

IS IT TIME TO DO AWAY WITH ENGINEERING'S CANADIAN EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENT?

By Izumi Sakamoto, PhD, and Daphne Jeyapal



AS REGULAR READERS of *Engineering Dimensions* know, on July 15, 2013, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) released a policy on removing the “Canadian experience” barrier.

This is the first provincial position stating that the use of Canadian experience is discriminatory as a standard for immigrant employment and accreditation. However, this has been controversial for PEO, eliciting questions on how and why this policy could and should affect the well-established professional licensing requirement of one year of Canadian work experience. To ponder this question, we must first consider what the Canadian experience requirement offers candidates pursuing a professional engineering licence in Canada. As many proponents have argued, in addition to ensuring sufficient exposure to Canadian engineering codes, legislation, technical standards and regulations, this year also allows candidates to learn so-called “Canadian” communication skills and workplace culture. However, according to the OHRC policy, “a strict requirement for ‘Canadian experience’ is discriminatory on its face and can only be used in limited circumstances” and “the onus will be on employers and regulatory bodies to show that a requirement for Canadian experience is a bona fide (legitimate)

requirement.” This policy places the onus on PEO to justify its use. Our article explores some of the tensions surrounding the implementation and elimination of the Canadian experience requirement.

OHRC policy is an interpretation of the Ontario Human Rights Code that “recognizes dignity and worth of every person and provides for equal rights and opportunities.” It prohibits discrimination in employment (section 5) as well as discrimination with respect to membership in regulatory bodies (section 6).

While debates on the requirement of Canadian experience have circulated for decades, the release of this policy will undoubtedly raise the profile and awareness of this issue more broadly among employers, accreditation bodies and the general public.

As researchers, we are happy to have been part of the process of creating this policy. For several years, we have been leading research on Canadian experience. Our work has focused on understanding the commonly asked question, “What is really meant by Canadian experience?” Based on the findings of our research, our recommendation is simple: We must look deeper into our employment and accreditation practices and ourselves to tease apart the many components constituting this elusive and complex term.

The practice of using the Canadian experience requirement to reject newcomer professionals in the hiring, promotion and accreditation process is not new. Based on an analysis of over 1000 print newspaper articles related to Canadian experience and skilled immigration, we realize that the paradox of this requirement has permeated public discourse for a long time—if you don’t have Canadian experience, you can’t get a job; if you don’t have a job, you can’t get Canadian experience.

As early as 1978, there was a letter to the editor printed in the *Globe and Mail*: “I am a recent immigrant to this country who is undergoing the pain of obtaining permanent employment here. I have applied for and called in response to many job advertisements, but I am confronted with only one question, ‘What is your Canadian experience?’ I wish someone would be kind enough to tell me what this Canadian experience is, and how I get it without being given the chance.” Sadly, we hear the same refrain some 35 years later. Arguably, the requirement of Canadian experience is more complex in regard to engineering licensing requirements; however, many of the limitations and critiques remain the same.

While there continues to be a sentiment that newcomer professionals need to be in Canada and practising for one year before they are deemed competent, there are cultural aspects to this requirement. Cultural dimensions to any social construct mask myriad cultural values,

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beliefs and practices. In the case of Canadian experience, it blurs the lines between technical requirements and potential discrimination.

While candidates work to achieve standards on application of theory, practical experience, management of engineering, communication skills, and social implications of engineering, it remains unclear how one can tell whether candidates meet these standards, particularly communication skills. To generalize, there is no clear, measurable outcome of what communication skills candidates are supposed to obtain during their year of Canadian work experience. How can their learning be effectively evaluated, and how can it be assumed that candidates did not previously have, or could not acquire, these requirements without their Canadian work experience? In what way does the Canadian experience requirement assume that educational and professional institutions from other countries operate with standards and codes that are not comparable or up to par with our own?

Employers and human resources professionals across fields struggle with the notion of Canadian experience, too—they use the term as a proxy for trust and risk aversion in hiring, to see if the job applicant will fit into the organization and can hit the ground running.

As employers, we can relate to the temptation to hire somebody with familiar experience and backgrounds when working under time and workload constraints. It is easy to fall back on known skills and comfortable practices. However, there are other ways of hiring and assessing job candidates' competencies. It is critical for employers to tease out what is really at the core of these job requirements. OHRC is preparing learning resources in this regard, and the university-community coalition, Beyond Canadian Experience Project, will be aiding the initiative.

In our research, job-seeking immigrants argue that, in many cases, Canadian experience is a euphemism for a lack of trust in immigrants—somehow immigrants are less than Canadian-borns and need to prove their value by assuming volunteer work or lower-skilled jobs than what their credentials deserve.

In our arts-based focus group, one Indian-trained teacher created a mask to represent her response to this popular belief—she painted half the mask with a blue eye and blond hair, and the other half with a bindi, a black eye and black hair. She said she would have to wear a mask with blue eyes and blond hair to be accepted into a job, and by extension, into Canadian society because, without a job, you don't really belong. This and other similar stories are consequences of using the term "Canadian experience" as a criterion for immigrant hiring. Listening to story after story like this is heartbreaking. They also speak to the injustice of excluding the full participation of skilled immigrants in Canada.

Our research concludes that the Canadian experience required by employers is often not about professional standards but rather social and cultural ones: immigrant workers are seen as having no experience at "being Canadian" and don't fit in in the workplace. Often people use Canadian experience to mean soft skills (as opposed to hard skills such as education and credentials), the ability to work seamlessly in a given Canadian workplace culture. These "skills" are ill-defined. Yet, this requirement is pervasive and widely believed to be an important

criterion in assessing an immigrant's suitability to a given job.

Instead of embracing an attitude (and reflecting this position through policy) that everybody needs to learn the particularities of evolving cultural environments to some degree, and adapt to new workplace contexts, we cannot justify our cultural discomfort by simply excluding newcomer professionals from our workplaces.

As an industry or an employer, the onus is on us to support their transition and to negotiate cultural differences alongside them, whether it's a new graduate or a highly experienced newcomer professional. Or else, the simple reliance on Canadian experience as a requirement is discrimination in a multicultural Canada.

As the OHRC reminds us, "even where employers and regulatory bodies may be acting in good faith, a candidate's Canadian experience, or lack thereof, is not a reliable way to assess a person's skills or abilities. And, imposing requirements of this nature may contravene the [human rights] code. Employers and regulatory bodies should be clear about the specific qualifications they are seeking, rather than using 'catch-all' terms like Canadian experience."

In the face of Canada's skills shortage, the logical move is for professional regulatory bodies and workplaces to open their doors and their minds to the vast knowledge and expertise skilled immigrants have to offer. However, the reality is that while some internationally educated engineers are lucky to obtain 12 months of paid internships upon arrival, many others are not that lucky and end up working in fields other than engineering to make ends meet. This is a waste of international talents. Furthermore, many immigrants chose to come to Canada for its inclusive social values, ourselves included. As such, using the criterion of experience in Canada to exclude immigrants is truly ironic.

OHRC's new policy is a much needed official step in the right direction—the job rests with all of us to make the best use of the policy and make our society truly inclusive to all of us who strive to be part of the mix. In our opinion, as PEO evaluates their policies regarding the Canadian experience requirement, several things must be addressed. PEO should:

1. Spell out the specific competencies and desired outcomes measured under the catch-all term, Canadian experience:
 - (a) The criteria of whether an internationally educated engineering graduate (IEG) has met the requirements for these various components should not be left to subjective judgment, and

- (b) The current effort by Engineers Canada to move toward competency-based assessment instead of the time-bound one (i.e. 12 months of Canadian experience) is commendable—this is a step in the right direction;
2. Demonstrate flexibility in assessing a candidate's competency and prior work experience, without relying on the requirement of Canadian experience; and
 3. Pursue an “aggressive outreach effort” (Asif Khan, P.Eng., cited in *Engineering Dimensions*, January/February 2014, p. 34) not only to educate IEGs through existing programs such as the Engineering Intern Program and PEO's licensing preparedness programs, but also increased availabilities in support and resources for IEGs, such as more paid internships, bridging programs and mentoring to ease the transition.

Lastly, the rest of us—PEO members, engineers, supervisors, and the general public—must ask ourselves why specific competencies have evolved into the notion of Canadian experience, and how we can refrain from evoking this term while continuing to

seek measurable outcomes from work experience to ensure a transparent, accessible licensing procedure for all.

According to the Ontario Fairness Commissioner's report, in 2011, engineers constituted the second largest number of internationally trained members among the regulated professions, after teachers. PEO has historically led the way among other professional regulatory organizations in Ontario (and perhaps in Canada) to work toward seamless recruitment and integration of IEGs. In 2008, we acknowledged PEO's contributions to accrediting IEGs in our academic article published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. We look forward to seeing how PEO's current Canadian experience requirement will be re-examined and made into specific competencies that would both retain high professional standards and maximum utilization of IEGs. Σ

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