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# "Canadian Experience' and Other Barriers to Immigrants' Labour Market Integration: Qualitative Evidence of Newcomers From the Former Soviet Union

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'CANADIAN EXPERIENCE' AND OTHER BARRIERS TO IMMIGRANTS' LABOUR  
MARKET INTEGRATION: QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE OF NEWCOMERS FROM THE  
FORMER SOVIET UNION.

by

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A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in the Program of  
Immigration and Settlement Studies

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2012

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ABSTRACT

Employment has always been the primary settlement need for most newcomers. However, more recent immigrants’ labour market integration achievements have generally not matched that of the Canadian-born, despite the fact that, on average, immigrants arrive in Canada better educated and at a similar stage of their career as those born in the country. Lack of recognition of international credentials, insufficient language proficiency and lack of Canadian experience are the most commonly cited barriers to immigrants obtaining employment commensurate with their skills level. This puts immigrants in a classic Catch 22 situation: unable to gain appropriate employment without Canadian experience, but unable to get this experience. As a result, many highly-skilled immigrants spend years trying to break into the skills commensurate labour market, and the longer it takes, the more difficult it becomes to have their skills and experience recognized.

This study was designed to identify the nature and scope of the barriers that prevent foreign-trained professionals from practicing their professions and contributing more meaningfully to their new society. In particular, the study seeks to explore experiences of main applicants who came to Canada under the Skilled Workers category from the republics of the former Soviet Union.

Key Words:

Foreign-trained professional, barriers to employment, Canadian experience, strategies to overcome employment obstacles.

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I dedicate this work to my family and friends for believing in me, for their concern, encouragement, and support.

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## Introduction

Immigration has always been a key component in the development of Canadian economic, social, and political fabric. Today, Canada is increasingly reliant on immigration for population and labour market growth. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that newcomers are able to utilize the skills and resources they bring with them. Employment has always been the primary settlement need for most newcomers. However, immigrants' integration achievements have become less successful than in the past, despite the fact that more recent waves of immigrants, on average, arrive in this country better educated, in better health, and at similar stage of their careers as those born in the country (TD Economics, 2012).

Lack of recognition of international credentials, insufficient language proficiency and lack of Canadian experience are the most commonly cited barriers to immigrants obtaining employment commensurate with their skill level. This puts immigrants in a classic Catch 22 situation: unable to gain employment without Canadian experience, but unable to get Canadian experience without such skills related employment (Harding, 2003). As a result, many highly-skilled immigrants spend years trying to break into the skilled labour market, and the longer it takes, the more difficult it becomes to have their skills and experience recognized. Both economically and socially, the waste of human potential is extremely high. The stereotype of immigrants with doctorates driving taxis reflects the most extreme aspect of reduced employment opportunities for immigrants, and indeed, university-educated immigrants often do work that is much less skilled (Bauder, 2003). In fact, denied work in highly skilled occupations, immigrants are often trapped in survival jobs in the least-skilled occupations (Reitz, 2007).

Among other factors that contribute to low rates of economic integration are discriminatory practices in the Canadian labour market. Deeply ingrained prejudices, ignorance,

social conformity, and established bureaucratic practices are some of these (Ngo, 2001). Many newly arrived immigrants are excluded from upper layers of the labour market because they lack experience in the Canadian labour market. However, in occupations that are not highly desired by Canadian-born residents, the requirement of Canadian experience does not exist. For example, many South Asian immigrants find work as security guards, and the lack of Canadian experience is not an obstacle to employment in this occupation (Bauder, 2003).

Additionally, according to Statistics Canada (2011) even amongst new immigrants who went back to school in Canada and received a higher level of post-secondary education, the employment rate was 15.4% below Canadian-born persons with the same levels of education. Therefore, despite the fact that these new immigrants have the same education as their Canadian-born counterparts and have equivalent experience levels, research has shown that they still encounter a significant disadvantage in the job market (Reitz, 2001). It is important to address this problem with policy-makers, granting agencies, service providers, employers, immigrants and members of the general public wishing to better understand and support the needs of newcomers so that they can eventually achieve their employment goals and develop a sense of attachment and belonging within Canadian society.

Nevertheless, a good number of immigrant professionals manage to find suitable employment in their fields, in spite of the various barriers they encounter in their quest to re-establish themselves as professionals in Canada. There are a number of existing studies that gather, analyze and document the success stories of newcomers in entering the professional labour market (Canadian Council for Refugees, 1998).

Today's workplace is more complex than in the past, and the "global workforce" represents a relatively new challenge. Why are immigrant skills underutilized? What can or

should be done to alleviate the problem? This research will try to explore why immigrants, allowed into Canada based on skill, in very many cases, do poorly in the labour market. What strategies do they use in their search for the desired jobs? The following key research questions will be raised to address to the problem:

1) How do new immigrants perceive and experience the ‘Canadian experience’ barrier? What other barriers do they undergo? Understanding immigrants’ employment-related problems will help to elaborate strategies and techniques that can be used to successfully overcome these barriers.

2) What methods and techniques have been used to cope with obstacles on the way to skills commensurate employment? Identifying strategies that resourceful immigrants use to manage their circumstances can help other newcomers to adjust their approach in order to meet the employers’ expectations.

## **Literature Review**

An extensive review of existing literature was conducted to provide a sound rationale for undertaking the research. To set the context, the literature review first provides a contemporary picture of immigrants in Canada. The review further examines the obstacles immigrants face having their skills and experience obtained outside Canada recognized as they attempt to find skills commensurate employment. The prime focus is given to the issue of lack of Canadian experience. Given the ‘Canadian experience’ problem, the paper also examines strategies that foreign-trained professionals use to help them secure skills appropriate employment.

Canada has a long history of immigration, and immigrants of many backgrounds have shaped Canadian identity and consciousness. Over the years, millions of immigrants have become integral to Canada’s social, economic and political fabric. Today, approximately 19% of Canada’s population was born overseas, giving Canada one of the world’s largest foreign-born populations in terms of proportion of population. Immigration now accounts for more than half (52%) of Canada’s total population growth and for more than 70% of the net growth in the labour market. Moreover, three-quarters of immigrants entering Canada now are visible minorities (Canadian Chamber of Commerce, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2011).

New Canadians bring a wealth of experience and skills into the country. Compared to earlier immigrants and Canadian-born individuals, the proportion of recent immigrants with high-school education or less is lower and those with university education is higher. The 2006 Census found that, in Toronto, 53.1% of immigrants who arrived since 2001 had a university certificate, diploma, or degree at a Bachelor’s level or higher, compared to 33.6% of people born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006).

For newcomers to contribute fully, they need to be effectively integrated into the host country. “Integration” is a broad and diverse concept. This paper will discuss the effective entry of immigrants into the labour market as a primary requirement for integration. Paradoxically, at the same time that immigration is increasing in importance, there is worrying evidence that integration outcomes are less favourable than in the past. Immigrants are generally more exposed to disproportionate levels of poverty, long-term unemployment and social exclusion, as well as poorer working conditions and temporary employment, especially in the short term. Their unemployment rate in 2010, for example, was 11.1% and their average annual income just \$20,143.70, compared with an unemployment rate of only 3.8% and an average income of \$61,904 for native-born Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2011). But how much of this is attributable to rather worse economic conditions and the collapse of redistributive mechanisms like trade unions?

## **Existing Theories**

There are two main theories applied to understanding the experience of immigrant professionals in the Canadian labour force: human capital theory and labour market segmentation and shelters theory. Human capital is considered particularly important in the context of Canadian immigration, as it is the basis of the point system used in the selection of new immigrants. The very idea of the point system implies that there is a type of immigrant that best suits Canada from an economic standpoint. Human capital theory claims that “skills and knowledge acquired throughout an individual’s lifetime through investments in formal education, on-the-job training and work experience are linked to productive capability” (Abu-Laban and Gabriel, 2002, p.49). However, the validity of this theory is called into question in the context of existing research indicating that immigrant professionals, in spite of their high

qualifications compared to their native-born counterparts, are very often underemployed in Canada and hence their human capital skills are greatly underutilized.

Labour market segmentation, or Split Labour Market, theory offers an alternative explanation of immigrant underemployment and resulting inequality. This approach contends that labour markets are stratified into highly impermeable primary and secondary labour markets. Whereas the primary sector offers workers comparatively high wages, good working conditions, job security, and chances of advancement, the secondary sector does not adequately reward workers' for their skills, resulting in jobs with low wages and poor benefits (Rosenbaum, Kariya, Settersten & Maier, 1990). This theory helps to explain the economic discrimination experienced by immigrants, women, and visible minorities through their concentration in the secondary labour market (Reitz & Sklar, 1997). In the centre of the Split Labour Market theory there is the ethnic antagonism that divides labour market along ethnic lines. To be split, a labour market must contain at least two groups of workers whose price of labour differs for the same work, or would differ if they did the same work (Bonacich, 1972). According to this theory, the lack of recognition of foreign work experience results in an economic structure that advantages the Canadian-born worker over the immigrant newcomer (Bonacich, E., 1979).

The Labour Market Shelters theory maintains that through regulations and the creation of labour market shelters (professional organizations and unions) immigrants' entry into certain professions is greatly restricted and the newcomers are pushed into secondary labour markets (Buzdugan and Halli, 2009). Mechanisms of social closure can include any entrenched barriers that prevent access to equitable job markets on the basis of ascribed characteristics. One of the methods directed at denying access to immigrant applicants is non-recognition of foreign

credentials and thus reserving privileged positions to Canadian-born (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002; Bauder, 2003).

The labour market segmentation theory, therefore, explains quite well at many levels the realities of occupational dislocation and underemployment that many immigrant professionals are experiencing in the Canadian labour market. The theory, however, fails to explain why some immigrant professionals, in spite of their "undesirable" ascribed characteristics, manage to make their way into the primary labour market.

## **Barriers on the Way to Employment**

Research has demonstrated that the top three factors affecting the hiring outcome are related to: language skills, recognition of foreign work experience and credentials, and Canadian work experience (see Appendix 1).

A literature review of past and current peer-reviewed articles, government and non-government web-sites, reports and publications for the last two decades was conducted to identify broadly defined issues regarding lack of integration of immigrants into the labour market. The purpose of this review is to find answers to the following questions: How do new immigrants and employers perceive and experience the notion of 'Canadian experience'? What methods, techniques and strategies exist for immigrants to help overcome existing barriers to labour market integration?

## **Foreign Credentials**

One of the most noted barriers to obtaining professional employment is the non-accreditation of foreign credentials. As for foreign-trained professionals, those immigrants whose

occupation is a regulated profession in Canada, are required to go through the accreditation process, which is a systemic examination of pre-migration qualifications by an accrediting body (Mata, 1999). In addition to their demonstration of language proficiency, immigrant professionals must demonstrate the extent of their formal education, commonly referred to as academic equivalency. They must seek credit for relevant work experience in their countries of origin. They also have to achieve Canadian recognition of qualification in their professions, often through certification examinations (McDade, 1988).

On the surface, it seems reasonable that immigrant professionals must go through the accreditation process to establish their Canadian equivalencies. Nevertheless, complex and often uncoordinated interactions among institutions as well as unfair procedures employed by regulatory bodies have created barriers that are detrimental to immigrant professionals' ability to practice their professions in Canada. To start with, there is currently no national body responsible for the recognition of foreign degrees, professional accreditation and licensing (Mata, 1999). This is due to the division of powers between of federal and provincial jurisdictions. Immigration falls under federal jurisdiction. Once immigrants arrive in Canada and take up residence in a province, they become subject to its policies and regulations. Consequently, immigrant professionals are subject to educational and occupational standards that vary by province and by occupational characteristics of the various provincial labour markets (Mata, 1999).

Inconsistent practices between provinces not only call into question fairness but also restrict immigrant professionals' mobility within Canada. Furthermore, Canadian professional associations, who are the sole accreditors within the Canadian system, often lack the necessary information on both the education systems abroad and work experience equivalencies (Mata, 1999). Thus, inadequate knowledge of overseas educational systems often results in a rejection

of prior learning. The process appears to be long, involves considerable financial resources and without a guarantee of a fair and reasonable outcome. As a result, immigrants start looking for any job to support their families postponing their accreditation. Many skilled professional immigrants never come back to their pre-migration field of work experience.

## **Canadian Experience**

Definitions for ‘Canadian work experience’ and ‘Canadian experience’ can be used interchangeably as they are both related to experience gained in Canada with regard to employment, however throughout the literature there was a difference in the content of this concept.

The straightforward definition of ‘Canadian work experience’ can be stated as the existence of current or previous work in Canada. The studies that analyze barriers in labour market integration of newcomers consider much broader understanding of this concept. The following categories can be subsumed within the ‘Canadian experience’ definition: language and communication skills, knowledge of Canadian standards, ability to fit onto Canadian workplace culture, doing things the “Canadian way” (Pan-Canadian Sector Council and Immigrant Dialogue, 2005); soft skills (including teamwork, leadership, presentation skills), the technical and non-technical knowledge, knowledge of business practices and ethical codes (Girard and Bauder, 2005); occupation-specific language proficiency (Lockhead and Mackenzie, 2005); telephone skills, fluency and absence of heavy accent (Hakak, Holzinger and Zikik, 2010); following the dress code/blending with coworkers, acculturation and assimilation (Lu, Y., Samaratunge, R. and Hartel, C., 2011). Additional barriers or ‘lack of Canadian experience’ mentioned included prejudice and discrimination issues and issues related to access to

employers, such as lack of social networks (Pan-Canadian Sector Council and Immigrant Dialogue, 2005).

### **Experiencing the ‘Lack of Canadian Experience’**

The analysis of the identified sources was undertaken in order to verify the existence and illustrate the negative consequences of the ‘no Canadian experience’ barrier and to better understand how this notion is perceived by immigrants and those who provide settlement services or hire immigrants. This may help move towards strategies resulting in better employment outcomes.

The greatest perceived challenge for immigrants is the general lack of recognition by employers and regulatory bodies of the value of work experience acquired outside Canada. Many immigrants to Canada arrive with an impressive work history. Unfortunately, the same criteria that are good enough to gain entrance to Canada are often insufficient to gain skills-appropriate employment. Feeling unable to evaluate and understand how foreign work experience may relate to the Canadian workplace and contribute to it, employers too often refuse to consider immigrants as potential high skilled employees. The requirement of Canadian work experience has also been identified as a mechanism by which some employers with subtle prejudices employ to justify not hiring immigrants (Bauder, 2003; Hakak, Holzinger and Zikic, 2010). Employers have also been found to treat education from certain countries (such as Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America) as different and inferior to education obtained in other areas such as Europe and the United States (Reitz, 2001). Many of today’s occupations require certification from a recognized educational institution, professional association or governing body. Among those are law, architecture, nursing, social work and teaching (Bauder, 2003). But the toughest

challenges and institutional barriers in attempting to enter the labour force are imposed for foreign-trained doctors (Foster, 2008). A recent survey by Statistics Canada illustrates the painful progress made by skilled immigrants seeking recognition of their practice and credentials earned outside Canada. Between October 2000 and September 2001, a total of 124,700 immigrants arrived in Canada with one or more foreign credentials. After six months in Canada, only 14% of these immigrants had their credentials assessed and fully accepted ( Statistics Canada, 2006). The research (Brampton Board of Trade, 2007) involving 15 employers from different business types and workforce sizes confirmed unwelcoming practices: most employers, 73%, said foreign credentials are too difficult to assess and they would not consider hiring skilled immigrants without a clear understanding of how their credentials equate with Canadian standards. The same is true of work experience. On foreign experience, 73% of participants said work experience and references, provided by skilled immigrants, were “too difficult to verify” (Brampton Board of Trade, 2007, p. 23).

Non-regulated occupations in Canada are also often unwelcoming for immigrants. Here the requirement in job vacancy postings for Canadian work experience serves as a proxy for recruiters to be sure that applicants understand the Canadian workplace – its values, ways of working, and essential communication and leadership skills. Employers perceive that there is a lack of understanding by many immigrants about expectations and business practices in the Canadian workplace. They believe there is reverse onus on the immigrant population to better understand and adopt the “Canadian culture” (Brampton Board of Trade, 2007). In essence, lack of Canadian work experience imposes a major barrier screening out many immigrant applications for jobs.

Cultural differences in terms of work norms and practices also play an important role in newcomers getting Canadian experience in skills commensurate jobs. In the Canadian culture, employees prefer to work for a manager who gives them freedom to take decisions and determine their way of doing a job. Canadian managers generally prefer employees who can work with little direction and supervision. In other countries, for example Korea, employees prefer to be given a lot of clear directions, and managers are used to giving such directions. When a Canadian manager has, for example, a Korean newcomer, this employee will generally expect - and ask for - detailed directions, the manager will often be hesitant to operate this way. Both employee and manager may suspect incompetence of the other because of these cultural differences (Onip.online, n.d.). Cultural barriers are also a burden for immigrants in their job-search process. Speaking well about oneself is not socially accepted in many cultures. The North American concept of “selling yourself for work” is an alien notion for many other cultures. “Avoiding eye contact” – a sign of respect elsewhere – could be easily misinterpreted during a job interview as lack of confidence or even dishonesty. Many immigrant job seekers do not know how to prepare proper resume or a cover letter. Because of such cultural differences, immigrant job seekers very often are not able to effectively compete with native born applicants for a job since their applications are not even selected for an interview (Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society, n.d.).

One research report speaks to immigrant acculturation challenges. A newcomer survey conducted by Petri (2010) identifies that in order to be accepted into the society and not to feel the ‘otherness’ newcomers need to speak the way Canadians do; to learn to never directly to say ‘no’ but to instead thank the person and state why they are saying no. One study participant noted that Canadians are far less direct than people from his culture. Another participant strongly

emphasized his learning curve and need to adapt to the Canadian way of doing things. He mentioned that when being given a goal he (or someone from another culture) would often approach it in a different manner from the Canadian-born, and although the same goal would be achieved, he noticed that Canadians became very frustrated with this different approach. Consequently he learned to adapt to the way Canadians worked (Petri, 2010).

Ability to work in a team that is so highly valued in Canada might not be so well-known to other cultures. One employer said they had difficulty when two South Asian employees of different castes refused to talk to each other (Brampton Board of Trade, 2007).

Despite having graduated from Canadian MBA programme, Latin American participants in research conducted by Hakak, Holzinger and Zikic (2010), mentioned perceived challenges regarding cultural differences, such as a feeling of not fitting into the dominant Canadian culture, either because they do not recognize themselves in the informal interactions that take place at work or because they are not accustomed to the Canadian work culture. 55 percent of the interviewees mentioned this as a challenge and identified it as a hindrance to their personal and their professional well-being in Canada. For instance, one interviewee noted: “[...] when people arrive at work, they start to joke, to talk about the news, about sports, everything, and you are always kind of an outsider, because you are not so fast to follow them and you don’t know what is going on in sports because they are sports that you’ve never followed [...]” Thus, the lack of familiarity with Canadian culture and with informal conversational topics that are part of this culture can contribute to participants’ experience as outsiders in their work contexts (Hakak, Holzinger and Zikic, 2010, p. 166).

## **The Linguistic Barrier**

Lack of good communication skills can be perceived as lack of Canadian experience. This issue is noted in nearly all studies related to the barriers affecting the integration of immigrants into the Canadian labour market. Lack of English may be interpreted as poor communication resulting in limited social and employment performance. The language barrier may lead to loss of confidence, depression, and withdrawal (Pan-Canadian Sector Council and Immigrant Dialogue, 2005). The investigation of the impact of literacy on the labour outcome demonstrates that both literacy and recognized educational attainment exert a causal effect on earnings that is substantial in magnitude (Green & Riddell, 2001). Another study reveals how the lack of sufficient linguistic abilities can hinder employment: “Companies that require their engineers to deal with customers are reluctant to employ international engineering graduates in these positions, if their language skills are not up to the required standard of proficiency. ... some engineering jobs require engineers to explain technical issues to non-technical staff ... In these circumstances, poor language skills can be a significant impediment” (Girard and Bauder, 2005, pp. 6-7).

Having an accent itself is not the indicator of person’s language ability, although it can emphasize the “foreignness” of some immigrants over that of others and speak to their level of assimilation (Brampton Board of Trade, 2007). The type of accent is most important; an accent in itself does not matter and for certain nationalities, such as the English (a historically traditional source of immigration), it could actually be of benefit. Research has demonstrated that individuals with “non-majority” accents are frequently rated lower on criteria related to aptitude, intelligence, and social status (Hakak, Holzinger and Zikic, 2010). Henry and Ginzberg (1993) found that chances of having success in job search varied among people with accents. To secure

10 potential job interviews, a person with no discernible accent had to make about 11 or 12 calls, compared to 13 calls made by European immigrants. People with other accents, often members of racial minority groups, worked harder and longer. They had to make 18 calls to get 10 potential job interviews. As one participant from another study stated: “If it’s really heavy in some way or form you’re not going to blend in. You go and you pay money to go to a language therapist or don’t come to Canada—go somewhere else. Because that is just how it is.” Again, accents emphasize to the employer the differences between themselves and the interviewee (Petri, 2010, p.26). Thus, judgments based on accents alone may indicate a form of differential treatment that does not take into account job-relevant skills and characteristics. The role of accents play in the Canadian labour market can have an important effect on the ability of newcomers to attain “Canadian experience”.

### **Other Forms of Immigrants’ Inequalities**

Regarding different kinds of prejudice in access to employment there is the need to recognize that racism and xenophobia still persist in Canadian society (TD Economics, 2012). It is perhaps more subtle than traditional notions of discrimination, but is significant nonetheless. The injustice that visible minorities experience in employment is empirically supported by several authors. The study by Reitz and Sklar (1997) investigated socioeconomic disadvantages faced by visible minorities in the Canadian labour market. Using regression analysis, the study examined occupational status and earnings effect of ethnic attachment of 1,792 immigrant men and women from seven ethnic and racial minorities in Toronto. The study found that racial minority immigrants paid a cost for their minority status in reduced occupational status and earnings. The study further elaborated that whereas immigrants from European origins faced

economic disadvantages on a culture-contingent basis, all racial minorities suffered economically regardless of specific culture, identity, behaviors or network affiliations. The study concluded that "racial disadvantage does not appear to be directly related to ethnic or cultural retention among racial minorities, leaving the implication that discrimination occurs simply on the basis of skin color alone" (Reitz & Sklar, 1997, p. 269). Pendukar and Pendukar (1996) reported that among both men and women, White immigrants experienced small earning disparities, but visible minority immigrants suffered large earning differentials. They further discovered substantial variation in the earnings disparities experienced by the different ethnic groups. For White immigrant men, those from northern and central Europe, did not appear to face any substantial earnings penalty. The same was true of immigrants with more than one White ethnic origin. Visible minority immigrant men, on the other hand, universally faced earnings penalties. Immigrant men from some ethnic groups, such as Latin American and Filipino, earned about 20% less than Canadian-born men (Pendukar & Pendukar, 1996, p. 520-521).

A study by TD Economics (2012) demonstrated that identical résumés sent to the same job postings received significantly different response rates. Résumés with English-sounding names received 35% more calls than those with Indian or Chinese names. Alarming, this study was conducted in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, the three traditional bastions of diversity where many of the largest companies in Canada are headquartered. Similar experiment in Toronto with six thousand résumés (Oreopoulos, 2009) led to the following conclusions: first, Canadian-born individuals with English-sounding names are much more likely to receive a callback for a job interview after sending their résumés compared to foreign-born individuals, even among those with foreign degrees from highly ranked schools, or among those with the same listed job experience but acquired outside of Canada; the second conclusion was that

employers value Canadian experience far more than Canadian education when deciding to interview applicants with foreign backgrounds.

Facing this barrier, new immigrants developed resourceful approaches: they learned to be creative on their résumés, changing small details, ‘tweaking’ them and in some cases altering the location of their work experience to meet Canadian expectations. This was often necessary for them to do just to get the opportunity for an interview (Petri, 2010).

Another widespread strategy is volunteering. Newcomers volunteer to increase their employment opportunities and prospects. Volunteer work allows them to acquire new skills, gain Canadian experience, get letters of references, use their skills, improve their language proficiency, and gain a better understanding of Canadian workplaces. Moreover, volunteering gives them an opportunity to meet new people, make new friends, feel useful, and get distracted from the losses caused by settlement and migration. Finally, volunteering gives them the opportunity to feel like working persons again after being out of the labour force. These can boost their self-esteem and self-confidence (Behnia, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

This literature review was conducted to select and summarize key theoretical knowledge on barriers that immigrants experience in labour market integration. The research reveals that immigrants in Canada are on average better educated than Canadians, and they often have considerable non-Canadian work experience. Yet, for a variety of reasons, despite the fact that their education and experience would benefit the country in a knowledge-based economy within a globalized world, many newcomers do not experience economic success. Lack of language proficiency, limited or no Canadian work experience, ethnic and racial discrimination, and non-

recognition of foreign credentials are the key issues affecting immigrants' employment in Canada. The term 'Canadian experience' is often used to describe what immigrants usually do not have: employment history in Canada, high language proficiency, knowledge of 'Canadian way' of doing things, work culture, soft skills. This section investigated how this concept is perceived by immigrants and employers, what impact this barrier has on their job search and outcome as well as adaptation in general.

Encountering the discriminatory practices in the Canadian labour market, immigrants developed diverse strategies to cope with, respond to, and manage their circumstances: learning to adapt to the Canadian way of thinking and behaving, altering their résumés to meet Canadian expectations and needs, improving their English language skills and softening accents, understanding and modifying their own thoughts and actions to the norms of Canadian thinking and learning to meet the Canadian employers' expectations, are all adaptations that newcomers have engaged in to help improve their position in the Canadian labour market.

# Research Design

## Approach

This study will utilize a qualitative approach to address its research questions. Choosing a qualitative approach is important and appropriate for at least three reasons: first, qualitative study allows for a personal and in-depth examination of participants' unique individual experiences and their individual view point on the research problem. Second, the qualitative approach allows the researcher the flexibility to probe initial participant responses for details – that is, to ask why or how. Third, it helps to extract information that cannot be found in numerically-based data and sources.

Furthermore, the study adopts grounded theory methodology to generate new concepts and theories as they emerge from the observation and analysis of the data throughout the course of a research project. Grounded theory allows research to remain open, with the flexibility to change focus during the research process (Newman, 2006).

Since little research exists on the experiences of Russian-speaking immigrant professionals in Canada, it was decided to conduct face-to-face interviews with expatriates from former Soviet Union in order to best capture and explore the perceived experiences of this particular cohort of immigrants. Findings from this study cannot be generalized to all Russian-speaking professionals in Canada but information obtained can be used to enrich the knowledge on labour market integration of this cohort of the newcomers and newcomers in general.

## **Sampling**

The researcher's personal interest lies in the experience of the recent Russian-speaking immigrants from the former Soviet Union seeking professional integration into the Canadian labour market. The goal stemming from this interest is to create new knowledge about this particular cohort of immigrants, to which this researcher belongs herself. I seek to identify distinctive cultural, national peculiarities, barriers and success stories related to their job search experiences.

The "purposive sampling" technique was used and only those who met the selection criteria participated in the study. This type of sampling allows one to choose participants whom are relevant to a particular research question. Participants had to be recent immigrants with less than 5 years of residence in Canada. Compliance to this requirement is important, first of all, to analyze recent trends in immigrants' settlement and integration, and second, to obtain fresh and accurate data that is not distorted or forgotten with a lapse of time. Furthermore, participants had to be the main immigrant applicant to Canada in order to test applicability of human capital theory and the labour market segmentation theory, as they had been selected and granted admission to Canada through the point system which assessed that their level of education, work experience, language ability and age matched required Canadian immigration assessment levels. Participants had to be expatriates but could come from any country of the former Soviet Union (FSU) as they all represent a significant cohort of Russian-speaking immigrants, which is over 500,000, according to the last Canadian Census. People from this group have in general a common culture, language, and mentality. No matter that these people come from fifteen different countries of the FSU, they all were raised and received their education during the

existence of the Soviet Union, which disintegrated in 1991. The age range of the group is between 30 and 50.

Ten participants from this researcher's personal network were contacted via e-mail and received an invitation letter to participate in the study. No coercive methods were used, on the contrary the voluntary nature of participation in the research study was emphasized. Seven people agreed to participate and gave their written consent for the interview and tape-recording. The interviews were appointed and conducted at a mutual convenient time and place.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to better capture each individual's story. Initial answers were followed up by asking participants to provide clarification if necessary and to offer specific personal examples to disclose rich descriptions of their subjective experiences. Furthermore, notes were taken during the interview to capture non-verbal expressions as well as to keep track of key phrases or major points made by the research participants.

During the interview the participants were first asked to share general information, including country of origin, profession, length of stay in Canada, level of language proficiency. Then they were invited to tell what methods and techniques they applied in the job search, and asked to identify which of them were the most and least useful. Then followed the questions about resume and cover letter writing and job interviews experience. Participants were asked to share their feelings and perceptions about of the job search process. Then followed the questions related to the concept of 'Canadian experience': when they first heard about this concept, how they understand it, if they apply it to their situation, and how they worked to gain this experience.

All the participants were proficient in English, so all interviews were conducted in English. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted during June and July in 2012. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide was developed based on a review of the relevant literature, a review of researcher's own experience as an immigrant and observations from other recent immigrants. Prior to commencing any conversations, the proposal for the research was submitted to the Research Ethics Board at Ryerson University and approval was obtained from the before-mentioned Board. Various ethical aspects were examined and ensured during the approval process: risk assessment, arrangements for the interview, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, research methodology and procedures. Written consent to be signed by the participants was also approved by the Ethics Board and contained the important information about research goal and benefits, participants' right to withdraw interview at any time or skip unpleasant questions, and guaranteed confidentiality.

The resulting interview guide can be found in the Appendix 2.

## **Analysis**

Analysis of qualitative data was conducted through the use of two types of coding: open coding and axial coding (Newman, 2006). Open coding was performed during the first pass through the interview transcripts. Themes and initial codes were assigned in an attempt to condense the mass of data into categories. In the second reading of the data, axial coding technique was used. Ideas and themes were organized to identify the axis of key concepts in analysis. Several closely related concepts were combined into more general ones. Four central categories emerged during axial coding. These include: credentials, language, Canadian

experience, and strategies to find employment. Constant comparison and diagramming of categories and subcategories allowed me to organize data into the indicated sequence. Analytic memos constantly accompanied the process of coding to reflect researcher's thoughts and ideas and this was reproduced in the final parts of the study – Conclusion and Recommendations.

# Research Findings

## Introducing the Participants

In this section participants will be introduced and referred to by numbers based on the sequence of their interviews.

Participant 1 is a 37 years old male who came to Canada in 2009 with his family. He came from Uzbekistan, Uzbek by nationality, fluently speaks Uzbek, Russian and English. He was accepted in Canada as an IT specialist. He has a Bachelor degree and 10 years of wide experience in IT technology. He was considering to slightly change his career but he did not find anything worth-while and decided to stay in his field. He believed that his knowledge and experience would let him find a job to support his family. He found a job in his profession after 2 months subsequent to arrival.

Participant 2 is a 50 years old female, who arrived in Canada in 2007 with her family. She came from Russia where she had been working as an English teacher for 20 years. As her occupation is among the regulated ones she had to be certified by the Ontario College of Teachers before she could continue working in her field of expertise. For two reasons she decided to change her career: first of all, she thought it was expensive and time-consuming to take up study again given her age. Second, she believed that no matter how good her knowledge of English is, a native speaker would be a better teacher in terms of vocabulary and pronunciation. She started looking for job as an office assistant and after 6 months she became an employee in an insurance company. The company paid for 2 months of her training because they were interested in hiring a Russian speaking representative.

Participant 3 is a 38 years old female who left Russia for Israel at the age of 25 and immigrated for the second time in her life, to Canada, at the age of 35. She applied and was selected by the Quebec government. She had learned French to gain acceptance to Quebec but did not practice the French language afterwards. She chose that immigration program stream because it was the most effective way for her and her family to get into Canada from Israel where they had lived for 10 years. The military obligations in Israel pushed them to leave the country. Once in Canada they decided to settle in Toronto because they had several friends here. Her English was quite weak and it was her husband who first obtained a job in construction. She obtained a university undergraduate degree in Economics in Russia but never worked in the field because soon after her graduation she moved to Israel. In Israel she worked in an optician's shop and after some training became an optometrist. Upon arrival in Canada she was not able to find any job for 2 years. Her optometrist's diploma was not recognized in Canada, although her experience was very wide. Her education in economics fell into the area of non-regulated professions, so she could look for a job in this field but she had no formal work experience in this area. In addition, her English needed improvement and she took language classes for 2 years. Just recently she found a job as an assistant to an optician.

Participant 4 is a 39 years old male, IT specialist from Russia, who came to Canada in 2009 with his family. Prior to immigration he had been working as a programmer-developer. He has a Bachelor degree and a certificate from Microsoft. With the help of employment agencies after 3 months he found a job as a system administrator. The type of job he used to do in Russia was not so widespread in Canada, so he accepted related position and he is very satisfied with the opportunity to get new work experience.

Participant 5 is a 40 years old single male, who came to Canada in 2007 from the Ukraine. He has a degree from the Ukrainian University in economic science. He speaks Russian, Ukrainian and English. His job hunt for his first Canadian job lasted six months. He has current employment in a mining company that is closely tied with Russia where the company has several mining sites. Participant 5 is highly valued for his knowledge of accounting and the Russian language.

Participant 6 is a single 35 years old female, single, who came to Canada in 2011 from Belarus. She has a Bachelor degree in Psychology, and additional education is in the IT sphere. She has worked as a Database administrator, with 6 years of foreign work experience in this profession. She speaks Russian, Belarusian, English, and German. Since coming to Canada she applied for positions in her areas of education and training without success to date. She is currently unemployed.

Participant 7 is a 35 years old female, who came to Canada with her son in 2010 from Kazakhstan. She has a Bachelor degree in languages and had been working as an English teacher in her home country for 12 years. Upon arrival she wanted to change her career and in order to make the right decision she took a year to research her interests and opportunities in the new country. Meanwhile, within the 2 months she found a survival job as a teacher's assistant in a private day care. After a year and a half she decided to enroll in University to study for a Social Work degree.

In the following table I summarized participants' information about their professions, length of stay in Canada and current employment status.

Participant	Occupation prior to immigration	Type of profession	Current occupation	Years of stay in Canada
1	Programmer	Non-regulated	Programmer	3
2	Teacher	Regulated	Employee in insurance company	5
3	Optometrist	Regulated	Shop assistant in the optician's	2.5
4	Programmer-developer (IT)	Non-regulated	System administrator (IT)	3
5	Accountant	Non-regulated (entry level) Regulated (managerial level)	Controller, Accountant manager	5
6	Psychologist/ Database administrator	Regulated / Non-regulated	Unemployed	1.5
7	Teacher	Regulated	Student of Social Work program	2.5

## Credential Recognition

All participants were aware of whether their profession was regulated or non-regulated in Canada prior to immigration. They all received this information from their friends and acquaintances and/or from the Internet. Also, at the time when their visas were issued, they received *the Letter and Information Accompanying Visa* document from the Embassy of Canada. This letter contained general information about employment regulations in Canada and encouraged immigrants to visit the Internet sites where they could learn more about their professions.

Two male participants, number 1 and 4, who were IT specialists and belonged to non-regulated occupations, were able to find jobs in their field within 2-3 months after arrival. Their quick success in job search was in part due to the absence of more formal credential barriers in

their professional areas. Participant 6 was not able to find employment in her field for a year and a half although her profession also belongs to IT. She noted:

Foreign credentials are not an obstacle in my profession. I could apply to advertized positions, employment agencies would agree to help me. The problem is somewhere else but not in my education and work experience.

The different situation was experienced by four other participants whose professions were regulated: none of them was able to secure work in their field in the first six months. Only participant 5 could find an entry position in accounting after six months because certification is not required for lower level accounting-related work. Participant 5 explained:

In accounting you don't need to get your credentials recognized if you work in the entry, low level. But if you want to work in the top positions, you have to get a designation. So from being a top Accounting Manager in the Ukraine I descended to the entry position to stay in my field, get income and study in Certified Management Accounting.

The remaining three participants from regulated occupations have not worked in their professions until present.

I couldn't work as an optometrist in Canada, as I did in Israel. So for me, non-recognition of my credentials was definitely a barrier to stay in the profession. (Participant 3)

I considered non-recognition of my foreign credentials as a main barrier to employment. I was in my element when I spoke on topics of education. I felt that I could pass any job interview and get a job of a teacher, but I couldn't even apply to the teacher's position. Then I started to apply to other positions, not related to education, but my resume revealed that I have no experience in that sphere. Even if I was invited to the interview I didn't sound confident. I was very depressed with this misfortune. I needed a job as soon as possible and this obstacle was impenetrable wall for me. (Participant 7)

Although they all knew that their education must be evaluated and acknowledged in order to practice in it, none of them started their credentials' assessment process from their home country. Three of them did not want to take any steps before they see the situation from inside. Participant 2 said:

First I need to be sure that I want to stay in my career. I have been a teacher for 20 years and I think it is time for a change. I wanted to try myself in something else. But I did not deny the possibility to apply and assess my degree after I am sure in my choice.

Participant 5 stated:

I knew it is possible to work in the field of accounting without a designation, but a designation can bring career advantages. I did not want to hurry. I wanted to research what positions are in bigger demand and then choose a certain designation. But to start the process from the home country – no, it was too early.

Participant 7 said:

I was not ready to start this process relying only on the web site. I knew I would meet people who could share their experience, visit agencies helping immigrants, see job opportunities in my field. All of these could give me the idea. I needed more real life information. I did not even research much before I arrived to Canada.

Another two participants had different reasons why they postponed credentials' evaluation. Participant 6, who has one of her degrees in Psychology, was not sure which province she would settle in:

I had a difficult choice of where to settle: in Ontario with my relatives or in Alberta with my boy-friend. In both cases I wanted to find a survival job first, to live in that place for a while to see if I like it. I did not want to apply for the credential evaluation because I was not sure whether I stay in that province or not. And I was hoping to find a job in my other field of expertise – IT.

Participant 3 was not going to assess her optometrist degree right away. She said:

I did not think of my career when we were going to Canada. I just wanted to flee from Israel where the situation was unsafe. I had two young kids and I thought I would stay at home with them. Moreover, my husband had more chances to find a job in the construction industry, than me as an optometrist. My English was very poor and my goal was to learn the language first.

The analysis of participants' approach to their credentials evaluation reveals that in the most cases people postpone the assessment process until their arrival. They might have different reasons but the common factor was uncertainty, either in the process of accreditation itself or in the issue to stay in their career or to change it.

## **Altering Resumes**

During the hiring process the employers first become familiar with applicants via their resume and cover letter. The way information is presented in a resume and the existence of solely foreign education and work experience in most cases can play an important role in the selection of candidates. Discounting of foreign experience by Canadian employers is observed in many publications (Oreopoulos, 2009 ; Reitz, 2001; TD Economics, 2012). To test this aspect of the employment experience the participants in this research were asked to describe what principles they followed in making their resumes, where they obtained guidance on resume writing, if they had to alter their resume or letter in any way, and why. The interviews allow for insight into what the participants believe resulted in successful results.

All participants were familiar with resume writing practices before coming to Canada, they either used resumes in their previous job search or read about it and saw examples. However they all were ready to change their resume to match Canadian style. As the primary source of information they all used Internet and four of them received professional help from different employment counselors.

Regarding the point of changing the name, only one participant decided to shorten her name to make it easier to pronounce. The rest of the six participants left their names unchanged saying that they liked the way their names sound, they were proud of their names, and they wanted their names on resume to coincide with their official documents.

All participants, however, made some alterations to the contents of their resumes. Participant 4 said:

I changed 90 percent of my resume. My old resume contained only dry facts of my career; my new one had lots of highlights. My friend and an employment counselor helped me to pick impressive action verbs to describe my responsibilities.

Two participants, 5 and 6, noted that they added more accomplishments to the part where they stated their responsibilities. Their pre-Canadian resumes contained only their duties, but now they highlighted their achievements and benefits to the company.

Participants 2, 6 and 7 applied to the jobs they have never done before because they could not work in their professions without their credentials being recognized. Facing this barrier, these new immigrants learned to be creative on their resumes, changing small details, and in some cases altering the location of their work experience to meet Canadian expectations.

I used to work for the British Council in Kazakhstan. But in one of my resumes I decided not to write the location. I just mentioned the British Council and my position. I cannot say if it made any difference though... I was not invited for the interview anyways.  
(Participant 7)

The same participants, 2, 6 and 7, mentioned that they have learned to include their transferrable skills in their resumes. This was necessary to emphasize their ability to learn fast and to do a job even if they do not have much experience in it.

I had to think well and to find the skills that show that I am an excellent team player, master in the Internet applications, responsible and creative person. I had to embellish myself. In Russia I would never boast like that. (Participant 2)

I used to work as an optometrist and now I was applying to work in the supermarket, so I emphasized my ability to work with clients. (Participant 3)

Four participants acknowledged that their resumes look more professional after they have been corrected and made over according to the Canadian conception of resume writing.

Interview request rates differed significantly among the participants. Participants 1 and 4, both males and both from IT industry, a programmer and a system administrator, had the highest

response rate on their resumes – every second resume led to the interview. Compared to another participant from IT, participant 6, female, a database administrator who received little response after a long and unsuccessful job search. She had only 2 interviews after many resumes sent over a year period. Among the possible explanations to the disparity of the callback rate in the same professional field the following reasons could be named: the market demand for the occupations, difference in the position being applied, different quality of resumes, and gender.

Another group of participants who had a very low callback on their resumes were immigrants whose professions are regulated in Canada. Unable to look for job in their occupation where they have had a wide experience, they were compelled to apply to various clerical, administrative support, and other non-certified positions.

I believe my resumes just did not meet their requirements. They all asked from 3 to 5 years of previous work experience in this position. Although I mentioned my short term experience in related field my main experience was in the education sphere. (Participant 7)

Low interview request rates could be explained by the lack of any experience in these occupations. Even such techniques as highlightening their transferrable skills and personal achievements could not help these resumes to attract employers' attention.

The analysis of the role of resumes in the research group illustrates that two main factors could play an important role in the interview request rate. First of all, work experience in the profession itself is very important. It can influence the hiring employers' decision to arrange a meeting with the applicant. Second, the type of the occupation matters a lot. Some professions are more universal and the experience received in one country can be applied more easily in another country. The example is IT industry where the same computer applications are used in different countries. So employers are interested in practical ability of an applicant to perform

technical task. The opposite relevance of foreign experience can be observed in the teacher's occupation, for example. Here the methods, approach, value system can differ among countries and education and work experience obtained in one country does not look so valuable for the employers in another country. Market considerations are also an important factor. In some occupations there are greater skills shortages than in others which shifts advantages to qualified applicants even with foreign experience.

### **The Importance of Language Abilities**

Another major barrier to immigrants' integration identified in the research literature is proficiency in the language. No research was needed to recognize that people not able to speak and understand the language of the country will have very limited opportunities to secure jobs in desired fields. But what about the people who received a high score in the English language test and who were granted entrance to Canada as the main applicants under the Skilled Worker category? Was their level of English high enough to allow them to feel confident during employment related situations? And did employers judge them to be competent in the language of work?

Six of the seven participants were highly satisfied with their ability to manage English during their job search.

My spoken English was good enough and moreover my technical English was very good, so I did not feel any discomfort. (Participant 1)

My vocabulary was sound and my grammar was excellent. I only needed to adjust the way I speak, my intonation. I saw the improvement in the first few months. (Participant 7)

My English was ok, but I still took English classes to fill up my time, to socialize. I kept looking for job meanwhile. (Participant 5)

I had several years of experience working with English-speakers in Moscow. So there was nothing unusual for me to speak with the potential employers at the interview. (Participant 2)

I feel very confident with my English at the interviews. There should be reasons why I am still unemployed but it is definitely not my language ability. (Participant 6)

When these participants were asked about their opinion regarding their accent, all of them acknowledged existence of the accent and they were also unanimous that their accent was light and did not present an obstacle to high quality communication.

The only participant who had problems with English was number 3, who had learned French to come as a Quebec nominee but settled in Ontario. Her French was also not at the level to operate at the professional standard. She had to take English for two years to more comfortably be able to look for a job.

Three participants were able to use their knowledge of their mother tongue to find their jobs.

The insurance company was looking for a Russian-speaking representative. I was there at the right time. They liked me, even if I did not have any experience in insurance before. They paid for my training and hired me. (Participant 2)

The mining company where I work has two mining sites in Russia. So they needed a person who would know English and Russian and moreover, who would know Canadian and Russian accounting. So I was a perfect candidate. (Participant 5)

My knowledge of Russian helped me to find part-time job in the Russian Saturday school. (Participant 7)

Speaking of a language as a challenge to labour market integration, the class and category of newcomers should definitely be taken into consideration. There are immigrants who were accepted in the country on the basis of the point system where the proficiency in English or French was central for their success in their immigration application. These immigrants upon

coming to Canada generally do not consider the language as a main obstacle in their job search. Yet many do confront problems related to knowledge of working English/French upon arrival. Moreover, we should not forget about the greater part of newcomers who come to Canada as dependants, refugees, family class members and others, for whom the language can be the major barrier to integration. Language classes and other relevant language programs should continue to assist those newcomers in the integration process.

### **Perception of the Concept of ‘Canadian Experience’**

The goal of the next set of questions was to understand how this group of immigrants perceives the concept of Canadian experience and if they were affected by the lack of it during their job search process. Many participants noted that their understanding of the term ‘Canadian experience’ applies primarily to the work experience gained in Canada.

I first heard this concept when I was getting ready for immigration. I read on the forums that if you had worked somewhere in Canada then your chances to get the next job are higher. (Participant 4)

As I understand, Canadian experience matters only if you had worked in Canada in the same position to which you apply. All other experience of your work in Canada, such as working in McDonald’s, does not count. (Participant 6)

During the conversation their definition of Canadian experience expanded to include communication and interpersonal skills, ability to fit in, understanding of cultural features, ability to work in multicultural environment. But they said there was little problem in getting that kind of experience. Participant 2 called it ‘Canadian life experience’. Participant 4 said:

This is all common sense. You just have to be friendly, attentive and ready to learn. And very soon you won’t differ from other employees and won’t look foreign.

Having Canadian experience in its wide understanding is definitely good for you in all aspects of life, but having Canadian work experience is much more important in your job search. (Participant 7)

Then participants were asked how lack of previous work experience affected their job search. The goal was to understand if it was expressed openly in job postings or at interviews.

Only two participants mentioned that lack of Canadian work experience did not prevent their fast success in the job search. Both of them were males in their 30s, from IT industry, who found jobs in their profession within 3 months.

In the interview the employer was interested in my previous work achievements, if I am able to do the specific tasks in programming, he asked me profession-related questions. He was satisfied with my knowledge. He did not ask me any soft skills questions. And I think it was not important for him that I have never worked in Canada before. As soon as I could do my job well. (Participant 1)

I think it is thanks to our profession in IT. Programmers in all countries use the same software, applications, programming language. If you have an international certification it is a big plus. To get it is not that hard, you can do on-line courses. I had a Microsoft certificate and it sounded well in my resume, I think. Local work experience was not that important in my case. (Participant 4)

A noticeable exception was the experience of another IT professional, female database administrator, participant 6. She felt very disappointed after a year of unsuccessful job search in her field of expertise. She and her employment counsellors prepared well to compete for a job:

My resume looks professional, my English is fine, my work experience is wide, my education is good enough, and I don't know why I am being ignored. I don't even have a chance to tell the potential employer what I am professional at. I had couple interviews for a year and both of them looked strange for me: I was not asked profession-related questions. They asked me how I work in a team, what I would do in different situations.

The participant considers several factors contributing to the negative result in her job search. First, she believes that her position is not widespread – the company usually needs one database administrator in contrast to the large number of programmers they sometimes have. Moreover, she supposes that the position of a database administrator is sometimes filled internally by other employees who become familiar with the database administrator's

responsibilities. It leaves little opportunity for people from outside to enter the company. The second factor is her lack of professional network contacts. And the last explanation is the subjective opinion of the hiring party – her opinion that she simply did not impress on them at the interview:

My other barrier to success is my shyness and inability to compliment myself in the interview. That's what they taught us in the Job Search Workshop – speak about your strong skills to present yourself from the best side. But this is not in my culture and mentality, we were taught not to boast but let others speak well about you.

Within the framework of the research it was necessary to learn where the immigrants draw information about the significance of Canadian experience. Six participants who use immigrant-serving organizations' web sites and attend various programs by those agencies noted that these organizations emphasize the importance of Canadian experience. Web site [www.settlement.org](http://www.settlement.org), for example, gives their definition of Canadian experience:

“ Many newcomers face barriers to getting hired because they do not have “Canadian experience.” This concept may refer to:

- Your language and communications skills
- Your knowledge of Canadian standards
- Your ability to fit into Canadian workplace culture
- Doing things the “Canadian way”

Participant 7 said:

When I was attending Job Search Workshop at one immigrant-service organization they told me that in order to attract employers' attention my resume should have Canadian work experience, even volunteering in Canadian organizations.

I was encouraged to be more involved into community life to improve my communication skills, to see how things are done in the 'Canadian way'. I think they wanted me to stay active, not to lose heart, meet new people because it might improve my chances to find job. (Participant 3)

I was discouraged by what I've heard from settlement counselor and what the reality was for me. She told me to get any Canadian experience. But how can experience of working

in supermarket or day care help me to get a job in IT? I think it is all individual. For some people –yes, they have to meet new culture, get some Canadian life experience. I've been through that. What I need is work experience in my profession in Canada. I just need more good luck. (Participant 6)

Four participants agreed that there are lively discussions about the importance of Canadian experience in the Internet forums and among immigrants when they get together and talk. There people share their stories about difficulties in finding job without previous work experience in Canada. They also emphasize the necessity to have useful contacts that might facilitate the employment connection.

Before arrival I liked to visit on-line forums, read Live Journal postings of immigrants. Without even being in Canada I already knew a lot about employment practices. I knew I won't have Canadian experience in the beginning, but I didn't panic, I thought I'd manage somehow. (Participant 1)

I still like to chat in the forums. Now I share my perception. My message is: It all depends if the employer likes you, if he thinks you'll fit in, and of course, your experience in profession means a lot. (Participant 5)

All participants mentioned that the phrase 'Canadian experience' was never mentioned directly in the job postings, at the time of the interview, or by their employers at any time. Experience in the profession was the most valuable factor influencing employment decisions, but the attribute 'Canadian' was never pronounced.

I have an extensive experience in going to different employment agencies, met a lot of people who deal with employment issues, I have never heard from any of them this phrase 'Canadian experience'. Nobody would say you directly that you lack the Canadian experience. (Participant 6)

I am two years in Canada, but I still don't have full-time job. I know that my problem is the lack of experience. Not the Canadian experience, but experience in the profession. I have just graduated from a Social Work program and my resumes do not lead me even till the interview. I have never worked as a Social Worker. And even my transferrable skills from being a teacher did not help so far. (Participant 7)

I got a job as a shop assistant in the optician's because of my experience in Israel. Of course I can't work as an optometrist, but these professions are in the same field so my experience was useful. And my English is not that good to have a claim on something better. (Participant 3)

Analysis of the perception of 'Canadian experience' reveals the high importance of Canadian experience held in immigration forum discussions, on web sites, by immigrant-serving organizations and among immigrants. None of the interviewers or potential employers ever explicitly identified this concept in written or spoken form. Most of the participants in my survey who continue to experience problems with finding a job put these difficulties down to other factors, such as lack of experience in their profession, lack of network connections, language deficiencies or not enough good luck.

## **Strategies on the Way to Employment**

Facing inevitable obstacles in getting established in their chosen occupations most newcomers develop diverse strategies to cope with their circumstances. Participants in this research were asked to share their methods to improve their chances of success.

Three of them maintained their optimism and positive mood, and were persistent and consistent in their efforts. They mentioned the value of holding a positive attitude as the right approach to successful integration.

During my first days in Canada I've heard good advice from my acquaintance: "You've just landed, full of joy and inspiration. Use this supply of energy and optimism to "jump" as far as you can. When the time goes by you will meet more difficulties of your new life in a new country and you might start to doubt. Then you might lose your heart. So act now on the full supply of energy and do as much as you can with this enthusiasm. "

(Participant 4)

I have always cheered up and encouraged myself, saying: "See, how much you've already done!" I was praising God for the people I've met here, for the beautiful nature,

for the smooth process of immigration and relocation. I focused on positive experiences when I felt accepted and appreciated. (Participant 2)

I've always told myself: "If the door is closed I'll look for the window to enter". You can always find another solution, another way out of the difficult situation. Positive thought is a great way to overcome challenges. (Participant 5)

I've always believed in myself. I've always been proud of myself, my name, my country, the job that I've done. I think this self confidence makes me look more reliable and wins interviewer's favour. (Participant 1)

I knew that in the interview I might be asked about something that I've never done before. But I was not afraid of that, I was prepared to say that I am a very good learner, I have twenty years of diverse work experience, and I will quickly adjust to a new environment and responsibilities. After few interviews I got a job offer. (Participant 2)

It is noteworthy to mention that those four participants, number 1, 2, 4, and 5, are employed full-time and satisfied with their career promotion.

Every participant mentioned that networking facilitates integration of immigrant professionals into the Canadian labour market. Successful networking can help to access the hidden jobs. All the participants established some social networks long before they came to Canada. They contacted their friends living in Canada. All of them landed and settled in the cities where they had friends. Two areas in which networking can be helpful were named: connections within Russian-speaking community and networking with the members of their profession.

I found a job through my Jewish community. I've always relied on this connection. Especially because my English is not very good I had few chances to pass the interview. The owner of the store is an old immigrant from Israel and I could describe my knowledge and experience to him in full. (Participant 3)

I myself was a helping hand when I introduced my friend to my employer in the day care. Soon she was hired. That was a survival job for both of us but it let us support our families. (Participant 7)

I was doing my CMA designation at the university where I met one Russian woman. She was working as an accountant in the mining company. Two years after we graduated she decided to resign her job. Her company needed another Russian-speaking accountant and then she remembered about me. That's how I got my present job. (Participant 5)

I go to salsa dancing, have some friends there, but none of them is working in IT where I desperately need to know somebody who could help or connect me to the potential employer. Whom you know is very important in finding work. (Participant 6)

Participants 1, 2, 4, and 7 managed to find their first job without connections, but actively develop their networking among acquaintances, colleagues, community and others. Five respondents talked about emotional support they received from their friends when they experienced difficulties during the beginning of their time in Canada.

Improving proficiency in English was another issue identified. All participants emphasized that high level of language proficiency was imperative for success in securing a professional job. Better knowledge of English would lead to easier adaptation, acculturation and full participation in Canadian life. Although most participants were fluent in English they kept working on it to become even more skillful.

I decided to take English classes not because I needed it but because I wanted to get more practice while I was looking for job. I also wanted to meet new people, go back to school setting, learn something new. (Participant 5)

I was tempted to watch Russian TV and read Russian newspapers, but I made myself to watch and read only in English. I translated and learned lots of new words every day. I am still doing it with the pen near at hand. (Participant 7)

Different employment agencies and programs were used by five participants mostly in the beginning of their job search. The participants attended Job Search Workshops where they learned job-search skills and hiring practices in Canada, their resumes and cover letters were corrected and adjusted by employment counselors, and they were trained using mock interviews.

Participant 4 was connected to his current employer by an employment agency. Unfortunately such services could not help Participant 6 to find any job:

I took coop course in a college, they promised I'd find a job in three months, but it did not happen even after 6 months. Anyways, I've met new people, got some advice.

Participants 4 and 5 added the following perspectives:

I knew how to write resume but people from an immigrant-serving agency helped me with its formatting, taught how to conduct myself in the interviews, suggested to use special words to get through the Canadian employers. (Participant 4)

I applied to Career Bridge program and they helped me to find paid internship within 6 months. It was a great achievement for me to find a job in my profession - accounting. And it was a great start. I've had income and I could afford studying part-time to get my CMA designation. I would recommend immigrants to contact Career Bridge. (Participant 5)

“Water never flows under settled stones” – this proverb implies that in order to be successful you have to be active, resourceful, positive and strategic. Participants in this study shared their strategies on the way to employment in Canada. The four most popular points of advice were: to stay positive, optimistic and perseverant; enlarge networking connections, improve language proficiency; and use different employment or bridging programs and agencies.

## Conclusion

Canada's current immigration policy is based on the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act of 2002*. In this act there are three main types of immigrants: family members, economic immigrants and refugees. The economic immigrants, including skilled workers, business immigrants, provincial and territorial nominees, and live-in caregivers are directly "selected for their skills and ability to contribute to Canada's economy," (Citizenship and Immigration Canada n.d.). Much of the Canadian immigration policy is focused on accepting immigrants with higher levels of education and skill sets, resulting in new immigrants having more education, and often a higher level of skills than native-born Canadians.

One of the main indicators of successful integration of newcomers is employment. Due to the ongoing effects of the economic crisis, government cutbacks and other unfavourable circumstances it is a challenge for many people to find appropriate job, and this is all the more so for new immigrants.

The research literature reveals that the main barriers that new immigrants encounter on the way to employment are inadequate language skills, non-recognition of foreign work experience and credentials, and lack of Canadian work experience. This research was conducted to further examine these insights using a small sample of new immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Taking into consideration that different categories of immigrants and refugees in Canada represent people of different countries, ages, professions, education, it is fair to expect that different groups of newcomers will face different combinations of challenges in their search for Canadian employment.

For this research it was decided to recruit a sample of newcomers from the same country of background and with other similar characteristics. Hence, the sample was restricted to people who came to Canada in the last five years, as main applicants under the Skilled Workers and Professionals category. The requirement to be the main applicant was necessary to interview only people selected by Government of Canada as independent immigrants. Under this system only people with high human capital can be accepted as desired immigrants, persons who are presumably positioned to contribute quickly to the Canadian economy and its wellbeing. Supposedly, this type of immigrants should have smoother integration into the Canadian labour market. People with the similar backgrounds were chosen to create common initial conditions for adaptation in the new country in terms of race, mentality, education and language. Consequently, Russian-speaking new immigrants from professional backgrounds were invited into this study. Through in-depth interview with open-ended questions seven participants were asked to share the difficulties and obstacles, as well as the successes, they experienced during their job search process.

One of the barriers discussed in the literature is language. In the research group six participants mastered English well. They had high scores in the language test prior to immigration and received maximum points for the language under the point system. All of them did not identify language as a main barrier. Most of them agreed that English is still behind their mother tongue but it never impedes effective communication in Canada. Only one participant mentioned lack of English proficiency as a main barrier to employment. It is quite understandable because she came to Canada as Quebec selected immigrant with French language skills but settled in Ontario. She had rather basic English and had difficulty applying to jobs where English was a must.

The next barrier being examined was non-recognition of foreign credentials. Three participants were from IT industry that belongs to non-regulated professions. All of them were able to start work without much delay. Two participants found jobs in their profession during the first three months of their search, but another participant is still unemployed after a year of search. Another three participants had education and work experience in regulated professions. Two of them were teachers and one was an optometrist. They are between 2.5 and 5 years in Canada but none of them is working in their profession. One of these immigrants is working full-time and the other two – part-time in other kinds of employment.

Only one participant was in a dual situation regarding his credentials. He was a senior accountant manager in the Ukraine but in order to get a position at the same level he needed certification. Still he could be employed in the accounting field but in lower entry level positions. He stayed positive and found a solution. He found an entry-level position in accounting, then he could afford to study part-time to get his Certified Management Accountant designation. Four years after arrival he was able to secure a skills appropriate position in his profession. My small sample suggests that a foreign professional from non-regulated occupations have better chances to find employment in his or her field in a shorter period of time than the one from a regulated profession.

The last barrier mentioned in the literature was lack of ‘Canadian experience’. The participants who had never worked in Canada before immigration were asked how much the lack of this experience affected their job search.

It is not surprising that those four participants who found jobs in the first six months of their job search mentioned that they did not feel any prejudice towards them because of their not

having of previous work experience in Canada. They never felt foreign and rejected on the grounds of their look, accent, or appearance ; they felt they were always accepted with dignity and respect. Two participants from IT had identical opinion that their first employers valued their foreign experience in the profession. Another participant found a job not in her field but as an administrative assistant. She considers herself to be lucky in her job search.

Another three participants who experience difficulties in finding appropriate jobs also do not blame lack ‘Canadian experience’ as their main barrier to employment. Being not able to work in their field of expertise two participants are looking for job in another field and the lack of work experience in those jobs is their main barrier. But even those three participants had never heard the phrase ‘Canadian experience’ being addressed to them by interviewers or employers as a reason for their lack of success.

The findings reveal that the three main barriers mentioned in the literature could be applied to these immigrants to a certain degree depending on the personal situation. But the main barrier affecting immigrants from this group was non-recognition of their foreign credentials. It made three people look for survival jobs in the secondary job market and not to feel themselves to be professionals anymore.

This study also tested two labour market theories. One of them, human capital theory, contends that those immigrant professionals with higher investments in education, training and work experience will be allocated in the most rewarding occupations (Bonacich, 1979). This theory looks to be supported by the study but with one amendment: better chances to secure desired employment go to those immigrants who are part of non-regulated professions. The experience of those immigrants who came to Canada under regulated professions tend to support

another theory - the labor market segmentation theory, which contends that labor markets are stratified into highly impermeable primary and secondary labor markets, on the basis of class, gender, race or ethnicity (Bonacich, 1979). The ex-teacher and ex-optometrist from the research group found themselves relegated to the secondary labour market sector that does not reward their previous skills, and results in low wages or unsatisfactory jobs. The situation of these unacknowledged professionals also confirms labour market shelters theory that states that certain professions create barriers that prevent access. One example of such a barrier is non-recognition of foreign credentials by accrediting and other bodies.

## **Recommendations**

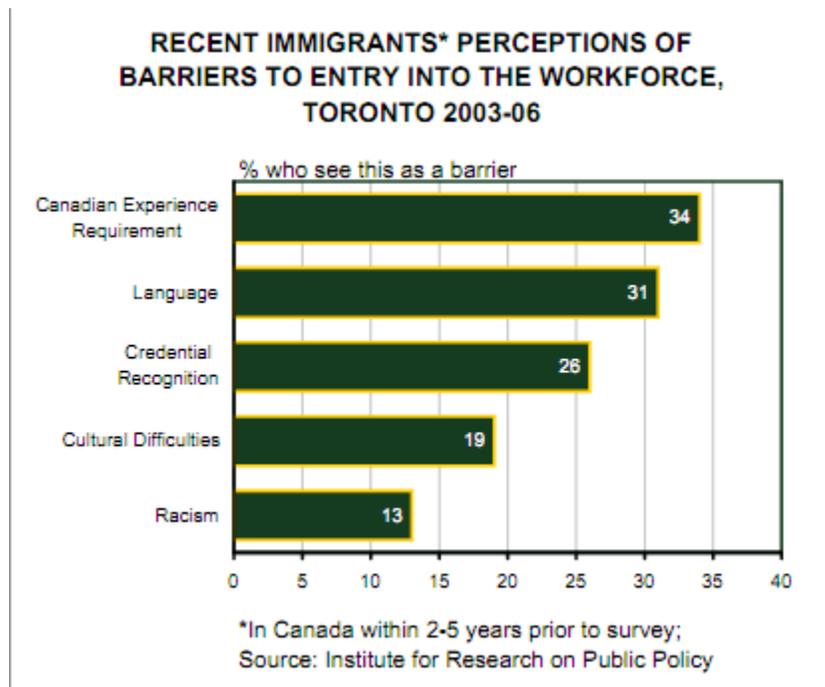
Several recommendations result from this study. They are directed toward reducing the effect of barriers to the labour market integration of newcomers.

First, to maintain language requirements as a condition to get entrance to Canada. At the same time to provide high quality of language classes supported through public funds for all in need.

Second, to make all professions including the formally regulated professions more open to immigrant newcomers with foreign experience and credentials in gaining ‘Canadian experience’. For example, programs could be introduced that enable foreign-trained professionals to work in their occupation in entry positions. This would provide a chance to maintain the currency of their qualification and gain Canadian-based work experience. Newcomers would also have access to income that they could direct to further study that could provide access for them to get their full Canadian accreditation.

Third, there is a need to conduct further research into the concept of ‘Canadian experience’ to find out what category of new immigrants are more negatively impacted by this phenomenon. Following variables in particular could be the focus of this study: country of origin, type of accent, profession, age, ethnic/racial background, and gender.

# Appendix 1



(TD Economics, 2012, p.13)

## Appendix 2

### Interview Questions

1. When did you arrive in Canada? From what country?
2. What was the occupation under which you got accepted as an immigrant? Is it regulated or non-regulated profession? When and how did you get information about credential recognition requirement?
3. How many years of experience in your profession did you have before coming to Canada?
4. Was your English level assessed? (International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Test d'Evaluation de Français (TEF))
5. When you arrived, did you decide to stay in your profession or did you want to change your career?
6. What were the first steps in your job search? (newspaper postings, on-line search, through network). How successful was it? What method was the most (the least) successful?
7. Were you familiar with the resume and cover letter writing before Canada? Where did you get the information about it?
8. Did you have to change a lot on your resume? In what way did you find useful to improve your resume and cover letter? Why?
9. What percentage of your resumes turned out for the interview?
10. Was the interview process in Canada different from the way it goes in your country?
11. What did you feel at the interview and after that?
12. If you did not get a job offer after the interview were there any explanations from the recruiter on the reasons why you were not hired?
13. Were there many interviews before you got your first job, if any?
14. How many interviews were the result of your search and how many of them were the result of referrals of your friends or acquaintances?
15. Till what extent did you feel that the language might be an obstacle in getting the job? Is it more vocabulary, accent or something else?
16. What other obstacles did you feel in your first job search? Do you still feel the same?
17. Have you heard of the concept of "Canadian experience"? How do you understand it?
18. Were you ever rejected from job offer for the reason of not having Canadian work experience?
19. Did you get understanding of Canadian work culture after you've worked for some time?

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