

The crisis facing internationally trained women engineers in Canada

NIGHTMARE REALITY

Women professionals who migrate to Canada enter with dreams of finding a good job in their field (Fursova, 2013; Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario [PEPSO], 2012). Unfortunately, for 86 percent of internationally trained engineers (ITEs) who are women, this dream has turned into a nightmare. This means that only 14 percent of women ITEs find a job in their field in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). Engineers Canada estimates that over 90,000 jobs will be available through retirement, attrition, and company growth over the next ten years (Engineers Canada, 2015). Canada advertises widely for skilled immigrants with high personal capital (skills, experience, and education), and, according to prevailing knowledge, this should be enough to get ITEs into good careers in engineering. So people enter Canada hoping to find a new homeland, but instead find a hostile land where their skills and experience do not help them land a good job.

Engineering is a highly gendered field and women entering engineering have to deal with sexism, systemic discrimination, and workplace inequality (Calnan & Valiquette, 2015; Ranson, 2005). Women's skill sets are devalued (England, 1992), and their responsibilities within social reproduction are considered by male employers to overshadow the job, which affects hiring and promotion. Women ITEs have to deal with the same systemic gendered discrimination as Canadian-trained women, but they also have to deal with the reluctance of Canadian employers to accept their foreign credentials and experience; racism; the lack of a peer or social network; and a lack of understanding of Canadian business mores (PEPSO, 2012; Expert Roundtable on Immigration, 2012).

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RECOGNIZING CREDENTIALS

Employers in both large and small businesses state that there is a shortage of people with the right skills to fill their vacancies (Engineers Canada, 2015; Ontario Society of Professional Engineers [OSPE], 2015; Expert Roundtable on Immigration, 2012). Employers want to hire people who can start immediately with a good knowledge of the demands of the job and who have high personal capital, which is precisely what the Canadian state screens for when selecting immigrants. However, in the social construction of the marketplace in Canada, there are numerous “understood” methods of assessing credentials, human potential, and hiring methodologies that new immigrants find very hard to negotiate without prior knowledge or help. As a result, their high personal capital in their originating country does not translate well into the Canadian workforce (Gottfried, 2013; Salaff & Greve, 2006).

Organizations such as Engineers Canada and the provincial organizations that represent engineers in training and professional engineers, federal and provincial levels of government, NGOs that support immigrants, immigrant organizations, business leaders, and academic institutions are researching this employment gap from both the demand side and the supply side. Problems on the demand side (racism, credentialism, the highly gendered atmosphere for women) are still not completely accepted by engineering companies. On the supply

side, getting credentials assessed and recognized is the number one concern of immigrants (Foster, 2011). The Foreign Credential Recognition Program can be accessed from outside Canada and completed before prospective migrants enter the country. This helps women, who tend to want to settle the family into the new country before looking for a job for themselves, and because completing the education credential assessment (ECA) program can take up to a year, it potentially could help them avoid the stigma of having been “out of the field too long” (Fursova, 2013; PEPSO, 2012).

Another area of concern for immigrant engineers is getting the first job. Engineers Canada states that 80 percent of ITEs fail to get past the first stage of the hiring process because Canadian degrees, Canadian language skills, and Canadian work experience are preferred and foreign experience and education are considered as other and different, and employers frequently have problems assessing foreign degrees compared with Canadian degrees (Expert Roundtable on Immigration, 2012; PEPSO, 2012). Organizations such as Prepare for Canada.com assist prospective immigrants and suggest that prospective ITEs look to less popular locations for work, such as northern Ontario or other northern locales. In addition, many vacancies are in the middle ranks, right where the majority of ITEs fit; but Canadian employers hesitate to bring in ITEs at the middle-management level, especially women, until they are sure they will “fit” into the workplace culture and they have the relevant knowledge and skills. Another major area of concern for women engineers is the lack of support within companies. Engineers Canada and each of the provincial overseeing bodies have recognized this problem and have recently formed “working

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groups” to support women in engineering, which are focused on both mentoring new female engineers and retaining experienced female engineers.

Government-supported internships have proven to be a successful method of integrating ITEs, who can access paid internships administered through recruitment companies such as Career Edge in Ontario, a not-for-profit social enterprise that has managed over 9,200 paid internships across Canada since 1996 (www.prepareforcanada.com, 2016; www.careeredge.ca). Eighty percent of ITEs who are accepted into internship programs are hired by the company in which they intern (Engineers Canada, 2015).

WASTED POTENTIAL

The employment figures for women ITEs in Canada are appalling. Immigration procedures, which screen for immigrants with high personal capital, are neglecting the social construction of the marketplace in Canada. Even with an ECA, foreign credentials when compared with Canadian degrees are not valued by employers; work experience outside Canada is devalued as not being relevant to the Canadian marketplace; and women’s skills and abilities are further devalued in this highly gendered sector. Engineers are leaving their home country, hoping to reach the promised land. However, as long as Canada screens for “high personal capital” and does not accept that high personal capital will not ease the path for immigrants to negotiate marketplace institutions and socio-cultural attitudes, nor deal with institutional barriers to good jobs, then ITEs and other professionals will find it difficult to access those jobs.

The underutilization of professional women’s skills is of particular importance as countries vie for highly skilled immigrant workers. The most open and flexible countries will be more attractive destinations for people wanting to work in their professions permanently after migration (Iredale, 2005). This waste of

human potential is a personal catastrophe for women ITEs and causes Canada to appear, not as a homeland, but as a hostile land. 

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