

Mentors give immigrants a chance at their first real job in Canada

Frustrated immigrants often fail to find work in their professional fields, but a new mentoring program in Ottawa is changing that.

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While the federal government spends millions trying to untangle the knot of unrecognized foreign credentials, a small volunteer program in Ottawa is revealing the power of mentorship in steering immigrant professionals into the workforce.

Hala El Kozah's first Canadian winter, 2004, was a lifetime away from her hometown of Deir el Ahmar in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.

But it wasn't the snow or the cold that got to her. It was her difficulty finding a mechanical engineering job. By year's end, "I reached rock bottom."

Looking for a job had become full-time work.

"I used to get out of the house at 8, go to a centre, use the Internet, the phones, try to network, everything, during the whole day," she recalls. "I'd come back home around 4 or 5."

Five days a week for five months. Her resume submitted all over the place. Not one job interview.

Ms. Kozah, 29, never dreamed it would be so hard. She recalled the four-hour orientation session she attended at the Canadian embassy after her work visa came through.

"'You'll be fine'," they told us. 'You'll get a job. The economy is booming. It's wonderful.'

"They told us immigration was based on the market needs in Canada. One of the top needs was mechanical engineers. They were ranked the same with nurses and doctors."

"I believe, without employment, there's no settlement or integration."

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Elwira Felczak(seated), Sonja katic, and Bruce Switzer all work for immigrants through Ottawa Community Immigrant Services organisation.

CREDIT: Chris Mikula
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