

# Welcome

**Strong onboarding program, cultural awareness can help ensure recent immigrants are safe on the job**

By Amanda Silliker

**I**'m working at the freezer and I stay for eight hours, not giving us a break. I feel sick one day, sick like I can't breathe, and the cold... One day I passed out. Somebody came in and tell me, you'd better not say words. You're not allowed to talk."

"I was working in a pizza store. I didn't know how to use the oven. So, that should have been part of the training because I burned myself several times."

"After I came here maybe for three months or four months, I was working in [a factory], picking the package, the carton and keeping in the skids. And I told my supervisor it is very heavy, and now I have a problem in my back. He told me, 'Remember, if you will go now, I will send a report against you to the temporary agency. They will not call you again for any kind of job.'"

These are just some of the comments that the Institute for Work and Health (IWH) heard from recent immigrants and refugees in the Greater Toronto Area as part of a study it conducted a few years ago. Recently, WorkSafe New Zealand met with the institute's researchers as well as other health and safety experts from across Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia to learn more about health and safety in a "superdiverse" country — one where a large proportion of the population is born elsewhere.

According to the resulting report, *Health and Safety Regulators in a Superdiverse Context*, it is well established that immigrant populations have a greater risk of poor workplace health and safety outcomes compared to other workers.

But it's important not to blame the worker during these discussions, notes Jules Arntz-Gray, director, training and awareness branch, at the Ontario Ministry of Labour.



"It can sound like, 'Oh because this person is a new Canadian, they're risky,' but it's not them that are risky, it's the fact that workplace parties — employers, supervisors, even myself as a regulator — need to understand that when there's diversity involved, in order to make sure that the necessary awareness, training or knowledge is there, we might need to do a bit more than we normally do," he says.

Because there are so many proven benefits to having a diverse workforce, this OHS challenge is not something that employers should shy away from. Laurence Beatch, director of organizational health and safety at the City of Vancouver, is a strong believer that the workforce needs to reflect the culture and the mosaic of the community.

"The benefit of diverse workforces is our ability to tap into the many values, strengths, different cultures and backgrounds' perspectives and abilities and disabilities that people

can bring into the workforce," he says. "I think it enriches our workforce and better enables us to respond to our clients and provide the services they need."

The report found that past experience of recent immigrants may lead them to having different views around safety in their new country. It cited the concept of risk blindness, whereby workers either don't see risk or see it as inherently acceptable because of their cultural background.

They might also have apathetic or negative views toward health and safety regulators, due to the role comparable institutions played in their birth countries, found the report.

Many immigrants might have a different risk perception because the jobs they are doing in Canada are jobs that they have never done before. They might not be aware of the hazards or even the fact that they are doing hazardous work, says Basak

Yanar, who was one of the researchers on the IWH study on recent immigrants and refugees.

"They come with diverse professional experience, but most of the time these jobs were concentrated in manual labour, warehouses, hospitality, restaurants. Some didn't have any experience in these jobs, and these were hazardous jobs compared to what they did," she says.

When starting work in Canada, recent immigrants will likely not be familiar with health and safety systems in this country. Many are unaware of the three basic health and safety rights: the right to refuse, right to participate and right to know. These rights might be embedded in Canadian legislation, but they are not common around the world.

"They won't even know what they don't know," says Arntz-Gray. "There are things we take for granted here: 'Of course, everyone knows you have the



**There are things we take for granted here: 'Of course, everyone knows you have the right to refuse unsafe work.'**



right to refuse unsafe work' and 'Of course, you have the right to tell your supervisor if a machine looks dangerous,' but those assumptions you can't necessarily make."

Zhila Pirmoradi, project manager, integrated strategy and utilities planning for the City of Vancouver, came to Canada 10 years ago as an international student from Iran. The culture of safety that she encountered in Canada was strikingly different from that of her home country.

"When I moved to Canada, I had an internship in the food industry and for first time I heard about non-sliding shoes that I had to get, all that kind of different safety gear. And when I came to the city, I learned 'Oh, OK, we need steel-toe shoes,'" she says. "There are so many different types of shoes!"

She says that immigrants have to learn that health and safety "matters way more, potentially here, than where they came from."

There may also be a reluctance to speak up about safety issues among new immigrants. In their old country, it might have been improper to do so or workers might not have been empowered to speak up. These beliefs are carried with them to their new jobs in Canada. For example, the IWH research found that many of these individuals found their jobs through their ethnic community. The participants felt very grateful to the person who gave them their job and felt that voicing concerns would be disrespectful.

"This person is your manager and also, as one participant said, their elder... There was a really interesting dynamic," Yanar says. "There is a different kind of loyalty to the employer."

One participant was coughing and sneezing when working with a particular chemical, but they felt they could not discuss it with their manager.

"It's very hard for me, because she's from my country. I know her in my country, we have a tradition: You have to respect somebody if she's older than you. So, I have to respect her, but sometimes she abuses me."

It might not just be the feeling of gratefulness that spurs the unrelenting loyalty; their livelihood could be on the line. In the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) program, for example, the workers' visa is tied to that one employer and the employer can end their visa for any reason.

"That's loyalty forced through precarity. They are worried about losing their job," says Arntz-Gray.

To address this, the federal government is currently piloting a program in British Columbia that allows workers to switch employers if they wish.

"By setting up this permitting system where you're tied to one employer, are we putting these workers in a place where they are going to feel that they can never raise an issue?" says Arntz-Gray.

Onboarding is one way to bring immigrant workers up to speed. It is to be expected that these individuals are not necessarily familiar with requirements, terminology, specific equipment in their workplace and safety instructions, Pirmoradi says.

"A decent onboarding in health and safety can help them work more effectively, comply with desired requirements and be exposed to less incidents that can be costly to them and to their workplace, for sure," she says.

The safety team should have a cultural awareness of the barriers that a new immigrant employee is facing

and try to understand how health and safety was regulated in their home country. Arntz-Gray spent some time working in Malawi and he quickly came to understand a huge barrier that many individuals faced around health and safety — the belief that when someone dies it's because God has called them home.

"It was kind of hands up in the air, you can't really stop these things. It's the same for accidents in the workplace; this idea of it's a person's time, kind of an element of fate," explains Arntz-Gray.

If a health and safety professional has an individual who comes from this type of cultural background, they would need to take this into consideration during training or when creating the health and safety program. In fact, safety programs may need to be tailored "to a very specific degree" to ensure they meet the needs of all workers, he says.

"Most health and safety professionals would go, 'Woah, what? This is beyond my skillset. I'm an expert at guarding machines.' But if you're part of the team that develops awareness training or anything that requires... a human element to implementing your health and safety, you might need to take these things into account," says Arntz-Gray.

It would go a long way for the safety professional to have a conversation with the new worker to better

understand their safety knowledge and background. Not only would this help the safety professional understand the cultural and linguistic composition of their workforce, but it would give the immigrant professionals even more exposure to new terminologies and familiarizing themselves with safety procedures, Pirmoradi says.

Pirmoradi sees having an understanding of an organization's cultural diversity as similar to using a map. It shows where you are, where you need to go and how you can get there based on all existing constraints and possibilities.

"I believe that awareness of different cultures is just like knowing where we are, so that in order for us to get there together, better strategies and processes can be designed in such a way that can leverage all the assets and advantages of a diverse team," she says.

According to the New Zealand report, new immigrants also face various mental health issues stemming from racial discrimination and harassment, downward mobility and lack of cultural safety in the workplace. Cultural safety is defined as an environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need.

"Sometimes, what happens is Canada creates great expectations for our newcomers and they arrive with

**ULINE**  
SHIPPING SUPPLY SPECIALISTS

**OVER 2,500  
SAFETY PRODUCTS  
IN STOCK**

**ORDER BY 6 PM FOR  
SAME DAY SHIPPING**

**COMPLETE CATALOG 1-800-295-5510**



**You might have 10 people who speak Urdu and some of them have been in Canada for 10 to 15 years, fully fluent in English. Use those people as your allies.**

great enthusiasm, but I don't always think we adequately welcome them and provide them the support and guidance that's going to integrate them into the country so they succeed both personally and professionally," says Beatch.

Doing work for which one is over-qualified, also known as occupational mismatch, can take a toll on mental health. The IWH research found it was very rare for recent immigrants to find work in their own profession in Canada. Immigrants are more likely to be found in precarious, part-time and shift work as well as non-unionized environments and small businesses.

"We have heard some conversations about feeling hopeless and disappointed because immigrants may not expect they are going to find themselves in these kinds of jobs," says Yanar.

A recent report from the United Way of the Greater Toronto Area paints a bleak picture for immigrants. It found that no matter how long an individual has been in Canada, the fact that they were not born here means they are earning less. Additionally, the racial divide in the GTA has reached an historic high with racialized groups becoming poorer over time. For every dollar a white person in the GTA earns, a racialized person takes home on average 69 cents, the report found.

It's important for employers to provide mental health support to all their employees, including those that are culturally specific. When one employee said they would like to speak with an elder rather than a traditional counsellor, Beatch made this option available through the City of Vancouver's employee assistance program provider.

"I get learnings from them and as I hear, my gosh, I wasn't aware of that cultural need or cultural sensitivity, how do I ensure that we as an organization become sensitive to it and respond to various employees' needs?"

Additionally, language barriers can contribute to feelings of hardship, rejection and difficulty in making meaningful relations at the workplace for some new immigrants, Pirmoradi says.

"And the feeling of being rejected can be the very Achilles heel for even emotionally strong human beings," she adds.

Having poor language skills may also inhibit workers from expressing themselves, Yanar says.

"People, because they may lack language proficiency, they may feel hesitant to speak up," she says. "Or one person [in our research] had an injury, but she didn't know how to explain it to her doctor."

Language barriers can also make it difficult to understand training, instruction and signage. Most provincial safety associations or

governments have posters and resources available in many different languages. Some employers have a buddy system where a newcomer is paired with another employee who speaks their language. According to the New Zealand report, foreign workers are more likely to respond to and take advice from their peers and people within their community.

"Quite often, what happens is you might get a nucleus where people apply for a job because there are already some people from their community who work there. So, you might have 10 people who speak Urdu and some of them have been in Canada for 10 to 15 years, fully fluent in English. Use those people as your allies for new people coming in," says Arntz-Gray.

But language might not be the only issue; it could go deeper to literacy.

"People might not be literate even in their own language," Yanar says. "So, simplification of occupational health and safety training, using more visual materials and really making sure the new workers understand [is crucial]."

At a previous employer, Beatch and his team made educational videos that showed the thoughts of a first-aid attendant. Because it was just the written thoughts on the screen and not voices, translation was much easier and the videos were produced in multiple languages.

When Pirmoradi came to Canada, language was the last of her concerns because she had been learning English since she was 10. But even for her,

there were some difficult phone conversations in the early days.

"But I feel for the capable skilled immigrants who may find language as one of the concerns before and after their arrival, as communications is such a key aspect in ensuring one's success," she says.

To help these individuals along, Pirmoradi recommends having visualized procedures, a list of company-wide abbreviations and glossary, mentorship support and standardized work.

Local consulates are a great resource for safety professionals, although they wouldn't normally think to go there, says Arntz-Gray. The Mexican consulate, for example, works with many Canadian employers to help them with issues they might have around communicating safety to Mexican workers.

Cultural intelligence training is something that employers might want to consider implementing. For the safety team, the training can help them understand the issues that may arise for various groups of workers and how these may increase their vulnerability to injury.

"It's important for safety managers to adopt that cultural lens," says Yanar.

But all employees can benefit from being more culturally aware.

"[Make] sure it is everyone that has these skills of understanding different cultures and managing that and interacting. It's not so much about what languages and what cultures anymore, it's more about this is our environment, it's diverse," Yanar says.

Regardless of their own experiences and understanding of different cultures, all workers need to be respectful of each other, stresses Beatch.

"When I hire someone, I am not hiring someone to be a friend of mine, I am hiring them to do a job and we do not have to like each other — and I tell employees that. What you do have to do is respect each other. And my expectation is respect and part of that is to respect the differences," says Beatch.

At the end of the day, it's on employers, supervisors, health and safety professionals, trainers and regulators to make sure recent immigrants are healthy and safe on the job, says Arntz-Gray. The data is very clear, he notes, that the first 30 days on the job are the most dangerous. But the challenges that are presented during this first month are amplified for immigrants because they are also grappling with cultural issues.

"As a health and safety professional, if we don't take this seriously, we will not succeed in implementing health and safety management systems, health and safety programs," Arntz-Gray says. "If we are ignoring the potential for increased health and safety risk for recent immigrants, we are going to have continued injuries, illness and death." **cos**

## Announcement - Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals 2019-20 Executive Officers



Monica A. Szabo, Board Chair, has over 25 years of experience in occupational hygiene, health and safety, and is a senior leader who has built a reputation for developing progressive and results-oriented health and safety solutions for the broader public sector. Monica is currently President of Szabo Safety & Operations Services. In addition to holding the CRSP, Monica is a Registered Occupational Hygienist (ROH), a Certified Occupational Health and Safety Technologist (OHST) and a Certified Municipal Manager (CMM III). Monica has been a Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP)<sup>®</sup> since 1993.



Kevin Dawson, Board Past Chair, is currently the principal consultant at Omnius Consulting in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Prior to forming Omnius, he was the Manager, Safety & Health at Nalcor Energy. Kevin holds a B.Eng. (Mech) and a MBA from Memorial University of Newfoundland. Kevin is a member of the Canadian Society of Safety Engineering (CSSE) and has served as the CSSE Avalon Chapter Chair. He is also a past Chair of the Newfoundland and Labrador Construction Safety Association. Kevin has been a Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP)<sup>®</sup> since 1998.



David Johnston, Board Vice-Chair, is an environmental, health and safety professional with over 35 years' experience. He is currently employed by Toronto Hydro as the Director, Environment, Health and Safety. David has worked throughout Canada and the United States in a variety of industries and is recognized for leading organizations to safety excellence. In addition, he is a tireless volunteer contributing to the advancement of safety and the profession through serving on multiple committees, associations and boards. In 2013, he was selected as Canada's Safety Leader of the Year. David has been a Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP)<sup>®</sup> since 1999.



Robin Angel, Secretary-Treasurer, is the Regional Director Occupational Health and Safety Division, Nova Scotia Department of Labour and Advanced Education. Robin has diverse experience in the disciplines of occupational health and safety, environmental management, industrial hygiene, and quality assurance systems. Her experience includes chemical manufacturing, oil and gas exploration, oil refinery operations, corporate industrial hygiene, tire manufacturing and occupational health and safety programs. Robin has been a Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP)<sup>®</sup> since 2006.

In addition to the Executive Committee, the 2019-20 Governing Board includes newly elected Governors Tehzib Chadwick, CRSP, CIH, ROH; David Larson, CSP, CFPS, ARM, CRSP; Peter Sturm, BA, CHSC, CRSP; and returning Governors include Paul Belair, MBA, CRSP; Mark Fernandes, MBA, CRSP; Marianne Matichuk, CRSP, CHSC, COHS, CNM; Dave Rebbitt, MBA, CRSP, CHSC, CET, CD; Sandra Stephens, LLB, LLM (Public Member) and the Executive Director is Nicola J. Wright, BA (Hons), CAE.

The Board of Canadian Registered Safety Professionals is a public interest, not-for-profit, federally incorporated self-regulating organization which sets the certification standards for the OHS profession.



www.bcrsp.ca  
info@bcrsp.ca