

Greater Victoria



Local Immigration Partnership



DIVERSITY WORKS!

IMMIGRATION AND EMPLOYMENT
IN THE CAPITAL REGION

Summit Report



EVERYONE IS WELCOME

Land acknowledgement

The Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership (GVLIP) brings together individuals and organizations located on the traditional territories of the WSÁNEĆ and Lək' wəŋən speaking peoples. As newcomers and settlers, we are uninvited visitors on this land and we acknowledge with respect the Songhees, Esquimalt, Tsartlip, Tseycum, Tsawout, Pauquachin and T'sou-ke nations whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day. In the spirit of creating strong, respectful relationships, we are committed to working in partnership with all Indigenous communities who reside in the Greater Victoria area, to reduce the impact of colonization that continues through our work with newcomers.



"Be mindful, walk with a good heart and a good mind."

- Brianna Bear, Songhees Nation



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INTRODUCTION



Florentien Verhage, Immigrant Integration Research & Planning Manager delivering the GVLIP Diversity Works introduction.

This report captures the round table conversations at the GVLIP summit *Diversity Works! Immigration and Employment in the Capital Region* that took place on June 7, 2022 in collaboration with the City of Victoria.

The conversations were facilitated by Silvia Mangu Alene and Jasindra Jawanda. Panelists Neha Sharma, Mohamad Alwafaai, Aboubakar Idriss, Karima Ramji, Samarth Mod, and Richard Michaels spoke about their experiences with racism and anti-immigrant sentiment in the workplace; shared suggestions for employers to change workplace cultures; and spoke about the benefit of having a diverse workforce.

The plenary presentation given by Patrick MacKenzie, CEO of the Immigrant Employment Council of BC, is linked at the end of the report.

This event was funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

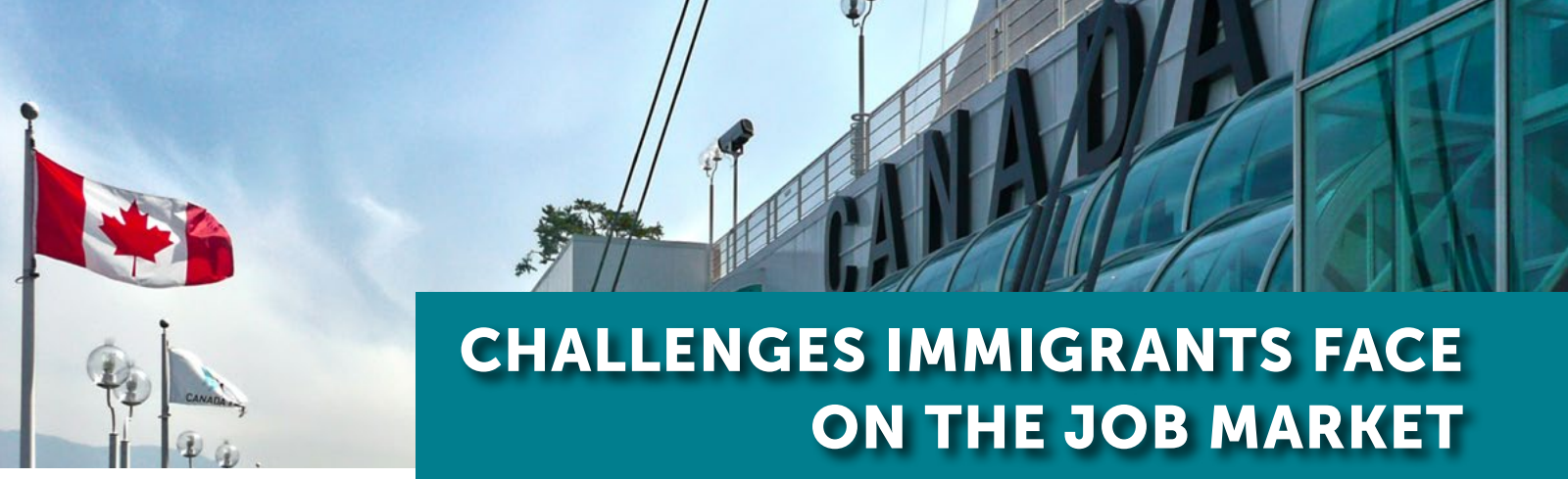
To best capture the voice of our speakers and to do justice to their insights, much of this report relies on quotations. Quotations are used as pull quotes and directly in-text.

We are grateful to our speakers for so generously sharing their stories and knowledge. Their experiences and insights are central to this report. Indigenous people, immigrants, people of colour, and self-identified women and gender diverse individuals (especially individuals who find themselves at the intersection of these identities) have historically been denied speech and it is long past time to start listening.



“We were not given the mic for a long time. And now that we have the mic as people of colour, we’re gently going to stay here, and we’re going to use it.”

- Jasmindra Jawanda



CHALLENGES IMMIGRANTS FACE ON THE JOB MARKET

1 Erasure of education or experience

Many immigrants arrive with high level-degrees and with years of work experience but cannot find fitting jobs in which they can meaningfully use their skills and knowledge. The GVLIP found that in Greater Victoria more than 30% of working immigrants with university degrees were employed in unskilled-labor positions.

Employers often do not recognize the years of education and work experience that someone has gained outside of Canada. This happens even if during the immigration process their education and experience have been assessed as a “match” for the Canadian labour market. There is a “fundamental mismatch between national immigration policy, which assesses the value of an immigrant’s skills, and the value that the nation’s employers place on that same immigrant’s skills” ([World Education Service, 2019, 18](#)).



“Immigration is an exercise in optimism, and if immigrants believe they’re going to make it, we all have to make sure that’s true. We have to do our best to make sure that’s true.”

- Patrick MacKenzie



“It takes courage to approach someone knowing full well that they will not understand you. They’ll be like, ‘Hey, what did you say?’ You repeat. They still don’t understand and answer a very different question with a smile.”

- Sam Mod

2 Language barriers, networking and local connections

It can be difficult to translate overseas experience and expertise into a Canadian context especially when learning a new language and finding oneself in a different cultural setting. This challenge can be compounded for newly arrived immigrants who do not yet have a local network that provides a reference to them. Many immigrants find that their perceived accent or limited proficiency in the English language counts against them in a professional networking context.

3 Insularity of the local community

Immigrants arriving in this community can experience culture shock and isolation. GVLIP's study on racism reported that [71 % of racialized individuals face racism regularly in this community and 70% felt isolated](#) because of it.

In addition, [a 2019 Canada-wide study](#) that showed that 68% of white people in Canada only have occasional contact or no contact at all with people from different racial or cultural groups. Without overlap between communities, many white Canadians might not personally hear stories about the challenges racialized communities face.

4 Hiring bias against non-white sounding names and other markers of racialization

It is hard to find a job if you are a racialized individual or someone with a non-white sounding name. Jobs do not come easily to racialized individuals and individuals with non-white sounding names. [A large body of research](#) supports that bias against certain names leads to discrimination in the hiring process.



“If you’re calling your friend, who do you call? I’m talking about the majority of white people in Canada who do not have a person of color or minority within their inner circle. What does that mean? It means that white people are not even aware of the challenges immigrants face.”

- Aboubakar Idriss

“The name that you are so attached to will probably be your enemy for a very long time.”

- Neha Sharma





RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

1

Increase Understanding and Value Immigrant Contributions and Potential

Grow to understand a variety of cultures. Start a journey of learning and recognize that connecting across cultural difference is not just important for job-seeking immigrants. Employers can use networking opportunities to learn more about different racial and cultural communities: “Ask people how they are, have a cup of coffee with them. Learn about others and you realize that the more you learn, the more barriers are broken down. Our culture is not just a textbook that you could read, it is found at the end of experiences that we collectively need to go through and on which we can build, hopefully, a better future for oneself and for everyone” (Aboubakar Idriss).

Recognize potential and give people a chance. Give newcomers opportunities to lead or develop new skills, not just at an entry level but in positions for which they have specific training and experience.

Believe immigrant applicants. When a candidate tells you they have a certain educational and workplace experience, trust that this is true.

Value and support immigrant applicants and employees. One-on-one mentoring, mental health support, and peer support can greatly assist newcomer employees.

Understand that diversity is a strength. Be intentional about deepening your appreciation for the ideas, skills, and talents that people from other countries bring to Greater Victoria. “It’s not enough to just bring people to Canada. Canada is sitting on a goldmine of excessive, unused potential. So find communities where you can find the talent” (Neha Sharma).



2

Change Systems, Policies and Practices

Measure everything. What does your work force look like? Measure the full diversity of your workforce regularly and create internal and public transparency by sharing those measurements. Share your Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies, objectives and key results and track your success and your goals diligently. With the results of those measurements, you can start employing strategies for changing systems, policies, and practices.

Commitment must come from the highest levels of leadership. If the top leaders are not fully behind EDI strategies, then those strategies likely will not work. It is important to have immigrant talent and people of colour included at top leadership levels.

Update policies and practices with equity in mind. Update employment programs, evaluation models, strategic plans, hiring and retention practices. Find consultants to help you with this, it makes a difference!



“If the top isn’t engaged, then it’s just going to be a box that was checked off.”

- Richard Michaels

Make job descriptions barrier free. Listing unnecessary requirements can deter qualified candidates. Instead focus on the core competencies needed for the position and build into the job description room for on-the-job training and mentoring. For helpful advice, see the [Employer Playbook: Strategies for Immigrant Inclusion in Canadian Workplaces](#) from the World Education Services.

Hire the best people who are responsible for hiring others. Make sure your Human Resources team has strong equity principles and staff who can implement them. When bringing on new HR staff, ask them to demonstrate their understanding of and experience with EDI work. If part of your hiring process is automated, make sure you can also respond to applicants manually. There is no automated tool that can create interest in your jobs as well as you can. Follow inclusive hiring practices, support your employees, and help them grow and succeed.

Taking risks is part of the landscape. The risk of hiring an immigrant is no different than that of hiring someone born, educated, and trained in Canada.

Develop a diversity framework that is effective and has real power to change things. Consider aligning the diversity officer with the finance department of the organization. This gives them visibility and the power to access budgets which leads to more effective and powerful reporting to upper management.



“Whether we are applying for a new job or trying to hire someone new, it’s about taking risks. And taking risk can be rewarding especially when we put ourselves in the position of being open-minded.”

- Mohamad Alwafai

Implement meaningful and measurable equity policies. For example:

Vacation swaps: To make sure employees can celebrate the holidays and feasts that are meaningful to them, allow them to swap days off. For example, someone celebrating Ramadan or Diwali can swap time off for Easter. “Vacation swaps have been super successful. People have really enjoyed it. It shows that care is not just at the surface and a buzzword in your organization. It’s something practical and can be implemented” (Sam Mod).

Adjust workloads during Ramadan: show care and respect for employees by adjusting workloads when needed. For example, during Ramadan avoid or break up long meetings and avoid day-time meetings where food is served to fasting employees.



3

Create an Accountable and Equitable Work Culture

Develop cultural intelligence. Develop your ability to work and relate effectively in diverse cultural contexts. [Cultural intelligence](#) has four components:

- **What is our motivation to do this work?** What is your individual motivation to succeed in this DEI work? As an organization?
- **What knowledge do we need to succeed?** Knowledge about how institutions work, about immigration policies, credentialing, logistics. But also knowledge about various cultural values that everybody brings to the table.
- **How are you strategically going to use that knowledge?** What is your motivation to succeed? What questions do you need to ask, what assumptions are you bringing into this? What biases, microaggressions and other behaviors do you need to try to not engage in?
- **How do you effectively put these strategies into action?** How can this strategy be done in a way that is respectful and appropriate?

“Think about cultural intelligence as a useful tool for employers who are welcoming newcomers into their organizations. Where are the tools that exist that help us understand different cultural groups and how to interact effectively with them?”

- Karima Ramji



Accountability and responsibility. We are all learning how best to make our workplace more equitable, so make sure you have within your team, your board, and/or your hiring committee, a person who's is comfortable enough to let you know if something is not working, especially when it concerns EDI principles. Being ready and able to respond without getting defensive when confronted with problems is important: "Be comfortable having someone at the table who will let you know when you are doing things wrong" (Aboubakar Idriss).

Empower immigrant employees. For example, encourage English language learners to present their work and share their expertise. This gives them a chance to practice public speaking and for other employees to experience a speaker who is not yet fluent in English: "So say they are in a project meeting....they're sharing their updates. They might be slow with combining their words, but it all makes sense. Be comfortable with that. Let them lead some of the demos and some of the project meetings to empower them, to give them more confidence" (Sam Mod).





FINAL WORDS

Arriving in Victoria from a different country can be daunting. Trying to find work in the midst of so many adjustments is both a challenge and an opportunity. Businesses and organizations in the region can help give newcomers the opportunity to contribute their talent and energies. Our Summit panelists, through their honest and open conversations, help us understand how to make inclusive employment a reality. We leave you with some final words from them:

It's a challenge.

"We leave our country to get to a new place. I believe most people do understand that they may be required to start afresh. That's something that most people are okay with. But to know that everything that you worked for will be watered-down is very difficult" (Neha Sharma).

"I think people move to Canada for different reasons. Sometimes it's a motivation, sometimes it's a necessity. Often it is a life changing experience" (Mohamad Alwafaai).

It starts with action.

"Companies love to talk about what they've done in diversity. But then when you look at it you see they put out a lot of PR, but where's the action?" (Richard Michaels).

"It begins with the individual, it begins with that hiring manager, who is going to be open to hiring diverse talent. It begins with that CEO who is going to say, yes, I want to be inclusive and I want to learn how to be inclusive" (Karima Ramji).

It's an opportunity.

"Do not look at their Canadian work experience, do not look at anything to do with culture, don't pay attention to how good their English is or how bad. Pay attention to their skills. Everything else a team can work with when that's the kind of culture you have created" (Sam Mod).

"Know that diversity is inviting everyone over for dinner. Inclusiveness is when everyone is allowed to eat...It's a journey for everyone. Everyone's role is needed in making this a welcoming place. There is no country without racism. People are trying to come up with solutions. That's why I chose Canada" (Aboubakar Idriss).

MEET OUR *SPEAKERS AND FACILITATORS*

ABOUBAKAR IDRISS

Lecturer at Sprott Shaw College, education activist, and social media influencer who provides students and refugees from around the world with information on education, scholarships and self-development.

JASMINDRA JAWANDA

Urban Planner committed to "creating space for people and place" that lead to diverse, inclusive, equitable, socially just and vibrant communities." She has worked with diverse and marginalized populations including racialized and Indigenous peoples, immigrants and refugees, youth, women and peoples with diverse abilities.

KARIMA RAMJI

Associate Director International, Indigenous and Strategic Initiatives, Co-op and Career Services at the University of Victoria. Relationship building, developing strong global partnerships, complex project planning and management, and cultural intelligence training are her specialties.

MOHAMAD ALWAFAAI

A multilingual leader with extensive experience in international project management, a degree in Computer Engineering, and expertise in business development, project management, operations/HR management, communications and humanitarian initiatives.

NEHA SHARMA

Program Associate with Royal Roads University. Neha works with newcomers, has volunteered on Victoria's Participatory Budgeting Committee, Renters' Advisory Committee and HERE Magazine. She came to Canada as an international student and believes that diversity and inclusion is key to an equitable and progressive society.

PATRICK MACKENZIE

CEO of the Immigrant Employment Council of BC. Previously, Patrick spent 11 years working for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. Through the IECBC, Patrick works on matters affecting Indigenous and immigrant populations, including economic integration, provincial nominee programs, credential recognition, and labour mobility.

RICHARD MICHAELS

CEO of Macrim Solutions and Chair of the EDI Advancement Committee at the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce. He specializes in assisting investors, developers, and landowners facilitate and create a vision of well-planned sustainable land use development and redevelopment projects using best practices.

SAM MOD

CEO & Co-Founder of Freshworks - an application design and development studio based in Victoria. Sam employs 105+ diverse folks and speaks passionately on topics relating to diversity, inclusion, technology, entrepreneurship, grit, leadership and humility.

SILVIA MANGUE ALENE

EDI Coordinator at the City of Victoria. Silvia is a passionate and experienced leader in the community, founder of the Kulea Culture Society and President of the BC Black History Awareness Society.



These sticky notes were submitted by delegates in response to Summit panel discussions.



What Now?

Employers have to start trusting international credentials and work experience when hiring people.

I've learned that as a white person I should reach out and make every effort to make friends and network with people who aren't white.

We should ask ourselves more "what opportunities is our community providing?"

Hearing lived experiences was a gift and educational

*Diversity ≠ Inclusion,
Equality ≠ Equity*

Is there an employment agency that represents new immigrants?

What Do You Know?

We need to decolonize our work culture. The workplace needs to change more than the newcomer.

We need to question current practices. Networking is a place of privilege not ability.

It is great to be inquisitive and ask questions but be mindful when asking. Curious inquiry as opposed to reinforcing stereotypes should be kept in mind.

What Have You Learned?

I emailed my boss who is hiring a new H.R. executive director today and said "make sure they have a track record of inclusivity"

It is true, newcomers choose us first. Let's do right by them. We need them.

Embrace discomfort and being challenged.

GVLIP'S ANTI-RACISM AT WORK CAMPAIGN

The **Anti-Racism At Work** campaign was created to encourage everyone to speak up against racism at work, especially white colleagues, managers, directors, and leaders who are presently quiet, hesitant, or unsure how to address the issue.

FIND OUT
MORE;



“When I spoke about witnessing racism, some white colleagues stopped talking to me and those that supported my voice only did so quietly after the fact... the quiet people who are not racist in society need to start speaking up and being anti-racist.”

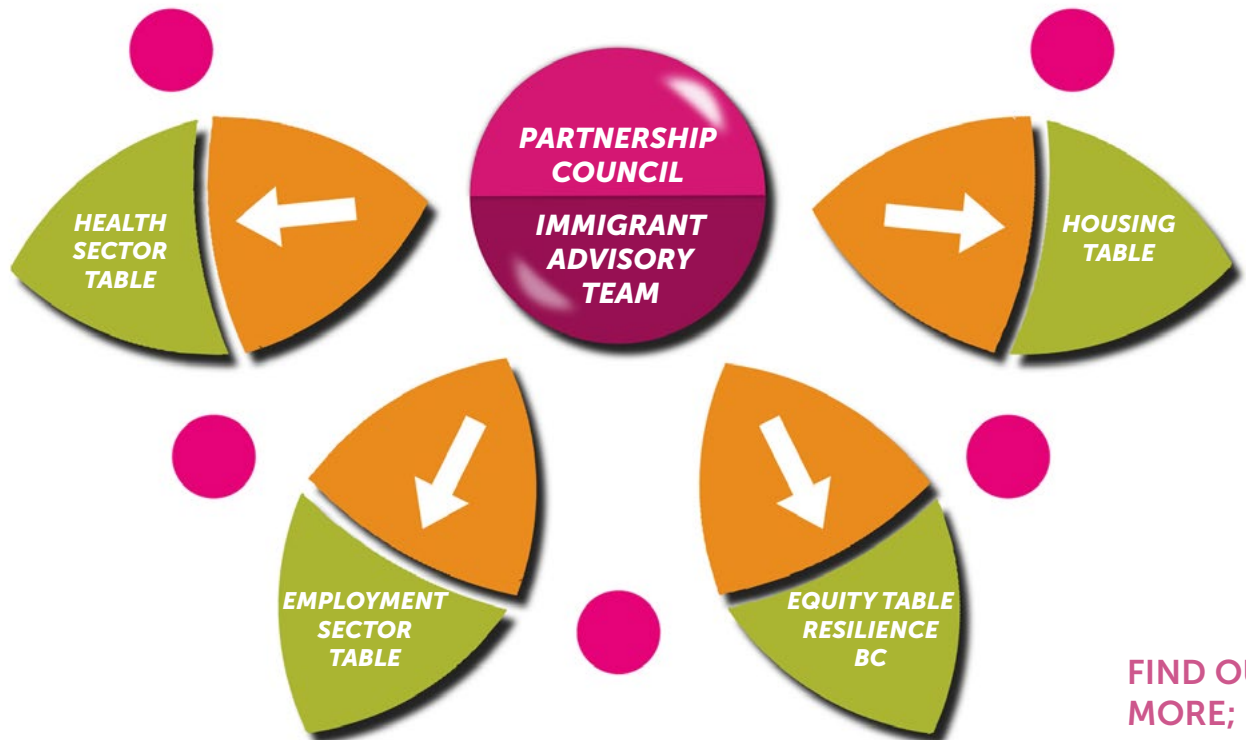
(Anonymous respondent to Racism in Greater Victoria survey.)

Deep and lasting change requires long-term commitment, full engagement, and consistency over a long time. Anti-Racism At Work hopes to remind workplaces of this responsibility, opportunity, and commitment to affect such change.

We are GVLIP

What Do We Do?

We champion the inclusion of newcomers in Greater Victoria. As a coalition of local organizations, government agencies, institutions, businesses, and recent and established immigrants, we are always looking for more organizations to join us!



FIND OUT
MORE;



How We Do What We Do?

By listening, informing, engaging in local research, making connections, and collaborating on community projects and events, we foster partnerships with local governance, employers, education, health care and housing organizations to create a welcoming, equitable, inclusive, just, and well-connected community in which everybody has opportunities to thrive, learn, live, work, and play in safety.



RESOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 2) FreshWorks Studio: <https://freshworks.io/diversity-inclusion-key-for-growth/>
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GVLIP PARTNERS

Bayanihan Filipino Community Centre
BC Construction Association
BIPOC Community Salt Spring Island
Camosun College - School of Access
City of Victoria
Capital Regional District - Community Health Network
Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce
Greater Victoria Public Library
REP Here In Canada
Indigenous Perspectives Society
Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria
James Bay New Horizons
Jewish Federation of Victoria and Vancouver Island
Landscapes of Injustice Project
Masjid al Iman
North Saanich Municipality
Saanich Parks and Recreation
School District 61 - Victoria
School District 62 - Sooke
School District 63 - Saanich
South Island Prosperity Partnership
Sport for Life Society
The Inclusion Project
University of Victoria - Community Engaged Learning
University of Victoria - Equity and Human Rights Office
University of Victoria - Psychology
University of Victoria - School of Business
University of Victoria - School of Nursing
University of Victoria - Transgender Studies
Vancouver Island Counselling Center for Immigrants and Refugees
Vancouver Island Health Authority
Vancouver Island Human Rights Coalition
Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society
Victoria Innovation, Advanced Technology & Entrepreneurship Council
Victoria Multi-Cultural Business Connector
WestShore Chamber of Commerce
West Shore Parks and Recreation
Worklink Employment Society
* In addition to 17 members of our Immigrant Advisory Team



Join us

to collaborate
on this important work

Email

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