Attracting and Keeping Skilled Immigrant Workers in High Tech – Lessons From Asian Computer Professionals

August 23, 2001 – The experience of Asian computer professionals working in Canada's high tech sector provides clues on how to attract and keep much-needed immigrant talent.

A new study from Canadian Policy Research Networks provides the first in-depth look at the motivations, attitudes, perceptions and intentions of Asian migrant knowledge workers living in Canada.

The study, Economic Migrants in a Global Market: A Report on the Recruitment and Retention of Asian Computer Professionals by Canadian High Tech Firms by Badrinath Rao of the University of New Brunswick at Saint John, was financed by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Human Resources Development Canada.

Rao's findings are based on in-depth interviews with 55 Information Technology (IT) professionals (8 of them Canadian-born, the remainder from different parts of Asia), and also interviews with 8 Human Resources professionals from high tech firms.

The Software Human Resources Council recently estimated that Canada faces a shortfall of nearly 30,000 computer professionals. Like other Western industrialized countries, we seek skilled knowledge workers from abroad to fill the gap. But other countries are doing the same and competition to lure the best is intense.

While Canadian companies successfully attract foreign workers, they often stay only a couple of years before moving to the United States.

"It's important for governments and employers here to understand the factors that affect workers' decisions, first, to come to Canada and, second, to stay with an employer here for the long-term," says Rao. "We need better policies if Canada is to be more than a mere transit point for IT workers on their way to the U.S."

Rao's interviewees were often surprisingly unaware or misinformed about Canadian conditions, from immigration rules to taxes and standard of living. They often assumed, on the basis of such misconceptions, that they would be better off elsewhere.

"It might help to address such misimpressions with better orientation in the country of origin," Rao says.

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The workers in Rao's study generally agree that Canadian companies provide interesting and challenging work, recognize the contributions of their employees, provide excellent working conditions and training, ensure workers are well motivated and provide opportunities for improving skills and abilities – all qualities they consider desirable.

So, why do so many of them want to move on to another country?

"You have to understand that they are, first and foremost, economic migrants," says Rao. "An overwhelming majority of Asian IT workers do not have any family ties in Canada. That is critical to whether they stay or go. Without family ties, the decision to go is more likely to be made on strictly economic grounds."

It is not surprising, then, that Rao, and many of those he interviewed, argue that one of the most effective recruitment and retention strategies might be to encourage Asian IT workers to bring their educated relatives from their homelands and develop their own family network in Canada.

"This could provide both the sense of community and security otherwise lacking, and make further migration less appealing," Rao says.

Other strategies interviewees suggest for attracting and holding onto IT professionals include: higher compensation, lower taxes, more challenging work, attracting more high tech companies, more opportunities for mobility within companies and outside, building awareness abroad of Canadian high tech companies, streamlining immigration processing rules and recognizing the credentials and work experience of outsiders.

Rao emphasizes that his study relies on a small sample of Canadian IT workers in the Ottawa area.

"A larger study and a more thorough analysis of what IT firms and governments in other countries have done to attract and retain workers could offer further insights on ways to improve our policies."

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