



Effective Employer Engagement in Newcomer Skills Development Programs: **Findings Report**

February 2023

A joint initiative of:

triec 
Toronto Region Immigrant
Employment Council

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About TRIEC

The Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) helps employers capitalize on the skills and experience of newcomers to the Greater Toronto Area and helps newcomers secure work in their field of expertise. In partnership with corporations, individual supporters, community organizations and governments, TRIEC works to remove barriers to the labour market and to support the retention and advancement of newcomers in the workplace.

About SRDC

The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created in 1991 specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policymakers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

Acknowledgements

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The Léger Opinion team at Léger was responsible for collecting employer survey data through their online panel, LEO.

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The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of PAC members' respective organizations or the funder.

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Acronyms

BIPOC	Black, Indigenous and People of Colour
CDO	Chief Diversity Officer
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPRNW	Career Pathways for Racialized Newcomer Women
EDI	Equity, Diversity and Inclusion
HR	Human Resources
IEC	Immigrant Employment Council
IRCC	Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada
PAC	Project Advisory Committee
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SPO	Service Provider Organization
SRDC	Social Research and Demonstration Corporation
TMP	TRIEC Mentoring Partnership
TRIEC	Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council



“We need to engage the people who have the jobs — the employers. We learn a lot from employers, which helps us to share that knowledge with our clients.” [S13]

Executive Summary

Employers play a critical role in the successful labour market integration of newcomers to Canada. While employer engagement has been identified as a priority in employment-related service delivery by funders, Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) and stakeholders, there isn't sufficient, widely available knowledge on effective approaches to engage employers and practical resources to leverage more action and partnerships between SPOs and employers. Recognizing this, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) partnered with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) to address the following key research questions:

1. What are different approaches for employer engagement in newcomer-focused skills training delivery? Are there lessons on employer engagement practices in the employment services sector that support job seekers facing various barriers to employment?
2. What are some of the effective employer engagement models that facilitate labour market integration of different newcomer groups? What are key factors that facilitate effective employer engagement?

The study used a mixed-methods approach, involving a literature review and online scan, as well as surveys and interviews with SPOs and employers. There were in total 38 complete surveys and 17 in-depth interviews with service providers. All SPOs were small or medium in size and covered most regions of the country. In addition, 10 in-depth interviews and a total of 101 surveys involving employers of all sizes and sectors across Canada currently engaging with SPOs were completed.

Employer engagement approaches, benefits and challenges

- While almost all SPOs engaged with employers in the six months prior to responding to the survey, most employers do not engage with newcomer-serving SPOs. The majority of employers who responded to the survey are either not aware of how employment SPOs can help recruit hire and retain newcomers to Canada and/or do not currently engage with SPOs that serve newcomers.
- SPOs engage employers for multiple reasons. The most common reasons for engaging with employers included to obtain job opportunities for newcomers, job fairs/meet-and-greets and as guest speakers at events. More involved interactions such as collaborating on building skills development curricula with employers were less common.
- Employers who engage with newcomer-serving SPOs do so for both economic and social reasons. They use SPO recruitment and training services, receive pre-screened candidates to help meet their labour needs, which, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), can help to reduce hiring and training expenses. Employers that recognize the potential of newcomers to add value to their organization/business seek to connect with SPOs to leverage this talent. Other employers turn to SPOs to help satisfy corporate citizenship and diversity and inclusion strategies.
- SPOs and employers engage in a variety of ways, including: to connect newcomers with employers for job search (e.g., mentoring, mock/informational interviews, information sessions/guest speakers, job fairs/networking events); for newcomer work experience, advancement and related supports (e.g., post-hire support, work placements, etc.); to collaborate on program design and delivery (e.g., curricula co-development and delivery, advisory groups, feedback through surveys/interviews); for human resource and training services for employers; and to create an enabling environment for newcomer inclusion. Types of engagement vary by organization size, but less so by location.
- SPOs report that their organizations experience continued and lasting relationships and collaborations with employers and employers are hiring from their clients. For SPOs, the benefits of employer engagement include an increased number of clients finding employment, improved understanding of the labour market, and the development and implementation of new programs and/or initiatives.
- Most employers think their organization/business is successful in engaging with SPOs, as these partnerships have contributed to their organization's/business' goals by enabling them to, for example, find good candidates, increase their workplace diversity, improve their recruitment and hiring practices and increase their cultural competency.
- Despite the successes, several internal (within their organizations) and external barriers to employer engagement exist. Staff time and resource constraints, employers not knowing about SPO services and supports, lack of SPO coordination and high turnover of SPO staff are among the challenges.

Emerging practices for effective employer engagement

- **Effective initial outreach to employers involves multiple ways of connecting**, such as directly via email or phone, via social media, through sector councils and/or industry associations, events and following up on referrals from former clients or collaborators.
- **A well-informed, single point of contact within a SPO** is necessary for building consistent and cohesive relationships with employers.
- Once a relationship is established, **continuous, two-way communication between SPOs and employers is key** for building trust, ensuring responsiveness of programs to employer needs and generating benefits to newcomer clients.

- **Openness to learning about each other's priorities and needs** and setting parameters for the relationship are important. For employers, this means being transparent about where they are as an organization/business, their needs and goals, as well as being aware of the services SPOs provide, recognizing the challenges SPOs face and being open to hiring newcomers. For SPOs, openness to learning means asking the right questions and understanding and responding to employers' specific needs and ways of working.
- **Having a strategy for employer engagement built around a clear business case and evidence of successes**, as opposed to making one-off requests of employers, helps SPOs to establish and sustain relationships with employers that produce win-win-win situations for them, employers and newcomers.
- **Working with a diverse range of employers can help meet the diverse needs of newcomer clients.** Employers of different sizes and industries may fit the various interests, preferences, and experience levels of newcomer client groups, but also require services and supports tailored to their specific needs and interests.



Introduction

Given an aging population and persistently low birth rates, newcomers are critical for Canada's workforce. Immigration is set to account for all of Canada's net labour force growth over the next two decades (McArthur-Gupta, El-Assal & Bajwa, 2019). In 2022, Canada welcomed a record number of 431,645 new permanent residents (IRCC, 2023). By 2025, the federal government aims to grow this number to half a million newcomers attracted to different regions of the country, including small and rural communities.

At the same time, the literature has consistently shown that newcomers to Canada face multiple employment barriers. Newcomers often do not have Canadian professional connections that are crucial for entering the labour market (World Education Services, 2019). Employers may not accept newcomers' international credentials or work experience (Pandey and Townsend, 2017). In fact, Employment and Social Development Canada stated that the most significant challenge experienced by newcomers looking for employment was a lack of Canadian work experience. In addition, newcomers may face racism and discrimination during the recruitment stages and in the workplace (Gurr & Park, 2021). As a result,

newcomers experience persistently higher unemployment rates compared to workers born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2023) and are more likely to work in jobs below their qualifications (Dean, 2018). It is also noted that highly educated newcomers earn less than their Canadian-born counterparts (Agopsowicz & Billy-Ochieng, 2019). The earnings gap is especially large for newcomers with a first language other than English (Magesan, 2017) and racialized newcomer women (Momani et al., 2021).

Programs to aid newcomers in finding employment exist throughout Canada. These programs, however, may not meet diverse needs. Some newcomers may leave the programs unprepared for the Canadian labour market. They may lack essential skills necessary for a job and understanding of the Canadian workplace culture (Social Capital Partners and Deloitte, 2014). Additionally, employment-related services are primarily positioned to help those seeking entry-level positions, which do not serve highly skilled newcomers well. Further, while employers play a critical role in moving newcomers from unemployment or underemployment into

commensurate work, newcomer skills development programs tend to emphasize the employability of the individual. Effective engagement between service providing organizations (SPOs) and employers can assist newcomer job seekers with barriers to employment and help employers meet their labour needs.

Employer engagement has been identified again and again as a key component of successful employment programs (see for example, Colechin et al., 2017; Armstrong, 2018; Pollack, 2012). Engaging employers in newcomer skills development can allow for targeting of specific skills areas that employers need, and newcomers may need help with. This avoids unnecessary and time-consuming general skills training that may not be required for performing a job. However, employer engagement in the context of newcomer-serving SPOs is not well understood as related studies are limited (Enchautegui, 2015; Spaulding & Blount, 2018).

With service delivery improvement funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) and the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) partnered to identify emerging practices (see Box 1) in employer engagement in newcomer skills training delivery and develop resources to help strengthen collaboration between SPOs and employers. At each stage of research, analysis, tool development and knowledge mobilization, the project has engaged and will continue to collaborate with a national network of immigrant employment councils (IECs), SPOs and employers.

This report aims to document emerging practices in employer engagement to help inform partnership-building and stakeholder management strategies, as well as tools for effective SPO-employer engagement. Specifically, this report addresses the following key research questions:

1. What are different approaches for employer engagement in newcomer-focused skills training delivery? Are there lessons on employer engagement practices in the employment services sector that support job

seekers facing various barriers to employment?

2. What are some of the effective employer engagement models that facilitate labour market integration of different newcomer groups? What are key factors that facilitate effective employer engagement?

Box 1. What is an emerging practice?

For the purposes of this research, the main criteria for **emerging practices** are as follows:

1. Informed by a review of grey and academic literature on employer engagement
2. Described as (potentially) successful, based on self-reported measures, by SPOs and/or employers participating in surveys and interviews, or the project advisory committee
3. Describe ways and conditions in which the practice is important and expected to lead to benefits
4. Do not require resources that are rarely available in the settlement sector context



Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to better understand emerging practices in SPO-employer engagement in newcomer skills development programming. The research draws from a desk-based review, as well as surveys and interviews. The literature review involved searching electronic databases available through Scopus, EBSCO and Google Scholar, using key words related to employer engagement, skills training and newcomers. It also relied on key grey literature, such as Urban Institute reports (Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015; Enchautegui, 2015), and an online scan of SPO websites to identify characteristics of existing employment-related programs for newcomers.

Primary data was collected through surveys and interviews of both SPOs and employers and inputs from a Project Advisory Committee.¹ The PAC is made up of IEC, SPO and employer representatives from across Canada, varying in size, location, reach, industries and sectors. See Annex A for more details about PAC membership.

Convenience sampling was used for the recruitment of SPOs and employers for the survey and

interviews. Recruitment of SPO and employer research participants was done on a rolling basis from May to September 2022. The majority of research participants for SPO surveys or interviews and employer interviews were recruited through direct outreach. This included reaching out to:

- Employment-related SPOs with publicly available contact information
- TRIEC's SPO and employer partners, such as connections through TRIEC Mentoring Partnership (TMP) and Professional Immigrant Networks (or PINs)
- IECs in different regions across Canada — including Halifax Partnership, Immiploy, IEC-British Columbia, Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council, Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Council, the New Brunswick Multicultural Council, Niagara Workforce Planning Board and Hire Immigrants Ottawa² — to ask to connect with their SPO and employer partners

- PAC members to either take part in the data collection or connect with the appropriate person or organization partners
- Referrals from individuals connected by TRIEC staff, the SRDC team and research participants (i.e., snowball approach).

In addition, public outreach was used to recruit participants. This involved posting calls for research participants on TRIEC's website and social media pages (LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook). The information for study recruitment was also shared with association networks, such as OCASI and CERIC Career Developer Network, and posted on Settlenet.org.

The Léger Opinion team at Léger, a Canadian-owned market research and analytics firm, was commissioned by TRIEC to administer the survey of employers to its online panel (LEO). With over 400,000 members, Léger has the largest proprietary panel in Canada. More than 70% of Léger's panel was recruited through its own call centre. To maintain quality standards, Léger incorporates validation techniques at the beginning stages of the panel member registration process. Léger has more than 200 profiling questions on its panel, to help target recruitment. Business influencers and decision makers are tagged on the panel. In addition to using the LEO panel, TRIEC led direct and public outreach efforts to employers.

Survey and Interviews with SPOs

An online survey of SPOs, consisting of both closed- and open-ended questions, was conducted to gather information about employer engagement processes, issues, challenges and successful practices. The survey was available on SurveyMonkey between May 24, 2022 and August 12, 2022. It included screening questions to ensure that participants met the following eligibility criteria: currently working at an employment SPO that serves newcomers only or newcomers as one of its client groups; their organization engages with employers; and they have in-depth knowledge of employer engagement in their organization. For the screened-out individuals, the survey sought to understand why relationships with employers

ended or why organizations hadn't engaged with employers at all.

The SPO survey had a total of 72 respondents, of which 64 respondents were eligible and provide employment-related services for newcomers (either serving only newcomer clients or serving newcomers and job seekers). However, three of the respondents were not currently (within the last 6 months) engaged with employers and an additional two respondents did not have in-depth knowledge of their organization's engagement with employers, and they were, therefore, skipped to the end of the survey. The SPO survey also had many missing observations and one invalid respondent. In total, there were 38 complete SPO surveys. Where SPOs have multiple programs that engage with employers separately, the survey was completed by more than one representative of the organization.

In-depth interviews with 17 service providers were conducted to further explore different approaches to employer engagement, challenges and needs, perceived successes and facilitating factors. The interviews were held between June 28, 2022 and September 29, 2022. All SPOs who took part in interviews with TRIEC staff also completed the survey before the interview, except for two additional interviewees identified through direct outreach efforts. Annex B provides details on service providers interviewed as part of the study. All service providers represented small and medium organizations and covered most regions of the country (8 from Central Canada, 4 from the Prairie provinces, 3 from Atlantic Canada and 2 from the West Coast).

Survey and Interviews with Employers

A survey of employers targeted decision makers and human resource (HR) managers in organizations of all sizes, spanning different industries across Canada (excluding Quebec,³ where IRCC does not fund service providers). The survey included screening questions to ensure participants entering the main survey were involved in HR-related decision making and/or building relationships with external organizations, their organization/business engages with employment SPOs that serve newcomers only or newcomers as

one of their client groups, and they have in-depth knowledge regarding engaging SPOs at their organization/business. Through open- and closed-ended questions, the survey sought information similar to what was covered by the SPO survey, but from the perspective of employers.

The employer survey was live between June 9, 2022 and July 21, 2022. As noted above, business influencers and decision makers are tagged in the LEO panel. These individuals were previously vetted through Léger's recruitment process. Screening questions specific to this project were also re-asked to confirm the eligibility of individuals. TRIEC worked with Léger Opinion to consistently monitor the responses from the research panel to ensure quality of responses. More specifically, responses to open-ended questions were reviewed and survey respondents with unintelligible answers or questionable eligibility were removed. To ensure only one respondent from each organization, any duplicates from the same organization with the same location were also removed from the final sample. Further, respondents who did not pass other data quality checks were also removed. A total of 101 survey completes from respondents that currently (in the previous 6 months) engage with newcomer-serving employment SPOs were obtained.

At the end of the survey administered by Léger Opinion, eligible participants who completed the main survey were asked to express interest to participate in a follow-up interview with a member of staff at TRIEC. Only two of ten employer interview participants were sourced from the LEO panel. All other employer interviewees were recruited by TRIEC staff through cold calls/emails, referrals, social media posts and TRIEC's website. The employer interviews were conducted between June 16, 2022 and September 29, 2022. See Annex B for more details.

Challenges and Limitations

There were some methodological limitations and challenges within this research that require consideration, as discussed below.

1. There are no agreed definitions of what

employer engagement means or a clear conceptual framework of what it involves. While some characterizations exist (see for example Cooper et al., 2008; Van Berkel et al., 2017; Enchautegui, 2015), they were found to be too vague or not set within the right context to be useful to guide this study. Meanings were, therefore, constructed as knowledge was acquired through the data collection.

2. Since a non-random sampling approach was taken (and it was not possible to apply sampling weights to correct for differential probabilities of selection), the sample of employers and SPOs is not statistically representative of the population; therefore, study results are not generalizable outside of the sample. Nevertheless, the samples are useful for gathering insights about different approaches to employer engagement, lessons on employer engagement practices, as well as perceived successes and ways to facilitate effective employer engagement between employers and SPOs of different sizes, locations and sectors/industries, where possible.
3. There were several recruitment challenges. Because the recruitment activities primarily took place over the summer months and with the COVID-19 pandemic ongoing, many potential research participants were unavailable due to vacation or health issues. The response rate was low for cold calls. In general, to recruit one research participant for survey or interview, TRIEC staff had to hold a few meetings to explain the research project and find the most appropriate person to participate in the study. Some potential research participants were eligible for the study but could not participate because of limited time and other priorities. Recruiting employer research participants by TRIEC staff was particularly difficult. One reason for this being that some of TRIEC's existing employer partners did not engage with newcomer-serving SPOs outside of TMP and felt they were not sufficiently knowledgeable to contribute meaningfully to the research. Although efforts were put into recruiting a diverse sample of employer participants, it was not possible to

recruit any employers from British Columbia for interviews. Due to the small sample sizes from different regions, the findings may not be representative within the regions. Nevertheless, through the course of interviewing with SPOs and employers, the same themes were observed repeatedly, so the existing samples are believed to capture the essential insights on employer engagement.

differently for different newcomer groups, such as racialized immigrant women, newcomer youth and refugees. The interview guides attempted to get select information for this analysis from SPOs, based on their experiences. However, detailed accounts on differential effects on newcomers of different social identities from employer engagement on any skill development programs were not provided by interviewees.

4. Self-selection bias may be a concern as the eligibility criteria was based on self-assessment. Many research participants for interviews and SPO surveys were current SPO and employer partners of TRIEC, SRDC, IECs and PAC organizations. SPOs and employer participants who were interested and available for the study and had positive experiences to share may have been more likely to participate. Further, the research relied on SPOs' and employers' own assessments of successes and challenges. Rigorous independent evaluations of SPO-employer partnerships were out of scope of this study.
5. Unlike the employer survey, there were several missing observations throughout the SPO survey. In some cases, respondents started but did not complete the survey. As a result, the final SPO sample was too small for disaggregated analysis by factors such as location and size. Detailed analysis of employer-SPO engagement within specific industries was also not possible. In this report, the sample size ranges for the descriptive statistics are noted.
6. Newcomer clients of SPOs were not directly engaged in this study. Perspectives on the successes and challenges of SPO-employer engagement for newcomer skills development were collected only from SPOs and employers. However, some interviewees were themselves immigrants to Canada.
7. Recognizing the importance of Gender-Based Analysis Plus, the research initially set out to understand how employer engagement and skills development practices may work



Key Findings

Current Approaches to Employer Engagement by Newcomer-Serving SPOs

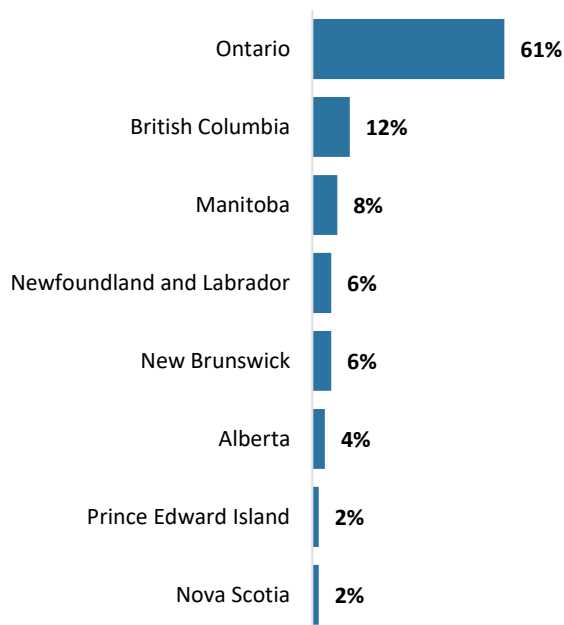
Profile of SPOs engaging with employers

The majority of SPOs who responded to the survey⁴ provide employment-related services, such as employment counselling, job search, job placements, skills development, mentoring and networking (93.0%). Of those who provide employment-related services, 63.6% of SPOs serve newcomers to Canada in addition to other groups of job seekers, while 33.3% serve only newcomers to Canada, and only 3% do not serve newcomers to Canada.

Of those SPOs who answered the survey and provide employment-related services to newcomers, the vast majority (95.2%) had engaged with employers in the six months prior to responding to the survey. These SPOs are primarily located in Ontario (60.8%), followed by British Columbia (11.8%), and Manitoba (7.8%). The remaining provinces and territories each make up about 6% or less of the sample (see Figure 1). The SPOs are primarily small (55.3% have fewer than 100 employees) and medium (42.6% have between

100 and 499 employees) sized, with only 2.1% of large (500 or more employees) SPOs among the respondents.

Figure 1. SPO location (n=51)



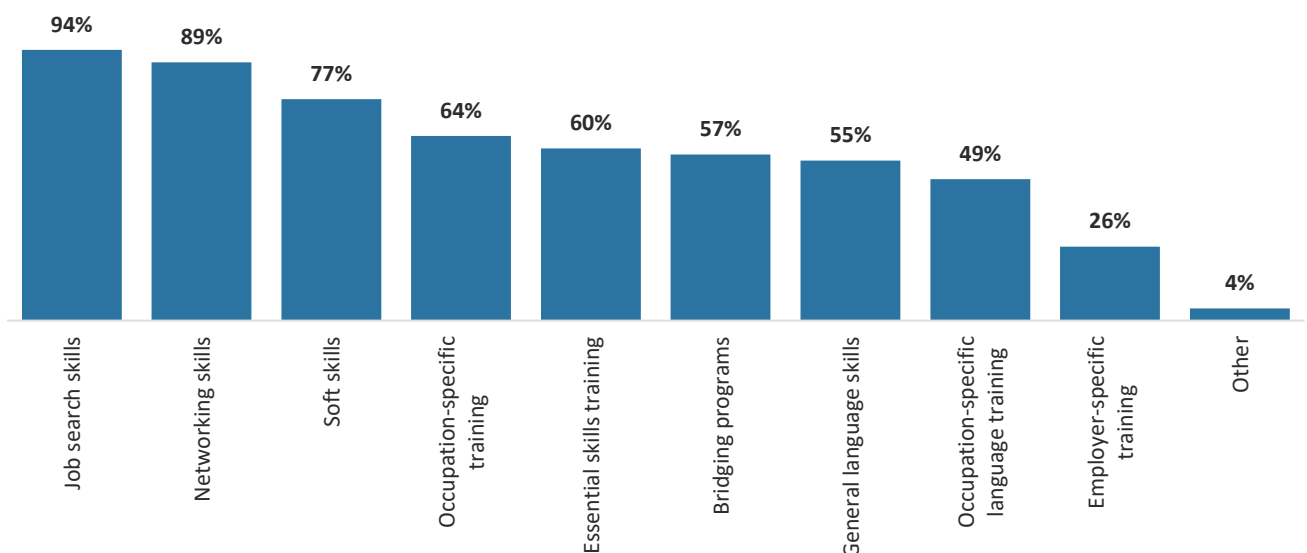
The COVID-19 pandemic does not appear to have affected the number of newcomers that SPOs served. For instance, 68.1% of SPOs served, on average, over 100 newcomers monthly before the pandemic compared to 72.3% of SPOs afterwards. About 17.0% and 12.8% of SPOs served, on average, 50-99 newcomers a month prior to and after the pandemic, respectively. Only 8.5% of SPOs served, on average, fewer than 20 newcomers a month before the pandemic and this percentage decreased to 4.3% afterwards.

SPOs provide a wide array of skills development services to newcomers, as presented in Figure 2. The most common service provided is job search, resume writing and interviewing skills (93.6%), followed by networking skills (i.e., skills for building professional connections) (89.4%), soft skills training, such as communication, time-management and teamwork (76.6%), occupation-specific training (63.8%), essential skills training, such as computer skills and digital literacy (59.6%), bridging programs for newcomers with international education and experience (57.4%), general language skills training (55.3%), occupation-specific language training (48.9%), and employer specific training (25.5%). Based on examples provided by SPO interviewees, skills development services are designed for newcomers in a mix of occupations and industries, including IT

professionals, engineering, manufacturing, skilled trades (e.g., plumbers, electricians, construction workers), healthcare (nursing, long-term care), business administration, accounting, early childhood education and hospitality. Besides skills training, SPOs also provide complementary employment-related supports such as translation and interpretation services, assistance with recertification in a regulated profession and pre-arrival services.

SPOs provide both non-targeted as well as tailored skills development services to meet the needs of various groups of newcomers. Most SPOs who took the survey responded that their services are specifically targeted to meet the needs of highly skilled newcomers (57.4%), refugees (48.9%), newcomer women (36.2%), and racialized newcomer women (25.5%). Interviewees also spoke of employment-related programs specifically developed for youth, as well as newcomers with limited education and English language skills. Slightly more than one third of SPOs indicated that all their skills development services were available to all eligible newcomers (34.0%) and were not targeted. Additionally, some SPO interviewees mentioned that they serve all newcomers, including refugee claimants, international students and their dependents.

Figure 2. Skills development services provided by SPOs to newcomers (n=47)



Profile of employers engaging with newcomer-serving SPOs

In Canada, employer engagement with employment SPOs who provide services for newcomers varies from not at all (employers unaware and/or not currently engaging with SPOs) to strong working relationships between employers and SPOs. While employers can make important contributions to employment programs, in practice, they are often not engaged with newcomer-serving SPOs. As shown in Table 1, most employers who responded to the survey are either not aware of how employment SPOs can help recruit, hire and retain newcomers to Canada (71%) and/or do not currently engage with SPOs that serve newcomers (74%).

The 101 employers⁵ that responded to the survey and that currently (in the previous 6 months) engage with employment SPOs serving newcomers are primarily located in Ontario (53.5%), followed by Alberta (15.8%), and British Columbia (11.9%). The remaining provinces each make up 3% or less

of the sample with about 5% of employers operating in multiple provinces and 2% operating nationally. As shown in Table 2 below, the employers in the sample are primarily for profit (70%), with 23% in the non-profit sector and the remaining 7% in the public sector. They are a mix of small (less than 100 paid employees, 36%), medium (100-499 paid employees, 28%), and large firms (500 or more paid employees, 37%) and in many different industries (as presented in Figure 3) and they (the office of the respondent) are primarily located in larger urban localities of 100,000 people or more (60% of respondents). The smaller the locality, the fewer the employers who responded to the survey and engage with SPOs, as shown in Figure 4. It is not always the case that larger firms are those located in larger localities although there is a positive correlation (of 0.3497) between the two.

Table 1. Employer awareness of SPOs (n=1,117)

		Share	Sample Size
Employers' knowledge of SPOs' strategies to recruit and retain newcomers	Yes	29%	328
	No	71%	789
Employers currently engaging with SPOs that serve newcomers	Yes	10%	117
	No	74%	827
	Don't know	15%	173

Table 2. Size and type of employer (n=101)

		Share	Sample Size
Type of organization / business	Non-profit	23%	23
	For-profit	70%	71
	Public sector	7%	7
Size of corporation	Small	36%	36
	Medium	28%	28
	Large	37%	37

Figure 3. Primary industry of employer (n=101)

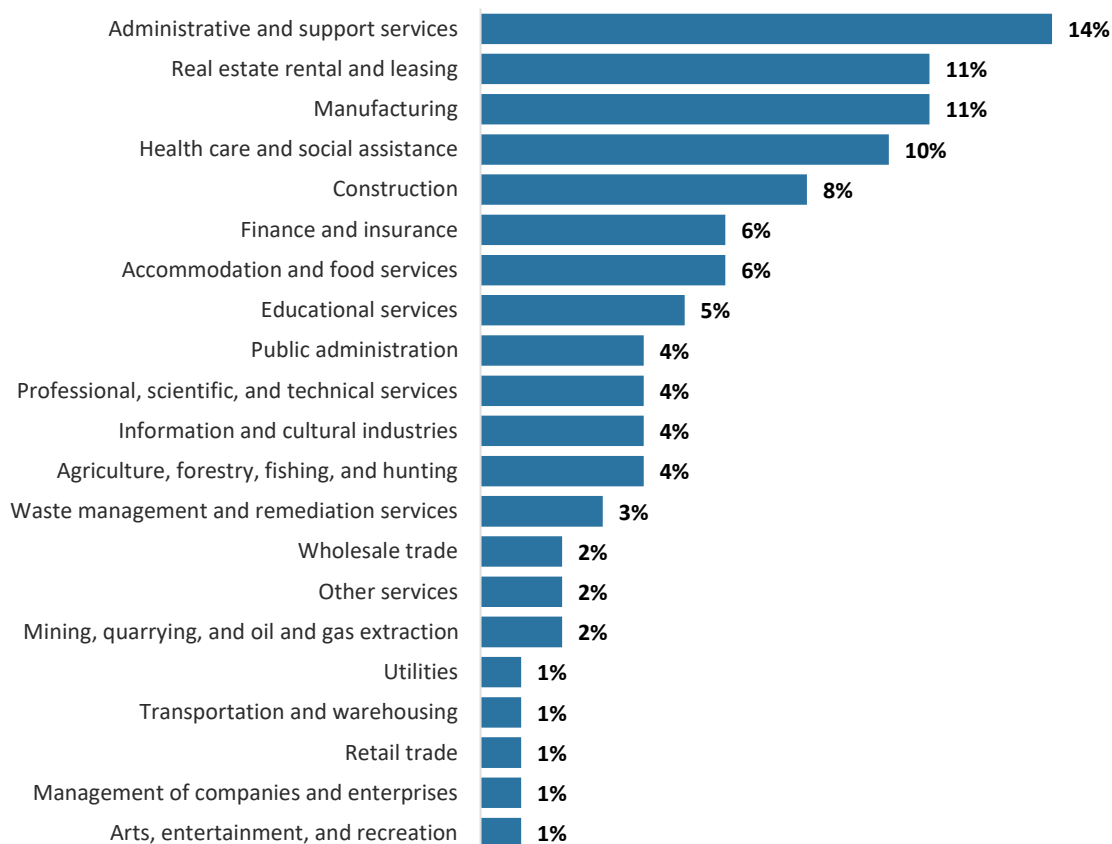
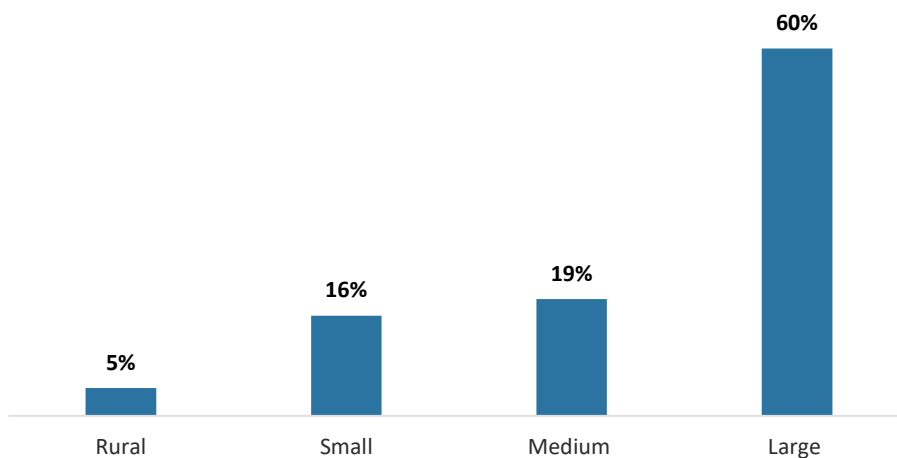


Figure 4. Locality of employer (n=101)



SPO and employer motivations for engagement

SPO motivations for employer engagement

Reasons for engaging with employers ranged greatly amongst SPOs, and many SPOs provided multiple reasons for engaging with employers.

- Employment program providers serving newcomers primarily engage employers to help program participants find or keep jobs and to help employers meet their hiring needs. The most common reasons for engaging with employers provided in the survey included obtaining job opportunities for newcomers (87.2%), participating in job fairs/meet-and-greets (83.0%) and for guest speaker events (83.0%). These responses were followed by postings on job boards (76.6%) and being able to provide mentorship opportunities (74.5%), internships/work placements (72.3%), and mock/informational interviews (70.2%) to clients.
- Engaging with employers provides SPOs access to industry-specific networks. Interactions with employers helps SPO staff to gain knowledge about the labour market, business culture and effective job search practices, which, in turn, allows them to better advise clients and facilitate job connections.
- SPOs reach out to employers to directly teach skills they may not be qualified to teach by incorporating practicum components into newcomer skills development programs. However, collaborating on building skills development curricula with employers (29.8%) is less common, according to SPO survey respondents.
- Though some SPOs look to employers to obtain financial and/or in-kind resources from them (29.8%), it is not a common reason for engagement.
- One interviewee [S8] noted that engaging with employers has become a mandatory element of funding proposals, suggesting that donor requirements are a driver for SPO engagement

with employers.

SPOs perceive that employers engage with their organizations for many different reasons, and survey respondents provided multiple such reasons. The most cited reason for employers engaging with their organization is finding good candidates (71.1%) and improving employers' recruitment and hiring processes (60.5%). Increasing workplace diversity (44.7%), reducing hiring and training expenses (42.1%), and enhancing their public image as an organization committed to diversity and inclusion (26.3%) are other reasons often cited by SPOs as reasons employers engage with them. Fewer SPOs perceive that employers engage with their organization to establish relationships with employment organizations (21.1%), in order to lower employee turnover (15.8%), to improve business performance (15.8%), or to increase their cultural competency (15.8%). Despite this, some SPOs continue to seek to engage with employers to affect systems change through awareness raising and education. Interviewees spoke of their role in influencing employer perspectives on equitable recruitment and retention practices, the benefits of a diverse workforce and the economic importance of immigrants to the labour market. Seeking feedback and information through surveys, interviews and focus groups, as well as providing training to employers on cultural competency/immigrant inclusion and in-work support programs were cited by 63.8%, 51.1% and 51.1% of SPO respondents, respectively.

Employer motivations for engaging with SPOs

Employers who engage with newcomer-serving SPOs do so for various reasons. Though motives may vary depending on institutional settings and branches of industry, the drivers of engaging with employment programs are both economic and social. On the economic front, employers seek to meet labour demand, based on job vacancies, skills requirements or other workforce and industry needs. Particularly when the labour market is tight, employers may look to SPOs to source candidates. Employers especially like that SPOs can help to screen candidates and recommend those that meet their requirements. Indeed, the most cited reason for engaging with SPOs in the employer survey was for recruitment services and support (60.4%).

Employers also identified to receive pre-screened candidates for their hiring needs (38.6%), to reduce hiring and training expenses (36.6%) and to help with connecting employees with training needs (28.7%) as reasons why organizations/businesses work with SPOs. SPOs can help employers, especially SMEs, with limited resources, to reduce costs of recruitment and training services.

“I think they save us money. That’s the main thing, because instead of going to a recruiting agency, which I have done in the past, and it’s so expensive, I think the SPO is much better to deal with. There are minimal costs, not as much as a staffing agency. But I think here, the other benefit is that these SPOs have already done most of the checklist work. So, they are checking which candidates they have on profile or on their database. Then when we request certain things, they’re already shortlisted, they’re already meeting that criterion. Of course, when we meet the candidate or interviewee, it all depends on the candidate to present themselves.” [E5]⁶

Some employers reach out to SPOs for assistance to connect with newcomers because they recognize the potential of international talent to add value to their business through diversity of thought, knowledge, experience and language skills. These assets help employers to better serve their clients and to innovate.

“I think the immigrants, or foreign talents, bring a really interesting perspective to our [work]. They help us innovate beyond regional boundaries, provincial boundaries, or even a national boundary. They bring perspectives that we have not seen before. Their mindset is a little bit more open where they can bring international experience at the tip of [their] fingers to help us understand how the world operates. More than 90% of our business is not in Canada. So, it’s very important for us to understand the industries beyond our local region. Not to mention the language that we have access to where they provide us extensive translation services or customer facing communication that otherwise we would not have access to.” [E2]

On the social front, employers have been turning to SPOs to help satisfy corporate citizenship and community values, such as diversity and inclusion.

About 43.6% of employer survey respondents who currently engage with SPOs do so for diversity and inclusion solutions for their workplace. Employers interviewed were specifically looking to increase the representation of women, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more) peoples and people with disabilities in their workforce. Newcomers were often not considered by employers as a distinct equity-seeking group within corporate equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategies. In some cases [E7, E9], EDI is seen as a brand-building strategy by employers who seek to increase awareness of their organizations among SPOs and their networks. In other cases [E1, E3, E6-E8], social impact is the central focus, with employers showing commitment to helping workers and their families settle and build long-term careers in their organizations. This is particularly true of employer representatives who are themselves immigrants and, based on personal values, have a desire to ‘give back’ to the community. Providing meaningful employment opportunities to newcomers was stated as a reason for engaging with SPOs by 56.4% of survey respondents.

Types of Employer Engagement in Programming for Newcomers

The motives for employer engagement are distinct from engagement behaviours (van Berkel et al., 2017; Bredgaard, 2017). Ingold and Stuart (2015) explain that employer engagement can be seen in terms of employer involvement or participation in a program, as well as providers' engagement with employers. It is a nonlinear continuum of activities or interactions, from passive (e.g., posting to job bulletin boards) to active (e.g., design and implementation of training) involvement between employers and providers, and from low (e.g., advisory groups) to high (e.g., mentoring) direct interaction with program participants. The types of engagement are, therefore, an indicator of the level of engagement of an employer with SPOs, with some types of activities implying stronger relationships than others.

Employers and SPOs in Canada engage in a variety of ways. Drawing from a mapping of newcomer skills development programs across the country, as well as surveys and interviews with employers and SPOs, the approaches to employer engagement are described below. The types of approaches that characterize employer engagement in workforce programs are also summarized in Table 3. Some surveyed employers who currently work with newcomer-serving SPOs are involved in multiple different types of engagement while others are involved with only one or a few.

Connecting newcomers with employers for job search

The most common method of employer engagement by SPOs involves connecting newcomers with employers. Connections are facilitated through job fair events and other networking opportunities with employers in different sectors. More than a quarter (26.7%) of surveyed employers who engage with newcomer-serving SPOs participate in job fairs/meet-and-greets organized by SPOs. One SPO interviewee described how a technology start up event allowed employers to introduce their work to potential recruits and SPOs to bring newcomer clients with

relevant backgrounds and interests. The event created an opportunity for job seekers with barriers to get into the industry and gave employers access to a talent pool that they could not have otherwise tapped into. Job fairs and networking events were found useful by SPOs not only to showcase clients but also to develop relationships with employers.

Programs to match newcomers with professional mentors in their fields is another way SPOs mediate newcomer-employer connections. For example, the TRIEC Mentoring Partnership, which is delivered by many community partners, engages with employers who support the program by encouraging their employees to become volunteer mentors to newcomers.

Organizing information sessions where guest speakers can advise newcomers about the Canadian labour market and their expectations is another way SPOs connect newcomers and employers. Employers may also participate in mock interviews or informational interviews to help prepare newcomers in their job search. Of those surveyed employers who work with SPOs, 15.8% participate in informational/mock interviews.

"We also engage them in helping us to educate and inform people. We did a session recently with HR managers, asking questions, trying to understand the culture of work for our clients. So, the room was full of newcomers, asking these HR people questions. And that helps people to understand the differences, the subtle differences. It helps them to understand what the employer is looking for, so that they can then reflect back to the employer [that] they have those skills." [S13]

Table 3. Types of employer engagement in newcomer programming

Connecting newcomers with employers for job search	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional mentoring to help newcomers develop skills and foster connections for workplace integration • Mock interviews and informational interviews with newcomer program participants • Employer participation in information sessions, including as guest speakers, to advise newcomers • Employer participation in job fairs and networking events organized by SPOs 	
Newcomer work experience, advancement and related supports	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-work (or post-hire) support programs to help with the retention and progression of newcomers • Work placements, practicums, and bridging programs to help transition newcomers into their professional fields (or related fields) • SPO provides employment support referrals for newcomers • SPO provides credential assessments and licensing information guidance 	
Employer involvement in program design and delivery	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-design of programs or curricula that meet the needs of employers and newcomer clients • Employer delivers components of training and skill development programs for newcomers • Employer sits on SPO's board of directors, advisory groups, or leadership councils • Feedback on SPO programs, including through surveys, interviews or focus groups designed to understand employer experiences and needs 	
Human resource and training services for employers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer uptake of SPO's diversity and inclusion training programs to change attitudes and raise awareness • Employer posts to SPO's job boards or reaches out for recruitment services to help fill vacancies 	
Enabling environment for newcomer inclusion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPO effects systems change for workers by advocating for reform of industry practices and public policies • Employer contributes resources, financial or in-kind, to help the SPO realize its missions 	

Newcomer work experience, advancement and related supports

SPOs and employers collaborate in ways that support newcomers to obtain professional work experience in Canada. This includes bridging programs, work placements and practicums to help newcomers gain employment in their fields of expertise (or a related field). These programs aim to help newcomers enhance their occupational-specific skills and/or soft skills, as well as obtain “Canadian experience.” SPOs also provide complementary employment supports for newcomers, such as helping with employment support referrals for newcomers, as well as supporting them with credential assessments and licensing information guidance. While these activities do not directly involve employers, they help to assuage employers who are unfamiliar with international qualifications.

In-work support programs designed to provide clients and employers with support after newcomers accept a job offer and take up their roles are rare. Traditional employer engagement initiatives focus on sectors where entry barriers are low and jobs have limited opportunities for career progression (van Berkel et al., 2017). They also tend to emphasise short-term job-match goals over long-term issues of retention and progression (van Berkel et al., 2017). There are, however, some examples of in-work support programs focused on newcomer retention and advancement. One example is TRIEC’s Career Advancement for Immigrant Professionals program, which offers a series of workshops for immigrant employees and their managers. MOSAIC and Achév support their newcomer clients during a three-month work placement in the senior care sector, and World Skills offers their Career Pathways for Racialized Newcomer Women (CPRNW) clients retention support workshops monthly. Less involved post-hire supports entail regular check-ins with employers after a newcomer they hire commences a job.

Employer involvement in program design and delivery

The literature highlights the importance of employers’ involvement in the development of

employment and skills training programs (Social Capital Partners and Deloitte, 2014). In general, employers have the best up-to-date knowledge of industry culture, hiring expectations, current market trends, and understanding of their needs for the future (Lumley-Sapanski & Callahan, 2019). Spaulding and Blount (2018) explain that co-designing and delivering employment programs between SPOs and employers may be especially pertinent to individuals experiencing significant barriers to employment, such as newcomers who may have gaps in work history or lack work experience in Canada. The authors argue that if employers are involved in program delivery, they will improve their knowledge of newcomers’ skills and abilities and can evaluate a newcomer candidate’s suitability for a job in their industry. Further, if employers provide the direction for programs, they are more likely to be engaged at several different levels (Mazenod, 2013).

Among surveyed employers who currently engage with newcomer-serving SPOs, 38.6% provide support with building skills development curricula and 44.6% deliver components of training/skills development programs to SPO clients. Programs such as Business Connections en Français (ACCES Employment) and Sewing & Fashion Design Training Program (Heritage Skills Development Centre) are designed to help newcomers find jobs that use their skills and experience and learn about the Canadian labour market. Employers and professionals in the field help to design the program curriculum or course content.

Less intensive ways in which SPOs may get employer inputs on programs is through advisory groups or leadership councils, or through feedback surveys, interviews or focus groups with employers (either as part of research projects, or program monitoring and evaluation). About 17.8% of surveyed employers who work with newcomer-serving SPOs respond to SPO requests for feedback through surveys, interviews, focus groups or other channels. These advisory supports and feedback loops allow SPOs to build their knowledge of the labour market and employer needs, which, in turn, can lead to more responsive programming.

Human resource and training services for employers

While employer engagement is seen as a key to the success of newcomer clients who access services, several SPOs also see employers as their clients. Many SPOs provide recruitment, retention and training services to employers. Besides job boards, where employers can post vacant positions, SPOs may also maintain databases of newcomer candidates that they can shortlist and send to employers. Providing job opportunities for newcomers recommended by SPOs was done by 31.7% of surveyed employers. Other types of services provided by SPOs to employers include:

- Translation or interpretation services during new staff orientation
- Support with applications under the provincial or federal nominee programs, as well as permanent residency applications
- Group trainings for staff or management teams, or one-on-one coaching, on inclusive recruitment, onboarding and retention strategies, as well as intercultural competency

Employers in larger centers are much more likely to engage with SPOs to receive pre-screened candidates and employers in smaller centers are less likely to engage with SPOs for meaningful employment opportunities for newcomers. This is likely related to the number of newcomers in different localities based on size. Employers in large centers are also more likely to engage with SPOs to connect employees with training needs.

SPO services are typically provided to employers free of charge, though providers noted having formal contractual agreements with employers for certain services, such as interpretation.

Enabling environment for newcomer inclusion

The process of employer engagement can be dynamic, with service providers both working with employers and seeking to influence and shape the context in which they operate by advocating for

reforms. For example, SPOs may attend to the structural employment barriers faced by clients by (Bailey, 2014):

- Being aware of how discrimination and institutional barriers affect clients and their employment trajectories
- Raising the awareness of employers about recognition of foreign education and work experience, as well as workplace diversity and inclusion
- Carrying out anti-discrimination awareness campaigns within communities

Several SPOs reported conducting post-hire follow ups to ensure a smooth transition for their clients and to assist with understanding of any cultural differences between the business/organization and newcomers. One SPO [S7] reported being called by an employer to understand the religious practices of a newcomer employee. The resulting conversation helped in creating a more inclusive workplace.

“So, they invited us in. And we managed to explain to them that like she's just doing that because she wants to clean herself and pray. And she needs to wash her feet as well. [...] So, when they understood that, it was really easy for them. Like one of the washrooms, they just closed it. And they added a sink in it. So, the person could go in and do it, in private without having other people seeing such things. So, it's like having the willingness, to go the extra mile to solve the problems and respect other cultures.” [S7]

Employers may provide resources to help SPOs realize their missions. This may include direct financial contributions, support towards fund raising, venues for co-hosting events and volunteering staff time.

Variation in Types of Engagement by Employer Size and Location

Employer engagement with service providers who provide employment programming for newcomers varies from not at all (employers unaware and/or not currently engaging with SPOs) to strong working relationships between employers and SPOs. According to Galley and Shirey (2014), optimal engagement will look different for organizations of different sizes. Small or microenterprises may lack HR staff to help sustain engagement. They may also have sporadic hiring needs, leading to infrequent engagement. Large employers may have larger-scale talent needs but may find one-off initiatives inefficient and prefer to develop their own long-term plans for hard-to-find talent.

Employer survey data shows that types of

engagement vary by corporation size, but less so by location. Larger employers and employers in large centers report more types of engagement. This is not surprising as larger well-established employers may have greater recruitment needs as well as more resources in terms of staff time and capacity to engage with SPOs. Further, employers in populous locations may already have diverse workforces that are welcoming of newcomers. Fewer medium size employers report in-work support programs compared to both small and large employers. More large employers report providing financial and in-kind contributions to SPOs and job opportunities to newcomers recommended by SPOs. The likelihood of providing job opportunities to newcomers recommended by SPOs increases with the size of their location.

Employer Engagement Benefits and Successes

Successful employer engagement would result in program participants finding jobs that match their education and experience (Bailey, 2014; Spaulding & Blount, 2018). Job-search skills and occupational language training help to improve employment prospects for participants, although they may still have to overcome several employment barriers to get hired. Skills development programs also help to increase participants' self-confidence and autonomy, which in turn help in settlement and integration into Canadian society (Wong, Duff & Early, 2009). According to an SRDC survey of skilled newcomers who previously used employment services, improvements in cultural knowledge, communication skills and soft skills were the top three areas of improvement credited by survey respondents to the services they had received (SRDC, 2021b).

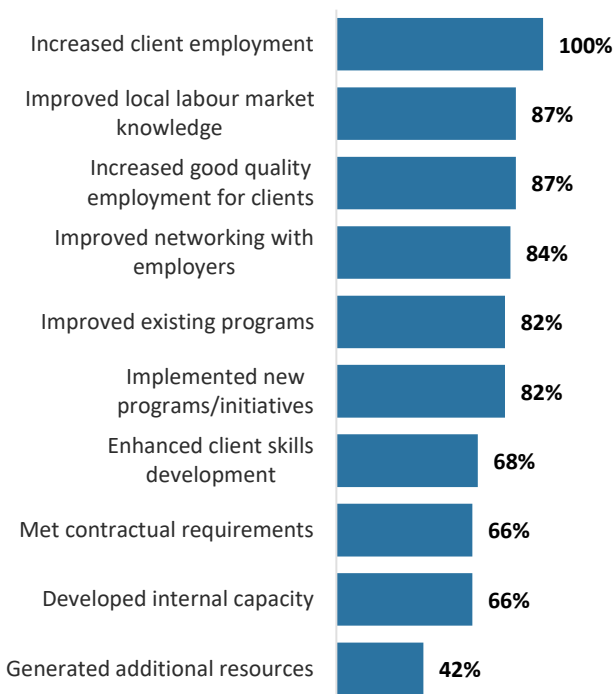
Overall, most SPOs believe that their organization is either very successful (60.5%) or successful (39.5%) at engaging with employers. No SPOs indicated that their organization's employer engagement process was unsuccessful. Many SPOs report that they experience continued and lasting relationships and collaborations with employers (44.7%) and employers are hiring from their clients (44.7%) as their major successes in employer engagement.

SPOs also identified their clients achieving their employment goals (13.2%) and developing new relationships and partnerships with employers (10.5%) as employer engagement success stories at their organization. SPOs explained how when newcomer placements prove to be highly qualified and remain with an employer, it helps to gain trust and a good reputation that contributes to sustaining the relationship.

"One local paper plant has become a key employer over the last 5 years. This employer was originally looking to improve diversity at their plant and reached out to one of our refugee employment programs. Honest communication about expectations, the type of work, work culture, and traits of a desired hire led to a very successful placement. This employer provides high quality employment and many people at this company work [there] for their entire career. This employer has continued to reach out to us on a number of occasions and has hired clients from our organization on a yearly basis. It is not a huge number of placements, but it is an engagement that has developed into a dependable, and two-way relationship that has benefited both parties and resulted in a number of high-quality placements." [SS65]

The specific benefits SPOs see as a result of their engagement with employers are presented in Figure 5. All survey respondents saw an increased number of clients who found employment (100%). Many other benefits included SPOs' improved understanding of the local labour market (86.8%), increased number of clients who found good quality employment (86.8%), developed and implemented new programs and/or initiatives (81.6%), and improved networking with employers (84.2%). SPOs also cited improving existing programs (81.6%), enhancing client skills development (68.4%), developing internal capacity, such as skills and knowledge development of staff (65.8%), meeting contractual requirements (65.8%), and generating additional resources to support program delivery (42.1%) as benefits of their employer engagement.

Figure 5. Benefits to SPOs as a result of employer engagement (*n*=38)



Likewise, most employers think their organization/business is either very successful (26.7%) or successful (71.3%) in engaging with SPOs, with only 2% of employers stating that they have been unsuccessful in doing so. Through this

engagement, almost all employers (99.0%) report that SPOs have contributed to their organization's/business' goals, including by enabling them to find good candidates (56.4%), increase their workplace diversity (37.6%), and improve their recruitment and hiring practices (35.6%). See Figure 6 for more details.

Figure 6. SPO contributions to employers' goals (*n*=101)



Large employers are more likely to report increased workplace diversity and increased cultural competency as contributions of their engagement with SPOs. Larger employers are also more likely to report finding skilled workers as a key component to working with SPOs. Smaller employers are less likely to report that they found good candidates as a result of their engagement with SPOs.

SPO programs may be time limited due to a lack of guaranteed long-term funding. When employers see results and replicate program components as part of their internal practices (e.g., recruitment, onboarding processes), benefits can be sustained beyond the life of the program.

Challenges to Successful Employer Engagement

Both SPOs and employers report several types of internal (within their organizations) and external barriers in engaging on newcomer skills development programs, as shown in Figure 7 to Figure 10. Within their organization, SPOs experienced difficulties engaging employers from different industries (39.5%), lacked resources to hire someone to engage with employers, such as an employer engagement specialist or job developer (26.3%), and that employer engagement was an

additional burden to their employees (13.2%). Very few cited that they were unsure of where to start and how to engage with employers or how to maintain relationships with employers as an internal barrier (5.3%). Just over one third (34.2%) of survey respondents indicated that they did not experience any internal barriers in trying to engage with employers.

Figure 7. SPOs' internal barriers to working with employers (*n*=38)

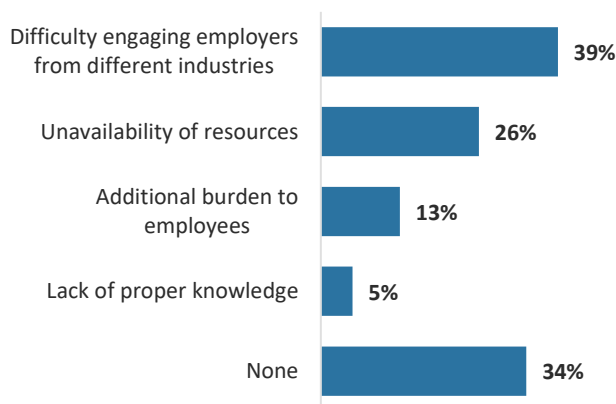


Figure 8. SPOs' external barriers to working with employers (*n*=38)

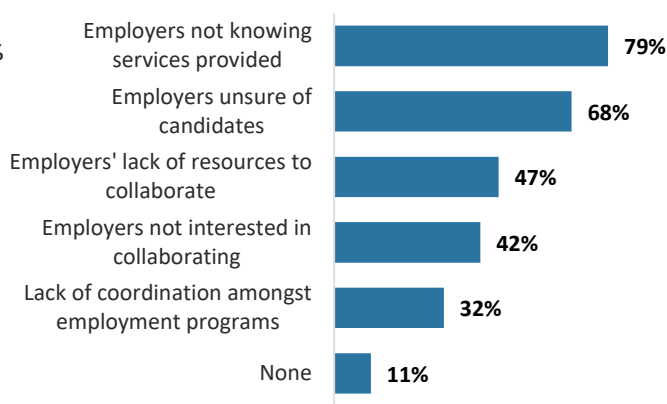
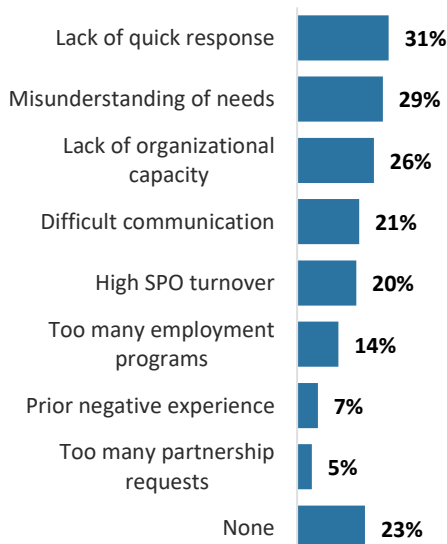


Figure 9. Employers' internal barriers to working with SPOs (*n*=101)



Figure 10. Employers' external barriers to working with SPOs (*n*=101)



SPOs reported several external barriers in engaging employers. These included employers not knowing the services SPOs provide (78.9%), employers unsure of the suitability of candidates SPOs refer (68.4%), employers lacking resources necessary for collaborating (47.4%), employers' lack of interest in collaborating (42.1%), and lack of coordination amongst employment programs (31.6%). Only 10.5% of SPOs reported no external barriers engaging with employers.

Even amongst the subset of employers who currently engage with SPOs, many continue to experience some barriers working with them. These barriers may be internal to the organization/business or external and related to the service provider sector. About a quarter (24.8%) of employers noted no internal barriers to engaging with SPOs. Large employers were more likely to report having no internal barriers working with SPOs. In addition, the likelihood of reporting no internal barriers working with SPOs increases with the population size of the location of the employer. However, 45.5% of employers noted that SPO engagement is separate from their organization's/business' mainstream recruitment and human resources practices, 24.8% noted an internal lack of organizational capacity to engage effectively with SPOs, and 24.8% noted that SPO engagement is an additional burden to employees' regular work responsibilities, making it difficult to find time to do. Employers in large centers are less likely to report that working with SPOs is not part of their recruitment and HR practices. Finally, 20.8% of employers also stated that senior leadership at the organization/business does not see working with SPOs as a priority and this was an internal barrier to working with SPOs.

In terms of external barriers, similarly to the internal barriers, 22.8% of employers noted no external barriers to engaging with SPOs. The primary (reported by more than 10% of employers) external barriers stated by employers included that SPOs are unable to respond quickly to meet the organization's/business' changing needs (30.7%), not understanding their needs and how to meet them (28.7%), a lack of organizational capacity among SPOs in order for them to engage effectively with the employer (25.7%), difficulty communicating with SPOs (20.8%), high SPO staff

turnover (19.8%), and the fact that there are too many employment programs offered by SPOs making it difficult to keep track (13.9%).

There are some variations in external barriers to SPO engagement by employer size and location. While there is no strong relationship between the number of external barriers identified and the size of the employer, large employers were more likely to report no external barriers. Medium size employers were more likely to report that SPOs are not able to respond quickly to meet their changing needs. The relationship by location parallels employer size. Employers in large centers were also more likely to report no external barriers to working with SPOs. Employers in medium size locations were more likely to report that SPOs are not able to respond quickly to meet their changing needs and that communication with SPOs is difficult. Employers in smaller localities were more likely to report more external barriers working with SPOs, specifically related to SPOs' lack of organizational capacity to engage effectively with them and a lack of understanding of their needs and how to meet them.

In the sections that follow, some of these and other barriers are explored in more depth, based on insights shared by SPO and employer interviewees, as well as the literature.

Resource constraints

A common root challenge with employer engagement is limited resources from both SPOs and employers. Three SPO survey respondents had not recently engaged with employers with two of them having previously engaged with employers in the last three years. All three explained that their employer relationships had ended because, although employers are generally interested in collaborating, they no longer had resources to allocate to it. Resources refer to both staffing and funding.

Staffing

Economic conditions have a direct influence on employers' willingness to engage with SPOs. When times are good, employers have job openings to fill and are willing to invest in creating immigrant-

-inclusive workplaces. But when there is an economic downturn, diversity & inclusion coordinators are among the first to go, and SPOs no longer have leads within organizations to collaborate with. Other employers have staff who work on EDI issues from the side of their desks and find it difficult to engage with SPOs in meaningful ways regardless of the economy. Small employers in particular may lack resources and staff availability, and their capacities are often “overstretched” (Payne, 2008; Cooper et al., 2008). For SMEs, participating in work placement programs, for example, can be especially burdensome due to the amount of paperwork involved and some employers [E7] have noted the need to simplify the process.

SPOs find it difficult to form and maintain relationships with employers due to resource constraints. For example, program staff in SPOs may be responsible for recruiting clients, delivering programs and reporting to funders and, at the same time, be expected to market the program and develop partnerships with employers. Small SPOs may have challenges engaging with large employers, as these SPOs may not have the staff capacity to meet employers’ expectations (Spaulding & Blount, 2018). Some SPOs explained that forming new relationships with large employers is a long game, which not all service providers have the time to play. For one SPO [S10] it took nearly two years to get to a place where they could make a presentation to an employer on one of its programs.

Funding

While some SPOs interviewed receive private sector funding, most rely primarily on government funding (federal, provincial and/or municipal). Restrictions on current funding arrangements do not allow SPOs to have the right staff in place to establish and nurture employer relationships. Relationship management can be time consuming, as explained above. Communication staff, administrative roles and other required support functions are generally underfunded. Though COVID has necessitated new ways of working and engaging with newcomer clients and employers, which put strains on SPO staff, this has not been matched by increases in

government funding for SPOs. Further, due to limited flexibility and no guarantee of funding extensions, SPOs cannot easily adapt their programs in response to newcomer client and employer needs. Instead, SPOs may unintentionally be encouraged to focus on short-term results, such as entry-level job placement (Mazenod, 2013), rather than helping newcomers to secure and retain skills-commensurate employment.

Employers noted that there are several incentive programs to hire new graduates offered by academic institutions, but similar funding is not available to support SMEs in recruiting newcomers. Upfront financial benefits may go a long way to incentivize SMEs to hire from immigrant talent pools [E2].

Limited employer awareness or interest in SPO services

As discussed before, the majority of employer survey respondents (71%) were not aware of how employment SPOs can help recruit, hire and retain newcomers to Canada. While some employers recognize that part of the onus is on them to understand their own hiring and recruitment support needs and research how to fill them, many face challenges in finding information about how SPOs can help. Employers who already engage with SPOs spoke of wanting to engage with more SPOs but not knowing how to identify those with clients that meet their skills requirements. While larger SPOs may have relevant information on their websites to help employers understand their services and how to connect, smaller SPOs generally do not. Trying to navigate through the disparate sources of information available online to identify the right organizations and the right people within them to speak to has proven challenging for employers. Employers that operate at a national level are especially challenged to know which SPOs are available in a particular locality, the programs or services they offer and the clients they serve.

“The one amazing thing about SPOs in Canada is that there are a lot of them, which is both a pro and a con. You can pretty much find an SPO anywhere that you need one. But it is very difficult to know what is their target audience. And will they have, you know, the people in their programs that align with the jobs we’re looking for. We are looking for very technical people, [such as in] digital data science. There’s a lot of times where we’ll engage with somebody [and then] it turns out, they don’t actually have that talent pool.” [E7]

Some employers are simply not interested to engage with employment programs (Payne, 2008), partly because they may think SPOs work with “less desirable” candidates (Spaulding & Blount, 2018; Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015). Employers may hold limited views of what SPOs can offer and may see them only as places to recruit entry-level workers (Clymer, 2003). In some cases, there may be employer reluctance in hiring newcomers due to potential lack of language proficiency, lack of Canadian work experience and high turnover (Fang et al., 2021). SMEs in areas of low retention, such as small and rural communities, may be reluctant to invest in training if newcomers leave after a short span of time (Hann, 2018; Hum & Simpson, 2003). In other cases, discrimination towards newcomers can be the underlying factor hindering relationship building between employers and SPOs.

“One of the other challenges in building relationships with employers is their perspective on newcomers themselves. So, the reality is that there is a lot of unconscious, sometimes very conscious, and discriminatory bias that exists within the systems and within people themselves. And so, a lot of times when we engage with employers, they automatically assume that if we’re working with newcomers and immigrants, that those people have low level English, low level education, and are just looking for jobs in factories, for example, like lower skilled positions. [...] Sometimes just that gap in knowledge can make it difficult because they think to themselves, “Oh, you know, well, I’m not hiring for any, you know, assembly line positions right now,” and we’re trying to explain to them no, no, we actually want to talk to you about your accounting role, or your HR role, or your, you know, those kinds of roles.” [S10]

A lack of impact for an employer’s business goals and poor communication between employers and SPOs may hinder an employer’s willingness to participate in future employment programs (Cooper et al., 2008). One SPO interviewee [S8] explained that prior situations in which a newcomer hire did not work out can reinforce biases held by some employers and affect their willingness to recruit newcomers in future.

“Sometimes it’s really hard to convince the employer to bring on newcomers because there’s always a hesitation if they’re going to work out or not work out. Everybody is looking for prior experience. And sometimes it’s also challenging for clients because if one client doesn’t work out, then the employer is hesitant to hire another one and work with us. So definitely some stereotyping some assumptions in the sector about newcomer talent, lack of faith in skills.” [S8]

Other employers may not be ready to receive SPO services. Even when they engage with SPOs, employers may not know about the breadth of services offered. Employers may see SPOs only as staffing agencies and get disinterested when SPOs do not find job matches. They fail to understand that if no newcomer clients want a job, there is not much the SPO can do.

Misconceptions about what SPOs do and about immigrant talent can lead to strained relationships. Employers who do not recognize the value of immigrant-inclusive workplaces not only encounter challenges to hire and retain newcomers, but they may also fail to respond to offers for cultural competency trainings or other educational services or resources offered by SPOs.

“... we found that employers just want to get hiring done quickly. But they don’t always want to do the foundational work that creates an inclusive workplace, where folks will thrive. So, a lot of times when you see people leaving within that first few months, it’s often because of miscommunications or cross-cultural differences that are not being brought to the forefront. [...] And I think a lot of times employers want to apply the same formula that they’ve been applying forever. But the reality is that the world is changing, expectations are changing.

And when you are bringing people that have lived in completely different cultures, that requires a little bit of shifting on both ends.” [S10]

SPOs that have the best interest of newcomers in mind are hesitant to build or continue relationships with employers that are unprepared to receive newcomers. When employer biases towards newcomers play out in the form of low wages, poor working conditions or otherwise unaccommodating workplaces, partnerships fail to launch, or come to an end.

“The partnership ended, because [...] we felt like even though we had been consistently reaching out and trying to educate [the employer] and have a conversation, they mistreated the newcomer employees, in a sense that there was a lack of respect, there was a lack of their safety precautions needed to be working in a safe space. They overwork them. [The employer] took advantage of the fact that they were new, and they did not know so much about what their rights are in Canada as a worker. And that’s something which is a big red flag for us. So we never want to continue partnerships with such organizations.” [S12]

Lack of SPO coordination (internal and external) and efficiency

Respondents stressed the need for SPO coordination and efficiency to enhance engagement with employers. One employer [E1] noted being contacted by different SPO staff from various locations to ask for the same thing. This could happen both internally within the same SPO with different office locations or teams, or externally among different SPOs. Though some SPOs do partner with other organizations that provide complementary or specialized supports (for example, for refugee clients), as noted previously, a lack of coordination amongst employment programs was identified as a problem by 31.6% of SPOs. Some employers felt that communication with SPOs was difficult (20.8%) and that there are too many employment programs (13.9%). For example, to post a job, an employer needs to go through the job boards of several different SPOs, or even different teams of the same SPO.

Some employers even emphasized the need for a centralized database with information on the different SPOs and the various programs they offer from an employer perspective. Employment programs across Canada are often not coordinated with other existing employment programs. There are government-funded programs delivered by many SPOs, as well as an overwhelming number of individual programs delivered by provincial and federal governments with overlapping program goals and target groups, which contributes to the confusion among employers. Also, as new employment programs are continuously being developed with the termination of other programs, employers may experience frustration in constantly needing to re-build relationships and keep track of existing programs (Social Capital Partners and Deloitte, 2014; Payne, 2008). The lack of coordination amongst SPOs may be due to competition driven by scarce resources and funding environments that emphasize quick job placement (Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015).

Lack of internal coordination and efficiency is a symptom of a few factors. For one, SPO operations may be siloed. SPOs may have multiple programs, involving different funders and staff. When centralized approaches are not in place and ongoing information sharing across teams is not practiced, this can lead to inefficient communications with employer partners. Employers note that SPOs do not always provide timely responses to their inquiries (30.7% of employer survey respondents). Secondly, high turnover can also lead to inefficiencies in SPO-employer relationships. Nearly one in five (19.8%) employers mentioned turnover at SPOs as an external barrier to engagement. High turnover is a problem at SPOs, due to burnout, uncompetitive wages, short-term programs for which staff are hired and other reasons. When staff changes and handovers are not smooth, it can be challenging to keep relationships with employers going. One employer [E7] explained that relationships are often formed between people and not organizations. When an SPO staff member moves to another service provider, the partnership also moves with them.

Differences in organizational cultures

SPOs may experience challenges with developing foundations for strong relationships with employers. Communication between SPOs and employers may be difficult due to differences in organizational cultures (Spaulding & Blount, 2018). Due to this discord, employers may not know how to communicate their needs to SPOs and SPOs may not know how to solicit this information from employers (Taylor, 2011). This is a problem particularly because employers are diverse, varying in sizes, industries, sectors (private, public, not-for-profit), regions and so on (Galley & Shirey, 2014). Private firms in highly competitive industries, for example, may be reluctant to share curricula, preferring in-house training programs (Barnow & Spaulding, 2015). Some employers may be unwilling to be highly involved in employment-related programs if they can reap the benefits without fully engaging (Clymer 2003). Communicating the business case for engagement to for-profit, private firms may differ than for other organization types.

Scale of programs and their orientation

The scale of programs and their orientation may be a challenge for a few reasons. First, employers can usually hire only a few candidates for positions, especially when those positions are at non-entry-levels; however, employment-related programs often seek to place entire classes of training

graduates into jobs at the same time (Barnow & Spaulding, 2015). Second, programs are often informed by current needs, and both employers and SPOs may have a hard time planning for future workforce needs, especially when it may require long-term training that is beyond the scope of SPO programming (Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015). Even when employer needs are known, SPOs may face challenges in translating needs into trainings (Taylor, 2011). Finally, as federal and provincial funders set eligibility criteria for employment programs, the skills and credentials of program participants may not meet what employers are looking for.

Overall, suggested changes to how SPOs engage with employers are aligned with the barriers of employer engagement experienced by SPOs. SPOs indicated that they would like to improve marketing and outreach strategies to employers and clients (26.3%), as well as hire staff specifically for employer engagement and job development (26.3%) to better engage with employers. Survey respondents also suggested improving communication within their own teams and collaborating with other community organizations (7.9%) and initiating more frequent and continuous contact with employers (7.9%).

Emerging Practices in Employer Engagement and Facilitating Factors

The following sections discuss key practices identified by SPOs and employers to address barriers and realize the benefits of collaboration.

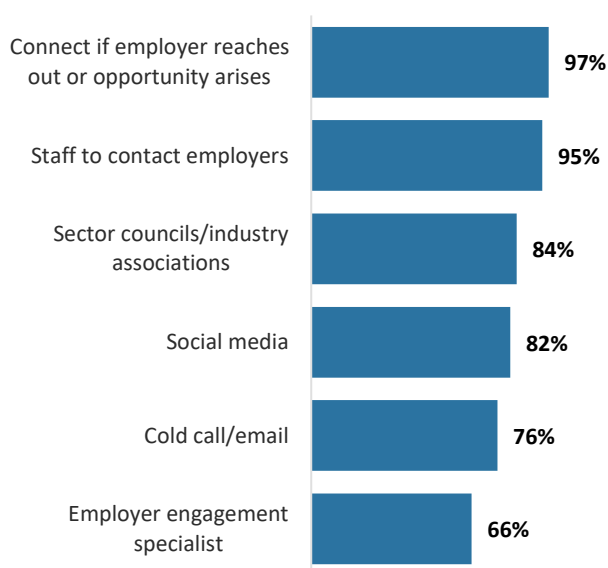
Effective outreach involves multiple ways of connecting

New SPO-employer relationships are formed in multiple ways by employers. These include directly

via email or phone (50.5%), via social media (45.5%), by employers reaching out directly to SPOs (37.6%), and through sector councils and/or industry associations (26.7%). Larger employers were more likely to form relationships by email/phone and through sector councils or industry associations. Employers in large centres were less likely to form relationships with SPOs through social media.

Similarly, SPOs establish new relationships with employers in several ways, as shown in Figure 11. The majority of SPOs either have staff who contact employers as part of their job responsibilities (94.7%) and/or make connections with employers if an opportunity presents itself or if an employer reaches out to the SPO (97.4%) to establish new connections. Other common strategies for establishing new relationships with employers include connecting with employers through sector councils and/or industry associations (84.2%), using social media or other communication outlets to showcase their work to potential employer partners (81.6%), making cold calls and sending emails to potential employer partners (76.3%), and having an employer engagement specialist, or more than one, on their staff who pursues new employer contacts as part of their role (65.8%).

Figure 11. Establishing new relationships with employers (n=38)



SPOs found both online and in-person methods useful for broadly promoting programs and events to employers. LinkedIn was noted as being particularly helpful to SPOs for targeting and reaching out to employer representatives. In provinces such as Manitoba where there is a large unmet labour demand in manufacturing (Arcand,

2022), employers directly reached out to SPOs for help to recruit newcomer workers. Large employers with local offices may also directly contact local SPOs to meet their hiring needs and corporate diversity and inclusion objectives. One SPO [SS17] spoke of how pivoting the in-person employer-newcomer engagement events they had been running for four years prior to COVID to an online event after the onset of COVID allowed them to reach more rural employers previously not able to take the time to attend a large day-long, in-person event. Another SPO [S3] shared that they held a well-attended, in-person employer engagement event that went a long way in spreading the word about the services that they offer; through word of mouth, the message was spread even to employers who were not in attendance.

Some SPO interviewees shared examples of former newcomer clients becoming senior leaders within their organizations and champions of SPO-employer partnerships. Referrals from former newcomer clients, as well as past collaborators, were mentioned by SPOs to be a popular and useful approach for initiating or continuing relationships with employers. These warm referrals were more lucrative than cold calling and tended to last longer.

Several SPOs and employers highlighted the need for more tools or resources to help facilitate SPO-employer connections. Some interviewees [E7] suggested that immigrant employment councils, or other groups, develop a mapping of SPOs with details on the industrial sectors programs and clients targeted, as well as of employers who are interested in working with SPOs. These ecosystem actors could also invest in the development of practical tools for SPOs on how to improve the way they engage with employers [S12, E4]. One employer [E7] called for a “hub and spoke” model, whereby employers go to one agency first for intake and assessment and then are referred to SPOs to connect with based on needs. A single coordinating agency or common platform could also be responsible for job boards to target newcomer candidates [E3, E7, S12]. Funders, including government funders, could consider ways to coordinate employer engagement strategies to optimize skills development and job matching (Wood, 2015). This may include better engaging

employers at the consultation stage to provide feedback for immigration policies, talent needs, labour market shortage and settlement/employment-related program funding [S8]. To complement these strategies, some interviewees [for example, E7] also called for more flexibility to use donor funds towards digital advertising/publicity costs to raise awareness of SPOs' value propositions to employers and organized advocacy specifically on immigrant employment issues [S16]. Taken together, such approaches would minimize the time investments employers may require to find the right SPO partner. At the same time, it would help under-resourced SPOs to streamline the process to identify and screen employers interested in working with them.

It is important to recognize that outreach and relationship building are distinct activities. Relationship building involves providing employers with information, referrals and follow ups that are useful to them. Employers who were recognized by SPOs as champions usually remained involved for a long period of time, took part in several different activities and contributed significant staff time or other resources. One SPO interviewee [S17] mentioned that their organization has had an industry council since it was first established many years ago. The council consists of employer partners from a mix of organizations. Some of the council members started out as junior employees but later became senior leaders and continued to collaborate with the SPO. The council meets consistently and frequently. Employer representatives on the council hire a higher volume of the SPOs' clients relative to other employers, hold site tours, act as guest speakers and provide ongoing feedback for program curricula development.

"We have an employer who has participated in almost all employer facing programs and services after initially engaging in 2020 for recruitment support. The employer actively participates and supports the Mentorship program (3 mentees completed) and mock interview programs. The employer has agreed to participate in new programs and has hired multiple clients over the years, some of whom have been promoted to senior

roles." [SS67]

Provide a well-informed, single point of contact

Though multiple ways of connecting are helpful for outreach, many employers would prefer to have a single point of contact within a SPO, preferably someone at a senior level who can speak to all aspects of the services provided. Employers seek consistent, cohesive relationships. When SPOs have many different programs, each with a manager of employer relations who reaches out to them separately, it can become onerous for them.

At the same time, employers ask that SPO staff be thoroughly knowledgeable about their industry/sector and the technical requirements of the positions newcomer clients are seeking, as well as the economic landscape, labour market policies and how they are changing. To address this, one SPO [SS50] explained that it has a team of six employer relations staff, each focused on a different sector to match job seekers to openings. Dividing roles by industry/sector allows frontline employment counsellors to develop specialized knowledge and be aware of current opportunities available for newcomer clients trying to join the workforce. It is, however, important for employers to recognize that SPOs are not equivalent to fee-for-service recruitment agencies and employers need to be more understanding and adaptable to SPOs' capacity limitations. Employers, directly or through sector councils, could more openly and proactively share information on labour market needs and challenges with newcomer-serving agencies. Partnerships between sector councils and newcomer-serving agencies could help to bring together the expertise from both groups to gather information on employers' needs and investment in skills (Holmes & Hjartarson, 2014; Rodier et al., 2020). One SPO [S4] noted that for it to develop capacities to cater to the needs of employers through new and innovative programs, more funding opportunities are needed. Employers [E2, E4, E7, E8] also noted the need for more funding to SPOs to mitigate some of the challenges they face to effective engagement.

Both employers and service providers require abilities to become engaged (van Berkel et al., 2017). Numerous studies and reports have highlighted the need for specific individuals within SPOs to engage with employers and other stakeholders. Spaulding and Blount (2018) speak about the need for a “business development manager” role. Business development managers can build new relationships and strengthen old relationships with employers. SPOs participating in the CPRNW project further echo the importance of having a designated employer engagement specialist, such as a job developer or employer liaison. This person can focus on building relationships with employers and finding employment opportunities for participants, building specific capacities and expertise while lessening the burden and workload on other program staff (SRDC,

2021a).

On the employer side, to be effective in fostering wider change, participation in employment programs must be supported at the right levels of the organization (e.g., Chief Executive Officer (CEO), human resources, management, equity, diversity and inclusion officer) (Enchautegui, 2015). A Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), or equivalent, is also important. The CDO should report directly to the CEO, with full access to and support from the entire executive team. For meaningful change, they must have a seat at the senior leadership table (Mallick, 2020).

See Table 4 for critical staff positions and competencies for employer engagement mentioned by SPOs and employers.

Table 4. Key staff positions and competencies for SPO-employer engagement

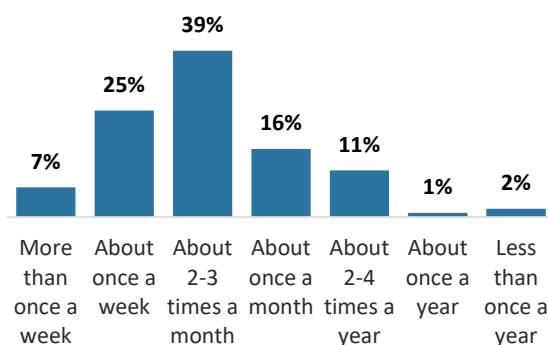
SPOs		Employers	
Positions			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Outreach: Community Partnership Officer, Corporate Engagement Officer, Communications Officer, Marketing Officer• Relationship management: Employer Relationship Manager, Employer Engagement Coordinator, Employer Liaisons (sector/industry specific), Manager for Employer Liaisons• Program implementation: Program Managers, Bridging Program Coordinators• Employment: Job Developers, Employment Specialist, Employment Counsellors		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Engagement Specialist• HR Manager• Recruitment Manager• EDI Lead / CDO• CFO, CEO	
Skills/Competencies			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sales and marketing skills• Communication skills (including listening)• Collaboration and interpersonal skills• Organization skills• Event coordination• Knowledge of local labour market trends• Knowledge of business needs• Understanding of immigration processes• Knowledge of human resources policies and practices		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication skills• Openness to learning• Cultural competency	

Continuous communication is key

One of the key components to successful employer engagement is continuous communication between SPOs and employers. Most employers who have relationships with SPOs engage with them

frequently with 38.6% engaging with SPOs about 2-3 times a month, 24.8% engaging with SPOs about once a week, and 6.9% engaging with SPOs more than once a week. The full distribution of frequency of engagement is presented in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Frequency of employer engagement with SPOs (n=101)

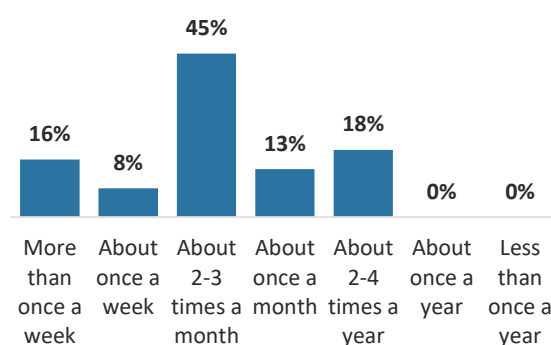


SPOs confirmed that they engage with employers frequently throughout the year, with 44.7% engaging with most of their employer partners about 2-3 times a month (see Figure 13). Roughly an equal number of SPOs engaged with employers more than once a week (15.8%), about once a month (13.2%) and about 2-4 times a year (18.4%). This engagement involves their employer engagement staff (57.9%), organizing and attending employer engagement events (23.7%), discussing employer needs as well as their own (21.1%), providing incentives and/or resources to employers such as offering training incentive programs, cultural competency training, and supports filling employer vacancies (13.2%), and ensuring timely communication with employers (10.5%).

Although frequency of engagement is a dimension that captures how engaged employers are with SPOs, it does not necessarily capture the strength of their relationships. That said, frequency is likely to be positively related to having stronger SPO-employer relationships. There is more variation in the frequency of engagement with SPOs amongst small employers than across medium and large employers (and the least amongst large employers). Almost 50% of large employers engage with SPOs about 2-3 times per month. On average, employers in small locations engage with SPOs more frequently.

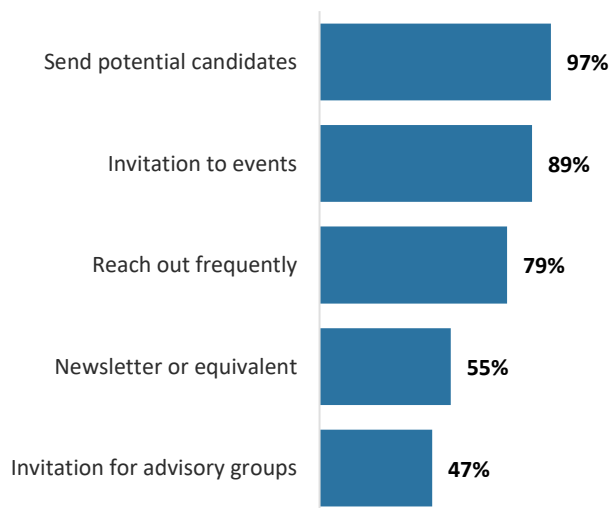
Overall, as presented in Figure 14, SPOs maintain their employer-partner relationships by sending

Figure 13. Frequency of SPO engagement with employers (n=38)



employers potential candidates for their hiring needs (97.4%), inviting them to various events (89.5%), and reaching out to employers at least once a month by phone or email (78.9%). Survey respondents' open-ended responses (describing their employer engagement strategies and key components to their approach to employer engagement) align with the aforementioned strategies. Key components include identifying and meeting employer needs (36.8%), open and continuous communication and support (34.2%), building relationships and trust (18.4%), referring quality candidates (18.4%), offering a variety of services (15.8%), and employer outreach (10.5%).

Figure 14. Maintaining relationships with employers (n=38)



Both SPOs and employers play a part in ensuring continuous, meaningful communication. Ongoing communication needs to be two-way. Newsletters to highlight program progress is one approach SPOs use to keep employers informed, but it does not allow for dialogue on what's working and what's not. Once a foundational relationship with employers is developed, SPOs should assure employers that they are committed to engage continuously (Arthur-Mensah, 2020). The JVS Employer Engagement Model, for example, requires every staff person working directly with employers to visit their contacts monthly to better understand evolving needs and demands (Dworak-Muñoz, 2004). The model sees the potential for gradually developing deep relationships with every individual engagement activity. For SPOs delivering skills training programs and work placements, it is crucial to create these feedback loops with employers, wherein SPOs can ask for feedback about the program or about participants during work placements. SPOs can then use this feedback to adjust their programs (Taylor, 2011; Arthur-Mensah, 2020; Myers et al., 2021). Employers who agree to engage with employment programs have an active responsibility and interest to provide feedback and insights to SPOs. One interviewee [E9] noted that having multiple touch points (in terms of types and frequency of interactions) with a SPO helped to build trust and heed off problems before they start.

“One of the best practices that I found was not to do kind of a one stop pit stop, but to continue having just touch points. Those touch points allowed [the SPO] to understand our needs more. Plus, I was able to understand what they had to offer more. We built trust.” [E9]

Communication with employers does not end when a newcomer is hired. One SPO [S12] interviewee explained that they have a mechanism where they follow up after a newcomer begins work, initially on a weekly basis and then, once the three-month probation is over, on a monthly basis. Others do 30-60-90-day check-ins [S3] after an employer has hired a newcomer. Some SPOs hold monthly partnership meetings with those employers who hire several of their newcomer clients. These follow ups help the SPO to understand what is happening

within the organization and any learnings that can be carried into future trainings and engagements.

Good communications within organizations are important for fostering and maintaining relationships with employers. Program teams within SPOs often rely on marketing and communications teams to send out promotional materials about events and properly tailor messages to employer audiences. If a program has a connection with one employer, other program teams are made aware. This allows for consistent internal communications and not overburdening employers. In some sectors, such as the skilled trades, it may be more effective for SPOs to engage with industry associations rather than individual employers who may not have time to engage in frequent meetings (Taylor, 2011). While employers and some SPOs flagged a lack of coordination amongst service providers as a weakness of the current landscape, some interviewees gave examples of how they connect employers and newcomers with other SPOs. These SPOs recognize their strengths and make referrals to other organizations when they cannot meet the needs of employer or newcomer clients.

While efficient ongoing communications, feedback and follow ups are seen to be important, this can be beyond what is feasible to sustain for many SPOs. Relationship management can be very time consuming. Insufficient resources and staff time make it difficult for SPOs to engage with employers efficiently. As noted above, 13.2% of SPO survey respondents said employer engagement is an additional burden for employees. SPO staff have competing priorities among serving clients, developing programs, applying for funding, working with employers and so on. High staff turnover at SPOs can also mean discontinued communication and information exchange between SPOs and employers. Having clear handover protocols and systems for documenting organizational level knowledge of employer engagement can help to ensure smooth transitions and continuity in SPO-employer collaborations [S3, E1].

Be transparent and open to learning

Employers' and SPOs' transparency and openness to learning about each other's priorities and needs was repeatedly stated by interviewees as a key practice for effective engagement. For employers, this means being transparent about where they are as an organization/business, their needs and goals, as well as being aware of the services SPOs provide, recognizing the challenges SPOs face and being open to hiring newcomers. Honest and authentic conversations can help to identify opportunities and to establish clear parameters for the relationship.

As discussed previously, several interviewees highlighted the issue of a lack of employer awareness of SPOs and their services [S2, S3, S5, S8, S10-S12, S14], as well as employers not understanding or valuing immigrant inclusion. The issue varied by industry, size of employer and region. For instance, some employers in industries such as financial services and hospitality are thought to put a premium on Canadian experience for certain positions and underestimate international experience or qualifications. SPOs find it difficult to engage with employers in these industries who are not always willing to consider newcomers for office jobs or senior level management positions. Rather, employers in these industries are seen to primarily target newcomers for entry-level, customer-facing jobs. One SPO interviewee [S13] noted that there is discrimination within the trades sector, especially amongst smaller enterprises that do not have well developed human resource policies. Additionally, in regions of Canada that have not historically had large settlements of racialized immigrants, SPO interviewees indicated that employers, particularly SMEs, generally do not understand the value of EDI. While SPOs recognized that large employers also suffer from systemic barriers, many felt smaller employers are especially "fixed in their ways" and harder to influence.

Helping employers understand and remove institutional biases that might exist in their hiring and workforce practices was seen as critical to improved engagement. As one SPO [S17] put it: *"[Employers] should be open to exploring diverse talent pipelines, and really be open to having those conversations with community partners [so that*

they] can share what they're currently doing or working on and be open to exploring those opportunities with them." Many SPOs have trainings, handbooks and other resources on cultural competency and inclusive workplace practices for hiring, onboarding, retention and advancement that have been developed for and shared with employers. The extent to which employers know about these resources and make use of them is unclear.

For SPOs, openness to learning means asking the right questions and understanding and responding to employers' specific needs and ways of working. There is a false assumption amongst some SPOs and decision makers that employers are a homogenous group with the same needs and requirements from candidates as every other employer (Payne, 2008). For example, the culture within a technology start-up will be markedly different from that of a construction company. Based on an examination of three organizations, Clymer (2003) identifies SPOs' abilities to develop private-sector expertise as a key principle of successful employer engagement. SPO staff must understand the business world and see the value of meeting both participants' and employers' needs.

SPOs spoke of the need to research employer practices before they engage, and to do due diligence before placing newcomers. One SPO has an employer assessment model [S2] that it uses for this purpose. When SPOs translate their understanding of needs into clear value propositions for different employers, it helps to build employer trust.

Be strategic and make the business case for employer engagement

SPOs may overlook the need for a clear strategy for employer engagement. However, approaching employers with one-off requests will not help to foster strong relationships. A passive, "wait and see" approach will also not be fruitful. According to an SPO interviewee [S6], to build strong, long-lasting relationships, SPOs need to approach employers with intention and avoid "transactional" approaches. Some SPOs take a 'pipeline' approach [for example, SS72] for employer engagement. It

starts with identifying a lead. A lead could be an employer that has many active job postings, was referred to the SPO, engaged with the SPO at an event and so on. A lead could also be an individual who is involved in the SPO's program (e.g., as a mentor) or attends an event, but potential exists for the relationship to be leveraged to engage their organization/business. Once a lead is identified, the SPO seeks to connect directly with the right decision maker within the organization/business in order to set up an initial exploratory meeting and conduct a needs assessment, for example to be clear on expectations and understand if the employer is hiring, needs education/training, or is looking for volunteer opportunities for staff. The SPO would then work to engage the employer in programs that match needs or to develop "boutique" or "niche" services that are tailored to individual employers to help meet specific business growth and/or employee retention goals [SS50, E6]. From there, efforts are made to nurture the relationship and move the employer into other areas of engagement. The pipeline approach (lead, initial meeting, needs assessment, engagement in activities, referral to other areas of the organization) allows SPOs to monitor which employers are at each stage of the pipeline. In this way, the SPO avoids one-off, one-time engagements with employers that are involved in a single activity and then forgotten. Instead, investments are made towards strong relationships that aim to produce benefits for employers, the SPO and newcomers over the long term.

SPOs must be able to communicate with employers in ways they understand and value, just as they would with other clients. This includes being equipped with information and statistics to explain how building a diverse workforce affects the bottom line. It is important that the pitch appeals not only to employers interested in the moral and ethical aspects of newcomer inclusion, but also interested in the financial and business aspects. When the motivation for engagement is corporate social responsibility only, programs can operate separately from organizations' mainstream recruitment and HR practices (van Kooy et al., 2014). They tend to take on special status, which are charitable in nature. The most active approach to employer engagement involves appealing to

firms as a business proposition, not as a charitable effort alone. Demand-led employer engagement can have a bigger impact beyond improving corporate image. Participating in employment programs can benefit employers' business goals, including decreasing the company's turnover rates and increasing quality of employees (Lumley-Sapanski & Callahan, 2019; Enchautegui, 2015). A report by Social Capital Partners and Deloitte (2014) speaks to the benefits to employers of investing in the skills training of Canadians, including helping to improve Canada's economic growth and addressing the prevalent skills gap, wherein employers cannot find candidates with the right skills to fill open positions in Canada.

Several SPOs [S7, S10, S13, S15, SS69] feel that public recognition of employer contributions to a program is important, but this does not appear to be a priority for employers. Some SPOs hold awards ceremonies to recognize employers of all sizes who have worked strategically with the agency to successfully hire, retain and develop diverse talent. They are given certificates of accomplishment, plaques or other tokens of appreciation for their contribution to successful immigrant integration. Recognition and rewards were not mentioned by employers as being essential. For some [E8, E9], having statistics and powerful stories about program successes were more important for deepening relationships with SPOs. Investing in data collection on employer outcomes can help to demonstrate the effectiveness of the partnership. Funders could play a role in encouraging the tracking and reporting of employers' use of SPO supports and related outcomes to help build an evidence base.

The endorsement of businesses'/organizations' leadership to partnering with SPOs is critical to getting commitment at other levels of the organization. As one employer [E2] advised, *"If you talk to the leadership of those organizations, [...] and if you can impact them, or at least create some momentum in that area, it will trickle down throughout the organization. So I think the leadership is very important. Sometimes they're hard to get, but once you get them, you're almost guaranteed that they'll have the buy in."*

Work with a diverse range of employers to meet the diverse needs of newcomer clients

Treating employers as clients must be balanced with ensuring wins for newcomers as well. SPO respondents from different regions of Canada all consistently expressed the need to work with employers of all sizes and various industries to better meet their newcomer clients' diverse needs. A one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work. Employers of different sizes may fit the various interests, preferences, and experience levels of client groups.

"We're very intentional about diversifying employer engagement in different sectors. So, on our programming team, we run specific courses that will teach sector specific employment language training. And we have that program for 12 different local sectors. When we engage with employers, for our online employment weeks, we make sure each day is divided by sector. So, we might have sales and retail one day, manufacturing and trades and next, it is healthcare. We divide things out by sectors to make sure we're engaging everyone on the employer side but also giving clients access to opportunities they might not have considered before." [S3]

Amongst those SPOs who engaged with employers in the previous six months, most have a working relationship or partnership with 50 or more employers (60.5%). Only 15.8%, 13.2% and 10.5% of SPOs work with 25-49, 10-24, and 1-9 employers, respectively. Excluding the employers that SPOs currently have a working relationship with, over half of respondents (52.6%) have made 50 or more connections with employers who have not yet participated in their activities. 21.1% and 15.8% of SPOs have developed connections with 25-49 and 10-24 employers, respectively, with no participation from employers in program activities yet.

Of those employers who are aware and are currently engaging with employment service providers who provide services for newcomers, most (51%) currently work with 1-5 SPOs though a substantial percentage (32%) work with 6-10. Only 11% and 6% work with 11-15 or 16 or more SPOs,

respectively. Larger employers are more likely to report working with 16 or more SPOs.

Surprisingly, employers in larger centers are more likely to report working with only 1-5 SPOs. However, employers in small and medium size locations are more likely to report working with 6-10 SPOs. There is little variation across location size in the likelihood of reporting working with 11-15 or 16 or more SPOs.

Working with diverse employers means having to tailor supports to their specific needs and interests. For example, smaller employers often do not have dedicated HR personnel or EDI policies, so they may count on SPOs for recruitment support and cultural competency training. Although large employers are likely to have HR staff, they may not be as flexible as SMEs. Large employers can be bureaucratic, with cumbersome hiring processes, which makes it hard to fill their needs. It can be harder for SPOs to develop relationships with larger organizations as multiple individuals may be involved.



Conclusion and Recommendations

Employer engagement is a crucial component of any employment program as employers have the best current knowledge of labour market trends and understand their own needs and goals.

However, there is lack of knowledge, capacity, and systematic approach to employer engagement for newcomer skills development programs. Some of the reasons for this are funding availability, lack of coordination within and amongst SPOs and lack of employer awareness. Employers may be unaware of the programs, lack knowledge on capabilities of newcomers and be unfamiliar with SPO processes, and thus reluctant to reach out. Employers also may be overwhelmed with the number of different programs and may feel burdened by the necessity of building multiple relationships with multiple SPOs for different projects.

To start the systematization of information on employer engagement practices, this project collected qualitative and quantitative data from employers and SPOs. Key findings are as follows:

- Effective outreach to employers involves multiple ways of connecting, such as directly via email or phone, via social media, through sector councils and/or industry associations, events, and following up on referrals from former clients or collaborators.
- A well-informed, single point of contact within a SPO is necessary for building consistent and cohesive relationships with employers.
- Once a relationship is established, continuous, two-way communication between SPOs and employers is key for building trust, ensuring responsiveness of programs/services to employer needs and generating benefits to newcomer clients.
- Openness to learning about each other's priorities and needs and setting parameters for the relationship are important.
- Having a strategy for employer engagement built around a clear business case and evidence of successes helps SPOs to establish and sustain relationships with employers that produce benefits for them, newcomer clients and employers.
- Working with a diverse range of employers can help meet the diverse needs of newcomer clients. Employers of different sizes and industries may fit the various interests, preferences, and experience levels of newcomer client groups, but also require services and supports tailored to their specific needs and interests.

Based on these findings, as a next step, the project will develop practical tools for SPOs and employers to help form and strengthen relationships. This is one of many suggestions SPOs and employers provided into ways in which engagement on employment-related programs and services for

newcomers can be enhanced. Below is a brief summary of all recommended areas for action to create an enabling environment for SPOs and employers to partner and improve labour market outcomes for newcomers to Canada.

SPOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a clear value proposition by identifying employers' specific needs and tailoring approaches • Adopt a 'sales pipeline' approach to employer engagement to help ensure long-lasting and involved partnerships • Develop a centralized system for documenting organizational level knowledge of employer engagement, and standardize handover processes to ensure smooth handoffs when people move from job to job • Provide timely follow-up, realistic expectations, and honest communication with employers, and listen to employers' challenges and feedback to modify services • Invest in data collection on employer outcomes to demonstrate the partnership's effectiveness and to guide decision-making • Continue to educate employers on immigrant-inclusive recruitment, retention and promotion practices
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be open-minded and actively reach out to SPOs to learn about the full breadth of services SPOs can provide, and when SPOs reach out, be open to the conversation • Trust SPOs' knowledge and expertise on immigration related issues and be open to learn and leverage the knowledge SPOs have • Make information available on labour market needs and challenges to newcomer-serving agencies • Be understanding and adaptable to SPOs' limitations such as staff time and resources • Build cultural competency of staff throughout the organization
Councils and Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve coordination amongst SPOs for information, resource and job candidate sharing, using a common platform • Develop practical tools/toolkits for SPOs on how to improve their employer engagement • Provide employers with a summary of SPOs in each region with programming in particular industrial sectors • Consider a hub and spoke model, whereby employers go to one agency first for intake and assessment and then the employer is referred to SPOs to connect with based on needs • Raise awareness and advocate on newcomer employment issues to affect systems change
Government/ Funders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider wage subsidies or other financial benefits to business for hiring newcomers • Reduce the amount of paperwork required for employers to engage with SPOs for work placement programs since the process and the amount of paperwork can become prohibitive for employers, especially for small employers with a limited number of staff • Provide more funding for smaller SPOs with new and innovative programs that work with employers, not just for larger, established SPOs • Allow program funding to be used towards digital advertising/publicity costs to enable SPOs to raise awareness of their value proposition to employers • Better engage employers at the consultation stage to provide feedback for immigration policies, talent needs, labour market shortage and settlement/employment-related program funding

Endnotes

1. Two virtual interviews were conducted with an IEC PAC member and a community organization staff who worked with employers and SPOs to seek additional input on employer engagement.
2. The IEC in Manitoba was not established at the time of project start up.
3. Some employer survey respondents noted that they worked out of Quebec, but because their organizations were not only based in Quebec, they were retained in the study.
4. The sample size for the profile questions ranges from 47 to 51, depending on the question.
5. Note that 117 employers responded that they currently (within the last 6 months) engage with employment SPOs that serve newcomers, but 16 of the respondents did not have in-depth knowledge of their organization's/business' engagement with employment SPOs serving newcomers and they were, therefore, skipped to the end of the survey.
6. All quotes in this report have been edited for conciseness and clarity.

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Annexes

Annex A: Project Advisory Committee

Name	Title	Organization
Andy Rapoch	Employer Engagement Coordinator	World Skills Employment Centre
Bao Ho	Director of Operations	Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council
Barb Kalashnikov	Employer and Community Coordinator	WCG Services
Clifford Hennig-Pereira	Senior Manager, Inclusive Recruitment	RBC
Daisy Quon	Senior Manager, Programs & Stakeholder Relations	Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IECBC)
Eduardo Bananal	Employer Relations Coordinator	IECBC
Eric Madan	Strategy Consulting Manager (Cybersecurity & Risk Management)	Accenture
Henry Akanko	Director	Hire Immigrants Ottawa
Kyle Turner	Employer Engagement Coordinator	Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS)
Lorena Costa	Manager, Employer Engagement	Hire Immigrants Ottawa
Megan Mathes	Senior Manager, Diversity Equity and Inclusion	Modern Niagara Group Inc.
Mohja Alia	Manager, Employment & Bridging	ISANS
Rae Li	Program & Project Management Associate Manager	Accenture
Ritu Janveja	Senior Manager, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	LCBO
Robyn Webb	Executive Director, National Connector Program, Director, Labour Market Development	Halifax Partnership
Sue Sadler	Senior Vice President, Services and Program Innovation	ACCES Employment

Annex B: Profiles of Interviewees

SPOs

Case	Location	Job Title	Occupations/Industries Covered by Programs	Size of Organization
S1	Prairie Provinces	Project Manager	Hospitality, Health care, Food, IT, Trades	Medium
S2	Central Canada	Senior Vice President	Sales and marketing, IT, Human resources, Financial service, Engineering, Supply chain	Medium
S3	Atlantic Provinces	Supervisor, Employment Team	Sales and retail, Manufacturing, Trades, IT, Health care	Small
S4	Prairie Provinces	Program Manager	Manufacturing, Retail, Hospitality, Health services, Contact centres	Small
S5	West Coast	Manager, Employment Relations	Hospitality, Food services, Manufacturing, IT	Medium
S6	Prairie Provinces	Service Manager	Hospitality, Food processing, Banking	Medium
S7	Atlantic Provinces	Program Manager	Engineering, Health care, Early childhood education	Medium
S8	West Coast	Senior Manager	Retail, Manufacturing, Warehousing, Food, Pharmacy	Medium
S9	Central Canada	Recruitment Specialist	Transportation, Hospitality, Telecommunications, Finance, Management	Small
S10	Central Canada	Project Manager	Regulated professions (health care, early childhood education)	Small
S11	Central Canada	Employer Advisor	Health care-related occupations	Small
S12	Central Canada	Manager	Trades, Hospitality, Sales and service, Childcare, Health services support, Manufacturing	Medium
S13	Atlantic Provinces	Director, Employment Services	Health care, Trades, Hospitality	Medium
S14	Prairie Provinces	Employer Liaison	All	Small
S15	Central Canada	Manager, Language and Skill Development Programs	Retail, Health services, Information technology, Administration	Medium
S16	Central Canada	Vice President, Employment and Newcomer Services	Food, Hospitality	Medium
S17	Central Canada	Senior Vice President	All	Medium

Note: Respondent identifiers beginning with “SS” (i.e., SS1 to SS72) refer to responses to open-ended questions in the survey, not interviewees.

Employers

Case	Location	Job Title	Industry	Size of Organization
E1	Central Canada	Senior Manager, Talent Acquisition	Finance and insurance	Large
E2	Central Canada	Director, Operations & HR	Professional, scientific and technical services	Small
E3	Prairie Provinces	Associate Manager	Professional, scientific and technical services	Large
E4	Atlantic Provinces	Director, Professional Services	Professional, scientific and technical services	Small
E5	Central Canada	Chief Financial Officer	Health care and social assistance	Medium
E6	Central Canada	Owner	Professional, scientific and technical services	Small
E7	Remote	Vice President, Social Impact & Partnerships	Educational services	Medium
E8	Central Canada	Manager, Management Consulting	IT consulting	Large
E9	Central Canada	Director, Inclusion, Diversity and Equity	Information technology	Large
E10	Central Canada	Partner, Human Resources	Research Services	Medium



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