



Immigration: Give us your skilled

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"I don't know, maybe I sound too depressed," sighs Jon Osmann, director of operations for the Ocean Choice lobster processing plant in Souris, on the eastern tip of Prince Edward Island, as he slumps back in his chair. "I'm just a fish packer trying to get the tools and the people I need to do the job, but I can't get the workers. We look everywhere, but it's just so frustrating."

For Osmann — an Icelander who in 2005 moved to Souris, about an hour's drive east of Charlottetown, after working as a consultant for fish-processing plants in several countries — recruiting in other provinces hasn't worked, either. Ethel Macdonald, his head of human resources, shakes her head in agreement, pointing out she has gone to job fairs and posted ads in newspapers and on websites — "you name it, we've done it" — trying to get the word out. But the jobs, which pay \$9 to \$11 an hour, go begging, and Macdonald says the plant has only 480 employees, when it needs 600 to run at optimum capacity. Meanwhile, the lobsters, valuable but highly perishable, keep coming in.

Ocean Choice isn't alone. Across Canada — from booming Alberta and British Columbia to the more humble economies of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island — businesses are facing severe shortages in both skilled and unskilled labour. A survey by Alberta Human Resources and Employment indicates demand for workers there will likely outstrip supply by more than 100,000 by 2016. Meanwhile, an aging national labour force and a fertility rate far below replacement level (Statistics Canada says it stands at 1.54, compared with the replacement rate of 2.1) mean it's getting tougher to find everything from certified plumbers and pipefitters to those willing to work at more menial, lower-paying jobs, like hotel maids, construction workers, Tim Hortons clerks, and general laborers, like the ones Ocean Choice needs.

Terence Yuen, a research economist at human resources firm Watson Wyatt in Toronto, says "the Canadian population is definitely aging" and that the fastest-growing group between the 2001 and 2006 census was the 55- to 64-year-old demographic. "What we have seen is just the tip of the iceberg," Yuen adds, predicting a strong impact on the number of available workers in coming years. He estimates that Canada's annual labour-force growth rate of 1.4% will likely drop to about 0.3% over the next 20 years.

It's figures like these that make it clear to many business leaders that immigration, while not a total solution, will play an increasingly vital role in maintaining Canada's prosperity. Many, however, say our policies for admitting foreigners on either a permanent or temporary basis haven't adapted to get the people we need here when we need them. They point to long delays in processing permanent immigrants (there's a backlog of more than 800,000 applications and up to a five-year wait) and a temporary foreign-worker program that isn't nimble enough to deal with specific shortages.

Canada is "squandering an incredible opportunity to take advantage of our attractiveness as a destination," says Peter Veress, founder and president of Vermax Group, a foreign-worker recruitment agency based in Calgary. "We're one of the top destinations for immigration around the world, but the federal government has yet to bring its immigration policies in line with that reality." Instead of promoting Canada as a "land of opportunity, a nation that welcomes immigrants," Veress adds, the country is now "bogged down" in archaic policies that leave it at a competitive disadvantage to countries that snatch up skilled workers first, through streamlined processes.

Business owners are crying out for solutions, especially when high-flying economies like Alberta's are sucking up workers from other provinces. Take the hospitality and tourism industry, where businesses, especially out West, are having difficulty finding enough staffers, a troubling prospect given that the 2010 Vancouver Olympics aren't all that far away.

Bill Stewart, a vice-president at Merit Contractors Association, an Alberta-based non-profit association of firms that employ nearly 40,000 in the construction business, has seen the work-shortage crisis from both sides. "I was in Hinton earlier this summer, and when we went into a restaurant, the first thing the waitress said was that it was going to take a while to bring our order, because they were so short staffed," he recalls. "There was also a sign on the door saying that the restaurant would close at 4 p.m. that day because there was no cook available for the night shift." Stewart says he is being told by Merit's member contractors that "they are having to turn down or reschedule good-paying jobs because they can't find the workers." There's even been talk in the oilpatch that some big projects might have to be delayed. And that's bad for economic growth.

Temporary workers, brought into Canada under a tightly administered program that works efficiently, would help alleviate some pressure. Osmann, for one, says there are many countries, his native Iceland included, that know how to quickly bring in temps — and there are often as many Poles in an Icelandic fish plant as locals. The situation at Ocean Choice during the past two seasons, meanwhile, highlights just one of the many problems with Canada's immigration policy.

The company thought it had found a solution in a federal government pilot project for temporary foreign unskilled workers. Sure, it would take time and money to prove that every effort had been made to hire Canadians first — but if it meant getting the necessary help, it would be worth the thousands it would cost to recruit foreigners, including paying their return airfare and finding them suitable accommodation. In May 2006, 30 Russians and Ukrainians started working at the Souris plant on temporary foreign worker permits. They stayed on until the end of December before returning home, pockets filled with Canadian cash. Osmann says the recruits were "diligent, hard workers," and he was happy to apply for even more temporary foreigners for the 2007 lobster season. The company requested permits on behalf of 80, including 15 from northern India.

There was a glitch, however. The temporary work program that had gone relatively smoothly in 2006 turned into a disaster, thanks to what appeared to be tighter regulations on the part of federal authorities — restrictions Osmann can't quite get a fix on. "Every time we tried to find out more details, we couldn't really get a straight answer," he says. The end result was that by springtime only 14 of the 80 foreigners who were approved for work permits were actually given visas. (The number has since risen to just over 20.) The approvals also came too late — the workers didn't arrive until almost a month into the spring lobster season. Among the rejected were all the applicants from northern India, who had applied on the recommendation of a local, who is married to a woman from the same region.

Despite rejections like these, Canada is still seen as a world leader when it comes to welcoming foreigners. The question is whether the numbers we're accepting are enough — and whether we're doing the right things to attract the best, brightest and most skilled as quickly as we need them. In late 2005, Joe Volpe, then federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, suggested that Canada increase its immigration targets to 1% of the population, which would mean bringing in 320,000 annually, or roughly a 45% increase over the average level in the previous decade. The current Conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper has also said the country needs more immigrants, but has stopped short of setting specific targets. Meanwhile, the backlog of applicants appears to have only grown — an estimated 500,000 of those waiting are much-needed skilled workers.

As it stands, says Diana MacKay, assistant director of education and learning for the Conference Board of Canada, immigration is now responsible for about half of Canada's population growth, and 70% of our labour-market growth. (Compare that with the middle decades of the past century, when the baby boom was in full swing and immigration accounted for only one-fifth of the country's population increases.) However, despite the key role immigration could play in keeping our economy vital, the Conference Board argues we are not using it to full advantage. "Our immigrant selection processes are not ensuring that the best qualified or most needy applicants are selected with all possible speed," it noted in a 2004–05 report.

Part of the problem, according to the Conference Board, is "our inability or unwillingness to prioritize" our three classes of immigrants: family, under which spouses and immediate family members are reunited; refugee, part of humanitarian efforts to give those threatened by war and political turmoil safe haven; and the economic class, in which immigrants are chosen based on their education or work skills. "Given the crucial importance of skilled and entrepreneurial immigrants to our economy," says MacKay, "a strong case can be made for giving first priority to the economic class."

Mackay says Canada's current point system for assessing the suitability of immigrants falls short of adapting to specific labour shortages — or to the needs of specific regions. It also tends to favour family reunification over economic necessity, and education (university degrees) over specific skills or training.

Les Linklater, director general of Canada's Immigration Branch, says the federal government has "been making significant changes" to immigration policy to make it more flexible and responsive to economic needs and population trends. While he acknowledges more can be done to streamline the process, he points to the success of recent Provincial Nominee Programs — agreements between the feds and individual provinces that allow them to nominate particular types of workers to fill specific labour shortages. Earlier this year, Ottawa also lengthened the time workers can stay on a temporary visa, to two years from one. As well, workers with particular skills — like those with journeyman certificates in plumbing or pipefitting — can apply for fast-track landed-immigrant status while in Canada on a short-term visa, rather than having to apply from abroad.

The government has also made it easier to bring in unskilled and low-skilled workers into regions where shortages are severe. It's a pilot project, modelled on an existing seasonal program for agricultural workers, whereby foreigners come to pick fruit or vegetables during harvest.

This special program allowed Ocean Choice to first bring in the Russian and Ukrainians for what Osmann describes as "good, honest," but, admittedly, hard work. The jobs are considered seasonal, but that "season" has actually stretched to about eight months, as the plant brings in lobsters from other locations, including Maine, which has a different harvest. (Around P.E.I., there's a spring season, which starts on May 1 and ends in June, and a smaller fall one from mid-August to the end of September.) Given that the workday isn't over until the full catch is completely processed, employees can often work 60-hour weeks, including Saturdays; it's not unusual for a worker to put in 2,000 hours in those eight months, equivalent to a full year's work at 40 hours a week.

Still, in an area where the unemployment rate hovers around 10%, according to Statistics Canada, it has been tough to find willing locals for the jobs. Many young Islanders or their counterparts in the other Atlantic provinces have headed off to Alberta, where jobs are easy to find and the pay is better. Those who stay behind are either too old — P.E.I. has one of the oldest average ages in the country — or choose not to accept jobs at places like Ocean Choice. Why? Well, that touches on a sensitive issue. Atlantic Canadians can go on employment insurance after 14 weeks, a qualification period much shorter than in other parts of the country, which critics says can mean there's less incentive to accept longer work.

Ocean Choice president Blaine Sullivan says it's not clear why the authorities rejected the latest candidates — though it might have something to do with the fact that a few of the foreigners recruited in 2006 went AWOL once they landed at Toronto's Pearson airport. The stated reasons for the rejections, according to letters sent by the immigration officer at the Canadian Embassy in Russia, include "current job status," "personal and financial assets" and "limited employment prospects in his/her country of residence" — implying that visas would only be granted to those who had assets or family ties that would guarantee they would go home at the end of their stint. "If they had all those assets back in their home country, something that would ensure they would go back home when their time was up, why would they come here in the first place?" asks Sullivan. As for the Indian applicants, Sullivan says authorities "should have been more up front about the chances of getting temporary workers from here rather than put them through the laborious application process."

The rejection of applicants at Ocean Choice has been particularly hard for 30-year-old Gia Mzhavanadze. He's one of the Russians that came in 2006, and one of 10 temporary workers allowed to come back a second time. But he was devastated that his wife, Dali, who had been among those originally approved for a temporary permit, was rejected. The plan was for her to accompany her husband to Souris with their toddler son, but Mzhavanadze, who operated a small grocery business in Russia, is convinced she was turned down on the grounds that the family would have no reason to return home if all three were in Canada. He can't help but think that's a bit odd, given that four other foreigners now working at the plant are related.

Osmann says he is doing what he can to see if there is a way for Mzhavanadze, "an excellent employee," to stay in Canada permanently. But he isn't optimistic, given our complex immigration system. He also knows that Mzhavanadze feels isolated and lonely without his family. "He keeps telling me his heart is in Russia," Osmann says, adding he is worried that Mzhavanadze won't come back for a third season. "And that would be a real shame, to lose him."

Even if there were hope for Mzhavanadze, it could take years to deal with his application. There simply are not enough staff members at Canadian embassies around the world to handle that backlog. At the same time, says Sergio Karas, a Toronto-based immigration lawyer who chairs the Ontario Bar Association's Citizenship and Immigration Section, there currently is no way of sorting through applications on file to see if any belong to people whose education or skills are most needed. "Canadians shouldn't be afraid to prioritize which applicants are most desirable, not simply process them as if they are all equal," he says.

Recruiters such as Chris Slade of Toronto-based Slade Consulting Group envy their counterparts in the U.K. and Australia. "Often, at job recruiting fairs held to attract skilled workers, the Brits and the Australians will have their immigration officials there, too," he says. Another concern is that employers here tend to put too much emphasis on "Canadian work experience" — and they don't adequately recognize foreign credentials and employment history. The Conference Board says this costs immigrants up to \$5 billion annually in unemployment and underemployment, with the greatest losses borne by those settling in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, which have the greatest concentration of newcomers. The trick is to develop programs that better integrate them into the social fabric, especially in smaller communities and in places like the Prairies or Atlantic Canada, according to the Conference Board's MacKay.

A suggestion for encouraging immigrants to settle outside the main urban centres is to target a particular group to become the nucleus of a new community in a smaller town, so that they have a natural support system. Another is to more carefully screen potential immigrants through various Provincial Nominee Programs. For example, while the PNPs of Alberta and Ontario are more geared toward attracting specific skills — for example, construction workers or health-care professionals — those of Manitoba and Saskatchewan (both trying to stem population declines) focus more on nominating immigrants who appear most willing to settle there. Their PNPs stress connections to family members or friends who already have roots, and the evidence suggests some success. For instance, in 2005 Manitoba boosted immigration to 8,000, the highest level in 15 years. Another idea — one that would especially suit Atlantic Canada, whose 15 post-secondary educational institutions receive many foreigners — is to invite international students to stay on as immigrants.

Back at Ocean Choice's Souris plant, it's the end of a long day for Mzhavanadze and his co-workers. They're all noticeably tired. But at least there's a staff barbecue hosted by the company in appreciation of their efforts to look forward to. Sullivan acknowledges that workers like Mzhavanadze, even if technically unskilled, are valuable to the P.E.I. economy. "In the past, the provincial government has expressed concern that the future of the 600 jobs at Ocean Choice be protected," he says. "Ironically, the jobs at the plant are under threat because we actually can't find the workers to operate it at ideal capacity. And I don't see this being a problem that's going to go away anytime soon."

As the foreign workers sit around picnic table with the locals, talking about whether they would stay on if they had the chance, Mzhavanadze says he's come to appreciate the charms of Souris, despite its lack of urban bustle. "It's a nice place to settle down," he says. But the young father acknowledges it would be difficult to leave his wife and son again for so long.

One of his Island-born co-workers stands up and tells Mzhavanadze that he can't leave, echoing an Ocean Choice recruiting ad: "We need good people." It's a sentiment that equally applies to Canada as a whole, as it prepares for a future with a shrinking labour force that, realistically, can't grow without an immigration policy that really works.