

The Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre: a Vancouver Public Library Pilot Project

By Richard Matiachuk.

Since March 25, 2008 the Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre has served over 620 clients from 81 different countries, 40 language groups (Albanian to Urdu) in 178 careers / job titles.

In one situation a Romanian client was referred to us. This client was a professional puppeteer who had been employed by a foundation as a puppeteer. He performed as a puppeteer (marionettes), taught puppetry across Europe, and designed / made puppets. In Canada there are not a lot of job postings for puppeteers; however, with his practical skills, teaching experience, and craftsman abilities we were able to give him some ideas on how he could use his skills here in Canada. We also located a puppet theatre in Calgary and a puppetry association in Ontario for him to contact..

Setting the stage

In December 2008 Statistics Canada released a report indicating that skilled immigrants who have been in Canada between 11 and 15 years have greater difficulty finding jobs in their areas of expertise than immigrants in 1991. According to the 2006 Census, statistics showed that, proportionally, more skilled immigrants were underemployed in 2006 (as truck drivers, cashiers etc.) than in 1991.

Prior to this statistical proof we knew that many skilled immigrants were underemployed (or worse unemployed). Though some government programs were in place to help overcome this situation, more help for skilled immigrants was needed.

On March 25, 2008, after months of planning and preparation, the Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre officially opened at the Vancouver Public Library Central branch location on West Georgia Street.

The Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre is a pilot project with funding provided by the Government of Canada's Foreign Credential Recognition Program in a partnership with the BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development.

InfoCentre goals:

The InfoCentre's goals are to:

- help skilled immigrants learn about the labour market for their occupation in BC,
- provide clear and concise job descriptions (to compare with their pre-immigration work experience),
- help with job search skills for the Canadian context,
- identify regulatory bodies for licensing,
- assist in compiling lists of potential employers, and to
- refer clients to other services (immigrant agencies or employment resource centres) to help in their job search.

InfoCentre services: what we do

The InfoCentre service is offered with two levels of interaction. When a person comes to the Central branch Level 4 Reference desk and self-identifies as a skilled immigrant we begin the first level of interaction by asking several questions to determine the kind of help we can offer. Some of these questions are not typically asked in a public library context. Patron privacy is usually a key concern in the public library so it is unusual to ask questions such as: how long have you been in Canada? What country are you from? What is your first language? What is your profession / skill? Are you currently employed in your field of expertise or at all? However, knowing the answers to these questions helps the library staff determine a client's eligibility for the service and what resources we might have that would be useful.

Once we determine the client's skill or profession, the information staff will either use a VPL guide to employment (known as a "Pathfinder") or refer the client to a second level of service which involves arranging an appointment for a one hour session with a librarian.

In many cases there is a Pathfinder prepared. We have over 40 Pathfinders for careers from: Accountants to Welders, and Chemical Engineers to Social Workers. These Pathfinders are available online at <http://skilledimmigrants.vpl.ca/index.php/guides/>

If there is a Pathfinder, then the library staff member will guide the client through the printed material. If prepared materials are not available, then one of two things will happen. Depending on time and staff available the librarian may proceed to show the client websites and resources which describe the labour market and job description. The librarian will, "on the fly", pull together resources about the industry / career. Or the client will be asked to return for a one-hour, one-to-one appointment with a librarian.

We book appointments for one-to-one sessions to allow time for a librarian to conduct sufficient research to provide the client with content similar to the Pathfinder. This research typically includes a job description, labour market information, possible job posting sources, regulatory bodies and associations, immigrant serving agencies, possible employment programs or internship placement options and, resources to build a list of potential employers.

In both levels of interaction we encourage the client to contact associations and regulatory bodies for credentialing, employment resource centres for help preparing a resume and cover letter, and/or to an immigrant serving agency for settlement issues.

First nine months: the stats and stories

Over 620 skilled immigrants from 81 different countries, 40 language groups (Albanian to Urdu) in 178 careers / job titles have been helped. Of these 620 clients, 125 have returned for a one-to-one meeting with a librarian for help in finding work in their specific occupation.

We have received email requests about working in BC from places such as India, Mexico and Cyprus. Since our website (<http://skilledimmigrants.vpl.ca>) was launched in early September we have had over 6000 visitors from 107 countries.



VPL is often a 'first stop' for many people new to the city. Some of our clients come to us after arriving in the Lower Mainland one or two days earlier. Thirty-five percent of InfoCentre clients have been in Canada less than three months, and 85% have been here three years or less. Within the first three weeks of the pilot project, a client epitomizing the 2006 Statistics Canada results came to the InfoCentre. He and his wife had been in Canada eleven years and neither was able to find work in their areas of expertise. The client was quite upset with the situation. However, after exploring some options on using his skills in other ways and showing him a directory with potential employers, he left the library saying he had more hope for finding work than when he had come in. The VPL staff are not career counsellors but we are available to help in the job search process.

InfoCentre resources

The InfoCentre is physically located in the Central library in downtown Vancouver which means clients can access the service in-person 65 hours a week. Though the InfoCentre is only in one library location the resources created for the InfoCentre are for all immigrants in BC and are useful for anyone looking for work in British Columbia. We invite library staff across the province to explore the InfoCentre website and use the online guides to help skilled immigrants in every BC community.

The future?

The Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre is a pilot project until August 30, 2009. Will it continue beyond that? We hope it does because there are a large number of skilled immigrants in our communities that are underemployed and new immigrant arrive daily who could benefit from this service.

Overall the service has been very well received by the clients. They are often amazed at the resources available to them and the depth of research that has been done to prepare the guides.

Final word

After hearing what we can do to help one client said: "I've finally talked to someone who can help me".

More information about the Skilled Immigrant InfoCentre is available on our website: <http://skilledimmigrants.vpl.ca>

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