

Project Insights Report

Career pathways of immigrants: Looking for meaning amid starting again



PARTNERS

York University



LOCATIONS

Across Canada



INVESTMENT

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Executive Summary

Skilled migrants often face barriers in the Canadian labour market, leading them to pursue other jobs in different sectors – alternative careers, often characterized by occupational downgrading. This creates challenges not only to their professional identities but also to their overall sense of self.

This project aimed to understand how skilled migrants determined their alternative career pathways. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 skilled immigrants in Toronto, Ontario, who had former careers in healthcare, but who were now engaged in alternative careers.

From these interviews, skilled immigrants described three different mindsets about their alternative careers, including viewing the shift as temporary, viewing it as exploratory or accepting the shift as permanent. These mindsets had an impact on how they were or were not shifting their sense of self to reflect their alternative careers.

This research deepens understanding of skilled immigrants for the career development professionals who support them and the firms who employ them.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Skilled immigrants who view their alternative careers as temporary may be less likely to engage fully with their roles.
- 2** Few of the skilled immigrants interviewed highlighted structural barriers as key factors leading to their alternative careers.
- 3** Some skilled immigrants use alternative careers as a strategy to gain Canadian work experience and build networks.

► The Issue

The rise in worker mobility and the global need for skilled and specialized labour has resulted in a significant increase in skilled migration. Skilled migrants remain a crucial component of the growth of both national and global economies.

However, skilled migrants often face significant barriers in the Canadian labour market, leading them to pursue other jobs in different sectors – 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. These unique careers, often characterized by occupational downgrading, create challenges not only to their professional identities but also to their overall sense of self. Little is known about migrants' quality of work life once they are actively engaged in alternative careers, often in lower-status jobs.



🔧 What We Investigated

This qualitative study aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of skilled migrants' lived experiences of alternative careers.

It explored the identities and meaning-making processes of individuals for whom alternative career options often meant “beginning again”. This project aimed to understand how skilled migrants develop a new professional identity and subsequently create meaning in new roles while navigating alternative pathways.

The project conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 skilled migrants in Toronto, Ontario, from the healthcare sector (e.g., physicians, nurses, pharmacists, etc.) as they experienced a major career derailment due to significant professional barriers. The interviews explored migrants' perceptions of their lived experiences during major career transitions, focusing on past career trajectories, motivation to pursue alternative career options, challenges, and the meaning-making process amid alternative careers.

Participants for the interviews were recruited through various immigrant settlement agencies in the Greater Toronto Region, offering what is known as Bridging Programs for skilled migrant professionals. A snowball technique was used as a secondary recruitment strategy. Initial contact involved 48 interested individuals, with 30 meeting the study criteria (i.e., individuals fully employed and engaged in alternative careers).

✔ What We're Learning

The interviews identified three alternative career pathways: provisional, experimental, and reformist, each categorized by a unique form of identity work and accompanying types of meaning-making.

Alternative career as a provisional pathway

Skilled immigrants sometimes view their alternative careers as temporary paths, as conduits for gaining experience, building networks, and securing the financial resources needed to pursue broader career goals. Skilled immigrants who consider their alternative careers as provisional are resistant to redefining their identity based on their new roles, many holding firmly to previous identities associated with their previous healthcare role.

Alternative career as an experimental pathway

Skilled immigrants may also view their alternative careers as temporary but experimental, allowing them to explore and gain new skills to move to desired jobs in the future. Skilled immigrants who feel this way may have a transforming sense of self where there is hope of forthcoming changes that may bring more purpose and meaning.

Alternative career as a reformist pathway

Some skilled immigrants may have made a conscious career change, where they are intending to stay in these alternative careers. Many of the skilled migrants interviewed for this project felt they were actively crafting and redefining their sense of self in relation to their alternative careers.

★ Why It Matters

This research is useful to career development professionals who work with newcomers, and for employers of skilled immigrants. A better understanding of how skilled migrants feel about alternative careers can help to tailor services to support their successful settlement and integration into the Canadian labour market.



This project also highlights the importance for governments and policymakers to better understand the powerful impact that various work and settlement programs, including bridging programs, can play in the later career success of newcomers and ultimately their contributions to the local organizations and society.

State of Skills:

Quality of Work

As Canada navigates continuing labour shortages in critical areas of the economy, policymakers and employers are looking for more effective approaches to recruit and retain workers

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

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