

Pathways to Belonging and Influence:

Strategies and skills of the flourishing Canadians, born abroad

Arriving in a new country, adjusting to a new culture and establishing your career is a challenging task. What are the secrets to success? The Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council (CRIEC) and Bow Valley College undertook a joint project to identify the strategies and practices of successful members of Canadian society who were not born in Canada. This project is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

We interviewed six role models in the Calgary community who have immigrated to Canada and found success here. They shared strategies, practices, and tips to overcome obstacles and succeed in Canada.

Ten key strategies for success were identified in these interviews:

1. Be persistent and resilient.
2. Work with a mentor.
3. Make connections and network.
4. Maintain a positive attitude.
5. Learn from your challenges and failures.
6. Be flexible and open to different opportunities.
7. Research necessary qualifications and documentation ahead of time.
8. Clearly communicate your skills and abilities.
9. Accept that there are cultural differences in the way that things are done.
10. Redefine your expectations for success.

1. Be persistent and resilient.

"When you run into difficulties, you've got to be strong and you've got to work for it. You can't give up...keep your focus...and then you work until you succeed." -interviewee

The single most important strategy for success across all interviews was to be persistent and resilient. Each interviewee noted that many challenges will present themselves when establishing yourself in a new country. The resounding message across the interviews was to keep trying until you succeed and not to give up.

2. Work with a mentor.

"[you need to] feel comfortable with them...and you need that person to either have achieved what you want to achieve or studied what you want to achieve." -interviewee

The second most prevalent strategy for success across the interviews was to work with a mentor. Interviewees expressed that mentorship was a critical factor in their success. Working with mentors meant interviewees had the opportunity to get to know someone who was experienced working in their field and aware of the way things are done in Canada. Mentors provided them with the opportunity to make connections with others in their respective industries, and helped them to understand the Canadian interview and job search process. Mentors also provided encouragement and often were able to see strengths in the mentee that they themselves did not see.

3. Make connections and network.

"Networking kind of builds a different kind of support group for yourself. You are able to understand people's ideas and tricks and success tips as well. You can't read that from materials or from literature, you have to actually meet real people with real life stories." -interviewee

Another important strategy for success across the interviews was to make connections and network. Interviewees expressed how valuable networking was to their success, both with immigrants who had successfully transitioned to employment in Canada, as well as with Canadians in their respective industries. Interviewees expressed that the more people they made connections with, the more they understood how to thrive here. Networking provided the interviewees with the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and possibly meet employers who might be looking for employees with those skills.

4. Maintain a positive attitude.

"We can achieve a lot of things when we believe in ourselves, when we believe in our family and when we believe in our abilities." -interviewee

All of the interviewees expressed that maintaining a positive attitude is a key factor in success. Two of the interviewees highlighted the value placed on presenting a positive, friendly attitude in Canadian workplace culture. Others expressed how believing in yourself, connecting with positive people who believe in you, and staying positive when presented with barriers leads to success in the long run.

5. Learn from your challenges and failures.

"If I fail at something, the question I want to ask myself is what did I learn from it?" -interviewee

Each of the interviewees expressed that they had encountered challenges or experienced some degree of failure along their career path. Each one also commented how valuable it is to learn from these experiences, make changes and find other solutions.

6. Be flexible and open to different opportunities.

“Getting established in Canada one needs to be flexible. You just can’t come with a set mind that [you’re] going to get into a particular job and start working in your profession or the kind of work you’ve done before.” -interviewee

Four of the six interviewees took a departure from the career path they had been following in their own country. They either did this to support themselves while trying to get established in their field in Canada, or they embraced different opportunities that led them to new career paths and opportunities. Interviewees expressed that this is part of the process, should be expected, and is a worthwhile experience. They also commented on the importance of being open to the many opportunities available in Canada. Some of the specific advice offered was to consider how you can apply your knowledge and experience in different areas. If you are having difficulties, consider whether or not further education will help you get to where you want to be in a few years.

7. Research necessary qualifications and documentation ahead of time.

“Carry as much evidence as possible of your achievements, of the things you’ve done, of the things you can do.” -interviewee

Another very important piece of advice shared in the interviews was to be prepared for challenges in establishing yourself in Canada and, if possible, to research how to overcome these challenges before you arrive. From a professional standpoint, find out where, geographically, job opportunities exist in your field in Canada. Also find out what training, experience, and certification is required to practice your profession in Canada. Expect that foreign credentials will be questioned and be prepared to provide documentation that describes the contents of your studies. Be prepared for the possibility of having to write exams to prove your knowledge and to take courses to update your credentials.

8. Clearly communicate your skills and abilities.

“Canada is a place where people need to hear from you that you can do this. People need to see evidence that you’ve done that in the past. People need to be shown that you are capable of doing that.” -interviewee

Employers in Canada may not be familiar with the school you studied at or the certification that you hold. For that reason, interviewees stressed the importance of clearly articulating your strengths, abilities, and knowledge and demonstrating to people what you have to contribute to their organization. Suggestions included describing your skills and specialization instead of defining yourself using only the title of your degree. It was also suggested that you look for examples of how Canadians with similar qualifications define their skills, abilities, and knowledge and keep these examples in mind when describing your own characteristics.

9. Accept that there are cultural differences in the way that things are done.

"...cultural differences and managing cultural differences is all about realizing that there's more than one good solution." -interviewee

Interviewees highlighted the importance of being aware of cultural differences. They stressed the importance of recognizing that the job search and hiring process in Canada may be different from previous experiences you have had in other countries. From an employment standpoint, interviewees recommended researching how Canadian professionals in your field define their title and abilities, how they network, and what is expected in interviews. Speak to as many people in the field as possible. Interviewees recommended learning about workplace communication norms in Canada. What is considered common practice in one country may not be effective in another. Without investigating this, misunderstandings may occur.

10. Redefine your expectations for success.

"Success is going to come, but it's going to take a while. During the time you are struggling and branching out and connecting with people, you are building yourself. You are growing so that when you become successful, that success will be sustainable." -interviewee

Success requires patience and takes time to achieve. Some of the interviewees expressed that there was no set time in which people should expect to achieve their goals. They also expressed that their definition of what success looked like had changed over time and as their circumstances changed. The majority of interviewees felt that, over time, success became directly related to their ability to make a difference in the lives of those around them.