



Brought to you by:

being human services

"Be Better...Do Better"

TIP SHEET #4

INTERVIEWING AND SELECTION

Refer to Summary of Resources
Tip Sheet #12 for a listing of
information sources.

diversity

An Employer Advantage

Alberta 

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

Everyone involved in the hiring process strives to find the perfect fit, and as an employer, you understandably want to hire the right person for the job. Current demographic trends indicate that net growth in the Canadian labour force can be increasingly attributed to immigration. This presents opportunities for employers, but also requires them to review their recruitment practices so they don't miss out on great talent. The focus of this Tip Sheet is on how to review resumes to "screen-in" top talent, use interview techniques and questions with immigrant-friendly language, and allow for different communication styles.

1. Resume Screening

A resume is often your first impression of a candidate. It is your opportunity to take a step back, objectively assess the talent that is interested in your role, and screen in high quality candidates. Resumes from immigrant candidates may raise questions or challenges for you regarding their past credentials and experience, and fear around being politically correct in correspondence or interactions with them. This section is dedicated to helping you overcome these potential barriers.

a Resume format and style:

- Focus on the content of the resume, not format. The style and format of resumes vary widely across cultures. Problems with readability, including spelling or grammatical errors, do not necessarily indicate poor oral communication skills.
- Like any job requirement, language proficiency should be assessed according to the requirements of the position. A person whose first language is not English may make minor errors in writing but still be able to communicate orally at the level required for the role.

b Cultural norms:

- Be aware that immigrants may include religious greetings, mention of their family, or other personal information that Canadians do not generally include on their resumes.
- Immigrants may also include information about their university ranking because this achievement is highly prized in their country.
- Focus on content, not the style of the resume. What and how information is communicated, including on resumes, varies widely across cultures.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

c Determine essential vs non-essential skills:

- Separate your "must-have" from the "nice to have" skills required for the job.
- Immigrant candidates who do not fulfill your wish list of "nice to have" skills may compensate with other skills, such as experience with international markets or connections to growing segments of the local market.



d Ability:

- Look for ability or signs the candidate has the potential to do the job, as demonstrated through past achievements, including volunteer experience.
- For example, look for evidence the candidate can learn, interpret, and apply law, rather than the evidence the candidate knows the law itself.

e Communication:

- Look for the candidate's ability to carry out the specific communication tasks required, rather than generalized "effective communication skills". Specify what communication skills are necessary for the position.
- Assess problems with spelling or grammar carefully; a person whose first language is not English may make written errors, but may still be able to communicate verbally at an acceptable level to do the job. Balance typos with other qualities and experience before disqualifying the candidate.
- Refer to **Communicating with Newcomers Tip Sheet** for more strategies to communicate with new Canadians.

Did you know?

In many countries, people don't use resumes to get jobs. They use word of mouth references.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

f

Experience vs "Canadian Experience":

- Many employers look for Canadian work experience when reviewing resumes, but this preference can create a discriminatory barrier that unnecessarily disqualifies otherwise suitable immigrant candidates.
- Intentionally review prior experience, including volunteer roles, and assess skills the individual would have been required to have for previous roles.
- If you are not sure what their experience may have looked like, consider asking for examples of the candidates work, or find other ways to determine if the candidate has the required competencies for the position.
- Instead of asking about "Canadian experience" or requiring a certain number of years of experience, ask how their experience is relevant to the job.
- Newcomers often emphasize their experience from their home country and may downplay or not mention their Canadian work history, especially if it is unrelated to their profession.
- Hiring someone who has done a very similar job has great benefits: you get someone who can learn the job, and who has additional skills such as international experience.
- Although Canadian attitudes are slowly changing, employers sometimes devalue individuals who they think have had too many job changes within a short period of time. Employers may not realize the personal sacrifice people make when they take a lower level job while searching for their a job in their chosen field.
- Newcomers may have a work history that gives the impression of instability or with little to no Canadian experience. Canadian employers are often interested in "Canadian experience", making assumptions about the transferability of skills. Although Canadian work history can give a clearer picture of transferable skills and experience, it is important to remember you may not have all the facts.
- Newcomers often take survival jobs while continuing to search for work that more closely matches their international training and experience. They may take a part time job while attending English classes, because they know strong English will be required to advance in their profession. They may have worked for several employers for short times or more than one employer at a time.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

Did you know?

A recent study in Canada showed that the name on a resume impacted the candidate's chance of being called for an interview. Despite having identical education and experience, applicants with "Asian-sounding" names were far less likely to be called for interviews than applicants with "Anglo-sounding" names. Prior to beginning the resume review process, consider having an employee who is not involved in recruitment cover the candidate names and location of their previous experience and education.

This is a great way to more objectively review resumes and limit personal bias from impacting decisions about interviews.

h Verify foreign credentials:

- Many Newcomers are arriving with high levels of education that Canadian employers overlook or have difficulty understanding. This challenge exists for employers in both regulated and non-regulated occupations.
- Some employers are less concerned with credentials than with the ability to get the job done, which can be assessed through scenario-based, "how would you handle X..." questions in interviews.
- If verifying credentials is a concern, ask the candidate to provide verification of their credentials or commission an assessment through an organization such as IQAS (International Qualifications Assessment Service).

g Time at previous jobs:

- Be aware that long tenure at a job can be interpreted as a sign of loyalty or as a lack of ambition; frequent job changes could mean a lack of commitment to employers.
- Immigrants may have many reasons for atypical employment histories, and it is best to ask for clarification before dismissing a potential candidate.



Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

Critical Consideration

The immigration process and all that is involved in settling into a new country have obvious consequences for a person's career trajectory. These consequences are often apparent on a resume (Example: periods of unemployment or frequent job changes). Frequent changes in positions immediately before and after candidates immigrated should not be considered indicators of their inability to achieve long-term success. Instead, focus on the international education and experience they obtained abroad; these are more accurate indicators of candidates' potential and prior skills acquisition.

i Stating accomplishments:

- The expression of accomplishment varies among cultures. Candidates from many countries are not comfortable with stating their accomplishments and can find it uncomfortable to sell themselves. In many countries, others do this for the candidate (Example: family, friends, or even the interviewer) and they are expected to downplay their accomplishments.
- The "Why should I hire you?" may not generate a response listing skills and accomplishments. Conversely, some may sound like they are boasting as they state they can do any project that might be given to them, due to their wide range of experience. You may wish to rephrase, asking the applicant to describe the tasks involved in (the last job, a specific project, etc.) or you might ask them to describe how they would carry out duties of the position.
- In Canada, many employers look for descriptions of accomplishments, particularly those that are quantified. For example, they may want to know the average number of sales in a month. Newcomers may list projects they've worked on or responsibilities, but not include specific accomplishments. As a result, employers may not appreciate the candidate's skills and could screen them out for that reason.



Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

j

Checking References:

- **Local references:** If no local professional references are offered, probe for local character or volunteer references.
- **International references:** Many international references speak some English; call them to check references. Consider sending questions ahead of time by email so the reference can be better prepared. Clarify name pronunciation with the candidate.
- **Non-English speaking references:** Email is an excellent option to obtain more information regarding your candidate. This enables the reference to use google translate to answer your questions without communication barriers.

Did you know?

Skilled immigrants are often highly educated. Of "recent immigrants (between 2001-2006) 51% have a degree, twice that of the Canadian born labour force."

According to Statistics Canada, skilled immigrants fill a gap in Canada's shrinking labour force. "Immigrants accounted for 21.2% of Canada's total labour force in 2006. By the end of the next decade, immigrants will account for 100% of net labour force growth."



2. Culturally Sensitive Interviews:

A job interview can be daunting for even the most experienced job seeker, but for many immigrants, responding to interview questions is a brand new skill that has to be learned. Interviewing across cultures requires an awareness of cultural differences and norms. Employers who are conscious of how culture influences body language, values, interests, work ethic, habits and self-expression will be better equipped to evaluate an immigrant's job skills and qualifications more fairly. This tip section will provide suggestions to create a more inclusive interviewing process and reduce unconsciously biased decisions.

a State a clear agenda for the interview:

- At the beginning of an interview, the interviewer may wish to outline the topics that are going to be discussed. This can help the applicant understand how the questions relate to the topics. Some companies will provide questions in advance either when the interview is arranged or at the beginning of the interview.
- Inform the applicant they will have an opportunity to ask questions at the end of an interview. You may wish to encourage questions so the applicant doesn't interpret asking questions as not understanding the job.
- Invite the applicant to take notes and allow enough time to document the information.

b Include minorities/diverse members on your panel:

- Including diverse individuals on your recruitment team is likely to increase the amount of diverse staff you hire in the future.
- Employees that are known to be culturally sensitive on the selection team are more likely to recognize behaviors that are culture based.



Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

C Address blind spots and personal biases:

- Personal bias is an individual's opinion about specific groups of people; it can be positive or negative and can impact the hiring decision accordingly. Our biases are largely subconscious and can cause us to make incorrect assumptions about others based on our expectations of behavior, rather than the actual behavior itself.
- As an interviewer, you must recognize how your own experiences impact your perception of a candidate. Slow down your decision-making, and ask yourself an important question: Are you considering this candidate as an individual, or are preconceived notions about race, ethnicity, gender, or religion impacting your assessment? Awareness is a necessary first step to address blind spots and ensure that personal bias is not clouding your judgements about a candidate's abilities and skills. Success ultimately relies on the motivation of the hiring personnel.
- Assess the qualities you think demonstrate "professionalism" in an interview (appearance, tone of voice, body language, etc.). Take note and reflect on how you react to these aspects and be aware when a candidate does not meet your expectations.
- Consider your perception of animated vs. reserved individuals: Do you think that more animated or outgoing candidates are less professional? Or are they are more engaged and eager for this role? For more reserved candidates, do you think they are less interested? Or more professional and polite?
- Think about your reaction to a "foreign" accent: Do you associate accents with English language proficiency? Do you feel more comfortable talking to people that sound like you? Do you find yourself making assumptions based on the way they speak?
- Examine your thoughts about ethnic backgrounds different from your own: Do you associate these groups with a negative interaction you or others have had? Do you feel more comfortable working with individuals who share a background similar to yours? Are you concerned about a person's fit in the organization if their background is different from the majority?
- Recognize biases related to a candidate who attended the same university as you or derived from your expectations based on the cultural norms.
- Consciously seek out individuals with different backgrounds, Take opportunities to immerse yourself in new environments, and take deliberate actions to disrupt your "normal" processes.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

d Communication challenges:

- Use immigrant friendly language and allow for differences in communication styles. English isn't a first, or even second, language for many immigrants, and Canadian workplace culture is new for all immigrants. During interviews, immigrants are working much harder than most non-immigrant applicants, as they are often translating as the conversation unfolds. You can assure candidates by telling them to take their time to think about how they would like to answer the question.
- Expect miscommunication and awkwardness (small talk can be particularly uncomfortable). To improve communication, avoid slang, jargon, and unnecessary technical terms. You may also want to rephrase common interview questions and ensure they are written/asked in plain language. Plain language uses simple terms and explains all issues as clearly as possible.
- Due to communication challenges, phone screening may not be as effective for some immigrants. There is no ability to observe non-verbal cues, which can aid communication and understanding for both parties. However, interviewers can be trained to work through different communication styles.

e Strategies to assess language and communication skills:

- If **spoken language** is important to successful performance on the job, then include a scenario to assess this skill. For example, if the position involves leading a team project, they could be asked what they would say in a meeting to a member of a team who was repeatedly missing deadlines. All candidates should be asked this question.
- If **telephone** skills are necessary, a recorded, simulated phone conversation could be used to evaluate the applicant's abilities to accurately transcribe and follow instructions. This type of evaluation should be done for all applicants for the position.
- If **reading** is an essential skill of the position, the skill can be assessed by providing examples of the types of documents the applicant will typically be reading, followed by either questions or an activity that demonstrates comprehension. This type of assessment should be done for all applicants.
- If **writing** plays a large part in carrying out the job duties, ask candidates to provide examples of their past written work or develop a specific writing activity to test skills and abilities. Note: writing tests should not require specific technical knowledge that is only gained through working in your company.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

f Avoid slang phrases and speak in plain language:

- Technical terminology may differ across workplaces and regions. Instead of using jargon, slang or acronyms that may not be clear, communicate using simpler language that will allow you to assess the core competency required for the role.
- For example: A skilled immigrant applying for a health care position was asked by the recruiter: "What do you bring to the table?" The candidate answered that she would usually bring food. She was not offered the position. (sourced from South Asian focus group)
- For more tips on speaking plain language, refer to the **Communications Tip Sheet**.

g Practice active listening:

- When the candidate has a strong accent, do not assume that their communication skills are not suitable for your workplace. Seek clarification and encourage them to speak more clearly and slowly to help you understand them better, and vice versa.
- Accents both lessen and become easier to understand with experience in the workplace.

h Pre-screening phone interview:

- Individuals who are English as a Second Language learners may have difficulty with phone interviews. Speaking over the phone limits an individual's ability to view your facial expressions and read your lips. Consider in-person interviews, or be patient with a person who is learning English.



i Be aware of body language:

- Ideas of personal space and appropriate body language differs between cultures. What seems rude, forward or unemotional may have a different meaning entirely for your interviewee.
- What may be perceived as "non-traditional" body language may not be indicative of the candidate's potential or abilities. For example: lack of eye contact may be an indication of respect for authority rather than being untrustworthy or lacking confidence.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

j Best practices when revising your interview questions:

- **Connect questions to essential skills:** Revisit the job posting and carefully consider the responsibilities of the role; list the essential skills required to complete each responsibility. Create questions and expected response(s) that would satisfy your assessment of skill. Test these questions on a colleague, preferably in a similar role to the one you're seeking to fill; if your questions did not produce the expected response, it's a good indication that the question may need to be revised. See **Job Description Tip Sheet** to revise job descriptions so that they clearly articulate essential skills.
- **Be intentional and specific:** Open-ended questions that rely on an understanding of Canadian culture are difficult for immigrant candidates to respond to. Questions that may seem straightforward ("Tell me about yourself") can lead to an answer that does not meet the interviewer's expectations. Be specific and revise "Tell me about yourself" to "Tell me about your education and previous experience that relate to this job". This revision clearly states what you would like them to speak about. By clarifying the statement, you set the candidate up for success. Review other questions and consider rephrasing to produce the type of answer you are seeking.
- **Avoid using metaphors in your question:** Common idioms, phrases, and metaphors used in interview questions, such as "Tell me about a time you had to think outside the box," or "What do you bring to the table?" are not necessarily common phrases across all cultures. These questions can cause confusion and lead to a misinterpretation. Revise questions to be clearer and focused on the skill you are trying to assess. In the example "Tell me about a time you had to think outside the box", are you assessing the candidate's ability to solve complex problems? Or are you assessing creative thinking? If looking for problem-solving, ask the question more directly: "Tell me about a time you were faced with a difficult situation - what did you do to solve it?" If asking about creativity, rephrase the question to speak directly to creative thinking: "Tell me about a time you had to create a new way of completing a task at work."
- **Add a skills-based assessment:** Administering an on-the-job assessment or test for specific skills or competencies is a great complement to a standard interview. A performance-based assessment allows candidates to demonstrate their ability to perform a specific skill and for you to assess the skill "in action." Skills-based tests can be provided in advance or during the interview, and they should be tied to a skill that is essential to the role.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

k Be aware of hierarchy:

- Be aware of the relative importance of hierarchy in different cultures and how that impacts answers in an interview situation.
- For example: asking a candidate from a highly hierarchical culture to give an example of a time that he/she disagreed with a supervisor's decision and had to present his/her case in order to change the supervisor's mind is not likely to be met with a detailed response. Unlike many western cultures where it can be appropriate to suggest alternative options to your supervisor, this is something that is just not done in highly hierarchical cultures - a superior's word is law.



Critical Consideration

Use a panel of interviewers instead of one person to conduct in-person interviews to ensure you draw multiple perspectives when assessing a candidate's suitability.

Carefully consider your own identity (race, gender, immigration status, socioeconomic status, etc.) and the various identities reflected within your team.

Consider colleagues who often bring a different perspective from yours to a challenge or work situation, or a colleague with whom you disagree with at times.

Being intentional about having the interview panel made up of colleagues who have varying perspectives can help counter any personal biases and challenge misinterpretations.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

I Offering and/or declining the job:

- **Offering the job:** Immigrants may not be familiar with common employment terms. Consider adding a plain English description for more technical phrases. For example: "A skilled immigrant was offered a job and was told he was on the "graveyard yard" shift. Thinking it meant working in a graveyard, he declined the job offer." (BC HMRA focus group) For more information, refer to the **Orientation and Onboarding Tip Sheets**.
- **Declining the job strategically:** If the candidate has skills you need, but is weak in key areas, suggest a course of study which would increase their chances next time. This is a quick and risk-free way of developing a pipeline of future quality candidates. Consider other roles within the company that may be suited to their current qualifications.
- **Be considerate and fair.** If it is poor communication skills, insufficient credentials or other reasons, provide specific reasons to the candidate. Avoid generalities, such as lack of Canadian work experience. The applicant will benefit from specific feedback.
- **Provide clear requirements.** When job requirements are clear from the beginning of the recruiting process, it ensures a fair assessment of suitability.

m Other considerations:

- Always be consistent with the Alberta Human Rights Code - employers cannot discriminate against candidates based on race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, or religion (amongst others)
- Consider a probationary period or a work experience position to assess the suitability of an internationally trained candidate.



A Harvard business study showed that if there are less than two diverse applicants on your short list, there is statistically no chance they will be hired.

Interviewing Tips for Success

- **Be consistent.** The interview process, questions, and format should be the same for each candidate.
- **Ask one question at a time.** Including several questions at once can be challenging for a candidate. Pose one question at a time, clearly and concisely; avoid slang or humour, as it can be difficult for the applicant to interpret.
- **Focus on content.** Cultural differences may impact a candidate's "style", and in turn, can affect how the interviewer views the candidate's suitability. Prioritize the content of what the candidate is saying and challenge your assessment if it is overemphasizing style.
- **Be prepared to rephrase your questions.** If a candidate's answer seems short or inappropriate, rephrase the question, since it may have been misinterpreted. In other cases, if there is a word or phrase that is unclear to you, ask for clarification. Some technical terms or phrases commonly used in other countries are not used in Canada.
- **Interpreting silence.** While preparing their response to a question, candidates will not often attempt to fill the silence with a typical comment such as, "That's a good question, let me think about it." In other cases, candidates may need to mentally translate back and forth between English and their first language. In both instances, it's important to reassure candidates that they can take their time, and for you as the interviewer to be prepared to embrace silences during the interview process.
- **Be mindful of non-verbal cues.** There are cultural differences in body language and self-expression. When reviewing your notes from the interview, identify where you may be critical because of the candidate's non-verbal behaviors, rather than the content of the candidate's response.

Tip Sheet 4: Interviewing and Selection

Culturally-Competent Communication for Interviews

Scenario (Recruiter)	Avoid saying or doing this	Try saying this	Rationale
When asking questions:	"Tell me about yourself"	"Tell me about your education and experience."	Immigrants may have trouble answering open-ended questions. Specific questions help focus responses.
When asking questions:	"Tell me about a time..."	Add, "I want to know your particular role in this work activity."	Many immigrants are modest about personal "achievements"; their culture may emphasize group over individual achievements. Emphasize you want to know more about their particular role.
When receiving a brief reply to a question:	Assume the person doesn't know.	Be patient, polite, and ask follow-up questions.	Respect for authority sometimes causes immigrants to "answer only what is asked"; elaborating without being asked may seem disrespectful.
When receiving a slow reply:	Become impatient. Think the candidate is incompetent.	Be patient. Encourage with a smile and nod.	Pauses in some cultures are natural, recognizing the significance of the question. Thinking before speaking is common for many cultures.
When receiving no reply to "Do you have any questions?"	Think the candidate lacks interest.	Assure the candidate they can ask any questions about the job or the selection process.	Immigrants are not used to being asked this question, in their culture it may be associated with "challenging authority".
When discussing technical matters:	Use jargon, slang, acronyms, or complex phrases.	Communicate using simple words and plain language.	Competency is key. Core knowledge that is transferable is what is critical. More complex communication will become possible with familiarization.
When the candidate has a strong accent:	Lose focus or become frustrated.	Seek clarification. Encourage them to speak slowly.	Again competency is key. Accents both lessen and become easier to understand with experience in the workplace.
When not certain of their language level:	Assume the person can't do the job.	Request an English test at specific Canadian Benchmark Levels.	Immigrants may have different proficiencies for oral and written English and jobs may require different levels.



For more tips and strategies to improve diversity in your workplace, check out our other Tip Sheets:

1. Job Descriptions
2. Recruitment and Job Sourcing
3. Assessing Skills and Competencies
4. Interviewing and Selection
5. Orientation
6. Onboarding
7. Creating a Welcoming and Inclusive Work Environment
8. Training and Development
9. Communication
10. Employee Retention
11. Common Terms and Definitions
12. Summary of Resources

Brought to you by:

