

Network tackles 'brain-gain'

Region to foster links between employers, skilled immigrants

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Canada's first immigrant-employment network, created to make better use of the skills of new Canadians, expects to be open for business in Waterloo Region by early spring.

The birth of the \$1-million Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network will be the result of work by hundreds of local immigrants, employers, government officials and community groups during the past nine months.

The key objectives of what has been dubbed a brain-gain network will be to combat systematic discrimination and foster closer links between newcomers and employers so the region can benefit from skills that often go to waste.

The creation of the network has been co-ordinated by the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce and Kitchener's downtown Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

Chamber president Todd Letts said yesterday that network organizers have approached local foundations to generate the money required to support the project for three years.

Letts said backers will make similar funding requests to government, but because the immigrant-employment issue is urgent, they don't intend to wait for up to a year to receive money from Queen's Park and Ottawa.

"This is a very big and very complex stew (and) we want to be innovative and entrepreneurial," Letts said.

"We need to get going now . . . and not wait for government."

Letts said the network will help immigrants break through the employment barrier by giving them more personal exposure to potential employers.

Employers, who need help understanding immigrant qualifications, often worry about their aging work forces and complain they can't find skilled workers to fill vacancies, he said.

Toronto has an immigrant employment council but Letts said Waterloo Region's network approach to the issue is "unique and could be used as a model by other Canadian communities."

Letts and Rich Janzen, the centre's research director, said the network is being watched by government officials and Canadian communities grappling with similar problems, where skilled immigrants end up unemployed or working at basic, survival jobs.

"Ultimately, the network will improve the lives of immigrants and employers," Janzen said.

Letts said Waterloo Region needs highly qualified immigrants and should do more to attract them to specific job openings in the area.

The network will use a website and links to government immigration services to provide accurate, current data about local job vacancies and skill levels required for positions before immigrants leave their countries.

Letts said Canada is often "betraying the promise" made to highly educated immigrants that their skills are needed here.

Newcomers are encouraged to come to Canada, then find no suitable positions available once they arrive, he said.

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