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Immigration is not a quick fix to fill labour shortages

Canada should aim to attract people who can adapt to market changes

By JANET BAGNALL, The Gazette July 9, 2010

It's a miracle that as many as four in five Canadians support immigration, calling it a good thing for the country in a recent poll. For years we've been told our immigration system is dysfunctional: People arrive not knowing either official language; their qualifications don't match Canadian standards; the job vacancies they were brought in to fill have usually vanished in the years it took them to make it through the 800,000-application backlog.

In the same poll, however, Canadians showed little enthusiasm for increasing the number of immigrants to Canada. In their view, the current level of 250,000 newcomers a year should be maintained or even reduced. Pollster Nik Nanos explained the apparent contradiction -immigration is good but only in moderation -by saying that Canadians tend to be in favour of as many immigrants as there are jobs for them.

Getting that balance right -ensuring 1,000 Canadian engineering jobs are open at the precise time that a backlog of 1,000 South Asian engineers is cleared -is impossible.

It is also likely to be detrimental to Canada's long-term goals, according to a new research paper by Jeffrey Reitz, University of Toronto professor of ethnic, immigration, and pluralism studies, part of a report this month from the Conference Board of Canada. But where the board's chief economist, Glen Hodgson, argues in favour of changing Canada's system to give more weight to selecting immigrants on their ability to fill Canada's immediate job needs, Reitz says the country's current approach works well over time.

Under Canada's points-based system, the majority of immigrants have been selected on the basis of a high level of education. The advantage of taking in highly educated people is that they are more likely to be able to cope well with good times and bad. As Reitz explained, they are more resourceful in dealing with problems that come up as they adapt to their new country. When they lose their jobs, they find new ones more quickly. Because they are highly educated, their children also tend to be highly educated.

In Europe and the U.S., Reitz points out, where immigrants are less skilled and have less education, the process of adaptation has been marked by social conflict. Reitz does not think Canada's relatively easy relations between newcomers and native Canadians are a result of multiculturalism. People integrate well when they have jobs and better-educated people have an easier time finding work.

For a long time, Canada's need for immigrants has been viewed as a straightforward equation between jobs that need filling and suitably skilled candidates brought in from elsewhere. The problem with this approach, says Reitz, is that labour markets can change so fast that no system can keep up.

Reitz cites a 2009 Statistics Canada study showing that the continuing decline in immigrant employment in Canada since 2001 might have its roots in the "IT bust," the point at which the high-tech bubble burst throughout North America. Just a few years before, Canada scrambled to find enough skilled workers abroad to fill the information-technology market shortage.

But what looked like a rational response to an urgent need might have added to long-term unemployment among immigrants, wrote Reitz. People with specific skills were brought in only to have the jobs they were to fill vanish.

Arguing against any change in Canada's immigration policy to favour short-term labour-market needs, Reitz points out that Australia, which also uses a points-based system, also ran into trouble when it focused on short-term job needs. In the past few years, it selected two groups of workers whom it felt had better chances of filling market needs: temporary immigrants who already had a job and international students who were already in the country getting local credentials.

But a 2007 survey showed that neither category had the same employment success as immigrants selected abroad on the basis of their education.

If Reitz is right -and Canada is better off choosing highly educated immigrants -that still leaves the thorny problem of needing a better system of recognizing the professional credentials that are the basis of their selection in the first place.

Solving that problem calls on skills that seem to be in short supply in Canada: interprovincial co-operation coupled with the willingness to negotiate a common set of standards for various occupations. Maybe we could import a few experts with those skills.

jbagnall@thegazettecanwest.com

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