

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

"You need a mentor"

A conversation with Lionel Laroche

Interviewer: Welcome to Pathways to Belonging and Influence: Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad. This series of recorded conversations is a joint project between Bow Valley College and the Calgary Region Immigrant and Employment Council, or CRIEC. These conversations feature role models in the Calgary community who were not born in Canada, but have successfully established themselves and are flourishing members of Canadian society. They share with us their stories, their insights into establishing oneself in Canada and their strategies for success.

I am here today with Lionel Laroche. Lionel is originally from France and is the founder and principal at Multicultural Business Solutions. Lionel provides cross-cultural training, coaching, workshops and consulting services to companies, organizations, and professionals.

Today Lionel will share with us what he learned through his own employment journey in Canada, from starting out as a chemical engineer to establishing his own company as a cross-cultural consultant.

Welcome Lionel, thank you for joining us today to share what you have learned through your experience.

Lionel: My pleasure.

Interviewer: So can you tell us a little bit about your background?

Lionel: So I grew up in France. In France I did my undergraduate studies at the Ecole Polytechnique de Paris. Then I went to the United States to do a PhD in chemical engineering at the California Institute of Technology. There, I met a Canadian woman, her first name was Diane. She finished her post doc at about the same time I was graduating from my PhD, and so at that point we were looking for work, ideally in the same city obviously, and so we looked for work in Canada.

Interviewer: So how did you go about your job search in Canada?

Lionel: I looked for a job in Canada the French way. What I mean by that is, I projected onto Canada, the structure of French society. If you want to have a career in France, not just a job, then you need to go to Paris. And in French we say: "Paris et le désert Français." So that translates into Paris or bust. So in my mind, I have to go to the equivalent of Paris in Canada. So I looked for a job in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

In my case, I was very, very conscious that, being an immigrant, would not be an easy task, because I had seen how difficult it was for immigrants in France, okay? *Yes*. So I figured, I'd better get going sooner rather than later, okay. I really want to get a good job, okay? So I started 9 months before I graduated, okay? When I went to conferences, I would try to meet all the Canadian delegates who were at that conference. I remember, at the time there was no internet, so I managed to get the directory of the Canadian Chemical Producer Association because these, I figured, would be the people interested in my chemical engineering knowledge, I tried to contact every single one of them. And I knew that sending my resume at random, like you know, to HR would go nowhere, okay. I needed to understand who might need my skills in that organization; who would be my boss, in a sense, if I was hired. Finding a job in Vancouver, I quickly realized was not going to work, there's no chemical industry in Vancouver, I wanted Montreal or Toronto.

There's a three hour time difference between Los Angeles and Montreal and Toronto, and I figured the best time to reach people is first thing in the morning. I figured, alright, I've got to call people between, let's say 8 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. Eastern Standard time. So that's five to six thirty Los Angeles time. I'd set the alarm, five a.m. I would wake up, I would start making phone calls, okay *and try to make those specific connections*, connections, yeah, exactly. And I did that for about two or three months. Every single work day, I would call people. I still have that log it was 100 pages because I wrote down the result of every conversation because I figured I'm going to talk to so many people in so many companies, I will not be able to keep it straight. So I have a complete log: this day, I talked to that person, this was the re, and so on, okay?

Interviewer: *Wow!*
So you really, really needed to have that stick-with-it-ness. Oh yeah.

Lionel: Now, one interesting point there is, like so many immigrants, I looked for a job in the big cities. But that was the wrong thing to do in my case and in the case of many immigrants. Like, the one big thing is understanding where your skills are needed from a, an industrial sector perspective. But the other one is geographically, because, industrial sectors are not distributed equally across Canada, *exactly*, and they are not concentrated in the big cities for many of them. So, as a result, going to Toronto created a lot of problems for myself, because fundamentally, my chemical engineering skills were not needed nearly as much in Toronto, actually they were not needed at all, as they were in Alberta. I should have looked for a job in Calgary and Edmonton But, I remember when Diane came to me and said, "You know, I have a job opportunity in Calgary, can you look for a job there?" My response was, "No way,

Lionel: like, over my” *It’s not Paris*. Well, exactly! Calgary will not cut it because I can get a job, but I cannot get a, I cannot have a career there. So that was, I mean, it took me ten years to realize this, I mean hindsight is 20/20. And that was a self-imposed limitation. *You formed your own roadblock*. That’s right, that’s exactly right, okay.

So I did find a job in Toronto, it made use of my engineering knowledge, but not my PhD. So, I worked there for four years, and then I left, I went to Xerox. At Xerox I was working in a research centre. So there I was surrounded by people with the same kind of degree. It was not quite the same field, but it was a lot closer to my formal education. I worked there for three and a half years and then I left engineering.

Interviewer: So you decided you didn’t want to continue your engineering path and you took your career in a totally different direction.

Lionel: I realized I am not meant to be an engineer as defined by Canadians, so I figured, okay, well if I’m not going to do that, what am I going to do? Knowing that you’re not going to go North does not tell you which direction you want to go. I mean you still have a lot of options. So, I went through a soul searching process.

So the first six months was, alright, answering one fundamental question: If I’m not going to be an engineer, what am I going to do? So that was about a six month process. Working for Xerox, I had access to employee assistance program, and I made use of extensively, extensive use of that, like I could go to career counsellors, I would go to presentations, a whole pile of things like that, information interviews, okay. *So making use of everything you could*. Exactly, so, by the end of the six months, I concluded, alright, I really like dealing with cultural differences, I really enjoy dealing with people who grew up in different countries and I think I’m better at it than average, and so I want to work in this area. So then the next question became, alright, how am I going to get paid?

The question was framed “What can I do within the context of Toronto that is really intercultural differences?” So at that, the conclusion was, there is no such job. *So when you couldn’t find what you wanted to do, you had to create it*. That’s it, I became a cross-cultural consultant. I was self-employed, and I’ve been doing this now for 19 years, since 1998. This is what I’ve been doing full time.

Interviewer: So, you shared with me earlier that the process of going from an engineer to running an established cross-cultural consulting company took a number of years and a huge amount of effort and creativity on your part Lionel. In the process, you established yourself as the Canadian representative for an American cross-cultural training company, then you went out on your own, you spoke at many, many events, you wrote books on the subject, and you consulted for an outplacement company. With each step along the way, you expanded your knowledge, and skills and experience. What did you learn along the way?

Lionel: I learned a lot about how to look for a job in Canada, I mean I had quite a bit of personal experience in the process, but now I could see it as applying to many different fields, many different people, and so on, and this was very helpful. It ended up being knowledge that was extremely helpful down the road.

Interviewer: So, what you learned through your work in the field of cross-cultural training and outplacement combined with your own experience finding work in Canada gave you unique insight into the employment journey for immigrants to Canada. Was there a point when you felt like you were where you wanted to be in your career, or that you had established yourself?

Lionel: From 1998 to 2004, it took six years to get to the point where I had found a niche, where I could make money in a sustainable manner in the long term. I stopped asking myself “Should I go back to engineering?” at that point. *So really, Lionel, you’ve had to reinvent yourself, many times, many times since you’ve arrived in Canada.* Absolutely. *And your goal has changed.* Oh yeah.

Interviewer: So, what advice would you give to someone starting their journey to finding a job in Canada?

Lionel: Canada is a land of specialists and you have to look for a job as a specialist. If you look for a job as a generalist, generalist means low level in Canada. *So you need to, Jack of all trades, master of none. You need to promote yourself as a specialist.* Exactly, and so you have to identify your specialization and you have to identify who needs that specialization. That work is hard work, most people do not do it, okay. Because they define themselves based on their degree, I mean I have an engineering degree, so I am an engineer. No, that’s not the case, okay? What are you better at doing, or the way I like to phrase it is what problem are you good at solving?

Interviewer: Okay, so defining yourself specifically is important. Are there some other lessons that helped you when you were looking for work as a chemical engineer?

Lionel: You need a mentor. We all spontaneously choose mentors in life, one very important part of mentor selection is we need to choose people who, in my experience, have two characteristics at the same time. One is, we feel comfortable with them. We need to be able to say, “I just don’t understand.” As opposed to trying to impress that person, because if you are trying to impress that person, well, it’s not going to work because you’re not going to open up, you won’t, and then they can’t really help you solve the problem. And the second one is, you need that person to either have achieved what you want to achieve or studied what you want to achieve.

Interviewer: So, not only do you need a mentor, but you need a mentor who you can relate to and who understands your goals. What about networking? Um, earlier on you mentioned how you set out to connect with Canadian contacts in your field when you were looking for a job in Canada. Do you have any advice, or lessons learned relating to mentoring?

Lionel:

Well, I mean, everywhere in the world, a network is essential for your success, in my experience. So, that part is universal. The part that is not universal is who do you spontaneously network with and how do you network with them?

In France, the way people network is by alumni association. I'm a graduate of the École Polytechnique. If I lived in France, I would go to events organized by that alumni association because that's where I would meet the people who see me as part of their network. *Okay.* On the other hand, I would not network as an engineer. Like, there are engineering associations in France, but these associations don't matter, and very few people network along those lines.

One thing I learned is networking is important everywhere, but how you network depends on where you are, okay? In France it's by alumni association. In Mexico, it's by family. Okay, like I mean I remember working with this Mexican HR consultant, her first name is Alma. And Alma, like I remember when I was talking to her about, well, when your daughter graduates, how is she going to look for a job? And Alma's reaction was, "Oh, I'm going to talk to all my friends and relatives and see if I can help Almita find a job." So, in that context it was very clear for her. And I remember having that problem with Diane because she was working with a number of organizations that I thought would be good potential clients for me and I asked her to introduce me, and she said I can't because that will create a conflict of interest. And what I realized at that point is, in Canada, your network is yours. You cannot share it with other people. Whereas in collective cultures, like Mexico or France, you can share your network. Like before you share someone's contact information, you first ask; you have to ask them permission. In France I will share contact information of my wife, my relatives without even thinking of asking them first.

So, networking is essential in everywhere around the world, that is true, that is universal. But how people network is the part which is really cultural. And so, for many immigrants, a big challenge, and for myself it's the same, was understanding how Canadians network, which is different.

So, the way I've learned Canadians network is fundamentally Canadians essentially define the professional world as a two dimensional matrix. On one axis you have the profession, cause you can be an engineer, an accountant, HR professional, a sales rep, trades, you know and then, the other axis is the industrial sector. You have, so you can be technology, oil and gas, financial industry, automotive, and so on. Canadians essentially, mentally, we define ourselves as the intersection of a line and a column on this big table. Okay? It's really striking, when you go to any networking event in Canada, you ask people "Well, what do you do?" That's the first question people ask you, okay. But what answer are they looking for? If you look at how that answer is formatted, you will see that most Canadians will answer "What do you do?" as a question with "I am a" and then they'll tell you what their profession is. And then they'll say, "specialized in" and then they'll tell you what their industrial sector is. So that's what I mean by they define themselves as an intersection of a line and a column. So, what I

Lionel: realized is I needed to understand which line, which column I'm on and so on. I realized that this is the way people see it, okay? And not only that but I also realized that on both axes it's very finely subdivided. What I mean by that is if you think of engineers for example well, you have chemical, civil, electrical, environmental, and a whole pile of other engineers, and these people see themselves as different. What I mean by that is if you are a chemical engineer and you go to an event organized by civil engineers, and you start talking to people, people will end the conversation very quickly because they do not see themselves as being connected to you, because we are in a different field. So networking with people who see themselves as being on the same line or the same column is essential for immigrants in my experience.

So for many immigrants, one big challenge is understanding how people, it's not how you define yourself, it's how Canadians define you. Whenever we move from one group to another, one of the abilities we lose is the ability to see ourselves the way others see us. And so, one very important step for immigrants is to learn how Canadians see them. And what I mean by that is, well, if a Canadian had the same professional experience as me, how would they describe and characterize that experience? That part is essential in my experience during the job search process. The search for the first position in Canada. So that's where many people run into a lot of difficulties, that's the first roadblock.

Interviewer: That is very helpful information, Lionel. Thank you so much for sharing your insights into a successful job search in Canada and for sharing about your own journey. And it's been quite a journey, I mean you've really, you've had to change your path many times, thank you, and you've looked for skills that you had within you that maybe didn't come through your education. No, that's for sure. And you've recreated your own place in Canada and you've made yourself successful. Thank you so much also for all of the invaluable strategies that you've shared with us. My pleasure.

Thank you for joining us for this conversation with Lionel Laroche in the Pathways to Belonging and Influence series. Join us for our other conversations with flourishing Canadians born abroad to learn strategies for establishing yourself in Canada.