical knowledge or skill set specific to Canada (n = 9); for example, knowledge of Canadian tax law or accounting reporting rules. One participant working in an accounting firm clarified that asking whether someone has worked in Canada is “very different than saying that somebody needs Canadian experience to do the job” (participant #11). On the other hand, when there is a “tough-to-find skill set within [the] Canadian market

place”, then lack of Canadian experience is not the over riding issue (participant #4).

Participants (n = 4) described situations in which ITP (Internationally Trained Professional) candidates had Canada specific technical skills but lacked Canadian experience. In each case these ITP candidates were then subjected to a much more rigorous screening process than other candidates would have experienced. One recruiter working independently said that in order to assess the skills of the candidate, he “was interviewed a lot more than maybe the average person would be for this particular role” (participant #4).

Soft Skills

An axiom in recruiting circles is that “*you get hired for your technical (hard) skills but get fired for your soft skills.*” In addition to the technical skills all participants (N = 13) identified soft skills as the critical skills that they look for in successful candidates. Specifically they look for communication (n = 11) and leadership skills (n = 7). Participants consistently emphasized these as critical skills for success, not only to land a job but also essential to career advancement.

Communication Skills

Most participants (n = 11) emphasized the importance of communication skills in hiring both junior and senior staff. Communication skills include oral and written communication (n = 5), command of language (either French or English) (n = 5), communication style and tone (n = 6), and an understandable accent (n = 4). As a competency, communication skills are required in every role because communication within the organization is a daily occurrence. For this reason, recruiters and hiring managers must ensure that this requirement is not “compromised in any way”

(participant # 6). One corporate recruiter from the insurance industry stated that her organization would consider people without Canadian experience but not without communication skills (participant #1).

Communication skills are seen as less important in cases where the candidate has specific technical skills and will not be working in a public setting or dealing face-to-face with clients. One of the corporate recruiters working for a bank related an incident concerning a business entity where due to difficulties in finding specific skills, hiring managers had no choice but to hire ITPs sourced from a particular university who were “mathematical geniuses...and brilliant individuals,” but lacked communication skills (participant #13). Once hired, these ITPs wanted to advance in the organization, but were expected to “start speaking at meetings and talking to groups of people” (participant #13). Unfortunately, they could not convey or define for technical employees – such as the marketing group - the data that they were managing. Therefore the organization had to bring in coaches to help these ITPs overcome their communication challenges (participant #13). Four corporate recruiters stressed not only the importance of candidates having a good command of language, but also emphasized the barrier to understanding some ITPs due to their heavily accented English (n = 4). Whether accents are a deal-breaker in hiring depends on the job description, and the level of interaction with internal or external stakeholders (participant #1). As expressed by a corporate recruiter, if the role required dealing with external stakeholders on the phone and the candidate had a “thick accent [so] that we can’t even understand them...[then] forget it, it could be a deal breaker”(participant #1). On the other hand, if the candidate “has all the other qualities other than the accent, we will fix the accent. No, fix isn’t the right word, but we can work on that” by enrolling individuals in

“English-speaking courses, and we ask them to join toastmasters”(participant # 7).

In addition to heavily accented speech, the style of communication (n = 5) was mentioned. What was referred to as “style” was mainly focused on the level of forcefulness, directness or tact. Some candidates “come across in a very aggressive fashion, right between the eyeballs” (participant # 8). One participant noted that communication style can inhibit “integrating and assimilating with Canadian employees...not really [due] to lack of communication skills but [to] different communication styles...not short on vocabulary, but they could be curt and abrupt in their approach and that causes conflict” (participant # 13). Another described, “the way they express themselves even if it’s English...sometimes they sound very rude. Sometimes [it] could be just the opposite ...where they sound very submissive. Or where it comes across that they cannot make decisions”(participant # 9). One recruiter referred to the approach, another noted mannerisms, and a third mentioned tone as being displayed differently by different cultural groups. One participant emphasized that people from specific countries have a “hard time interfacing with Canadian employees, and not because they’re not smart... They have to kind of soften their approach...it’s not just lack of vocabulary, it’s tone, just general demeanor”(participant # 1). Another commented that even mannerisms are part of the communication style, “the way people are perceived sometimes from different countries can be more harsh” (participant # 4), or as another put it:

“when it comes to the different cultures, there is a direct communication, then there is what I would call a much softer communication style...so for example, there is a communication style when you don’t have a good command of the English language – you’re very...straight to the point. There’s no soft beginning or soft ending to a

conversation...that can be construed as rude” (participant # 7).

These differences in communication styles can impact the quality of the relationships of individuals with their co-workers and clients. Communication style differences can hinder integration of the ITPs with co-workers, cause conflict and misunderstandings due to miscommunication, and/or even alienate clients (participant # 2). Communication style can come across as culturally inappropriate or politically incorrect.

From the very beginning of their interactions with the candidates, the recruiters and hiring managers assess the ability of the individual to establish common ground and a bond using effective interpersonal and communication skills (n = 3). Inability to establish this rapport early on can raise a red flag for hiring managers. They may perceive the candidate as someone who may have difficulty relating to others on the team, who may not be liked, or may be unable to work collaboratively with others. Therefore, early on in the interview process an ITP must find something to talk about that the hiring manager can relate to. As one third-party recruiter explained, “maybe I can be friends with this person, or maybe I can – if they go, sailing or boating, or if they have cottages, or they fish, anything that can be a potential mutual interest” (participant # 3).

One participant mentioned, that hiring managers need to be able to connect with the candidate in the interview, since hiring managers “want to like him too, because they want him to get along with the rest of the team”(participant # 4). One of the participants, a second-generation immigrant Haitian Canadian, explained that one of the reasons that she has been able to grow in her career has been her ability to adapt her style of communication to others in such a way that “people wouldn’t even see a difference, because as you know...people hire for fit, they

hire for what is similar to them” (participant # 12). She further explained the importance of connecting with others:

“New immigrants or someone from another ethnic background, such as myself, if they are meeting in the interview with the hiring manager and they are able to adapt to that person to create a bond, well that’s positive. That’s a great attribute: to be able to connect with an individual” (participant # 12).

One participant mentioned that even some native-born Canadians might lack the communication and interpersonal skills sought by hiring managers (participant # 11). Most participants (n = 11) explained that these communication skills can be developed over time and with experience, but as elaborated below in the section titled *Hiring Context*, a hiring decision depends on the need for the skills that the candidate has, the state of the economy, and the perceived cost and resources required for training and development. Many participants (n = 11) believe that ITPs can have these communication skills, and if they lack them, they can develop them after being exposed to and immersed in the Canadian culture (n = 3). As one participant explained, ITPs need to be open and flexible and learn to adapt their communication style to their audience:

“I have recruited many ITPs and speaking to them two or three years later, I notice ... a big difference. They have adapted to how to communicate to Canadians as well as communicating in a Canadian work environment. It is not just necessarily the language that is being used, as it is the style. There are some levels of development required from the individual depending on where they are coming from” (participant # 6).

Realizing the need for training, participants (n = 3) provided examples of how they coach and mentor their candidates if they believe the adjustment could be quickly accomplished. In

addition, once hired, if there are any issues due to a lack of communication skills, then organizations invest in language training courses for new hires (n = 2) or provide mentors or coaches (n = 2) to assist ITPs in developing the communication skills required to effectively interface with co-workers, and clients.

Leadership Skills

Seven participants mentioned leadership skills as key soft skills they look for in candidates. Leadership skills include the following abilities:

- (1) to articulate and present one's views with confidence (n = 6);
- (2) to network, build and manage relationships (n = 4);
- (3) to manage one's own performance and the performance of ones reports (n = 4);
- (4) to influence (n = 2);
- (5) to take ownership of one's work and personal development (n = 3).

An inability to voice opinions is equated with an inability to lead. One participant elaborating on communication styles explained that when ITPs or other candidates "sound very submissive...it comes across that they can't be leaders" (participant # 9). The ability to articulate one's thoughts and views with confidence and enthusiasm is viewed as a necessary soft skill, especially for advancement to any management or senior position (participant # 8).

Another participant agreed that hiring managers value soft skills such as presenting oneself with enthusiasm and confidence (participant # 9). She went on to say that if there are two candidates interviewing for the same position, one a new Canadian who may not have the confidence to express him or herself, and a native-born Canadian who is "bubbling with energy and

enthusiasm”, then the native-born Canadian may get hired first (participant # 9). The ability to communicate clearly, with confidence and enthusiasm (participant # 12) is tied to the ability to be able to convince, persuade and influence others (participant # 6). These attributes are perceived as necessary in matrix organizations where it is important “to be able to work with people and eventually get them to maybe see your point of view or influence them in something that is really important” (participant # 5). These skills are seen as necessary competencies that enable the individual to connect to others and build effective relationships across various levels of the organization (participant # 6). An ability to build strong relationships with “their colleagues, with their clients, with their superiors, with their support network” is perceived as necessary to address the needs of clients, and advance one’s career (participant # 12).

Other soft skills are identified as necessary skills, irrespective of a person’s role in the organization. These skills are accountability, responsibility and ownership of the work (participant # 5). Ownership pertains to the personal work ethic and to the desire to “continually grow professionally and invest their own time [in] professional training. Somebody who wants to be a know-it-all essentially in their field. Somebody who wants to go above and beyond their job description and call of duty” (participant # 11). Another participant expressed that the desire for continuous improvement and taking responsibility for one’s own learning is indicative of personal investment in their field of expertise and their commitment to excellence (participant # 12). One of the participants, herself an ITP, identified these qualities and went on to explain that:

“[It] ... has to do with where they’re born. I think it is about being confident, it’s about knowing your work, and I think it’s ...from a cultural perspective. Sometimes it’s about

confidence. You may know everything you are doing. You may not just be able to position it in a way. So I think it is very heavily culturally dependent but at the same time it counts for your personality trait. You are either somebody who is responsible, who will take ownership, and who will drive things forward or you're not"(participant # 5).

The ability to take charge of a situation and to articulate one's views with confidence translate into knowing how, when necessary, to challenge, or guide clients and other colleagues in a diplomatic way (participant # 10). These are critical skills in any client- or service-oriented business. It is also important for employees to know how to deliver constructive criticism or provide feedback to clients or direct reports in a collaborative and encouraging manner instead of an authoritarian one (participant # 11).

Participants shared anecdotes of how ITPs from different ethnic backgrounds sometimes would not challenge the client at all or, conversely, came across as too blunt and straight forward in their feedback. These employees then needed mentoring and coaching on how to provide feedback in a non-threatening way (participant # 10). Knowing the balance in delivering information and managing staff in a collaborative and non-authoritarian manner was related to the ability to adapt and adjust one's style of communication to one's audience, as discussed in the previous section (participant # 11). Managers in senior positions must also know how to coach and mentor their staff and manage through empathy instead of rigidity and rule-following (participant # 13), and how to be assertive instead of aggressive (participant # 11).

No single quote sums up the need for having all, if not most of the soft skills explored in this section, but a quotation from one corporate recruiter working for an accounting firm stands out as showing the way in which the participants saw these soft skills contributing to the overall

goals of the organization:

“[A] lot of talented people coming from countries where English or French is not the first language, but it has an impact when they arrive in Canada...we sell to our clients right away – we sell people, we sell brain, we sell thinking power... when we acquire an asset...an individual and a human being – we need to be able to make it profitable right away” (participant # 10).

Participants reported that these soft skills are required from all candidates and that even some native-born Canadians lack these skills. Participants said that with proper training, coaching and mentoring these skills could be developed over time, especially after a period of exposure and immersion in a Canadian work environment. Yet there seemed to be a need for a new hire to be effective and *profitable right away*, hence a reluctance to invest the time and resources needed in those who were seen to lack these skills at the beginning of the recruitment cycle. One participant emphasized that there is some “development possible with experience...and getting immersed in the company culture, but ... it would have to be that the seed – more than the seed – was already there so that ... in the interview, you would be looking for those soft skills, let’s say, 75% of the time” (participant # 8). To better understand why these soft skills are perceived to be so necessary and critical at the time of hire, and for successful integration and assimilation of employees, we turn in the following section to the unique characteristics of Canadian business culture.

Unique Characteristics of Canadian Business Culture

Inherent in the “Canadian experience” concept is the assumption that the Canadian work

environment contains unique characteristics compared to work environments in other countries. I explored this concept with participants by asking them to identify and describe unique characteristics of Canadian business culture. Even though through the interview process participants could readily compare ITPs with native-born Canadians, they were hard pressed to identify unique characteristics of Canada's business culture. Answering this question seemed to be easier for participants who were themselves ITPs ($n = 4$) or were native-born Canadians with international work experience ($n = 3$).

The unique aspects of business culture of Canada were identified as

- (1) a multi-cultural and diverse work environment ($n = 3$),
- (2) an environment that values networking and building relationships ($n = 3$),
- (3) an environment that values assertive over aggressive or passive behaviour ($n = 4$),
- (4) an environment that is collaborative and team oriented ($n = 4$),
- (5) an environment that is not hierarchical and formal ($n = 5$).

Generally, participants highlighted a belief that Canadians are humble ($n = 1$), get along with each other ($n = 3$), need to interact effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds ($n = 3$), need to be assertive but not aggressive ($n = 3$), and be direct communicators without being authoritarian or blunt ($n = 4$). Canadians value relationships, and those ITPs do best who can present themselves confidently, articulate their ideas, challenge and question their colleagues and manager's ideas without being overly aggressive, work collaboratively in teams, adhere to an open door style of management, and be effective in building relationships and networks at all levels of the organization. They also strongly value adaptability, and look for those who adjust their own work and communication styles to build

effective relationships.

Canadian business is known to be risk-averse. This characteristic leads hiring managers to value experience above education, or technical knowledge, and to firmly believe that experience is proof of ability, skills and knowledge.

Stereotypes & Generalizations

The participants found it difficult to talk about what is unique about Canada's business culture without comparing it to other nations' business cultures, especially if they had experience working in other parts of the world. If not, they generalized and drew comparisons based on their personal experiences of working with ITPs from different nationalities. I have decided to include these comparisons not to promote generalizations and stereotypes but to draw attention to the ways in which individuals from different countries are judged, on the basis of their communication and work styles against a normative style, which is the *Canadian way*.

One participant, who had worked in the United States, India and Canada explained that, based on her experience in Canada, hiring managers valued work experience above education, as compared to hiring managers in the U.S. and India who valued education more than experience (participant # 9). She went on to explain that when recruiting in the other countries, she observed that hiring decisions were made based on the education levels of the candidates, whereas in Canada hiring decisions even amongst recent graduates were based on the candidate's internship work experience (participant # 9). Another participant who had extensive experience in hiring ITPs mentioned that candidates from the U.S., U.K. and South Africa had an easier time adjusting their communication and work styles to the Canadian business environment, whereas

those coming from Eastern European countries, India or Asian backgrounds needed to make greater adjustments (participant # 5). She further explained that candidates from Eastern European countries came across rude due to being blunt and direct, and had a tendency to be tough in their management style, and needed to manage their staff with a *softer touch* in order to be able to develop more collaborative relationships with others (participant # 13). Two other participants also made similar generalizations about ITPs from Eastern European countries, one attributing the harsh style of communication to these individuals being from “*militant countries*” (*war torn countries*) (participant #13).

Participants (n = 6) also made certain generalizations about Asian candidates and employees, characterizing them as intelligent, hard working, and task oriented, but not effective in building relationships since they lacked social skills and did not socialize with their colleagues. One participant related a story about how a number of Asian employees had not been able to challenge their clients effectively and had followed the client’s instructions even though the client were clearly wrong, making it necessary for the organization to bring people who were native-born Canadians to coach them, and through job-shadowing provide them with the opportunity to learn how to challenge clients effectively (participant # 10).

Two of the participants from Montreal compared the differences of Canadian work environment with France. One highlighted how candidates from France were more formal and hierarchical and had to be coached in using culturally appropriate ways of communicating with hiring managers and their superiors (participant # 8). Another recruiter from Montreal who is a first generation immigrant from France explained how ITPs recruited from France had to adjust their style of communication to be less direct and more diplomatic with colleagues and clients

(participant # 10).

A participant who was a first generation ITP from India explained that she had to adjust to the communication style in Canada and learn to challenge others and express her opinions confidently while realizing that the Canadian work environment was not as hierarchical or formal (participant # 8). She mentioned how she is still *flabbergasted* by the way in which recent graduates, who are native-born Canadians, express themselves in interviews and ask questions of hiring managers (participant # 5). To illustrate the differences between India and Canada as it pertains to formality and hierarchy, she explained that she did not know the first name of her boss in India until she arrived in Canada and saw his name on LinkedIn (participant # 5). Whereas here she was encouraged not only to call her superiors by their first names but also to challenge their ideas and present her own thoughts and opinions confidently (participant # 5).

Some of the participants (n = 5) explained how they coached ITPs by sharing their experiences, illustrating cultural differences and generalizing about the attributes of people from various nationalities, in order to develop greater cultural awareness in the candidates. One participant, illustrated how some issues can be easily addressed through coaching ITPs, by relating the story of a hiring manager interviewing a group of Asian candidates, at the end of which he would ask about their salary expectations. If the candidates would not readily mention an amount, or would say they'd accept whatever the organization was willing to pay, the hiring manager would not consider them to be viable candidates, stating that he did not want to hire individuals who did not know their own self worth (participant # 10).

All participants (n = 13) either used personal experiences that illustrated or explicitly

expressed the expectation that ITPs had to adjust and adapt their styles to the requirements of the Canadian business environment. For example, helping candidates from France understand that they should not address hiring managers in a formal manner using titles such as Mr. or Mrs. before the names (participants # 8). One participant gave the example of how once an ITP persisted in addressing clients and his superiors formally and despite many reminders, which became a performance issue as it made others uncomfortable (participant # 11). Some of the participants (n = 3) emphasized that had they chosen to work in other countries, they would have had to make a similar type of adjustment to their own communication and work style; thereby making it clear that ITPs had to adapt their style to Canadian business culture. The need for change and adaptation was presented as a normal and necessary business practice.

Hiring Context

Another area that emerged from the data was an overview of the hiring process and how the requirement of Canadian experience impacts it. The data was collected from participants residing in several major centres across Canada with the hope of uncovering regional differences. The participants were recruiters who work for a single organization, commonly referred to as corporate recruiters (n = 9), and independent or third party recruiters, commonly referred to as agency recruiters (n = 4). Canadian experience seems to be a must have skill for candidates presented by agency recruiters to clients. As one participant stated, if “they’re paying [a search fee of] \$10, \$15, \$20,000 a candidate, they want the best of the best” (Participant # 3). Another participant who provides candidates for contract positions mentioned that clients ask for Canadian experience and consider that a critical qualification, especially when they have to pay

“a premium for them so they ... shouldn’t have to pay for that learning curve” (participant # 2).

In addition to the time and cost of training of candidates without Canadian experience, there seems to be an assumption that candidates with previous Canadian experience will fit better into the work environment and are less of a hiring risk. Participants (n = 7) mentioned that not knowing where the candidate comes from, and not being able to judge the standard of their education and overall work experience, can be an issue for hiring managers who are concerned with lowering any risks associated with a bad hire. Hiring managers define an ideal candidate as someone who has worked for a “direct competitor, understands the culture, [and] understands our business and industry”, this rules out many candidates who may have experiences in other parts of the world, or have a degree from universities that the hiring manager is not familiar with (participant # 1). This lack of familiarity can lead to uncertainty and reluctance of the hiring manager to take a risk (n = 7). Lack of global standards and the lack of an understanding of academic and professional achievements in other countries can cause of concerns for hiring managers. An example would be, not knowing whether a Certified Accountant (CA) from the UK or South Africa has undergone the same level of training as a CA from Canada. In addition some hiring managers have an “unwarranted superiority complex with Canadian hiring managers thinking our system is always better” (participant # 1). This can lead hiring managers be hesitant to consider candidates without Canadian experience. As one of the candidates summed up her points:

“...two candidates being equal in every respect – you’d probably go with somebody who’s got the Canadian work experience because there’s probably less risk in terms of their fitting-in factor” (participant # 2).

On the other hand, if the technical skills required are not easily found in Canada, the hiring managers have no choice but to broaden their search to international markets. To mitigate risk in these cases, depending on the role, candidates with all the required technical skills are put through a much more rigorous screening process and may be hired into a lower level position (participants # 10).

To avoid hiring someone without the right qualifications, hiring managers may inadvertently use a sliding scale for what can be considered the right experience. For example, if the ITP has work experience in one of the international offices of the same organization, the assumption is that he/she would be familiar with the culture of the organization but not the culture of Canada. Therefore they are recruited into lower level positions (participant # 1). If they work for a multi-national organization, such as Pepsi, the assumption is that they will better understand what is required of them. However, if they have only worked in national organizations in their home country, the comfort level of the hiring manager decreases. These concerns become less of a barrier to hiring when there is a great need for the technical skills of the candidate (participant # 11).

Participants (n = 3) also pointed out that Canadian experience as a critical factor in hiring becomes a much more important issue when there is a larger pool of candidates to hire from. The greater the shortage of talent, the less hiring managers are concerned with a lack of Canadian experience. To illustrate this point, one participant used the example of Calgary during its period of economic boom, by pointing out that “the importance that people place on Canadian work experience differ depending on the economy,” and that Calgary “had more jobs than they had people,” so in many ways they had no choice but to take the risk and hire whoever they

could find (participant # 2).

Some participants explained that when hiring managers directly ask for candidates with Canadian experience, as recruiters they will encourage the hiring managers to be more specific in their requirements and not use Canadian experience as a general term. They see their role as educating, coaching and helping hiring managers define their requirements based on skills and competencies needed for the role rather than placing undue value on where the candidate has gained his/her experience (participant # 6). By doing this they are able to help hiring managers think through or try to define the skills, competencies and qualities they are looking for “rather than generalizing and saying something like Canadian experience” (participant # 5).

Skills Assessment

There are three areas in which candidates are assessed during the interview process: (1) technical skills; (2) soft skills and (3) relevancy of previous work experience.

To assess technical skills some organizations use pre-screening tests administered online or during the interview. In the latter case, an expert in the area asks technical questions in order to evaluate the candidates' technical skills (participant # 10).

Five participants mentioned that they assess the soft skills of candidates throughout the screening and interview process by observing body language, verbal and non-verbal communication, and the overall behaviours of the candidate while interacting with others. These interactions can take place during several face-to-face interviews and meetings (participant # 2). To assess the social skills of candidates and their ability to interact with colleagues, one participant mentioned that sometimes candidates be invited to an informal social

gathering to meet with some members of the team, “to see how they cope socially”(participant # 12). In addition, during the interview process candidates’ ability to behave in a culturally appropriate manner is judged and evaluated (participant # 8). For example, one of the participants explained how during the interview of a candidate, the interviewee would laugh at times when the recruiter and the hiring manager could not find any humour in what had been said. This continued and resulted in not proceeding with the candidate’s application as his laughter was interpreted as his inability to adapt his communication style to his audience (participant # 12). Another participant gave another example of culturally appropriate behaviours that ITPs can demonstrate during the interview: “in terms of hierarchy...being able to look at the person in the eye because in some countries there’s the confidence, the shyness, women particularly...that has to be assessed. It could be learned before and know that in Canada we look at people in the eye and that [it’s] very important to do so...”(participant # 8).

Most participants (n = 7) use the Behavioural Interviewing (BI) technique to assess candidates’ previous work experience. Behavioral based interviewing is a commonly used interviewing technique based on discovering how the interviewee acted in specific employment-related situations. The underlying logic and assumption is that one’s behaviour in the past is a good predictor of one’s behaviour in the future i.e. past performance predicts future performance (Doyle, 2013). One participant, an ITP herself, gave examples of how people from different cultures responded differently to BI questions:

“We used to have a question...*tell us about a situation where you failed.* That was an interesting one where the manager asked this question and we saw that sometimes we were not getting the right response...from ITPs because in some cultures that’s seen as

kind of a not the right thing to do – that you cannot fail...we want to see the weaknesses...that was difficult for some people...they [would] say – I didn't have that situation where I failed“ (participant # 9).

Another participant explained that the approach she takes is an “inclusive and not exclusive” approach to BI, meaning that if she noticed that the individual did not understand the question right away she would rephrase the question in order to ensure that it is understood and clarified (participant # 11). She further explained that sometimes when the question is not readily understood, it could indicate a communication barrier, which has to be probed and verified by the interviewer (participant # 11).

To prove and demonstrate that ITPs have the skills needed they may have to go through extra steps and be subjected to formal and informal meetings (participant # 12). In addition, ITP candidates may have to take creative steps to get the interview and show that they are assertive and can make the adjustment needed to be successful in Canada. One such example was provided by a participant who worked in Western Canada, she recalled how an engineer she had hired, had told her the story of how he had overcome the barrier of “no Canadian work experience” (participant # 11). This candidate's experience was overlooked because the type of turbine engines he had worked with in the past, which had a much greater capacity than the ones in Canada, were not understood and/or appreciated by hiring managers. To remedy the situation the ITP:

Picks up the phone and calls [a] company that had a job advertised, and ...found out who the hiring manager was and called him directly and said – listen I've done this work and you're going to look at my resume and you're going to tell me that I have the experience

you want...I [need] 20 minutes of your time to let me sit down and explain to you why my experience is relevant to what you do, and why my experience is going to enhance your business (participant # 11).

He made his presentation and got the job. The participant emphasized that in her belief if “people are brave and willing to put themselves out there like that, I think that’s a very easy way to educate. I think demonstration is the key way to do it” (participant # 11).

How Can Immigrants Prepare for Jobs in Canada?

All participants (N = 13) offered suggestions as to how ITPs can prepare for their job search, both prior to and after arrival in Canada. In addition to these suggestions, some participants (n = 6) identified ways in which organizations can help ITPs become more effective in their job search and effective in their job performance once hired. Other participants (n = 3) commented on the role that government and government-funded agencies play in expediting ITPs integration into Canada’s labour market.

There were mixed views as to whether ITPs could prepare for their job search, prior to arriving in Canada. Some of the participants (n = 6) mentioned specific things ITPs can do prior to arrival in Canada. One participant mentioned that ITPs could come prepared with all the documents pertaining to their professional qualifications so that they can be ready for the evaluation of their credentials (participant # 13). Two participants who were themselves ITPs mentioned that, depending on the resources available, ITPs need to research and prepare themselves for their field of work in Canada. One of these participants reflecting on her own experience in transitioning to the Canadian business environment successfully, remembered how

she “came 50% prepared knowing what it would be like, the other 50% [she] had to pick up here”(participant # 5). Another participant explained that you might be able to learn about “the etiquette and the dos and don’ts before you get here”(participant # 4).

After arrival most participants (n = 8) recommended that ITPs find volunteer positions within their field or related areas in order to gain the necessary experience of having worked in a Canadian environment. Others (n = 5) recommended studying as a way to become familiar with the culture. Five participants (n = 5) commented that, even though, ITPs need a way to survive, experience in jobs outside their fields, what they termed *menial jobs* are not necessarily helpful, nor in some cases considered as Canadian experience since it is not in their professional field. One participant explained that getting a job as a taxi driver or in the food industry may be better than staying home but it will not help ITPs learn the business and professional culture (participant # 8). Another thought that being underemployed would cause “low self-esteem” and “deteriorate their personality” (participant # 9). Another participant who had made the transition himself as an ITP commented that menial jobs could become a trap if one stayed in them too long, and that it was better for the ITP “to find a door in [their] area of expertise...go through the side door and then climb back on the ladder” (participant # 10).

Networking and building relationships (n = 5), using social media, such as LinkedIn, and joining relevant professional associations were also recommended for newly arrived ITPs. In general, all these suggestions were linked to the importance of exposure to and immersion in Canadian business culture. One participant who is a third party recruiter and has experience working overseas suggested that one of the problems is that some ITPs tend to “assimilate into their own culture so they’re speaking their own language, they’re doing their own traditions,

which is fine,” but there is a need to also try to “enjoy some of the things that Canadians enjoy” (participant # 3). He used his own experience working in the U.K. emphasizing that when he worked there, he did not seek out other Canadians and avoided going out to hockey games but rather learned to do things that “English people do.” In this way, he made contacts and learned how people interacted there (participant # 3).

Participants (n = 5) identified mentoring or coaching as being the most effective training and development tools that the government or employers could offer ITPs. One of the participants who had transitioned from an Anglophone work environment to a totally Francophone one, talked about how despite the fact that she was fully bilingual and fluent in French, she had to learn the cultural nuances of speaking colloquial French by watching recommended TV shows as well as being mentored and coached by a French colleague. Formal mentoring programs that matched ITPs with someone from the business community were also considered as a very successful way of getting jobs. One participant shared his own involvement with such a program and mentioned that “people that go through the program find a job 70% faster” than those who did not go through such a program (participant # 10). Government funded bridging programs and job search programs that are not disconnected from the business community are effective ways for ITPs to gain the necessary knowledge and cultural exposure needed for success in obtaining a job (participant # 10 & 3). Two participants brought up important points regarding what organizations can do to assist with the integration of ITPs in the workplace. One was the idea of offering ITPs contract positions to help them learn the cultural nuances related to the way in which business is done in their field in Canada (participant # 2). The other was how important it was for organizations to look at all their policies, not just their

recruitment policies, in order to expedite the integration of a diverse workforce in the organization (participant # 13). As one participant put it, the concept of exposure and immersion works both ways, she stressed that ITPs have to be here in order to learn the nuances of Canadian culture but it was a two way street –“we teach them, they teach us” (participant # 13).

Conclusion

Discussion

Dimensions of Canadian Experience

This study explored the “tacit knowledge embodied in Canadian experience” from the employer’s perspective (Sakamoto, Chin & Young, 2010, p.149). The research results confirm past studies, and expand on the nature of tacit knowledge, as perceived by and sought by employers in the financial industry. The participants in this study reported that in addition to technical skills specific to Canada, for example knowledge of Canadian tax law, there are two broad categories of soft skills -- communication and leadership -- which employers consider essential in a successful hire. Other studies have identified that employers consider communication as a critical skill lacking in some ITP candidates (Adey, 2007; Creese, 2010). In this study, communication skills were further described as encompassing more than simply command of one of Canada’s official languages, but as including style, tone, approach, mannerisms, and an understandable accent. Leadership skills include the ability to present one’s views with confidence, to network, to build and manage relationships, to influence, to persuade, and to take ownership of one’s work and personal development.

Implied in the term Canadian experience is that there are unique characteristics of the Canadian business environment, and that there is a Canadian *way* of doing things. Participants of this research talked a lot about cultural differences; but they found it difficult to identify three unique cultural characteristics of the Canadian business environment. Applying Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, and *field* to Canadian experience as a social practice can help explain why those who are immersed in the *field*, whether it is the organization, the industry, or the Canadian business environment, have the hardest time describing the unique cultural characteristics of that environment – the *habitus*. A study conducted by the Conference Board of Canada highlighted that “learning the Canadian way is less straightforward”(Baklid, Cowan, MacBride-King & Mallett, 2005, p. 45). The Canadian way is the *habitus*, the way we are and the way we do things, as expressed by Bourdieu (1977/1972), and explained in detail in chapter 3 of this paper. It is difficult to express the ways we are pre-disposed and the habitual ways in which we do things.

The emphasis on communication skills as one of the most important soft skills needed for success is itself indicative of the perceived unique business practices in the Canadian financial industry. Despite the challenges of explaining *habitus*, the participants of this study paint a picture of the industry as being relationship based, placing significant importance on the ability of the individual to network, to build effective working relationships with all levels of staff within the organization and with external clients. Clearly in the financial industry, the ability of the individual to connect to others, to build common ground, to present his/her views confidently, to be assertive yet diplomatic, to influence others, to be persuasive and to challenge other's opinions without coming across rude or abrupt are highly valued. The stories that participants shared, drew attention to the importance of being sociable and liked by others,

working collaboratively, competing in a friendly and non-aggressive manner, exerting authority when needed in a gentle and non-alienating way, and relating to all levels within the organization without being disrespectful. These behavioural aspects are not the same across all cultures, thus participants identified acceptable candidates as having interpersonal and communication skills that are expressed according to Canadian norms. Due to pressure for immediate productivity and the desire to avoid costs of training and development, these Canadian normed skills are required to be present at the time of hire. As habitus is time consuming to acquire (Bourdieu, 1986) there is an assumption that candidates who have already successfully spent much time in a Canadian business environment are more likely to have internalized the Canadian *way* of doing business, having learned the *habitus*, and so will be a better fit within the organization, requiring less time, and lower costs for training and development. Conversely, there is also the assumption that those who have not acquired Canadian experience are more likely to fail to fit in well.

Factors Impacting Employers' Valuing Canadian Experience

Overall, hiring managers share the view that an ideal candidate is someone who has worked for a competitor and, in addition to being familiar with the technical aspects of the position, has a good understanding of the industry, can easily fit the culture of the organization, and quickly become a productive member of the team. This type of previous work experience is assumed to reduce time, cost and resources needed for training, while increasing the chances of the candidate *fitting in* with the rest of the group. Ultimately, it is assumed that previous knowledge and experience reduces the risk associated with any new hire.

As discussed in the hiring context section of the previous chapter, Canadian hiring

managers are risk averse and try to avoid mistakes. Due to lack of familiarity with the educational and professional qualification standards of other countries, they cannot gauge and judge ITPs previous non-Canadian experience, and therefore become cautious and try to avoid making mistakes by hesitating to hire ITPs. A study conducted by the Internationally Trained Workers Partnership (ITWP) engaging employers in Ottawa found out that employers wanted easy and direct access to pre-screened and job-ready candidates, since they felt that “they cannot risk hiring immigrants as they do not have the luxury of making a *mistake*” (Adey, 2007). Unless there is a scarcity of rare and unique technical skill, hiring managers put a higher value on proven experience in similar environments, therefore creating a situation where ITPs who do not have Canadian experience are considered less desirable as potential candidates. Hiring managers are more open to hiring someone without previous Canadian experience when a specific technical skill is needed and hard to find. At times like this, the risk of losing growth opportunities outweighs the risk of making hiring mistakes. When ITP’s are considered, recruiters and hiring managers attempt to manage the risk by putting ITPs through a more rigorous screening process, by testing their technical skills, by bringing them in for several interviews, and sometimes arranging social gatherings to gauge their ability to relate to other members of the team.

Challenges with Assessment of ITPs’ Skills

In this research we identified that a Canadian style of leadership and communication skills are required in a successful ITP hire. Using Bourdieu’s theory we can examine the need for these competencies a little more critically, in order to better understand the challenges of

unemployment and underemployment of immigrants caused by the lack of Canadian experience forming a barrier to employment. Bourdieu (1986) identifies those skills, competencies and styles as elements of a habitus that must match the field (Canadian business) that candidates seek to participate in. He explains that access to the field (Canadian organizations) would depend on conformity to the habitus (Canadian way of doing business). Hence different forms of symbolic capital such as cultural, linguistic and social provide members of the same group access to the field (Bourdieu, 1986). He considers that those involved in the same field perceive skills, talents and abilities as legitimate competence and not as capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, having the right accent becomes an asset, a form of capital that provides access to the right position. As expressed by one of the corporate recruiters, if the accent is not right they will *fix* it (Participant # 7). In this case accent is recognized and presented as a legitimate competence that needs to be acquired by ITPs. A question in a multi-cultural society such as Canada is, what type of accent is good? Who judges whether the candidate has the right type of accent? To recognize the skills and competencies identified by the research participants as different forms of symbolic capital, rather than competencies needed to function effectively within the unique cultural characteristics of Canadian business environment, allows us to better appreciate the challenge of transmission and acquisition of these types of capital. Bourdieu (1986) asserts that the acquisition of some of these capitals are “no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital” and that the “link between economic and cultural capital is established through the time needed for acquisition” (p. 5). Studies have shown the relationship between lack of these capital and systemic underemployment and unemployment of immigrants in Canada (Bauder, 2003; Creese, 2010; Cresse & Wiebe, 2009). As confirmed by most of the participants (n = 11) ITPs have the

ability to acquire these competencies/capital, these *cultural nuances* and *cultural codes* for functioning in the Canadian business environment. They can be learned and acquired over time.

The fact that time is needed to acquire these capital in order to function effectively in the Canadian *field*, explains why the hiring managers believe that these competencies and/or capital can only be acquired by ITPs after a period of exposure and immersion in the Canadian business environment, hence the preference for ITPs who have previous Canadian work experience.

However, what is not considered is that the acquisition of such competencies and/or capital may not be sufficient and cannot be the sole responsibility of the ITP. Creese (2010) illustrates in her study, how the linguistic competency of English-speaking immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa is challenged in Vancouver, and the issue goes beyond understanding the migrants when communicating, but rather their accented English can become a reason for systemic discrimination leading to inequality. Her study shows that the “*problem* with African-English accents is revealed to be less as a matter of miscommunication, and more a matter of power and linguistic domination”(p. 309). There should be an acknowledgement and awareness that at times habitus can be a used to determine who can and cannot be admitted to the field, not for legitimate job performance reasons, but rather for the maintenance of a social status-quo or the preservation of the advantages of a privileged group – the incumbents.

Some of the anecdotes showed how recruiters and hiring managers put the onus on ITPs to adapt to the style of communication -- examples such as asking the candidate to look into people’s eyes, providing training to *fix* the accent issues, encouraging ITPs to make presentations, to socialize with team members after hours, to address others informally, without using titles, and learning how to challenge clients without being too aggressive or submissive.

Hiring managers and recruiters should become more inter-culturally competent so that differences, which are due to the cultural background of the individual, are not judged inaccurately as a lack of competency. Studies have shown that culture plays a role in the way in which we present ourselves and communicate with others (Kim, 2002). Kim (2002) explains that there are “cross-cultural variations in general levels of communication apprehension” (CA): an individual’s level of fear and anxiety associated with communicating with another person (p. 33). Kim’s results showed that people from collectivistic cultures such as China and Japan have higher levels of CA while those from individualistic cultures, such as Australia and the U.S., have less CA (Kim, 2002). During the assessment and interview process these differences of culture have strong impact on the result of the selection process. The point here is that by recognizing a certain type of communication style as a competency, recruiters and hiring managers can legitimately screen out ITPs who have not adapted their style. On the other hand, by becoming inter-culturally competent, hiring managers and recruiters can become aware of the impact of culture on one’s style of communication. This awareness can enable one to distinguish personal biases and preferences from skills and competencies, during the interview process, resulting in a more informed and legitimate hiring decisions.

One of the most common interviewing techniques, widely used by recruiters is the Behavioural Based interview (BI). Recent human resource guides highlighting best practices for increasing diversity within organizations draw attention to the cultural biases introduced to the recruitment process by the use of this technique (Schalm & Singh, 2008). At least two of the participants during this study confirmed that some of the questions have to be adjusted for the cultural differences of interviewees, which would otherwise have a negative impact on the

outcome of interviews of ITPs simply due to misunderstandings that can be easily addressed. Therefore, both recruiters and immigrants need to make adjustments in order to reduce culturally driven misunderstandings during the interview process. Immigrants need to prepare for and better understand the recruitment process of businesses in Canada, while organizations need to ensure that they conduct bias free recruitment processes for ITPs.

By looking at candidates through the lens of our own habitus, anyone who does not share the regularities of our habitus will inevitably lack the symbolic capital needed, or in other words will be short of the required skills/talents and abilities that are deemed valuable and necessary.

Implications

This study provides guidance that can help different stakeholder groups who are involved with Canadian work experience as a social phenomena and practice.

Organizations need to be aware of their *habitus* and define aspects of it so that they can attract those who will have a cultural fit with the organization. They also need to ensure that their hiring and talent management practices are bias free so that they can increase the diversity of their workforce at all levels of the organization. The real business case for diversity needs to be “enhancing creativity, innovation capacity and decision making” in order to remain competitive in a global market rather than becoming mirrors of the customer base to which they are providing services, or cloning employees and leaders who act the same but look different (Baklid, Cowan, MacBride-King & Mallett, 2005, p. 96).

Government needs to look at the underlying reasons why the Canadian business community values Canadian work experience. By introducing new immigration streams such as

the Canadian experience class, the government legitimizes the need for such a skill set. In a global economy in which countries are competing for top talent, this move can potentially give the wrong message to potential immigrants that Canada does not value their non-Canadian work experience. It also encourages organizations to profess to embrace diversity but to actually seek uniformity. Government funded settlement agencies can use insights generated by this research to better understand the Canadian business reality and to assist immigrants to choose the appropriate initial jobs that will enable the new immigrants to acquire the cultural capital needed to enter their own fields of expertise.

ITPs need to understand that in order to become employable in their fields in Canada, they need to become aware of the importance of *habitus*, and whether by volunteering or working in their fields in Canada, they should observe and learn how work is conducted in Canada, and with what styles. Participants of this research were clear that menial and survival jobs do not serve ITPs well, as the experience is not considered relevant but the psychological effects can be damaging and the time spent out of the field can lead to obsolescence or be interpreted as a lack of initiative. Realizing the reality of Canadian business, ITPs can make a conscious decision as to how much they want to adapt their style to the work environment in Canada, make informed choices and weigh their options. From personal observation, I have seen increasing numbers of new immigrants choose for their families to live in Canada, while they continue to work outside of Canada while providing for their families needs.

This study also confirms the need for all stakeholder groups to become more inter-culturally competent in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings that can impede the process of economic adaptation of new immigrants to Canada, resulting in NOT addressing Canada's talent

shortage by attracting a diverse and international workforce to help Canadian business maintain a global competitive edge (Baklid, Cowan, MacBride-King & Mallett, 2005).

Limitations

It is difficult to draw broad generalizations from this study since it focuses on a single industry. Also, the small sample size of participants from different parts of Canada limits the ability to draw conclusions regarding regional differences. Future studies can build on this one by engaging hiring managers and human resources professionals from different industries and geographies. While collecting data, some of the participants commented that these results would be different in industries, such as Information Technology, where the need for specific technical skills supersedes other competencies. If organizations continue to put the onus of adaptation on ITPs, it will be interesting to examine the long-term effect of this on employee engagement, promotion and retention.

Future Direction

This study shows what some dimensions of Canadian experience are but it also reveals why employers value it. The value of Canadian experience becomes more evident when participants (n = 4) confirmed that hiring managers generally would not pay the fees of third party recruiters for candidates who do not match all their job requirements. Some of the third party recruiters participating in this research (n = 3) acknowledged that they could not put forward ITPs without Canadian experience unless they had very specific and rare technical skills that could not be sourced in Canada.

The results of this research suggest a philosophical discussion about the nature of Canada

as a multi-cultural society. If our communities are becoming more culturally diverse then why are our organizations trying to remain culturally homogenous, hiring only individuals with similar communication and work styles? Is it because Canadians have not yet appreciated the strengths that diversity brings to our communities, our organizations, and our lives? Maybe Canadian business organizations should reflect more diversity, similar to the diversity forming in Canadian communities due to Canada opening its doors to different cultures. The first businesses to find a way to use the cultural diversity of their workforces as a source of strength and innovation will have a strong and not easily duplicated competitive advantage over their peers. Through recognizing and overcoming its inherent risk-aversion and built-in biases Canadian businesses can grow, accepting a true diversity of approaches, thoughts, styles and behaviours. In this way Canadian businesses can also become much more competitive in the global business community, demonstrating that they value international experience and are indeed interested in attracting, engaging and retaining top talent from around the world.

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