

A Carswell Business Publication

## One March day in Ottawa

For one day in March, a conference room at the Novotel Hotel in Ottawa was the centre of Canada's HR universe.

The Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations (CCHRA) hosted a national forum on March 26, bringing in some of the brightest HR minds from across the country. It was a chance to network, a venue for members of provincial associations to meet face to face and, most importantly, an opportunity to brainstorm. And *Canadian HR Reporter* had a front-row seat to watch it all unfold.

The theme of this year's forum was "Integrating New Canadians into Canada and the Workplace: Maximizing Potential." There couldn't be a timelier, more important topic to address when it comes to Canada's workforce.

That's because there are four digits every HR practitioner, and every employer, needs to know: 2-0-1-1. That's the year when all of the growth in the labour force will come from immigration, according to Statistics Canada. That's the kind of deadline employers can't afford to ignore, and one the HR profession simply cannot miss.

HR professionals across the country should be buoyed by what went on in that conference room in Ottawa. The profession was speaking at a very high level, addressing arguably the most important topic employers will face in the next decade: Finding talent.

And since so much of that talent will be coming from overseas, the importance of integrating new Canadians into the workplace cannot be overstated. This is one of the biggest challenges the HR profession has ever faced — and it is preparing to meet it head on.

CCHRA is producing a white paper based on what was discussed at the forum — it will be a must-read for the profession and *Canadian HR Reporter* will cover it in detail when it is released. In his closing speech at the forum, Merrill Brinton, president of CCHRA, said he doesn't want the white paper to sit on a shelf, collecting dust. It needs to be a document that sparks action and change, a vehicle to get employers headed in the right direction because so much is at stake.

Here are a few key points I took away from my time in Ottawa:

**Alberta is still a black hole.** When it comes to labour, Alberta remains a black hole, sucking in employees from across the country. One fellow from the East Coast joked that Fort McMurray, Alta., is the third biggest city in Newfoundland



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and Labrador — reference to the fact so many workers from his province are being drawn to the oilsands. Everyone I talked to from Alberta confirmed it remains a pretty bleak scene for employers throughout Wild Rose Country.

Talent is difficult to find, hard to hold on to and it doesn't come cheap. Even well-paying, unskilled positions continue to go unfilled, and nobody sees any light at the end of the tunnel.

**Canada should try to become Alberta.** The battle for talent isn't just an intraprovincial one — it crosses international boundaries. Just as organizations position themselves as employers of choice, Canada has to position itself as a country of choice. Canada needs to be a black hole itself, sucking in talent from around the world. We aren't the only country facing a shortage, and we're competing with Britain, Australia, the United States, India, China and a host of other nations for a small pool of highly skilled workers. We can't sit back and assume talent will want to come here because we think it's such a great place to live.

Other countries are looking at Canada's point system for immigrants — the one that brings the cream of the crop here — and will undoubtedly emulate it. Therefore, we need a national branding strategy to showcase to the world how great Canada is, and we've got to reduce the amount of red tape and bureaucracy it takes to get skilled workers here.

**Exploiting geography and policies.** Canada's geography is a competitive advantage to be exploited. Yes, the winters can be daunting for immigrants from more tropical settings — a fact underscored by the snow swirling around Ottawa in March — but our proximity to the U.S. can be used to our advantage.

I hadn't been back for a week when I read the story of Arpit Guglani in the *Toronto Star*.

Bill Gates wanted to hire Guglani, a 23-year-old graduate from the University of Toronto and a native of New Delhi, to work for Microsoft in Seattle. But Gates couldn't score a visa for Guglani and lost out on hiring him.

"Other nations are benefiting from our misguided policies," Gates told a congressional hearing in Washington last month. "They are revising their immigration policies to attract highly talented students and professionals who would otherwise study, live and work in the United States for at least part of their careers."

Political attitudes in the U.S. are hurting businesses, Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, of the Washington-based Peterson Institute for International Economics, told the *Star*.

"The high-skill immigrant has been taken hostage by the whole immigration argument in this country and the backlash against border security and the illegal migrant question," he said. "It is devastating to the high-tech sectors in this country and the spin-off jobs they create."

America's loss can be Canada's gain. One conference attendee from south of the border told me she was impressed with how welcoming and open Canada seemed to be to immigrants. We need to exploit that and use it to our advantage, luring skilled immigrants who want to come to North America but can't, for one reason or another, get into the U.S.

**Canada is a country of immigrants.** It's easy to forget, especially when one's family has been here for generations, but Canada has always been a country of immigrants. Ruth Brothers, vice-president of HR at Novopharm, talked about how the Toronto-based pharmaceutical giant was set up by Leslie Dan, an immigrant from Hungary, and how the company makes diversity a priority — 53.2 per cent of the workers at Novopharm are visible minorities.

The number of great Canadian companies founded by first-generation immigrants is too numerous to list. We need to ensure we continue to attract these entrepreneurs and that the proper supports are in place to help them when they arrive.

But perhaps the most important thing I took away from the forum in Ottawa was how dedicated HR professionals are. They took time out of their busy schedules, flying and driving in from across the country, to work collectively and brainstorm ideas for problems facing the entire country. There was no talk of "this is better for me." There was a real focus on the big picture, on how HR can make things better for all organizations and all Canadians.

That's exactly the kind of thinking, co-operation and consensus building we need to solve this problem.