

Immigrants looking for a 'foot in the door'

JORDAN PRESS, Staff Writer Wednesday, September 1 st, 2004

Mansoor Ahmed looks calm for a man in the middle of an interview. He doesn't have a job and will need one soon when his savings run out. This interview is crucial.



Photo by GEORGE BESHIRI

Instructor Maria Vargas, far right, talks to a class of Canadian immigrants regarding job applications and resumes.

The 37-year-old, who just celebrated his birthday last week, is decked out in black loafers, black pants and an off-grey shirt that matches the pattern on his tie. His jacket is folded neatly over the desk next to him. He doesn't even look like he's broken a sweat when the questions come at him.

The interviewer, Jo-Anne Thomas, asks him what kind of environment he works best in, what Ahmed thinks it takes to be successful as a network manager and to give an example of an important deadline Ahmed met.

All his answers are crisp and flow easily. Thomas then asks

Ahmed what he thinks of Canada. "Canada is a good country," Ahmed says. "There are opportunities, you just have to get your foot in the door."

Once the interview is over, Ahmed shakes Thomas's hand, stands up then sits back down. Thomas said he's done a great job and now he's ready to do the real thing, which is only a day away.

Students get a chance

Ahmed is one of the students at the Dufferin-Peel District Catholic School Board adult learning centre for newcomers to Canada. The school, which has 2,000 students pass through classes each year, just finished making a move to St. Gabriel's Catholic School in Malton. Although it provides ESL and computer classes, its staple is the co-op course-- the only one of its kind in the school board-- that gives immigrants a foot in the door in the occupational area they were trained in before coming to Canada.

"The problem here is that when people come to Canada, they don't realize how difficult it is to get Canadian experience," said program coordinator Lori DeLong. "They think, 'I'm experienced and come from a good university and I have lots of skills-- I'll find a job.' But everybody has the same problem and they come to us eight months, a year later and they're just desperate.

"This is the answer to getting the Canadian experience."

In the co-op program, foreign professionals take classes on how to adjust to the Canadian workplace, how to job search and network. The classes last for eight weeks before students begin their 11-week co-op placement at a company and position in their field.

Before going for their co-op, students do Internet research on the companies they might land a job with and present their findings to their teacher.

During the unpaid placement, teachers from the centre make regular visits to the workplace to make sure everything is running smoothly. Teachers like Thomas also take calls from students when something comes up during their placement that they don't understand.

Thomas had one student call her wondering what to do because the student thought the Queen was coming to the office. The student had received a mass e-mail from a fellow employee saying they were going on a 'Queen run.' Thomas explained Queen Elizabeth wasn't coming, but ice cream from Dairy Queen would be on the way.

There's a \$15 fee for the course to cover the cost of materials. The province picks up the rest of the tab, since people who go through the co-op course get high school credits.

To get into the program, applicants must first take a written and oral test, the latter consisting of an interview designed to gauge the applicant's language skills. Each test takes about a half-hour and applicants must make minimum school board standards.

Cathy Molnar, the person who interviews candidates, said the people in the program often shouldn't be in the jobs they're currently holding.

"All of our students are overqualified for the positions we get them," she said.

Most of the students sitting in the classes in session this summer and year-round were engineers, chemists, doctors and teachers in their home country. Many come from Southeast Asia, China, Egypt and India. The average student age is 40.

There are more men than women because the men need to find a job first while the women stay home with the children, DeLong said. Often, husbands go through the program and find a job first then the wives do the same afterwards.

While the jobs they get through the program aren't up to the standards they once had, about 80 per cent of graduates find jobs within two months of leaving the program. Some get hired on full-time during their placement.

"There's almost zero chance of an immigrant finding a professional job on their own because people honestly look at their resumé and their name and they don't even call them and just throw it in the garbage," DeLong said.

"This is a whole different system of finding jobs."

Ahmed is pretty confident he'll land the position he wants. His resume includes information technology work at the University of Lahore as well as at the Internet Factory in his native Pakistan. In Canada, he's spent time as an instructor at St. Clair College as well as had a job at DaimlerChrysler in Windsor.

With all that experience, Ahmed said he's at an advantage because he was able to save money for the dry period he's in now-- something not everybody has the luxury of doing. Others who attend classes have to take a part-time job at night to eke out a living.

Ahmed said if he lands the co-op position, which starts in October, he'll take a part-time job anywhere-- a gas station or coffee shop to name two-- to keep funds ready for his wife and their four-year-old daughter.

His big plan is to have his own company within about five years. He said if that happens, he would make sure to hire co-op students from the program.

Getting companies to hire co-op students has been the toughest part of the centre's job, DeLong said. Educating employers about the upside to hiring foreign-trained professionals has been a near-impossible task for the 10 years the program has been running, she said.

However, some companies can't stop taking students from the program. Hewlett Packard, BMO Bank of Montreal and the City of Mississauga are just some of the employers that have regularly taken on co-op students.

Since 2001, more than 80 students have gone on placement at Ingram Micro Canada, an information technology distributor based in Mississauga. Laura Simpson, the company's recruitment manager, said the quality of people they get through the program is high and some get opportunities for contract and full-time work.

"This was an opportunity for them to gain even more experience and obviously it was a good opportunity for us to work with experienced people," she said.

Sofia Amaro-Elliott got her opportunity to work full-time at the Living Arts Centre in Mississauga after she completed the co-op course three years ago. Before immigrating to Canada, she had worked in hotel management in Mexico.

Has a full-time job

After she got married and settled in Canada, she raised a family and didn't have a job with a company for nearly a decade. During those 10 years, she ran small businesses out of her home-- a daycare, a candle-making service-- just to bring in some money.

Once it came time for her to go back into the workforce, a friend who had taken the co-op program recommended Amaro-Elliott take it.

"When it came time for me to go back to the workforce, the co-op program helped me freshen up my skills and gain the confidence I needed to come back to the workforce," she said.

"The fact you are an immigrant and you do not have the contacts anymore, it's a very intimidating thing for an immigrant to start facing all those challenges. Without the help of the co-op program, I think it's much harder."

Amaro-Elliott, who now works as the assistant manager of food and beverages for the Living Arts Centre's catering operation, said that if she hadn't taken the course she would have eventually taken computer courses to upgrade her skills. Then she would have gone looking for a job.

"But it would have been harder and maybe I wouldn't be working in a place where I really wanted to work," she said.

The company Ahmed went to for his real interview is a place he really wants to work. He said the interview went well, but he'll have to wait to find out if he has his foot in the door.

For more information on the centre's programs, call the school at 905-362-0701 or visit <http://www.dpcdsb.org/coopcentre>