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ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHWAYS OF SKILLED IMMIGRANTS:

Looking for meaning amid starting again



Canada

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Executive summary

The rise in worker mobility and the global need for skilled and specialized labour has resulted in a significant increase in skilled migration (Tharenou & Kulik, 2020), with skilled immigrants remaining a crucial component of the growth of national and global economies (Crowley-Henry et al., 2018). Upon arrival, newcomers' expectations of employment and career success are based on Canada's continued need for skilled labour and its human capital-based immigration model. However, they often face career barriers in the local labour market, forcing them into "alternative careers." These alternatives, often characterized by occupational downgrading, create challenges not only to their professional identities but also to their overall sense of self. This qualitative study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of skilled immigrants' lived experiences of alternative careers.

While current literature has highlighted challenges experienced by immigrants entering the local labour market (Zikic & Klehe 2021; Wehrle et al., 2018), this study addresses the gap related to their experiences and sense of belonging post-organizational entry. Little is known about the quality of work in alternative careers for immigrants. Thus, we explore identity work and meaning-making processes of career actors for whom alternative career options often meant "beginning again."

Our findings identify three unique alternative career pathways: provisional, experimental, and reformist. Each is categorized by a unique form of identity work and accompanying types of meaning-making. This study advances existing literature on major career transitions, specifically career trajectories for immigrants inside local organizations and through unique forms of alternative careers. We also build on the existing literature by highlighting the career narratives of those who must make sense and search for meaning while pursuing less-than-ideal career opportunities. Finally, our findings provide practical implications about the career outcomes for immigrants, and more broadly integration outcomes (Zikic & Voloshyna, 2023) for employers, settlement agencies, and policymakers.



Introduction

The decision to migrate and pursue alternative careers in a new context is a complex process that significantly impacts individuals' work and life satisfaction (Tharenou & Kulik, 2020). Existing literature has predominantly explored skilled immigrants' career trajectories before entering local organizations and the professional identity challenges they face at the periphery (Zikic & Richardson, 2016).

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However, a significant gap remains in understanding the nuanced experiences of skilled immigrants actively engaged in alternative careers accompanied by career downshifting. This research aims to fill this gap by uncovering more about the lived experiences of immigrants who navigate alternative career paths in Canada. The study explores subjective dimensions, providing valuable insights into the personal narratives, motivations, challenges, and accomplishments of individuals experiencing alternative careers.

Additionally, there is limited insight into their search for purpose and meaning in this new work context (Sarpong & Maclean, 2021), and very little is known about their work quality and meaning-making once they leave the settlement sector and enter what is often defined as alternative careers. Alternative careers refer to career options available in the host country, often different but in some ways still related to the original profession or field in which they were initially trained. This study unfolds the narratives of those facing less-than-ideal career opportunities, examining how individuals make sense of situations where their career choices may not align with their initial expectations.

The literature on finding meaning at work has addressed the concept of “fit” between individuals’ motivations, values, and career goals. However, less attention has been given to understanding how individuals find meaning in situations characterized by a “mismatch” or lack of fit, where career choices do not align with expectations, education levels, or work preferences. This research, therefore, aims to answer the question: “How do immigrants develop a new professional identity and subsequently create meaning in new roles while navigating alternative careers?”

A unique contribution of this study is the identification of three distinct alternative career pathways: provisional, experimental, and reformist. These pathways shed light on the interplay between professional identity and the meaning-making process. Through this exploration, the study advances the literature on major career transitions, providing valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners.



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Research project overview

This study took place in Toronto, Canada. As an important and unique context for studying the career trajectories of newcomers, Toronto is a major global city that allows access to a diverse sample of immigrants.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the sampling criteria relied on a mix of purposeful and theoretical sampling. Our focus was on immigrants who switched to an alternative career path, likely without the possibility of returning to their original careers. Our goal was to connect with immigrants from the healthcare sector (for example, physicians, nurses, pharmacists, etc.) as they experienced a major career derailment due to external local labour market barriers (Zikic & Richardson, 2016). We recruited our participants through various immigrant settlement agencies in the Greater Toronto Region offering what are known as bridging programs for skilled immigrant professionals. We also used a snowball technique as a secondary recruitment strategy. Initial contact involved 48 interested individuals, with 30 meeting study criteria (i.e., individuals fully employed and engaged in alternative careers). Participant selection followed the theoretical saturation principle, aligning with available resources and time constraints (Kvale, 2008).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 immigrants were conducted between 2022 and 2023, and each interview lasted 60 to 80 minutes. The interviews explored immigrants' perceptions of their lived experiences (Gioia & Pitre, 1990) during major career transitions, focusing on past career trajectories, motivation to pursue alternative career options, challenges, and the meaning-making process amid alternative careers. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to assist in analyzing a large amount of data collection.

Our qualitative data analysis utilized grounded theory principles (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), proceeding in three stages of coding (open, axial, and selective) while constantly applying comparative methods and going back and forth between interviews and the literature that informed our thinking (Lock et al., 2022). These coding stages allowed us to build relationships between themes and relate the analytic categories to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).



Findings

We briefly present our findings based on the three groups we identified. For each group, we describe participants' reflections on their professional identity within the context of alternative careers and alternative career meaning-making. Our findings indicate a unique portrait of each career pathway as reflected by individuals' experiences of the transition.

Alternative Career as a Provisional Pathway

Individuals in this group view their alternative careers as temporary paths. They consider these roles as conduits for gaining Canadian work experience, building networks, and securing financial resources while pursuing broader career goals. This pathway is a stop on the way to them achieving their ultimate career objectives, such as returning to their original profession or attaining a higher-status position in a related field in Canada.

Resisting identity work: Individuals maintain a deep attachment to their original professional identity and continue aligning their career plans with their past roles, resisting modifications and viewing their alternative careers as temporary. We define this group as “resisting identity work” as they resist seeing themselves in a new role often linked to the significant investment of time, effort, and dedication they have made in their past careers. This attachment makes it challenging to develop a new sense of self and allows for any real connection or acceptance of the alternative career work context.

My main identity will not change. I was a physician.... So, this is how I see myself... I didn't think about how to identify myself because I feel like what I have is what I have. No one will take it from me, and I can decide to go back anytime and practise my own job” (26).

Utilitarian meaning-making: Individuals in this group find meaning in their alternative careers primarily as a tool for achieving personal and future career goals, lacking passion and creative exploration. We identify this as “utilitarian meaning-making” as it is founded on one's desire to use the alternative career as a steppingstone and a refusal to explore and seek any unique or more genuine meanings at the moment.

That's [alternative career] not my interest. That's not my passion.... I am doing it to support my household and build capacity in my CV to get into residency. I have passion for something else ... but whenever I see that my medical education I can help me here, and I feel that, okay, I am adding value somewhere ... it gives me some satisfaction. (6)

Alternative Career as an Experimental Pathway

In this pathway, individuals still see their alternative career roles as temporary but embrace them as an “experimental pathway.” They move beyond the realm of their past professions, exploring and gaining new skills within their alternative careers to move to desired jobs in the future.

Morphing identity work: Individuals in this group experience a noticeable change in how they view themselves within their alternative careers, actively exploring new identities and continuously transforming their sense of self. While they may have temporarily disengaged from their past professional identities, they are still searching for new meanings for themselves and more satisfying roles. We define this type of identity work as “morphing,” as it reveals a dynamic process whereby individuals observe and navigate changes in their professional identity triggered by the demands and requirements of their current role.

It was a difficult time in the beginning... Back home you're used to everyone calling you a doctor. But it's been like a year and a half now ... and slowly I'm getting used to it, I'm not a doctor and I'm not licensed to practice in this country, so slowly ... maybe like in four years down the line I don't know what I will identify with then. (28)

Anticipatory meaning-making: This group presents a more positive, forward-looking mindset, where individuals find meaning by exploring new opportunities within the alternative career context. We define this form of meaning-making as “anticipatory” as they are not currently settled enough to identify new meanings in their current alternative careers. Instead, they anticipate forthcoming changes that may bring new purpose and meaning.



It's[alternative career] temporary. I believe that I will not be in the same position for an unduly long time. But that offers me a good exposure into the Canadian public health system in general, even if it's from the periphery ... it is an important role to be in, always a learning process for me, which fulfills me (27)

Alternative career as a reformist pathway:

In contrast to the first and second pathways, this group demonstrates a greater level of acceptance and connection to their alternative careers, experiencing them as a conscious career change, which we define as a “reformist” pathway. They view the alternative career as an opportunity for advancement through learning and development, intending to stay in these roles for an extended period.

Sustaining identity work: Individuals in this group show definite disengagement from their previous professional life. We describe this type of identity as “sustaining” as individuals actively craft and redefine their sense of self in alignment with the demands and opportunities of the alternative career. They express dedication to their alternative careers, looking to achieve future career goals within this sustainable path.

I have come to a place where I've accepted that I'm not practising dentistry.... I've made my peace with that ... now I'm looking for what's the other thing that I can do to bring value to the life of others, to my environment, to my society.... For me, this [alternative career] is a job where I'm learning to grow. I would consider it a change.... I have my goals. So, I'm just trying to further learn and develop to get there. (30)

Progressive meaning-making: Sustaining identity work has empowered individuals to invest in their chosen alternative career path and align themselves with the new context. This investment, in return, fosters a sense of purpose and satisfaction in their current roles and allows for “progressive meaning-making.” The narratives in this group indicate a sense of fulfillment as they continuously advance and progress within their chosen trajectory, perceiving it as a sustainable career in the host country.

If I had plans to go back to nursing I'd say yes, this was a transitional job. But this is my actual job now ... this is my career path.... I'm learning so much.... And there's work-life balance. So, it's healthy personal and professional growth ahead of me. (21)





Implications and future directions

This qualitative study investigated the lived experiences of skilled immigrants who engaged in alternative careers. Given that many of these alternative career options may lead to underemployment and downward career shifts (Harrison et al., 2019), our study questioned, “How do immigrants develop a new professional identity and subsequently create meaning in the new roles while exploring alternative careers?”

Our findings can inform those offering career assistance, employers, and governments on at least three unique paths newcomers can pursue locally. We also expect that depending on the type of identity work and related meaning-making processes, individuals may also develop different efforts and motivations in their alternative careers; this can significantly impact job engagement and, eventually, turnover. Moreover, immigrants' satisfaction with alternative career pathways and their engagement in the local organization will also affect their integration success (Zikic & Voloshyna, 2023). Relatedly, individuals pursuing the provisional pathway may be less likely to fully engage with their roles and even colleagues at work than those in the exploratory or the reformist path. Finally, this study highlights the importance for governments and policymakers to better understand the powerful impact that various work and settlement programs (e.g., bridging programs) can play in the later career success of newcomers and ultimately their contributions to the local organizations and society.

In examining the three groups and their narratives, we found that neither group addressed the consequences of their relational movement or the fact that they had completely changed social circles and needed to immerse themselves in new relational networks. The current narratives were overwhelmingly focused on their agentic ability to develop successful alternative careers. We suggest that future research further explores the role and meanings related to the social context of alternative careers.

Another interesting finding for future consideration is the respondents' lack of focus on structural barriers or any external forces that may have led to their alternative career pathways, which differs from the narratives of immigrant professionals at the periphery in Zikic and Richardson's (2016) study. This may be an indication that once immigrants accept the local context challenges and decide to downshift into alternative careers (which was not the case in Zikic and Richardson's study), they may not look back but rather proactively seek to adapt and focus on the current career pathway.

Finally, another unexpected finding for future explorations is to further examine how alternative career transitions may be related to or even triggered by the non-work domain. While respondents in this study touched upon issues such as staying in specific alternative roles just to support the family, these narratives did not explicitly address how engaging in alternative careers may impact or be related to family relationships, for example.

Endnotes

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