

Shamira Madhany – Bridging Barriers: Integrating Immigrants into Canada's Workforce

Host: Jeremy Strachan

Overview:

Shamira Madhany discusses the barriers that many skilled immigrants face when entering the Canadian workforce. Madhany is Managing Director, Canada and Deputy Executive Director, World Education Services. Madhany explains how post-secondary institutions can help immigrants bridge the 'Canadian experience' barrier with bridging programs, or by helping international students access pathways to employment.

Highlights from our conversation include:

1. Helping international professionals get their credentials recognized in Canada can play a "very significant" role in keeping our economy competitive into the future.
2. As the global marketplace for skilled talent becomes more competitive, the countries that succeed will be those able to attract immigrants by utilizing their skills and abilities to the fullest.

JEREMY:

I'm here with Shamira Madhany, who is the Managing Director of World Education Services Canada.

Shamira leads WES, focusing on helping immigrants and refugees integrate into the workforce through credential recognition. And her work supports diverse talent pipelines and improves access to employment for skilled immigrants.

Shamira, how are you doing?

SHAMIRA:

I'm doing fine, Jeremy.

JEREMY:

Curious to hear what your impression of Magnet Live is so far. Are there any key takeaways, any sessions that you've been to that have got you thinking?

SHAMIRA:

Sure. So, Jeremy, this is a really innovative way to do, I would think, about three things. One is it's an amazing networking opportunity to meet people that you haven't seen in a long time or new people. Two is that the way the sessions have been organized, it's pretty diverse. And you can move from session to session and really basically connect the information across. And three, I guess the key takeaway for me is very much around how everybody is talking about the same issues or similar issues with respect to what's happening with the labour market, the issue of immigration, and how we all want to row in the same direction to ensure that individuals are able to contribute to the economy, commensurate with the experience.

JEREMY:

Yeah, absolutely.

Shamira, what are the key barriers that skilled immigrants are facing when entering the workforce? And I'd like you to sort of give me some of your thoughts on how businesses can help remove these obstacles.

SHAMIRA:

Sure. So basically, when newcomers come to the country, they're already dealing with some basic challenges, as all newcomers would. Things like just getting started, getting housing, schooling, getting their licenses recognized, getting into licensing occupations if they basically are coming from regulated occupations. So that's generally basic. But one of the biggest barriers that they face is how does the prior

work experience translate into the workplace in a new situation? And so for me, in terms of, you know, the biggest barrier and a gap that exists right now, that I know employers are grappling with is what employers call Canadian experience. But really, when you have discussions with employers or employer sectors and in some of the workshops that we have heard today, it's very much around what employers are saying is, when I ask for Canadian experience, what I really mean, it's a proxy for, I'm trying to understand how your depth of experience translates into the Canadian workplace. And how can I take the risk understanding that you come from a different situation where your education system might be different, where the standards might be different.

So how can you demonstrate to me that I should take the risk so that I am able to do the job that I'm doing? And so for me, that's the biggest barrier that right now is a gap that we need to think about in a very critical way because we need highly skilled immigrants and they're here amongst us, but how do we leverage the experience?

JEREMY:

And there's a big piece of that. That puzzle, and maybe it's more of a question, that has to do with what sorts of opportunities are post-secondary institutions giving international students and new learners those chances to get that Canadian experience through workshops, work-integrated learning? And it's something that, yeah, I'm sort of resonating from the comments you just made.

SHAMIRA:

Sure.

So, Jeremy, it's important for me to basically make sure that I divide up international students who basically come to Canada to study, and then some leave to go back to their home countries and contribute whatever they've learned. And there are others who stay, and they move into permanent immigration pathways. And then there's another group of immigrants who are chosen to come here on a permanent basis who are highly skilled and who are able to contribute.

So I'm just going to answer the question in sort of a nuanced way.

If I think about international students, especially for those who choose to come to our country who are young and hardworking and who want to contribute, how can the post-secondary institutions really play a role to support them in moving into a permanent path?

And so in my mind, the post-secondary institutions can play a significant role the way they do with domestic students. It's a matter of, you know, what are the courses that they're taking? What are the job placements that can offer on a temporary basis to give them the work experience? And how do they get the support that's necessary that they might have taken a course here for a year? But if you look at their background, they might have taken other courses that are basically in global institutions.

So that's where international students come in because many are taking courses, for example, in health care, in STEM, in other programs like trades. How do we not lose them in the whole rhetoric that's happening right now?

And then when we think about immigrants who come here on a permanent basis, and 60% are what we call express centre economic class. And our studies at World Education Services have shown that more than 50% are in regulated occupations that have either bachelors or higher. Majority are not working in their occupations and retail.

So how do post-secondary institutions then play a role to ensure that those individuals who choose to go to post-secondary institutions are able to get the necessary bridging programs to move from what they knew and had and translate it into Canadian standards?

JEREMY:

I see. Yeah. I want to ask you, how have you seen the narrative around immigration shift over the past few years? And, you know, why does this matter? And how would you like to see this narrative change?

SHAMIRA:

So until recently, there had been consensus around the key role that immigrants play. Basically, there was strong data that showed, and still is correct, that we have an aging population.

Our fertility rates are very low. It's 1.2 per family.

And we know, as a result of all of that, that our labor market needs new immigrants, and that generally by 2032, which is less than 15 years from now, 100% of our labor-first growth will come from new immigrants.

And so understanding and knowing that, we know that immigration will play a very significant role in order for Canada to remain competitive.

Now, we're talking about Canada, but what we also know is that there are many competitor jurisdictions that have similar issues.

UK, Australia, Germany, even Japan.

And so they're all competing for the same talent. And so what we need to do with respect to really immigration and leveraging immigrants who are highly skilled is to make sure that when they come, we are leveraging their deep experience and integrating them into the labor market commensurate with their experience versus they come here, their experience is not recognized because there aren't tools, or employers don't know how to assess the prior experience, their money starts running short and they end up getting into retail and they basically sacrifice what they came for and their children will now succeed.

JEREMY:

Yeah, that piece about assessment is so, it's such a big one. How do you make those matches in a way that is coherent and somehow measurable?

So I'm going to just pivot on that a little bit and go when it comes to businesses and educational institutions.

What role can they play in creating a more inclusive workforce that benefits us all, that benefits employers, that benefits newcomers, and that's helping our lagging economy?

We're in that productivity lag that we've been hearing about over and over again over the past day and a half.

SHAMIRA:

Sure.

So I'm happy to tell you, Jeremy, that in fact, World Education Services over the weekend won an award from the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

It's called the Inclusive Growth Awards.

And the rationale for why we won that is really the message out there.

And the question you ask me, the message out there is everybody understands from the Canadian in a local community to generally employers to the employment sectors that immigrants play a valuable role.

And they know that immigration is key to where we want to go.

And that's the way we're going to increase our productivity and GDP.

The gap and the solution is, in my mind, pretty simple and in front of us.

You have employers who play a significant role where there are best practices, where they will bring in immigrants through mentorship programs, where they will have bridging programs right in the workplace, where they will say, come in, we'll start with, you know, entry level.

We'll see what you can do. We'll provide the experience and then we'll promote you fairly quickly.

So there are employers who understand and willing to do whatever is necessary because it's good for the company, it's good for the individual, it's good for the country.

Post-secondary institutions, they also play a role where they've had bridging programs, where we know there is a gap for those who are coming from countries where maybe the education systems are not similar.

And the bridging programs mean that what they do is they work with maybe a local employer like a hospital, the post-secondary institution, the individual, and a local settlement agency to create a bridge between what the individual knew, how they worked, for example, as a nurse, and what it takes to work as a nurse here.

And those bridging programs then supports the individual to succeed when they're writing the licensing exam.

So, you know, there are many best practices.

The conversation here is how do you take all those best practices and move from just basically one-offs and remove the negative rhetoric to we all are going in the same direction for our country.

JEREMY:

Absolutely.

Shamira, thank you so much. That's Shamira Madani, who's the Managing Director of World Education Services Canada.

SHAMIRA:

Thank you, Jeremy. Thank you. That was wonderful.