



Case Study **December 2004**

Community-based Learning Opportunities Winner, 2004 **Skills for Change Supports Skilled Immigrant Employment**

OVERVIEW

For more than 20 years, Skills for Change (SfC), a non-profit organization operating out of Toronto, has been a pioneer in developing and delivering sector-specific employment preparation programs to meet the growing unemployment and underemployment problem among Canada's skilled new immigrants. SfC provides integrated language improvement, skills development and job search training to deliver employment services and support through 20 different programs. SfC's service model of programs has become a recognized standard for the labour market integration of skilled immigrants in a variety of professions including accounting, engineering, health care, biotechnology and information technology.

Since the late 1960s, Canada's immigration policy has attracted a large number of skilled immigrants who, since their arrival, have encountered significant systemic

and formal barriers preventing them from gaining employment in their profession or field of training. Generic employment preparation programs often don't meet the transition needs of highly skilled newcomers, leaving a large gap in employment support programs.

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses community learning.

Name of Program
Skills for Change

Date Established
1983

Skills Developed
Communication
Information management
Information and communications technology

Contact
David Hughes
Manager, Business Development
and Administration
Skills for Change
791 St. Clair Ave. W.
Toronto, ON M6C 1B7
Tel.: (416) 658-3101 ext. 216
Fax: (416) 658-6292
E-mail:
hughes@skillsforchange.org

SfC responded to the gap in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) by developing employment services and supports for new immigrants with specific skill sets. Computer literacy and the use of technology are important building blocks in all SfC employment preparation programs. More than 10,000 clients from a broad range of immigrant and refugee communities in the GTA are served annually by the organization.

OBJECTIVES

The mission of Skills for Change is to provide immigrants and convention refugees with learning and training opportunities that will allow them to participate fully in the workplace and wider community. The specific objectives of the learning program model are to:

- Assist immigrants and refugees in finding employment in the accounting, engineering, health-care and information technology sectors;
- Develop immigrants' awareness of the Canadian labour market in the above sectors;
- Give participants the necessary job search skills to access and use available community resources;
- Offer job development support and employment counselling to secure paid employment or work experience placements;
- Assist clients in developing realistic career action plans; and
- Promote the unique value of sector-specific employment preparation programs.

TARGET GROUPS

The Skills for Change programs provide job search training and career preparation support to skilled immigrants and refugees in the GTA, with a specific focus on individuals with training and experience in the fields of accounting, engineering, health care and information technology.

ACTIVITIES

The first Skills for Change training and mentoring program, developed in partnership with Digital Equipment in 1993, targeted skilled immigrants with a background in engineering. Since then, SfC has collaborated with a

variety of partners to launch a progression of successful programs including the Sector Terminology, Information and Counselling Program (STIC); Mentoring for Employment (MEP); work experience placements; and the Ontario Network for Internationally trained Professionals (ONIP) website which provides online networking and assistance with labour market integration <www.onip.ca>.

The Sector Terminology, Information and Counselling Program (STIC) was developed by Skills for Change in partnership with the Access to Professions and Trades Unit of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to address the specific employment issues of skilled immigrants. STIC is a six-to twelve-week full-time employment preparation program that focuses on providing skilled newcomers with information about professional licensing requirements, orientation to their specific labour market, language and terminology training, and job search and counselling support. STIC is funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada and relies on its strong partnerships with the Certified General Accountants of Ontario, Professional Engineers of Ontario, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario, Certified Management Accountants of Ontario, the Coalition for Access to Professional Engineering, and the Ontario Association of Certified Engineers, Technicians and Technologists.

The Mentoring for Employment Program (MEP) is a three-way partnership between SfC, internationally trained newcomers, and professionals working in the Greater Toronto industrial and corporate sectors who volunteer their time to mentor newcomers. The program provides the structure and resources for the recruitment, screening, training and support of mentor relationships, which can last up to six months. Matches are occupation-specific, cross-cultural, and based on the experience and expertise of both the client and the mentor. The mentors guide and support the newcomers in their search for suitable employment by providing relevant information and networking contacts. Mentoring provides professional development and volunteer opportunities for mentors, in addition to experience working with diverse groups.

All applicants for SfC programs and services are assessed to determine program eligibility, language and skill levels, and educational and occupational experience. Computer-based assessment and testing is done for keyboarding skills and competence in software applications.

Language training has been a core program at Skills for Change since the agency delivered its first program. An eligibility prerequisite for the STIC program is an intermediate level of English (measured using the Canadian Language Benchmark System). If a potential client's English language skills are insufficient for enrollment in the STIC program, they are offered an opportunity to enroll in a SfC language program. English as a Second Language courses and basic business office skills, such as accounting and word processing, are offered in partnership with local school boards.

RESOURCES

Skills for Change developed its first mentoring and skills training program for engineers in partnership with Digital Equipment Canada. The model evolved, and in 1997 SfC brokered a new partnership with the Access to Professions Unit of the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to develop and deliver the STIC pilot program with funding from Human Resources Development Canada. Since its inception, local school boards have acted as service delivery partners, providing instructors for the occupational terminology and accountancy training components of the program.

In 2003, the Access to Professions and Trades Unit granted funding to the provincial Job Connect Program to adapt and include the STIC curriculum in their existing services. In 2004, SfC received a second grant from the Access to Professions and Trades Unit to provide a bridging program, based on the STIC model, to enhance access to the trades.

Skills for Change uses information and communications technology to enhance the delivery and effectiveness of its programs. Its training facility has seven computer labs and nine classrooms for program delivery, as well as a job search centre equipped with more than 150 personal computers. Clients have access to the Internet, computer skills upgrading, software applications

specific to employment preparation, online resume posting, online employment resources, online discussion groups and workshops.

INNOVATIONS

Canada accepts more than 200,000 newcomers annually, with over 50 per cent settling in Ontario, of which 80 per cent settle in the GTA. Since the late 1960s, federal immigration selection criteria have favoured highly skilled immigrants who were seen as being able to make an immediate economic contribution. In response to a growing need, Skills for Change developed and created a sector-specific employment preparation program for the GTA, geared towards accommodating highly skilled and educated immigrant professionals.

Adaptations of the Skills for Change program model have been widely sought and used by other agencies and educational institutions:

- An adaptation of the STIC curriculum has been integrated into the existing services of the provincial Job Connect Program.
- SfC has worked with other community agencies that provide employment preparation services, such as COSTI - IIAS Immigrant Services, playing a consultative role in implementing sector-specific programs.
- SfC has provided consulting services to the Mentoring Program at Ryerson University for the past two years and completed a number of "train the trainer" initiatives for mentoring across Ontario.

BARRIERS

Since federal immigration policies are not clearly aligned with the provincial regulation of professions and trades, new skilled immigrants to Canada face unexpected barriers to continuing their professional careers. Until the early 1990s, new immigrants were referred to generic "one-size-fits-all" employment preparation programs operated by community agencies. While these programs were offered with good intentions, it was clear that they were not able to meet the employment needs of the increasing number of highly skilled immigrants. The result was either underemployment or unemployment—a social and economic cost that has been difficult for individuals, communities and the country to bear.

SOLUTIONS/KEYS TO SUCCESS

In response to a real need to help newcomers to Canada integrate themselves into the labour market, Skills for Change offers programs that ease the transition. Programs geared toward sector-specific professions provide training and advice on a variety of employment preparation issues, ranging from keyboarding and computerized accounting to licensing requirements and job searching. The target clients, made up of immigrants and refugees, gain access to the information and resources needed to prepare them for a career in their field of training. They also develop sensitivity and awareness as they learn about Canadian culture from their mentors.

SfC takes a proactive approach to meeting the needs of skilled immigrants and refugees and to partnering with organizations and companies who can support and benefit from their skills. They are always seeking out new partners and funders for potential program expansion. The sheer number of skilled immigrants who settle in the GTA ensures a sustainable high volume of potential clients (for SfC) and potential employees (for Canadian businesses and organizations).

OUTCOMES

Skills for Change's continuum of sector-specific employment programs has served more than 1,600 clients since 1993, with more than 65 per cent finding employment in their profession within three months of completing the program. The STIC program graduates more than 360 clients annually, and more than 120 clients are placed each year with mentors in the fields of accounting, engineering and biotechnology. ONIP online events for career practitioners have resulted in an active and dedicated audience of over 90 service providers from all over Ontario. ONIP online reaches an estimated audience of 6,000 clients each year, including individuals who have graduated from the STIC programs, as well as skilled professionals from around the world who are considering immigration to Canada and who need sector-specific employment information.

IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

The sector-specific employment preparation model pioneered by Skills for Change, benefits new immigrants, their families and communities, prospective employers and the Canadian economy. It helps immigrants gain full employment in their field of training and expedites the transition to full participation in Canadian society. Meaningful employment allows new immigrants to become active, contributing community members, shifting the focus from social and economic support to social and economic benefit. They enhance Canada's multicultural mosaic and have the opportunity to engage in civic endeavours such as volunteerism. Many program graduates return to Skills for Change to act as mentors to newcomers.

The Skills for Change programs provide specific benefits to individual clients, to their professions and employers, and to Canada and the economy. These include:

- Achieving job satisfaction by working in their field of expertise and contributing to personal and family well-being;
- Bringing an international perspective to their professions;
- Contributing innovative ideas to their workplaces and communities;
- Addressing the current and looming skills shortage due to an aging population and declining birth rate;
- Taking full advantage of human capital brought to the country and economy by skilled immigrants; and
- Demonstrating that Canada gives equal opportunity to all citizens and embraces cultural diversity.

USE AS A MODEL

Since its inception 10 years ago, the sector-specific mentoring employment preparation model has evolved in response to the changing needs of both the economy and the skilled immigrant population. The model has been highly successful in supporting internationally trained professionals to secure employment in their professional fields, and has served as the basis for a number of new initiatives. Its versatility and effectiveness allow it to be applied to any profession for the successful labour market integration of new immigrants.

About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resource requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of community learning and highlights an award winner from the Community Learning Awards, funded in part by the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Community-based Learning Opportunities Winner, 2004: Skills for Change Supports Skilled Immigrant Employment
by *Alison Campbell*

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