

Patrick MacKenzie – Unlocking Canada's Hidden Talent: The Immigrant Workforce

Host: Maggie John

Overview:

Patrick MacKenzie joins us to discuss challenges faced by skilled immigrants and their integration into the Canadian labour market. Patrick MacKenzie is the CEO of the Immigrant Employment Council of BC. He has made a career of public service from coast to coast, working in policy and program areas aimed at supporting many of Canada's most vulnerable communities through economic and social development as well as international relations. MacKenzie shares his thoughts on how we can solve this miscommunication between employers and skilled immigrants.

Highlights from our conversation include:

1. How employers should shift their focus from formal credentials to the actual skills required for a job.
2. The importance of recognizing that immigrants' diverse work experiences can offer fresh perspectives and drive innovation.

MAGGIE:

It is Magnet Network Live, and I'm your host, Maggie John. I'm now joined by Patrick McKenzie.

He is the CEO of the Immigrant Employment Council of BC, where he works to connect skilled immigrants with job opportunities in the province.

He focuses on integrating immigrants into the workforce, addressing barriers to employment and helping businesses access diverse talent pools. Welcome, Patrick.

PATRICK:

Thank you very much.

MAGGIE:

I've been asking everybody what their big takeaway is. What are you taking back to BC, that nugget of information that you're chewing on?

PATRICK:

You know what, this is just a great reminder of, I think, the power of Magnet to begin with, but just the complexity of the issues that we're looking at and the sheer volume of people and organizations that are working to make Canada a better place.

MAGGIE:

So what are some of the key challenges faced by skilled immigrants entering into the Canadian market? And how can businesses help remove some of those barriers, Patrick?

PATRICK:

I mean, honestly, for 40, 50, 60 years, we've been talking about the barriers to immigrant integration in the labor market. So it kind of begs the question, are we asking some of the wrong questions?

But historically, and even today, we've talked about a lack of foreign credential recognition. We've talked about a lack of English or French ability, depending on which part of the country you're settling in. And we've talked about that nebulous question of a lack of Canadian experience.

And while I think they're all sort of valid elements to look at, I believe what they point us toward is sort of two questions, but they're really linked to miscommunication.

You know, we have so many talented immigrants coming to Canada. If you look at it, I mean, the data shows us that immigrants who come to Canada are generally much more highly educated than Canadians are. And so we have all this talent, and yet they don't know how to navigate the Canadian labor market.

So they're miscommunicating in terms of what their ability is or where they could fit in. And at the same time, employers aren't necessarily certain on how to reach out to this talent pool because they don't know how to connect with them and they don't know how to make their job opportunities relevant to those folks.

MAGGIE:

You talked about miscommunication, and I loved what you said at the end, because I wonder if our system is just too complex. Have we made it too complex? Have we added too much red tape so that, I mean, you know, all of us have the stories, Patrick, of being in a taxi. And, you know, we have an engineer as our taxi driver, and he's looking for a job, and we need engineers in this country.

PATRICK:

No, you know, I mean, it is a complex question, right? Canada has many complex systems. And for sure, the labor market is complex.

I think one of the problems that we've created, though, is that we have this reliance on credentials as a proxy for ability.

Yeah. So I went to university in Canada. I went to Mount St. Vincent University in Halifax. When I applied for this job that I have now, no one asked me for a credential. They knew I went to a university.

I'm pretty sure none of them had ever set foot on the campus of that university, but they trusted that it was something similar to their experience.

That trust breaks down completely when we're using a foreign credential or foreign experience. And I think what it is is for employers, rather than focusing on the skills that they need in a job, because most jobs are unregulated...

Like you talked about engineers and I was so happy that you didn't say a doctor driving a cab.

Well, there are probably those two.

Well, there are, but there's not nearly as many as we're led to believe.

But it becomes a question of skill. It's, can this person solve my problems? I don't need them to have a credential to do this job. Right.

And we don't ask about skill.

And so, and I think we're doing that because we're not looking at our jobs in terms of skill as well. It's like, what skills does someone need to do what needs to be done in my organization or in that role in my organization?

And so, by trying to simply...

Search for someone to fill a need in the workplace, we use credentials. But that inadvertently complicates our ability to and makes it much more complex. It inhibits our ability to actually find the right people at times for the job that we have.

MAGGIE:

How do we fix that?

Well, I think it's a mindset change. Certainly, I think broadly in the labor market, employers need to start thinking about skills and what are my specific needs?

Not, you know, not I need an engineer. It's like, what would that engineer do?

And then you might find out you don't actually need an engineer. You need a technician. Right.

And if that's the case, that's great for the employer. You're not paying for an engineer. You're paying for someone with a few technical skills. And so you're not going for the P-eng, let's say. Right.

And then it opens the door up, I think, to broader thinking and to more people who might be able to fill these roles.

For me, the real crime is that we have so many people who choose Canada. And we have to remember, immigrants choose Canada before we get to choose immigrants. If they don't apply, we don't get the opportunity to pick.

And so what's that story we're selling? What's brand Canada?

And are people willing to buy it? And if they're not, then we're going to lose the opportunity to find these folks.

And I think key to that is giving anyone who comes to Canada and anybody who's already in Canada, don't get me wrong, Canadian born, give them the opportunity to put their ability to its maximums of economic use in the country. That's great for the individual. That's great for the community. Great for the country as well.

MAGGIE:

And what I'm hearing also, Patrick, is that the employer needs to ask themselves the right question before they can ask the potential employee the questions.

PATRICK:

Absolutely. I mean, it takes some work. It takes work. And I think the challenge, too, in Canada is we're not like the Americans. We love to say we're not like the Americans. But in this case, we're really not like the Americans.

We don't have these huge national champions. We are a country of small, medium-sized enterprises.

And so how do you scale that thinking up? Because in the end, like I said, and I go back to this sort of 80% of the labor market is unregulated.

So how do you find those folks who have the ability that you need as a small business owner to come in and help grow your company?

And then how do you scale that as a country?

So that we've talked about the productivity challenge here in Canada. We've known for 60 years, most OECD countries have been getting productivity wrong.

Certainly, if you're looking at GDP per capita as a metric, it's in decline. And so for Canada, how do we turn that around? Because we're not doing a good job of it right now. We know that.

MAGGIE:

How can businesses better support immigrant talent in adapting to technological advances and new work environments as well?

PATRICK:

It's funny. I would say that there would be a lot of immigrants that could help businesses adjust to technological advancement. And again, we're choosing really, really well-educated, highly skilled people to come to the country. Like this is not an immigration system that's built to take in the lowest common denominator. We're actually built in to take the best. And we've been that way for a very long time.

So from an employer's perspective, rather than looking at immigrant candidates or the immigrant, if they're looking at the immigrant talent pool at all... I mean, let's be clear, let's not look at it from a perspective of deficiency. It's like, oh, got this fella, he's not from Canada, English might not be great, or not sure what the education would be like, not sure if they understand how to offer customer service in a Canadian way. And look at it and say, okay, this is somebody who's worked around the world. This is somebody who's worked in another place. And what is it they could bring to the table for me? What do they know from there that we don't already know here? And how do I turn that to my advantage?

I get asked often, how do we work with those businesses who are really anti-immigration, that don't want to hire immigrants? I said, I don't. And I said, fine, I'm a small nonprofit. So I don't have a massive marketing budget. I don't have psychologists helping me to tinker with their minds here and figure this stuff out. But I also say I'm not going to have to worry about them in five or ten years because they're not going to be around because their competitors are thinking about this. And if they know a deeper talent pool from which to fish, they're going to do better than you are.

MAGGIE:

That's good. That's good. That's a mind shift of either you change or you're going to be left behind.

PATRICK:

Well, that's it. And like I said, this, like looking at things from an asset base rather than a deficiency base. Like think about it. Did you ever get a job where you walked in and said, well, I tell you, I know what you're looking for, but let me tell you all the things I can't do. And I think that, you know, if we're looking at immigration that way, we're setting everybody up for failure. And it's bad for the country, but it's devastating for those individuals who've placed their trust in this country.

MAGGIE:

What role does collaboration then between employers, government and immigrant services play in creating more inclusive and dynamic workplaces?

PATRICK:

I mean, without it, it doesn't work. Without the employer, it doesn't work. And I think the question is, where do we put them in the conversation? And I think we have to put them at the center. We can talk about credential recognition all you want. You can talk about that engineer driving a cab. But at the end of the day, who's the ultimate gatekeeper for most jobs? It's the employer. Yeah. Like, yes, you'll have regulators. You can't be a doctor if the College of Physicians and Surgeons doesn't say you are. But again, you're talking about a small proportion of the jobs that are out there. Yeah.

So if we're, and this is the way we work. Like, my organization, we're a small organization, but we want to have an outsized impact. Right. And so we make sure that any time, like, if we're looking for a problem, we're not trying to find it ourselves. We're asking the employer, what's your problem? Like, what's keeping you from doing this? Yeah. There's your challenge. And then they'll tell us. And they don't necessarily know the solution. But then we want to work with them to figure out a solution. And we want to work with them to figure out a solution that actually meets their need.

Then at the same time, we want to work with the settlement sector, with our other service delivery partners out there, and say, okay, this is what the employer says they need. This is what's missing. Or this is what will make life easier for them to do, you know, the things that are good for their business, but what we believe is good for society as well. And then we ask them, okay, can you deliver this? Is this something like is this something that actually works? Can the system do this? And then it begs

the question of, okay, can you design it for the system or do you have to redesign the system or elements of the system? And I think we found something that works. At IEC-BC, we have a service delivery network of 60 partners from coast to coast.

I don't know anybody else out there that's doing that because we're looking at it. We're saying this is a complex problem. It's a complex issue and there's no one solution. There's no silver bullet.

So how do we develop something that will work for as many people as we think possible? But then we also want to find others out there who are like-minded and not, I don't mean doing the same thing, but they're looking at it and saying this isn't a zero-sum game. What's that secret sauce that we could create for people so that we can find a solution that works for you. You know, and so, because what you need might be slightly different than what I need. And so this is where I think there's tremendous opportunity with AI and the data sets that we have out there. Imagine if we could sift through and connect all these different dots between landing data and service use data and tax data and census data and say, okay, hey, for a person who looks like this, with this profile, if they get this combination of services in this order, at this point in their journey, they seem to do better.

So let's try that. And I think as we're moving into a time where we may see some more austerity in public services, that's going to be really important. We need to do it more efficiently, but not just for efficiency's sake, but for effectiveness too.

MAGGIE:

Yeah, for the betterment of our country.

PATRICK:

Absolutely. And the individuals too. We do have to have that macroeconomic view. I mean, there can't be bespoke service for everybody. But we have to remember, at the end of the day, these are individuals. These are families. They've placed their trust in Canada. But we need them. And let's make sure we're, I think, first picking them properly. So when you're talking about economic selection, that we've got a system that chooses folks that the economy needs.

And that's what the economic selection system is for. It's not about feeling good. It's not about goodwill. It's about supporting the economy.

But that gives us the license to do the humanitarian, the refugees, the family class and all that.

And I think it's very important that these parts are all very strong and work well together.

MAGGIE:

Patrick, thank you.

That was Patrick McKenzie. He is the CEO of Immigrant Employment Council of BC.