

June 18, 2009

Canada's need for foreign talent remains strong

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Special to The Globe and Mail

Accounting firms are frustrated with slow immigration system, difficulty in securing work permits for skilled professionals

Experienced chartered accountants from abroad are still in great demand in Canada even though the current economic crisis is causing layoffs in other sectors.

And, luckily, the federal government has mostly been listening to concerns about the shortage, business immigration lawyer Jonathan Leebosh says.

Mr. Leebosh, a senior manager in Egan LLP, an immigration law practice allied with Ernst & Young, offers accountancy firms assistance in moving staff and personnel to Canada.

"It's a very interesting time," he says. "Historically, there has been a shortage [of CAs] over the last 10 years. There's always been demand for accountants that Canada itself hasn't been able to meet."

Accountancy is one of 38 occupations listed as being needed in this country for the foreseeable future by Immigration Canada. Mr. Leebosh says Immigration Canada is being more focused in terms of what type of immigrants are allowed into the country.

"To me, the story to tell is that accountants are still in demand in Canada, maybe not to the same degree as a couple of years ago, but they are recognized as an occupation in demand."

Mr. Leebosh's firm works with human resources departments of chartered accountancy firms, including Ernst & Young, and helps them shape their hiring strategies.

His biggest difficulty, he adds, is the slowness of the immigration system, with permanent residency taking up to 12 months to complete. And then there is Canada's notorious difficulty in providing short-term work permits to fill immediate employment gaps.

"Apart from all the procedural issues, what is happening now is that the government is taking steps they feel are necessary to ensure that Canadians are offered jobs before foreign workers," he says.

But qualified Canadians are in short supply.

"Our clients identify their accountancy needs and once they're identified, they're probably in desperate need for them, and they can't really wait 12 months," Mr. Leebosh says.

"Typically we are trying to get work permits for people in the interim. It would be wrong to say that the short-term work permits aren't there, but they are certainly very challenging to obtain."

Fiona Macfarlane says 25 per cent of Ernst & Young's work force in Canada are skilled immigrants. Originally from South Africa, she emigrated in 1987. After a struggle to find work, Ms. Macfarlane is the firm's Americas chief operating officer, tax, a \$3-billion practice.

"At a recent tax event we had all the people from the practice in Canada come together, and we welcomed the audience in their native language. We had to stop at about 15 languages. We were running out of time. It was amazing and very moving," she says.

"You think about where the clients are coming from ... they may not be headquartered in North America any more. They may be headquartered in China or Dubai. So to have that kind of skill set and context within your own practice can be very powerful."

Ms. Macfarlane says Ernst & Young put a lot of effort and resources into programs.

"We depend on immigrants for our economic growth. We try to level the playing fields. We have Succeeding-in-Canada training, we have cross-cultural training," she says. "Once you understand there are differences and understand your own biases, it's much easier for you to figure out what the other person is saying and help them be successful."

Tim Forristal, the vice-president of education at the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants, says Canadian employers want to be able to hire foreign CAs with confidence. "Canada is looking for lots of people right now, especially those with an international financial reporting background," Mr. Forristal says. "Establishing best practice [in setting qualification levels in foreign CAs] is a huge part of our mission."

The CICA has approved 13 foreign designated accounting bodies, whose members need only to pass local tax and law exams in the province or territory in which they intend to practise. They are: Ordre des Experts Comptables (France), the Japanese Institute of Certified Public Accountants, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia, Institut des Réviseurs d'Enterprises de Belgique, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, the Hong Kong Institute of Certified Public Accountants, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland, Instituto Mexicano des Contadores Publicos, Nederland Instituut van Register Accountants, New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland, the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants, and the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy in the U.S.

Four foreign designated accounting bodies have been determined not to be equivalent: The Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants, the Philippines Institute of Certified Public Accountants, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka, and the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants of the United Kingdom.

And a further four are under review: the Institutes of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Zimbabwe.

Foreign CAs from other jurisdictions are not automatically eligible for exemptions from any education or examination requirement of the Canadian CA program. They can ask for assessments to see if any exemptions apply. If not, then they must complete all requirements.

GIVING A LEG UP

Fiona Macfarlane, the Americas chief operating officer for tax at Ernst & Young, has developed an approach to supporting immigrant employees that she calls "The Five Cs":

Credibility

Immigrants need a hand to ensure their credentials can be used to their full potential in Canada, but in some cultures it is considered arrogant to be self-promoting. Find someone who came from that country to provide guidance, if needed.

Confidence

Newly arrived immigrants might feel unsure of themselves. Not being familiar with Canadian household icons can be daunting, for instance. Make an effort to reassure employees.

Competence

Companies can teach immigrants technical and soft skills that are relevant to the local marketplace. This can help put their prior experiences into a Canadian-relevant context.

Courage

Immigrants tend to be courageous people. Companies that inspire them to capitalize on this talent will benefit, Ms. Macfarlane says.

Champion

Find someone who can champion new immigrant employees and help them prepare for their first interview, or build a network.

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