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The Importance of Immigrants to Waterloo Region's Prosperity

A Dynamic Collaborative Community Response

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The need

Waterloo Region's economy is one of the strongest and fastest growing in Canada. Its unemployment rate hovers around 5%. It has an insatiable need for a talented workforce to sustain and grow its technology-driven economy. Yet, as with many communities across Canada, Waterloo Region has failed to adequately facilitate the participation of immigrants into the local labour market (Janzen et al. 2003).

To remedy this situation, various segments within the Waterloo Region community recently committed to working together. What follows is their story of collaboration. It is a story of intentionality, of collectively acknowledging the importance of immigrant employment to our community. And it is also a story of strategy, of collectively determining how best to move forward together in order to meet the challenges and realize the opportunities of an increasingly diverse workforce.

Defining the problem

Waterloo Region is no stranger to immigrant workers and entrepreneurs. Its commerce and culture have historically been influenced by the German-speaking immigrant work ethic and entrepreneurialism. Today the region is highly multicultural, with the fifth highest immigrant

per capita population among urban centres across Canada, according to Statistic Canada's 2001 Census.

Yet evidence shows that immigrants in Waterloo Region perform below the labour force with respect to employment rates and income levels – despite having education levels than the employed labour force overall. According to Statistics Canada, in 2001 the unemployment rate for recent immigrants in Waterloo Region was 14%, compared to 5% for Canadian-born individuals. Underemployment is also a major problem, with many of the skills needed in the community not being accessed.

As a result, many immigrants have come to work in survival jobs, some contemplating a return to their homeland or relocating to other jurisdictions. This situation impacts negatively on immigrants and their families, on the local economy and on the health of the community at large. Clearly the underutilization of immigrant skills needed to be addressed.

Identifying community assets

Waterloo Region has a strong business sector. Four business associations lead the way: Communitech, the area's technology business organization; Canada's Technology Triangle Inc., the region's economic development marketing

organization; and two local Chambers of Commerce (Greater Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge). In recent years, these associations have taken a leadership role in embracing the need for a collaborative partnership to ensure that businesses will have access to the right talent in response to local labour force needs.

Waterloo Region also boasts a strong network of support for immigrants, with a long history of welcoming immigrants dating back to its Mennonite and Lutheran roots. Today it counts some 30 organizations, initiatives and local government departments providing services to newcomers, including a number of immigrant employment-specific services. These dedicated and committed community organizations have led local efforts to help newcomers find employment. They have also been the lead voices calling on other sectors to do their part.

Other Waterloo Region stakeholders are primed to respond to the issue of immigrant employment. Some of the country's leading post-secondary institutions – Wilfrid Laurier University, University of Waterloo and Conestoga College – are located here. Local municipal governments and non-governmental funders have identified the need to build more inclusive communities. Furthermore, Waterloo Region has an emerging immigrant leadership articulating the mutual benefits realized by the full participation of immigrants in community life.

Despite these assets, only two years have passed since these various sectors noted above have begun collaborating on a cross-sectoral and region-wide response to immigrant employment. Notably lacking in the past was the engagement from the region's employers. Yet the realization has recently dawned that just as the benefits of immigrant employment are shared, so too must be the responsibility.

Situation analysis: given pending and existing skill labour shortages, the business community (private, public and non-profit sector employers) needs access to a skilled workforce, while a significant pool of skilled immigrant workers exists within the region. A key challenge to overcome was this disconnect.

A collaborative response

Waterloo Region is known for innovation, entrepreneurialism and a collaborative will to get the job done. It was the will of stakeholders to convert this immigrant employment challenge into a community prosperity opportunity and

to do so by bringing all needed stakeholders to the table.

Presently, Waterloo Region's vehicle to facilitate such engagement is in the form of the Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network (WRIEN, pronounced "Ryan"). How it was conceived and launched is a study in leadership and collaboration that may be of interest to other communities. The following is a brief overview of WRIEN's evolution.¹

A cross-sectoral, collaborative region-wide response to three fundamental needs defined the focus for moving forward:

- Promoting the well-being of immigrants and their families (*strong lives*);
- Contributing to a prosperous economy (*strong economy*);
- Building healthy, vibrant and inclusive communities (*strong communities*).

The path to creating effective collaboration and engagement embraced three distinct phases or chapters:

- Organization and hosting of an Immigrant Skills Summit;
- Preparation to build an immigrant employment network;
- Launching of the Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network (WRIEN).

This was not a perfectly tidy process that mechanically followed textbook steps. Rather, it was an organic and dynamic process, with leadership creating "new rules of the collaborative game," and learning how to implement these rules. Perhaps the main lesson learned was that the solution to immigrant employment was really not an event, a structure, an organization or any other tangible entity that can be created. The solution rather hinged on an open, relational process of engaging people to solve problems and act together in ways that they had not done before.

The process began with the organization of the Immigrant Skills Summit Waterloo Region, held on April 28, 2005 and led by the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services (CREHS).² The Summit's mandate was to

¹ More details are available on WRIEN'S Website at www.wrien.com.

² See www.crehs.on.ca/skills-summit.html.

The Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network (WRIEN) was created as a system-level response to immigrant employment. The intent was not to help individual immigrants find work – other local organizations effectively play this role –, but to engage cross-sectoral stakeholders to create the necessary conditions, such as a favourable community environment, in which immigrants and employers are more readily and more effectively matched, to their mutual benefit.

develop plans to better attract and integrate immigrant skills.

To ensure the Summit agenda and outcomes would be as productive as possible, five pre-Summit task groups were formed: Employer Initiatives, Qualification Recognition and Enhancement, Immigrant Support, Immigrant Attraction, and Foundations for a Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Council. Some 16 community institutional sponsors covered the costs of the Summit, which was attended by a cross-section of more than 175 community members, from six stakeholder segments (immigrant leaders, business, community-based organizations, government, education and non government funders).

The Summit generated significant input and feedback to a comprehensive set of action plans. In summary it mobilized action, invoked discussion, set priorities and inspired attendees to act. It led to the second step, the Preparatory Phase for future collaboration.

The one-year Preparatory Phase developed answers to five go-forward questions that were not answered or resolved during the Summit. These answers were critical to moving towards more formal collaboration. Questions that needed to be addressed were the following: Who would host the immigrant employment network? Who would provide funding for the network and its activities? Who would staff the network? What are the terms of reference for the work groups and Steering Committee? What are the activities of the network and how would these relate with the existing work of immigrant employment agencies in the region?

The success of the Preparatory Phase relied on three elements: leadership, funding and community participation. During this phase, CREHS shared its lead facilitator role, recognizing the need to effectively engage the business/employer community. After an open community process, the co-leader of choice was the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce. The business sector had not only

become engaged, but started playing a leadership role.

The second barrier to moving forward was funding. Both the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce and CREHS committed to preparatory funding. They utilized their networks to bring the Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation, McDonald Green of Cambridge, the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce, Communitech, and Canada's Technology Triangle Inc. on board as additional funding partners for this Preparatory Phase.

The third ingredient for success was community participation. The Preparatory Phase advisory team involved 20 stakeholders from a variety of sectors (immigrant leaders, business, community-based organizations, government, education and non-government funders). A growing network of 350 individuals remained connected through an email loop. Many of these members continued to be actively involved in the initiative's five work groups.

In the end, the Preparatory Phase advisory team was successful in crafting the terms of reference for the Waterloo Region Immigrant Employment Network and in securing \$900,000 in core funding for its three-year mandate. Funders (significantly all local) included the United Way of Kitchener Waterloo and Area, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, the Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation, the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, the Bridgeway Foundation and the United Way of Cambridge and North Dumfries. With core funding in place, the stage was set to launch the Action Phase.

In May 2006, WRIEN was officially launched as a community prosperity initiative, hosted by the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce. The Action Phase was kick-started following the commitment of core funding and the hiring of an executive director and manager of administration in July 2006.

In mid-July, staff and the Steering Committee came together for a strategic planning session to

re-confirm WRIEN's terms of reference and add clarity to the action plan development process. After a year of meeting, discussing and planning to improve the immigrant employment situation in Waterloo Region, the Steering Committee and all five work groups were anxious to see some real actions and results. The Steering Committee invested three months in the development of WRIEN's Action Plan to ensure that all stakeholders would have an opportunity to input and to ownership of their respective sections. The full Action Plan and the Executive Summary are available on the WRIEN Website.

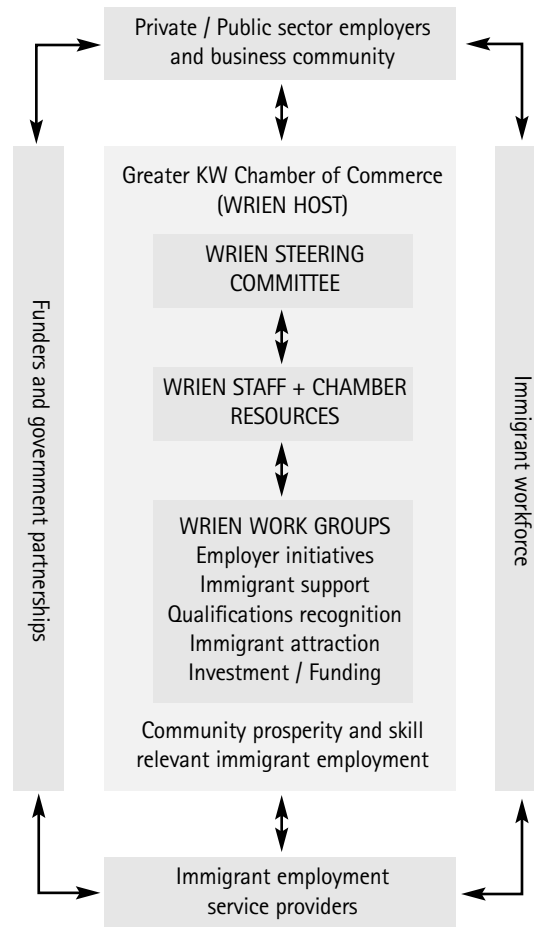
To ensure that WRIEN'S core focus was not diluted in the 25-page Action Plan, the Steering Committee defined its top five "success defining" outcomes, as follows:

1. Provide immigrants with quality, non-interview format opportunities to network with employers and to gain "Canadian" experience;
2. Promote a fair, consistent, transparent and accessible credential and experience assessment process that is more user-friendly for immigrants and employers;
3. Attract the skilled workforce that responds to local labour market needs;
4. Promote enhanced regional service delivery synergies and effectiveness from the immigrant and employer perspectives;
5. Be the information "clearing house" for information and data collection, interpretation and dissemination pertaining to immigrant employment in Waterloo Region.

It is important to note that WRIEN was created as a system-level response to immigrant employment. The intent was not to help individual immigrants find work – other local organizations effectively play this role –, but to engage cross-sectoral stakeholders to create the necessary conditions, such as a favourable community environment, in which immigrants and employers are more readily and more effectively matched, to their mutual benefit.

A number of factors contribute to the success of WRIEN. One is the emerging business sector leadership; a host organization such as the Greater Kitchener Waterloo Chamber of Commerce lends it credibility within the business community, paving the way for increased employer involvement. The active leadership among other sectors has proved equally engaging. Putting core funding in place

FIGURE 1
Wrien community prosperity model,
September 2006



prior to launch brought a strong base for pursuing additional project funding. Finally, incorporating a comprehensive and ongoing evaluation strategy (conducted by CREHS) helped ensure transparency and the careful assessment of WRIEN's process and impact.³

The three-year WRIEN mandate will be completed in 2009, but its legacy will continue. While it remains unclear what the next chapter holds, it will no doubt be co-written by those engaged through the WRIEN process. The seeds of collaboration have been sown.

Reference

Janzen, R., M. Lymburner, R. Case, J. Vinograd and J. Ochocka. 2003. *Voices for Change: Making Use of Immigrant Skills to Strengthen our Communities*. Centre Report. Kitchener: Centre for Research and Education in Human Services.

³ See www.wrien.com/en/evaluation.shtml.