Finding Employment: Strategies and Barriers in Recessionary Times  
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Abu-Laban (1998) describes an overall shift in immigration policy in Canada from multiculturalism to self-sufficiency and integration into Canadian society that occurred in the 1990s. With this policy shift has come increasing interest in the labour market experiences of immigrants chosen for their ability to “integrate” into the Canadian economy. The resulting academic research has provided many indications that immigrants are facing barriers to full participation in the labour market (Reitz, 2007).

One of the first steps to immigrant resettlement in their destination country is the attainment of meaningful employment (Lamba, 2003). Reitz (2007) states that, based on Canadian census data, newly arrived immigrant men (5 years or less since immigration) experienced a 15% lower employment rate than Canadian-born men in the mid-1990’s, as compared with a 5% lower employment rate seen amongst newly arrived immigrant men in the 1980. Newly arrived immigrant women experienced a greater decline over the same period of time (20% lower than Canadian-born women in 1996 compared to only 4% lower in 1980). The problem faced by immigrants is further exacerbated by higher than average levels of involuntary part-time employment (Gilmore, 2009).

Lower employment rates amongst immigrant men and women, particularly amongst those newly arrived in Canada, suggest the need for increased research into how employment searches are conducted, and the barriers faced when seeking work. Frijters, Shields and Price (2005) found that immigrant job search strategies are less successful than those of individuals born in the UK. Furthermore, their results indicate that immigrants are more likely to obtain employment when using formal as opposed to informal strategies, and that employment success is positively related to years since immigration. Goel and Lang (2009) found that immigrants with strong social ties obtain employment more rapidly than those who do not.

Data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada showed that the most significant barriers to employment reported by immigrant respondents in Canada in the early 2000’s include lack of job experience in Canada, difficulties of transferability of foreign qualifications, language problems, lack of available jobs and lack of social networks (Chui, 2003). Oreopoulos (2009) analysed the effects of names on resumes on call-back rates and found that applicants with English sounding names with Canadian education and experience were three times more likely to received interview requests compared to those with Chinese, Indian or Pakistani names whose resumes included foreign education and experience. This study, as well as other indicating barriers faced by immigrants resulting from negative perceptions and biases against immigrants, present important questions regarding not only which strategies are being used by immigrants and Canadian born who are successful in finding employment, but also whether they differ between groups. Furthermore, examining the barriers encountered by immigrant and Canadian-born respondents, and the characteristics of those who remain unemployed, will increase levels of understanding of the systemic forces which exclude individuals from full participation in the labour market, and assist employers in identifying and utilizing all available talent.

Using recent survey data collected between January and April 2009 from 1,425 respondents, this paper explores the strategies used and barriers faced by immigrant respondents in a difficult economic climate, as compared to the experience of Canadian-born respondents. The top five most selected strategies for employed immigrants were “Searched advertisements in the newspaper or online”, “Asked friends and family about opportunities”, “Visited employment centres”, “Contact potential employers directly”, “Attended courses or seminars on finding a job”. The top five most selected strategies for employed Canadian-Born persons were “Searched advertisements in the newspaper or online”, “Asked friends and family about opportunities”, “Contact potential employers directly”, “Networked with friends and professionals in my field”, “Used referrals from another employer”.
The top five barriers that unemployed immigrants faced were “I do not have enough Canadian work experience”, “I cannot find jobs in my field of expertise”, “I do not have any connections in the job market”, “I do not have enough job references from Canada”, and “I do not have enough work experience”. Predictably, Canadian-born individuals faced a different set of barriers when looking for a job. The top five most selected barriers faced by Canadian-born respondents were “I did not have enough money (e.g. for clothes, transportation)”, “I do not have a driver’s license and/or access to a car”, “I do not have enough education”, “I do not have enough work experience”, and “I do not have any connections in the job market”.

Immigrants and Canadian-born respondents had substantially different levels of education. Over 68% of all employed immigrants had obtained a bachelors degree or higher while only 45% of employed Canadian-born individuals had obtained this same level of education. There is an even greater difference in education levels between unemployed Canadian-born and immigrants in our sample. Only 8% of all unemployed Canadian-born individuals had obtained a bachelors degree or above while almost 54% of all unemployed immigrants had at least a bachelors degree or higher. However, the average ages of the immigrant respondents were higher than those who were born in Canada: the average ages of Canadian-born employed and unemployed individuals were 35.8 and 34.4 years respectively, as compared to 40.6 years and 39.5 years. In addition, immigrant and Canadian-born respondents also had different average tenures with their current organization. Employed immigrants had an average tenure of 3.5 years while employed Canadian-born individuals had been with their current organization for an average of 4.6 years.

This paper plans to further explore the incidence of employment and unemployment for both the immigrant and Canadian-born respondents.

References


