

Project Insights Report

Analysis of Programs for Welcoming Talented Immigrants



PARTNERS

Concordia University



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Quebec



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Executive Summary

In recent years, small and midsize manufacturing enterprises in Quebec's non-gateway regions have faced significant challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled workers, notably immigrants. Part of the challenge stems from their comparatively remote locations and complex, costly immigration processes. Moreover, temporary foreign workers often leave for better opportunities after gaining permanent residency, influenced by a range of factors including family ties and community involvement.

Despite these challenges, immigrants remain an important potential source of human capital that could help small and midsize enterprises (SMEs) outside urban areas meet their workforce challenges. However, to improve recruitment and retention, SMEs must broaden their approach to diversity.

To that end, the research project led by Concordia University investigated a range of onboarding strategies, focusing on the integration of immigrants with technical or trade skills into manufacturing SMEs. The study involved 28 participants of (11 immigrants and nine women) from four manufacturing SMEs across three different regions in Quebec. Through qualitative interviews and the collection of numerous onboarding documents, the research found that a workplace culture that fosters learning and communication significantly enhances immigrant satisfaction and compensates for gaps in structured onboarding processes.

To close gaps in recruitment approaches in a more systemic manner, the research project developed "[Bienvenue Onboard](#)," an innovative recruitment and retention model specifically geared toward SMEs. The model outlines seven cyclical steps that emphasize strategic recruitment, staff preparation and continuous adaptation to feedback. The findings from the project suggest that enhancing community-integration support alongside workplace integration can increase immigrant retention, especially in regions outside of large metropolitan areas.

The model offers insights into how other sectors and regions might approach similar challenges and is thus of considerable value to a wide range of policymakers, human resources professionals and organizational leaders.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 Non-linear, cyclical onboarding enhances integration by continuously adapting to feedback and evolving needs.
- 2 There is a need to provide French-language training on the job to help newcomers integrate into the workplace and non-gateway Quebec cities.
- 3 Workplace cultures that promote learning and communication increase immigrant satisfaction and aid in overcoming the gaps in structured onboarding processes.

► The Issue

In recent years, SMEs in Quebec, particularly those outside major urban centres or non-gateway communities have encountered difficulties in recruiting and retaining skilled workers—a situation that only intensified during COVID-19. Historically, these non-urban regions have faced challenges in attracting and integrating immigrant workers, who possess essential technical and trade skills but are often underutilized. The process of integrating these workers is also hindered by cultural, linguistic and regulatory barriers.

Many local SMEs are not fully prepared to integrate immigrant workers due to a lack of resources or knowledge that would allow them to implement effective onboarding programs that cater to the diverse needs of immigrants. This gap not only impedes the economic integration of immigrants but also prevents SMEs from tapping into the full potential of this available labour pool and limits regional economic growth.

Specifically designed onboarding practices for SMEs outside of major gateway cities is essential for mitigating labour shortages and ensuring the ongoing viability of these critical economic contributors.



What We Investigated

The purpose of this study was to explore onboarding practices provided by SME manufacturing employers outside of large cities in Quebec, as well as perceptions of those practices among staff and immigrants. In particular, the study asked SME employees from across ranks and departments to describe their involvement and experiences with onboarding immigrants, the challenges they faced and the perceived skills and training needs of immigrant employees. The study also asked immigrant employees to describe their experiences and perceptions of employers' onboarding practices and their own perceived skills and training needs.

More specifically, the research set forth to examine the following research questions:

1. What challenges do non-urban Quebec manufacturing SMEs face in terms of recruitment, retention and training of immigrants?
2. What set of practices (welcome program) do they use to facilitate recruitment, integration and training of employees with immigrant backgrounds?
3. How do SMEs perceive the match between their talent needs and skills? How do they perceive the available immigrant labour pool? What is this perception based on?
4. How do SMEs evaluate immigrant reception programs implemented by stakeholders—governmental and non-governmental—in order to support SMEs in their recruitment processes?
5. What experiences and perceptions do immigrants employed in the regions have of the program? And what experiences or perceptions do immigrants have of their employers' welcomes?
6. What support do immigrants believe they need to successfully integrate into their workplaces and regions?

Four manufacturing SMEs from three different regions in Quebec participated in the study. The research methodology involved conducting 60- to 90-minute, in-depth qualitative interviews with six to eight employees from each company, totaling 28 participants. This was a diverse group of 11 immigrants and nine women in the male-dominated manufacturing industry.

✓ What We're Learning

The research revealed a number of critical lessons with respect to the recruitment and retention of immigrants in SMEs.

A comprehensive model was designed to help onboard and retain immigrant employees The research resulted in the development of the “Bienvenue Onboard” model, which outlined seven cyclical steps tailored to improve the recruitment and retention of immigrants and temporary foreign workers in SMEs. The model emphasizes the importance of strategic recruitment, preparation of staff, and continuous investment in employee development.

Workplace-based language training aids integration

Learning on the job turned out to be one of the most effective ways for immigrant employees to integrate into both their workplace cultures and communities. This was also the case for linguistic training. In particular, providing language training on the job facilitates integration while providing valuable skills to the newcomer to better improve workplace performance. This approach to delivering language training may also have longer-term benefits to the newcomer, as the language training is anchored in each newcomer's industry and field of work.

A culture of learning improves satisfaction

Employers noted that a workplace that fosters a culture of learning, teamwork and open communication significantly contributes to the satisfaction levels of newly onboarded immigrants. This is particularly important in less structured onboarding scenarios where organizational culture compensates for procedural gaps.

Promoting wider social integration helps retain immigrant employees

Efforts to improve social integration within the community—such as family ties, housing stability and access to quality education—plays a pivotal role in the decision of immigrants to stay or leave a community. Efforts could include providing financial advice (such as opening a bank account or signing a mortgage) and support in accessing childcare, registering children for school and joining social and professional groups. This underscores the importance of comprehensive community integration support alongside workplace integration.

Training non-immigrant employees fosters inclusive workplaces

The study suggests that SMEs can enhance immigrant retention by both training immigrant employees in the workplace culture and training the current, non-immigrant employees to be able to work with colleagues who may not fully understand company processes or the language.

★ Why It Matters

Improving the recruitment and retention of immigrants in SMEs across Canada, particularly outside urban areas, is crucial for a number of reasons. First, SMEs are vital to the overall Canadian economy and play an integral role in smaller local economies, often acting as the backbone of rural communities. By tapping into the diverse skills and perspectives of immigrants, these businesses can drive innovation, enhance productivity and address persistent local labour shortages. This not only strengthens the economic foundation of these areas but also fosters a more inclusive and dynamic business environment. Immigrants often bring unique entrepreneurial spirit and cultural insights that can help enrich SMEs. Successful integration of immigrants into local economies can help bridge social and economic gaps, promoting greater community cohesion and resilience.

The findings from this project help to inform a wide range of stakeholders, notably policymakers, human resources professionals, newcomer-serving professionals and organizational leaders within and beyond the manufacturing sector. The findings inform them on best practices in the recruitment and retention of immigrants within SMEs, notably those outside urban areas.

The lessons from this research also have broader implications for workforce equity, diversity and inclusion. In particular, by adopting a wide definition of diversity and linking it to company policies and values, organizations can create more harmonious and inclusive workplaces and be more successful at attracting and retaining the immigrant talent they need. This approach not only benefits immigrant workers but also enhances overall workplace culture, which can lead to improved productivity and innovation.

► What's Next

Future research is needed to understand the use of this emerging seven-step iterative method among SMEs in different industries and different contexts. Currently, much of the available research investigates onboarding without differentiating by industry, thus ignoring industry-specific factors that may impact the process and retention. Industry-specific research would serve to develop industry-specific profiles that would help customize onboarding strategies to the specific needs of different industries.

Recognizing this need, the Quebec government recently developed an [Integration Support and Accompaniment Program](#), which aims to support newcomer-serving organizations outside of Montreal.



State of Skills: What Works for Newcomer Integration

Industry-specific, employer-driven initiatives have been successful in accelerating and enhancing the employment prospects of newcomers.

[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.

How to Cite This Report

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