

# Immigrant Onboarding in Non-Gateway Quebec Small to Medium Enterprises



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## Context

Canada is experiencing a labour shortage and historically low unemployment rates (Department of Finance Canada, 2023). A shortage that is particularly accentuated among small to medium enterprises (SMEs) (BDC, 2022), those with 1-499 employees and represent 99.8% of Canadian companies (Global Affairs Canada, 2019) and 50% of the gross domestic product (ISED, 2022). Among the top three sectors struggling most with the current worker shortage are manufacturers (Statistics Canada, 2022), a cornerstone of our economy (Industry Canada, 2020).

To address this labour gap the federal government is aiming to increase immigrant intake numbers to 500,000 (IRCC, 2022). Despite the increased intake of immigrants, it takes five to ten years for them to economically integrate (Statistics Canada, 2018). Reasons for this vary and include the non-recognition of academic credentials and professional experience, language proficiency human biases and a lack of professional networks to help access jobs in their field (Arcand et al., 2009; Aslund et al., 2014; Béji & Pellerin, 2010; Bélanger & Vézina, 2017; Boudarbat, & Grenier, 2017; Cousineau, & Boudarbat, 2009; Godin, 2008; Guo, 2013; Hakak et al., 2010; Krahn et al., 2005; Vatz-Laaroussi, 2015).

Furthermore, not all employers have equal access to this pool of workers. More than half of Canadian immigrants, 61%, move to: Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver (IRCC, 2018). As a result, employers in less popular immigrant destinations increasingly turn to temporary foreign workers whom they see as a permanent source of labour. There is evidence of this as the number of temporary foreign workers in Canada has increased from 110,000 in 2010 to 770,000 in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2022b). However, retaining this source of labour in smaller communities may present a different set of challenges.

Yet, in the current job market turnover and the high costs associated with replacing workers is a reality that even employers of temporary foreign workers must contend with as they too, may change employers before the expiry of their work permits or after they obtain their permanent residence. For these reasons developing a strategic onboarding program is crucial for manufacturing SMEs in less popular immigrant destinations.

According to Human Resource Development research, workplace onboarding, new employee attraction, hiring and skills development programs, may play a crucial role in this situation as they are credited with improving organizations' ability to attract and retain new employees (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). However, the onboarding of immigrants remains an understudied field (Wang and Jing, 2018).

## Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore onboarding practices provided by non-gateway manufacturing SME employers. The study asked SME employees from across ranks and departments to describe their involvement and experiences with onboarding immigrants, the challenges they faced and the perceived skills and training needs of immigrant employees.

Furthermore, the study asked immigrant employees to describe their experiences and perceptions of employers' onboarding practices and their own perceived skills and training needs. This is even more crucial as we enter an era in which artificial intelligence will affect manufacturing processes and jobs in this critical sector.

This study contributed to developing a longer-term human systems intervention that is rooted in context and that specifically addresses the onboarding of immigrant employees in manufacturing SMEs located in non-gateway cities across the province of Quebec. This is especially important in Quebec, where out-migration of immigrants is higher than in Ontario and British Columbia (Boudarbat & Grenier, 2017)



# Methodology

Four (4) manufacturing companies were recruited for this study, three were non-unionized and one was unionized. The four companies are in

- i. Chaudière Appalaches
- ii. Capitale Nationale
- iii. Côte Nord
- iv. Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean

In each company, six to eight employees from across ranks participated for a total of 28 employees, of which 11 were immigrants. The table below describes participants by their positions within the companies and immigration status.

Number and positions of participants

	Locals	Immigrants	Total
Management	3	1	4
Human Resources	4	1	5
Supervisors	5	1	6
Non-managerial	5	8	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>28</b>

Number and category of immigrant participants

Immigration status	Total
Temporary foreign workers	5
Family reunification	3
International students	1
Refugees	1
Economic immigrants	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>

Data collected consisted of three sources: interviews, field notes and artefacts gathered from company and community websites.

# The Four Key Findings

## 1. Key challenges and support needs for manufacturing SMEs

### • **The challenges**

- Inability to compete with the higher salaries offered by larger companies and large multinationals in the area.
- Attracting immigrants from gateway locations is perceived as an unrealistic strategy.
- Retaining immigrants in the companies and communities.
- Length, complexity and cost of hiring a temporary foreign worker is a barrier according to both SMEs and immigrant workers.

### • **SMEs' additional support needs**

- Access to practical strategies for developing a structured onboarding program for workers in general and adapted to immigrants and temporary foreign workers.
- Access to information and support concerning the procedures, the costs and the timeline for hiring temporary foreign workers and renewing their work permits.
- Information to understand the type of support they should plan to provide temporary foreign workers.
- Financial support for SMEs in communities that attract few immigrants and are obliged to fill labour shortages by turning to temporary foreign workers as a permanent source of labour.

- Financial support to develop a structured onboarding program to help SMEs struggling to balance competing needs between investing to maintain and grow the business and investing in Human Resource departments.

- Access to training for existing workers in both managerial and non-managerial positions. Training needs include sensitizing existing employees to how they can help integrate incoming workers, leadership training for managers and supervisors and general training to update skills.

- Community integration and access to affordable housing for immigrants and temporary foreign workers to help improve retention.

## 2. Perception of immigrant workers as a source of labour by manufacturing SMEs in non-gateway locations

### • **Higher management and Human Resources**

- Employers see immigrant workers as a vital and competent part of the workforce and want to make them feel welcomed and part of the team.

### • **Supervisors and or colleagues: The perspectives of these individuals depend on several factors**

- Level of interaction with immigrants or diversity (friends vs. acquaintances/colleagues with superficial interactions).



- Past positive or negative interactions with immigrants and diversity.
- Personal life experiences that may represent similar struggles as those faced by newly arrived immigrants.
- The ability to empathize with the struggles immigrant workers face.
- Perception of employer's motives for hiring immigrant or temporary foreign workers.

### 3. Immigrants' additional support needs.

- Access to structured onboarding programs to help understand the work processes and evaluation criteria.
- Access to additional language training classes beyond francization classes, and opportunities to practice conversing and using local expressions.
- Additional training and learning opportunities in and outside of the workplace (ex.: learning how to use a digital machine or returning to school to pursue a degree/certificate aligned with their work).
- Recognition of education credentials and previous professional experience.
- Financial and legal support for the immigration process of immediate family members of temporary foreign workers.
- Building relationships with colleagues in the workplace. Immigrant workers, particularly those on a temporary visa, are less likely to raise concerns about collegial relationships in the workplace with supervisors or Human Resource personnel.
- Developing friendships with people in the community.

- Access to basic information about how the local culture and processes work (ex.: how to get a driver's license, how to buy a house, tax system etc.)

### 4. Manufacturing companies that are agile and resilient offer:

- A culture of continuous development that offers workers, managerial and non-managerial, various forms of training such as on-the-job training, formal training, academic training and organizational development. This will be especially important as we enter an era where artificial intelligence will inevitably impact manufacturing processes and jobs.
- A stimulating work environment that provides workers with the opportunity to learn and collaborate with colleagues.
- A management style that promotes: communication, teamwork, innovation and empathy. This is particularly important for developing non-Francophone immigrants' language proficiency because the workplace is where they spend most of their time and where they have the most opportunities to practice the language.
- An immigrant integration support system to help: acquire equivalences for degrees, recognition of education credentials that are not part of a regulated order, recognition of previous professional experience and career development planning.
- A structured onboarding program that prepares and trains both existing and incoming staff.
- Structured onboarding program that prepares existing staff for the arrival of new workers.

- Structured onboarding program that begins preparing new workers for integration before their first day on the job.
- A long-term strategic business plan that is shared regularly with staff (annually and/or quarterly).
- Horizontal organization chart that promotes communication and breaks down silos across departments.





# Summary of the 7 Steps to Effectively Integrate Immigrant Workers

## 1. Prepare an onboarding action plan

- Build partnerships in the community
- Prepare and share your strategic business plan
- Work on your company culture and branding
- Promote a continuous development work environment
- Consider factors that make up 'good quality work'
- Audit and optimize the physical layout, communication methods and content.

## 2. Advertise and recruit strategically

- Advertise the position and promote your organization's best assets
- Cast a wide net for recruitment
- Interview strategically

## 3. Prior to day 1

- Prepare existing staff
- Prepare newly hired incoming staff

## 4. Develop an effective orientation program

- Have a workplace orientation program
- Have a job orientation program in place

## 5. Encourage managerial support

- Equip managers and supervisors with orientation tools
- Promote managerial communication
- Support the workflow

## 6. Follow up and invest to retain workers

- Schedule regular check-ins
- Support immigration paperwork and social integration
- Invest in career development, training and the organization

## 7. Assess, tweak and repeat

- Assess the onboarding experience
- Consider marketing tools and automation

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