

CONSTRUCTION

# COMMENT

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*IRCI president Bruce Switzer and vice-presidents  
Gabriela Lopez and (seated) Maria Papalia.*



**IRCI helps  
foreign-born  
professionals  
find work**

## In an environment where acute labour shortages are a looming concern, Integration Resources Canada Inc. is helping companies connect with skilled newcomers.

Across the industrialized world, the story is the same: demographic changes have combined to produce acute labour shortages and employers find it increasingly difficult to fill positions with skilled workers.

Industries across Canada have already felt the pinch of a shrinking workforce—in some areas of the country job growth is massively outstripping labour-force growth, a trend that has produced growing demand for workers—and stakeholders are now calling on government to reform immigration law and allow more foreign-born workers to fill the gap.

Bruce Switzer is the president of Integration Resources Canada Inc. (IRCI), a private company that facilitates the integration of Canadian- and foreign-born professionals into the Ottawa labour market. He says he speaks with industry sector councils about their preparations for this demographic challenge, to identify the needs of the market, concluding that the problem of labour shortages may not require a radical solution.

“I think what a lot of people don’t appreciate is the fact that there is a huge supply of skilled labourers in this country who are not working in their chosen field.”

All too often, Switzer and IRCI vice-presidents Gabriela Lopez and Maria Papalia say they see foreign-born professionals arrive in the IRCI offices complaining of under-employment. These are people who hold undergraduate and graduate degrees from recognized foreign universities and who struggle to earn a living in Canada while working in front-line service industries. These people arrived in Canada and were told their skills and talents could not be recognized in this country and that they would be better suited to low-skill, low-paying positions.

“The difference in our approach,” says Papalia, “is that we don’t believe newcomers lack the experience to work in this country. The only thing they lack is the skills to gain a foothold in the labour market.”

### A HUMAN APPROACH

IRCI prides itself on taking a human approach to integrating foreign-born professionals in the Canadian labour market. Through one-on-one coaching with mentors, the IRCI team teaches newcomers basic social integration skills such as etiquette and protocol. The aim is to meet the individual’s specific needs to help him or her compete on the basis of their talents.

“A lot of people who come to this country don’t realize that you have to sell yourself to a prospective employer,” says Papalia. “It’s considered impolite in many countries to accentuate your skills, which is part of the reason that some of these people accept low-skill employment.”

When a newcomer comes to IRCI for help, the group begins with a brief assessment of the candidate’s language skills and recommends him or her for language training, as required. If their English is good enough, the IRCI team will work with the newcomer to develop his or her resume, bringing out their strengths and objectives and coaching them on

how to interview properly and how to present their skills in such a way as to make them more attractive to a prospective employer. The group also helps newcomers select companies and industries to which their skills might be best suited and helps them pitch their skills to these companies.

“It’s difficult for us to help professionals like doctors and engineers find work in their fields, simply because these professional skill sets are very precise,” Lopez explains. “But we can help these professionals develop their networking skills and translate their experience into different aspects of their discipline and we can certainly help skilled labourers like construction workers find work in their fields.”

The construction sector in particular is forecasted to be hard hit by shortages of skilled workers, but Lopez, Switzer and Papalia all say that there is a great opportunity for the construction industry to look for skilled talent in their own backyards.

“All three of us have backgrounds in construction, so we understand the business” says Lopez. “And we see the shortages of workers that are projected for this industry, but we want employers to understand that it’s not actually necessary to look abroad for new hires. A lot of the people we see every day have work permits and citizenship. All they lack is training or proper certification.”

### BUILDING CONFIDENCE

One of the IRCI team’s principal challenges lies in convincing employers of the value of using foreign-born workers. That’s why the group is actively involved in forging partnerships with employers, both as a source of employment leads and as a source of mentors.

“One of the benefits of our mentorship program is that it gives employers a pipeline to good, skilled talent,” says Switzer. “Human resources professionals are aware of demographic trends and they are looking for long-term solutions to staffing problems. By partnering with IRCI, they get a leg-up on the competition and can source new talent.”

“I think a lot of employers find that newcomers have a very strong work ethic and that, once they have a chance to work in a position, they are eager to show off all that they can do,” says Lopez.

The point behind IRCI’s work is to make employers realize that sourcing skilled workers from abroad is not entirely necessary. There is an excess of well educated, under-employed and highly skilled workers in this country who lack access to employment.

“Our goal is to make people realize that after all they been through in terms of moving their entire family to this country, they don’t have to lower their professional expectations and they can compete in the Canadian workforce,” says Switzer.

“Confidence is often one of the hardest things to restore in someone who has come from overseas and we want to help than win back that confidence so they can compete in the job market and make our communities great,” says Papalia.