

Pilot program brings hope to foreign-trained professionals

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This Week

Imagine stepping of a plane at the Ottawa International Airport, excited to start a new life and career in a brand new country. That was Bharathi Sriraman's dream of what would happen when she came to Canada.

Unfortunately, for this now Nepean resident she was mistaken. Neither her master's degree in philosophy and linguistics, the five languages she speaks or her experience as a researcher could convince companies to hire her for a position she would be suited for in Canada.

"I remember when I was in Germany, I was told by the Canadian embassy that as a permanent resident I would be able to apply for a lot of jobs," she said. "They also assured me that I was very qualified and should have no trouble getting into the job market."

The main problem with her resume was that it had no Canadian experience on it. As a result, she had a difficult time getting interviews and since she was new to the country she didn't know what would be expected of her in the interviews that she did get.

Sriraman, who emigrated from Germany in 2001, was determined to enter the job market, but since she couldn't find a position in Canada to suit her area of interest or her level of expertise she decided to go back to school to work on her doctorate.

After much work she decided in 2006 that academia wasn't what she wanted. She wanted a researching job that included a little bit of communications work, networking and public relations.

"I didn't see myself as a closeted aca-



Job hunter: Bharathi Sriraman is one of many foreign-trained professionals looking for work in their field of expertise in Canada. As a member of a new pilot project through Integration Resources Canada she is hoping find it.

ademic," she said.

She decided once again to try and find some work, thinking it would be easier now that she had been working on her PhD at a Canadian university.

"Even through my education at a Canadian university I really didn't have the job-seeking skills I needed," she said. "It was still very difficult for me to access employers."

Sriraman went looking for help at employment agencies hoping they could help her find her dream job, but only found it made the search more difficult.

"It was a frustrating experience," she said. "I've been through various employment agencies and what I find with them is they give you the tools and you have to go out there and work on your own."

It wasn't until she found the pilot program at Integration Resources Canada in Nepean that she thought her dream might come true.

"They tell you that you have the skills as an international professional. You don't hear that from most employment agencies. Most employment agencies will tell you, you need Canadian experience," she said.

The future is looking brighter for her now that she is a member of the group along with 14 other foreign-trained professionals. In total there are six in the group with PhDs six with master's degrees and three with bachelor's degrees. All of them have been unable to find work in their field and who have resorted to jobs at call centres or fast food chains just to bring money into their homes.

"This is one smart group. Every single one of them have gone through programs that have told them they don't have enough Canadian experience," said Bruce Switzer, president of Integration Resources Canada. "When I look at the kind of programs they were being trained in for the Canadian job market versus the kind of training Canadians get at the same level, it guaranteed that they would never get a job."

The group of 15 meets on Tuesdays to discuss their successes and share experiences in the job market. The group acts as a form of support network. Everyone in the group has agreed to continue meeting until every one of them has a job.

"That means when number 15 is still unemployed they'll have 14 employed indi-

viduals working to get them a job," he said. "It's kind of a unique experience that we're trying. From our point of views it means that they're able to build a support network and they all realize that this network will probably be with them for the rest of their professional careers in Canada."

Switzer believes the group works because help is given on a one-on-one basis. That help includes helping the professionals practice for interviews, reformatting their resumes and even setting up interview with companies who might be hiring or just for the applicant to gain information and experience.

"The big difference between our program and other programs is that it's one on one coaching. If somebody decides to take our program we work with them until they find a job in their field of expertise," he said.

He said that with the help of the group and volunteer within his organization employees will be able to see what a great asset foreign-trained professionals can be. This realization is especially important because in a few years the majority of the labour force will be foreign-trained according to Switzer.

"The thing that's critical about this is that in three years 100 per cent of labour growth in Ottawa will be immigrants," he said. "They have incredible work ethics. They have the work ethics of our grandparents and our great-grandparents."

This program has helped Sriraman believe that she has a chance to work at a level she is qualified for in a field she loves, both of which seemed to be a problem for her without the help of the group.

"When I apply for the basic positions, I don't end up getting the job because I'm told by people I'm too bright. I'm told by people I'm over qualified," she said. "The frustration is I can't get into the entry levels and I'm not far enough to get into senior levels."

She said the group has so far worked for her and hopes that it can work to give other people the confidence and help it has given her.

"It puts power back into our hands. As in we determine where we want to go," she said. "The way it's helped me is not to feel that I'm the only one. I know for a fact that there are lots of other people struggling."

The group has been meeting since early March and already one person has secured a position that fits her qualifications. Switzer predicts that the rest will secure employment very soon.

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