

2. Understanding and managing challenges

How important are language skills?

Communication skills are certainly a priority in hiring, whether your applicant is Canadian born or a recent immigrant. Many positions require an applicant to be able to communicate effectively, to speak English with some degree of fluency, and to read and write in the English language.

The good news is that many immigrants come to Canada with good language skills. English is taught as a second language in many countries and in Canada's point-based immigration system for skilled workers, language skills count for almost one-quarter of the total assessment.

For newcomers who don't arrive with strong English skills, language training is a priority. London offers many language programs for newcomers; some of them are free some are fee-for-service, and some may be delivered in the workplace.

Given the opportunity, most newcomers will work hard to make sure their English skills are where they need to be.

Keep in mind, an employer who hires skilled immigrants who are able to communicate effectively in more than one language, will have a business edge as local markets increase in diversity and international markets grow.

Language/communication barriers are worth overcoming. Here are some ideas to assist employers:

- **Language assessment** – Become familiar with ways of assessing a newcomer's ability to speak English. The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks offers an assessment tool. They can also help employers develop evaluation tools that are specific to an occupation or job. Visit their website at www.language.ca.

- **Language skills upgrading** – If an employee has difficulty with language skills, consider offering encouragement or financial support for the worker in attending an English upgrading program. Often with this additional training, you will have a loyal employee who is ready to accept additional responsibilities.
- **Occupation specific language training** – Many immigrants come with strong basic English skills, but they may not have mastered Canada's version of occupation-specific language. There are community based programs offered for some professions, such as engineers and health care workers, but this kind of training can also be provided by coworkers. You might consider teaming your new worker with another employee who can act as a coach, helping with occupational language. In a short time, most workers will pick up on the necessary vocabulary.
- **A strong accent** – A good question to consider is whether an accent will interfere with the ability of an employee to perform his or her duties. In many cases, the answer will be no. Many newcomers to Canada haven't had many opportunities to practice language skills, but when employed full-time in an English speaking environment, they quickly gain the ability to speak in a clear manner.

Many newcomers say employers make the mistake of thinking an applicant's English language skills reflect their ability to perform their job.

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Local Resources for Language Training

Employers may wish to refer newcomers to resources for improving language skills. The Government of Canada offers language training for newcomers. The program is called LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada). Assessment and referrals for LINC are conducted at the London Cross Cultural Learner Centre. Classes are taught at many London locations including through the Thames Valley District School Board and the YM-YWCA.

Fanshawe College also offers a one-year General Arts and Science program in English Language Studies and the Centre for Lifelong Learning offers English as a Second Language courses.

For information on Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) contact the London Cross Cultural Learner Centre at 505 Dundas Street, London or phone 519-432-1133.

London Cross Cultural Learner Centre – www.lcclc.org

Thames Valley District School Board – www.tvdsb.on.ca/ace

Fanshawe College – www.fanshawec.on.ca

Centre for Lifelong Learning – www.cfl.on.ca

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