

# Fostering Talent Integration in Ontario's Municipalities: Challenges and Best Practices

Neil Harris [neil.t.harris@gmail.com](mailto:neil.t.harris@gmail.com)

Nicole F.G. Moore [nicolefgmoore@gmail.com](mailto:nicolefgmoore@gmail.com)

Tania Maksymenko [yt.tania@gmail.com](mailto:yt.tania@gmail.com)

Nicola Lee [nicolaLee@live.com](mailto:nicolaLee@live.com)

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## Abstract

*In recent years, Ontario has experienced population growth due to an influx of new residents, including many newcomers to Canada. However, successful talent integration requires a win-win approach for both newcomers and the host community. To achieve this, stakeholders—including newcomer adults—must collaborate and define specific goals and outcomes for talent integration in urban, suburban, and rural communities. Communities must also understand the challenges and opportunities of talent integration and identify effective solutions that have worked in the past, such as employer-led initiatives, community-based transportation solutions, and culturally responsive services. By implementing best practices and prioritizing factors such as affordable housing, cultural and linguistic integration, communities can promote the economic and social integration of newcomers while creating a more inclusive and diverse community that benefits everyone.*

## Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to outline the major challenges faced by Ontario's communities in integrating new residents and discuss best practices and effective solutions to address these challenges. Drawing on the insights gained from the roundtable discussions with economic development practitioners at EDCO 2023, the article aims to provide comprehensive insights and practical recommendations to promote successful integration of newcomers.

## Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of welcoming new residents and talent integration to the local economies across Ontario. Economic Development professionals were recruited through their attendance at the 2023 Economic Developers Council of Ontario Conference. The participants at the roundtable were Ontario's economic developers and representatives from the private sector. Qualitative data were collected through semi-

structured interviews with a subset of participants to explore their subjective experiences of welcoming new residents.

Each participant was given an EDCO Hot Topics Guide that included statistics on Ontario's job vacancy rate and the industries currently affected, information on the percentage of immigrants in Canada, where immigrants had chosen to live, the places of birth for immigrants.

## Immigration Targets

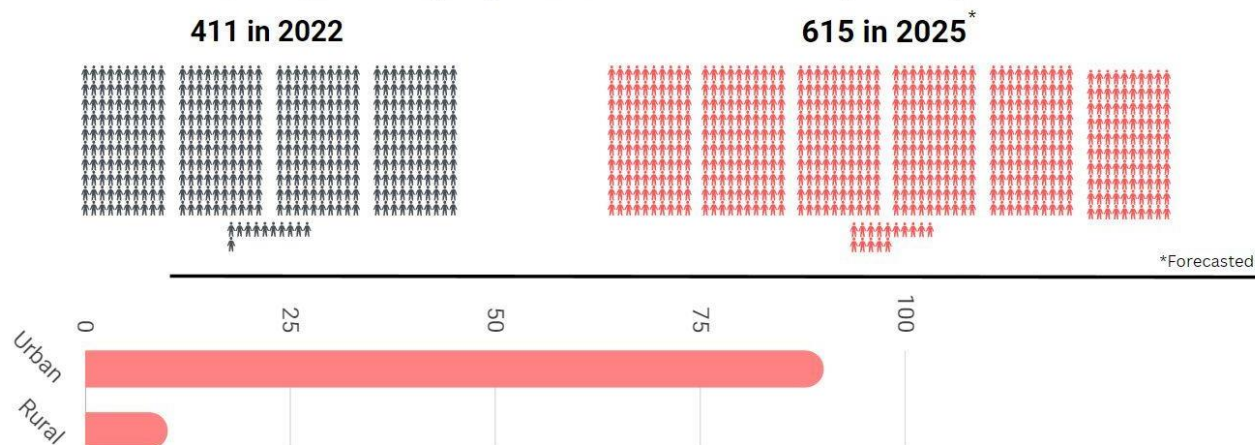


**Immigration accounts for almost 100% of Canada's labour force growth.** Roughly 75% of Canada's population growth comes from immigration, mostly in the economic category. By 2036, immigrants will represent up to 30% of Canada's population, compared with 20.7% in 2011.

In 2021, **Ontario received about half of all new Canadian permanent residents.**

53.4% of newcomers intended to settle in the city of Toronto, Vancouver or Montreal.

## Immigration projections for Ontario per day



In 2021, **over 9 in 10 recent immigrants lived in one of Canada's 41 census metropolitan areas**, which are large urban centres of over 100,000 residents. Additionally, **4.4% of recent immigrants settled in small urban areas** and 3.2% of recent immigrants settled in rural areas in 2021.

## Participants:

A total of 36 participants were randomly assigned to one of the two tables hosting the research discussions at the Hot Topics segment of the conference. The two tables hosted two unique groups at each table and held a 45–60-minute exploratory interview. Participants were able to complete self-reported answers or engage in conversation representing the unique circumstances of the community they represent. The participants were representatives from urban, rural and suburban Ontario.

## Questions:

The participants at the roundtable were asked the following questions:

1. What stood out to you when you reviewed the summary related to talent integration and the welcoming of new residents?

2. What has been your community's challenges/ opportunities related to talent integration and the welcoming of new residents?
  - a. Do you have an example of successful programs or policies related to welcoming new residents (in your community or elsewhere)?
  - b. In a perfect world, what would you like to see in your community related to talent integration and the welcoming of new residents?

## **Literature Review**

Based on the literature review on socio-cultural and economic talent integration, two primary factors have been identified as crucial for successful adaptation: employment and welcoming communities. A welcoming community, as defined by Esses et al. (2010), is a place that can fulfill the needs and promote inclusion of newcomers, as well as the necessary infrastructure in place to facilitate these capacities. Characteristics of a welcoming community include opportunities for economic, social and political engagement, social capital, affordable housing, accessible health and public transit, and safety. The primary objective of a welcoming community is to eliminate obstacles that prevent newcomers from making meaningful contributions in every aspect of Canadian life (Esses, 2011).

"Newcomer integration is a reciprocal process, where both newcomers and the host community play an integral role in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment" (Guo, 2016). Collaboration is essential for the success of this process, as it enables both parties to exchange perspectives and experiences, leading to mutual benefits (Wilkinson, 2013, Biles, Burstein, and Frideres, 2008).

The strategic approach to newcomer attraction and retention may vary based on the size of the community. While larger communities have the advantage of leveraging their existing resources, smaller communities may need to begin from the group up (Hiebert, 2000, Qadeer and Kumar, 2006).

The role of employers in talent integration has received limited attention in academic literature and requires further exploration from both theoretical and practical perspectives (Drolet et al., 2014). This article highlights effective employer-led initiatives as a valuable tool for newcomer integration and emphasizes the importance of supporting proactive employers in this regard.

## **Discussion Summary**

One of the main questions raised during the roundtable discussion was, how can Economic Developers identify, target, and integrate these new residents into the life of their communities?

Participants shared insights on best practices, identified challenges and gaps, and explored innovative solutions. They discussed the following common challenges faced by most communities and shared examples of how communities can be proactive at creating more inclusive environments.

## **Major Themes**

**Lack of affordable housing:** One of the major barriers identified by the participants was the sharp increase in housing cost. The group emphasized that the housing issue is not just limited to big cities, but it is a province-wide problem.

- **Influx of residents during the pandemic:** Some communities experienced housing shortage due to the rapid increase in population growth in a short period of time. The population growth was primarily driven by the influx in remote workers during the pandemic. This highlighted the need for coordinated effort to address the housing needs of new residents.
- **Employer-led initiatives:** Companies in Northwestern Ontario, Norfolk County, and other places have been stepping up to help address the challenges of affordable housing and access to groceries and food for their employees.

**Transit access and infrastructure:** In rural areas where the population is dispersed over a large geographic area, transportation can be a major challenge for newcomers.

- **Employer-led initiatives:** Some employers have been providing solutions by picking up and dropping off their employees. For example, Resolute Forest Products in Northwestern Ontario, Unilever and Titan Trailers in Norfolk County have been proactive at creating holistic solutions in hiring immigrants and displaced people.
- **Community-based transportation solutions:** Some communities and employers facilitated rideshare programs through community volunteers.

**Cultural and linguistic integration:** Communities identified that there is a strong need to welcome newcomer residents with holistic services for successful integration.

- **Engaging new residents:** Communities identified the need for cross-cultural awareness to effectively engage their newcomer residents.
- **Adapting community services:** Language barriers were preventing many immigrants from fully participating in community programs. Offering services in the first language of interested candidates resulted in an increase in the participation and success of their programs.
- **“Sticky City”:** One municipality shared that to become a “sticky city” is to create programs that fully integrate newcomers in the community. This is done by meeting economic, financial, social and cultural needs of new residents, ensuring they remain invested in the community.

**Creating a sense of belonging:** Communities identified that having grocery stores, and restaurants that cater to people’s cultural preferences is critical to retaining residents.

- **Places of worship:** In Muskoka, a group of Indian families purchased smaller motels in the town and converted them into a temple of their faith. Being able to practice their faith in the community will assist in keeping the new residents grounded in that community.
- **Ethnic foods:** Another municipality has taken steps to work with local farms to grow ethnic foods suitable for the Canadian climate, offering newcomers access to foods they are familiar with.
- **Childcare and essential services:** New residents want to know if there is access to childcare or space in schools in their new community.

**Labour shortages:** Communities acknowledge that more work is needed in the workforce needs and the attraction and retention of newcomers.

- **Skills match:** One of the pressing issues discussed among participants was a skills mismatch in immigration to their workforce needs.
- **Job sharing program:** A rural municipality has created a *job sharing program* where employees work at two jobs over the course of a year, with transportation being offered as part of this program.
- **Red-tape:** There is a belief that some bureaucratic processes are posing an issue for matching employers with internationally trained professionals.

**Immigration trends: large cities vs. smaller communities.** The current trend of immigration seems to focus heavily on large metropolitan cities. Only 4.4% of new immigrants settled in smaller communities.

- **Effective newcomer attraction strategies:** To develop effective attraction strategies for smaller communities, it's essential to understand the factors that attract immigrants and what are some of the unique benefits smaller communities have to offer.

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## Conclusion:

The EDCO 2023 Hot Topics roundtable discussions highlighted the importance of talent integration in Ontario urban, suburban, and rural communities. The need for affordable housing, transportation, cultural and linguistic integration, and access to essential services were the major themes discussed. Employer-led initiatives, community-based transportation solutions, and adapting community services were identified as effective ways to address these challenges. The importance of creating a sense of belonging was also highlighted. Participants, especially those from rural communities, expressed the need for more resources and intergovernmental partnerships to create and deliver immigrant support programs.

## Recommendations

Attracting and retaining newcomers is crucial for the future economic development of municipalities in Ontario. To achieve this, it is recommended to further study the role of employers in talent integration. Employer-led initiatives have proven to be a valuable tool for newcomer integration. With the changing nature of work and the increasing competition for skilled labour, it is important to understand how employers are taking the lead in newcomer attraction and retention initiatives and how to effectively support them.

Another recommendation is to further study the role of economic developers in facilitating partnerships between employers, workforce development organizations, settlement agencies, newcomers, and other stakeholders. This will help to effectively engage these key stakeholders and develop partnerships that are mutually beneficial, especially considering the limited resources available. By studying the role of economic developers, valuable insights can be gained on how to navigate the complex regulatory and funding landscape that often surrounds newcomer attraction initiatives.

Sharing best practices in Ontario and other provinces is also key to successful talent integration. By learning from successful initiatives and adapting them to local contexts, Canadian municipalities can improve their strategies for attracting and retaining newcomers. Collaboration between different regions and stakeholders can lead to more effective and efficient policies and practices.

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