

Future Skills Centre Podcast

Episode 2

Newcomer Integration in Canada: New Brunswick Example

In 2022, Canada welcomed a record number of newcomers to the country: over 431,000 new permanent residents. In this episode, we consider the issue of the economic and employment integration of newcomers to Canada, focusing on the New Brunswick context. Our guests are leaders at a large, local employer and at an organization that works to enable newcomers to participate fully in the province's society. They share their personal and professional experiences and provide insights and suggestions for communities, employers, and the skills ecosystem across Canada.

Guests

Jason Limongelli, Vice President for the Woodlands Division, J.D. Irving, Inc.
Moncef Lakouas, President, New Brunswick Multicultural Council

Host

Julie Cafley, Executive Director, Catalyst Canada

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Transcript

Julie Cafley: Hello and welcome. You are listening to the Future Skills Centre podcast, which brings together experts from all over Canada to discuss the most important challenges for the future of work. I am your host, Julie Cafley. I am the Executive Director of Catalyst Canada. This podcast is brought to you by the Future Skills Centre and the Conference Board of Canada.

Today we will be looking into the question of the employment integration of these new Canadians, and in particular the situation in New Brunswick. The province has recently made a priority of immigration for the next five years, with the target of attracting 7,500 immigrants a year by 2027, but besides attracting these newcomers to New Brunswick, there is the question of their employment integration. How do they enter the labour market? What are the main obstacles for them and for employers? What are the priority actions to be taken in order for these new arrivals to become the new workforce New Brunswick so badly needs? With me today are two representatives of New Brunswick to discuss these issues: Moncef Lakouas, President of the Multicultural Council of New Brunswick, and Jason Limongelli, Vice-president, J.D. Irving Group. Thank you both for joining us today to discuss these issues.

To begin, Moncef, we are going to talk about the impact of newcomers on New Brunswick. What makes newcomers such an important factor in the economy of New Brunswick?

Moncef Lakouas: Thank you, Julie. Immigration is an extremely important factor not only for the demographic growth of the province, but for its economic growth as well. We recently celebrated the fact that the population of New Brunswick had reached 812,000; that is something, I would say, that is rather historic: there is construction to be completed, there are new schools, and eventually there will be employers recruiting people from around the world. There are new businesses, micro-businesses that are launched by immigrants. There are many students attending schools and universities. There are international students coming in, more than ever before in the province of New Brunswick. All these things mean that we are perceived as one of the best provinces in the country. We are seen as a province enjoying extreme growth, and there is development that represents a great deal of potential for men and women coming from elsewhere. We are also bilingual, so that enables people whether they are French or English or from other cultures to eventually make New Brunswick their homeland. The future belongs to New Brunswick in terms of economic and social development. That is why many people, including myself and my family, have chosen this place because there is nowhere better than the East Coast in which to plan your life and settle, and make your immigration a success.

Julie: Great! Thank you, Moncef. Jason, can you talk to us a little about the profile of these newcomers? What types of position do they look for most often?

Jason Limongelli: Certainly, Julie. Thank you. There is no doubt that we at J.D. Irving are looking for people with specific skills. We want workers experienced either in forestry, to work in the forest or definitely as truck drivers, but also in management. We have a great need for accountants, people in finance, people for management and operational planning. Our focus is on people who already have skills and permits to work in Canada and in New Brunswick, or can acquire permits or licences easily to work in this country. We look more to permanent residents. We want people to stay, immigrants to stay in the province, in our operations, and definitely in our communities, both urban and rural. It's not just a question of temporary positions. For us, definitely, we are more focussed on permanent residents.

Julie: Excellent. I would like to understand more about the obstacles to employment integration for these newcomers.

Jason: There is no doubt that we do have some cultural obstacles, but in our experience, things are getting better and better in the communities where people work for them to overcome the cultural obstacles. But there are other challenges, certainly housing, which is a challenge at present. Even though we are bringing people in, 6,500 a year, there is no housing. That has become a big challenge in terms of bringing people here, but there are also other kinds of skills. We in Canada, and in New Brunswick, are used to certain things. We are accustomed to our financial system, and our tax system. We do not always recognize that people from other countries are not used to our systems. For example, there is a big challenge in explaining our tax system in New Brunswick: provincial, federal, sales tax, tax on cars, property tax, finance, or working with a bank to get a mortgage. Some things that, depending on the country you come from, people are not used to. And we do not have the resources at present to make sure that these challenges are taken care of with new arrivals. I believe that we certainly have a good system of integration, to make sure that people feel welcome in New Brunswick, to integrate them into school, but to live their lives like a Canadian, like a New Brunswicker, we still need more resources to help them achieve full integration.

Julie: Excellent, thank you. And Moncef, from your side, how do you see these obstacles to integration?

Moncef: It's the same thing, we know the same people. When people come from abroad, there are many challenges to integration in the first year, for the first two years, among other Canadian experiences. They are asked when they apply for jobs other than in programs where they are already matched with an employer: "You have no Canadian experience, we cannot hire you because you do not have any references, and so on." That is already a major obstacle. Secondly, language. People face language challenges, among other things, Francophones coming from Africa and others who think that – the province, normally, it is a bilingual province, when you arrive in the south-east and you are not proficient in English, you do not necessarily have an opportunity to get a job, other than in fields that operate strictly in French, but they are very limited. There are some, perhaps, but I can count them on one hand. More than 80% of the jobs locally are filled by networking. People who arrive

from overseas and do not know anyone, how are they going to find a job when they do not know anyone? As you know, at the end of the day, in New Brunswick, we all know each other. Even though the population has increased, we are just 800,000 in the whole province, and I think we know everyone. The chance for an immigrant to find a job when they do not know anyone, that eventually tells against them.

There's also the question of the recognition of equivalences. My spouse came as a nurse-anaesthetist, but when she came here she was told: "You cannot practise." "So what do I do?" "You have to study at the university." "Are you going to give me equivalences?" "No." "You have to start again on a four-year program." She studied to be a nurse twice, eight years of study to do the same thing that she knows how to do today, and \$45,000 in student debt later on. You know for sure that not everyone is prepared to repeat their studies from square one. Among other things, they won't lead anywhere.

The last thing I will finish with is also the question of systemic discrimination. It is not a fun subject to address, but the survey done by the Council tells us that over 90% of people can testify that systemic racism exists in our institutions, both public and private. A person who comes with a "different" name, who applies for a certain job, who does not get it. Experience shows that when you change your name, with the same assets, with the same experience, and you give a common name, basically, you have a better chance of getting a job. But it's something we have to address as a society.

Jason: Just to draw a somewhat simple conclusion from everything Moncef has mentioned, immigration to Canada is extremely complicated. There are 62 immigration programs in this country. The immigration policies were drawn up in the 1950s, when we were looking for surgeons, and people to work on building nuclear plants, other skills, it was seen as a privilege to enter Canada. Frankly, our immigration policies are outdated, do not recognize the demographics in Canada or in the provinces, do not recognize the globalization of skills, that people in other countries are as competent as Canadians and that educational systems are equivalent. I personally think that is where the problem begins, in broad terms, we need to completely overhaul immigration policy in Canada, and it's all very well to have pilot programs, and that does help. It is certain that it helps, and we are supportive of that. At the same time, there is a bigger challenge to completely overhaul the immigration system in Canada. We cannot address all the challenges Moncef has mentioned with pilot programs and one-off deals. And there is no doubt that small companies in the province will be unable to untangle all the complexity, whether cultural or financial, or federal policy, the federal and provincial governments, pilot programs, small companies that need workers at this time in New Brunswick really do not have the resources, do not have the skills to untangle all the complexity of it.

Julie: Your answer raises a question about the idea that in many cases, newcomers will get short-term positions on low wages for which they are overqualified. Is that true?

Moncef: Yes, I understand they have created a new term for them: they call them “survival jobs.” [Laughs] They do that for a certain time, until they can transition. My spouse is an example of this. As a nurse-anaesthetist at age 21, she was already an anaesthetist and in sole charge of an entire emergency unit, together with colleagues. When she arrived in New Brunswick, she worked in a summer camp, because that was the option New Brunswick gave her, people will say. So already the fact that she was mostly French-speaking and not necessarily, she was not proficient in English, she became so in time. The fact that the hospital denied all her requests for access because she was told you are not from New Brunswick with equivalences either you do housekeeping work, or a little bit, or work as an attendant, but even work as an attendant came with terms and conditions. So for a time, a nurse-anaesthetist at a summer camp, nothing against summer camps, but that is not what we want for the province of New Brunswick. There are many situations like that. Look in the hotels, look in the taxis, look in construction, you will see people who are extremely well trained, who have talents, who have skills, but who are not necessarily using them today.

Jason: We too have also heard that term, “survival job.” In general, in our experience, it applies to the partner of the candidate we are bringing here with a view to immigration, there is no doubt that the candidate we are bringing here, if he or she has a work permit, depending on the immigration program, the spouse may work or not. In many cases, they are not working in their actual professional field. The challenge is higher or greater when we talk about rural centres, the more rural sector, where there is no large industry, much of the time in a city, there is an existing industry. If the candidate’s partner does not want to work in the industry, it means that eventually there will be a retention problem. And if we think about rental costs today, having a house costing \$2000-\$2500 a month, there is no doubt that it takes two people working in a family just to pay for housing. If the partner is not working, it is certain that they will begin to look at options. Either move to Moncton or live in the more urban St John, or take off, as Moncef has said, to Montreal or Toronto, where they can tap more resources, more cultural resources, more jobs for the whole family. So sure, it is a big challenge, how are we going to build a workforce? How are we going to have a system that provides an opportunity for the candidate’s spouse to work in their chosen field?

Julie: It is clear that we can see the challenges, the obstacles. Can you talk to us a little about strategies? What actions are needed to facilitate employment integration in terms of skills development, recognition of qualifications, and help with their new life? What can we change? What can we do? What works? I will begin with Moncef.

Moncef: That is a big question. Look, I know that Canada is the country in the world that invests the most in settlement. We are talking about billions of dollars, so the infrastructure is there. The only concern is that, as Jason has said, immigration is such a complex phenomenon. When an immigrant comes from another country, we do not necessarily know who does what. We do not know what the settlement agency does in relation to the province, or in relation to employers. It is extremely difficult to get access to information. So the thing really has to be centralized to ensure that when a person arrives in a province, the first thing is that they are matched with a job in their field of expertise. Because employers,

like Jason, there are many looking for staff who are qualified, who intend to stay in the province of New Brunswick for the long term and become citizens. My view of strategies is that we have to invest in the infrastructure to ensure a match with available jobs under the best conditions, with no restrictions. Because it takes a person six months to get access to a health insurance card. That is no fun. When it takes six months for a person to get a driver's licence, that is no fun, because it just creates one more logjam that we do not need. We have 8000 jobs available now just in the Greater Moncton region – 8000. I believe that if we look at the provincial level, there are even more. Jobs come up every day. As Jason was saying, there are 120,000 who were going to leave over the next 10 years, and we will not necessarily have all the talents to replace those jobs that are leaving; it is going to leave a huge gap.

There are people who want to come here. I think there are more than 4 million individuals who apply to come to Canada every year, and about 10% of them get into Canada. Those people are motivated and qualified, and have the necessary training to fit into jobs. They just have to be allowed to integrate under the best possible conditions, that we put our cultural biases aside just a little and be able to think about living together. Because at the end of the day, the challenges in education, the challenges in health, those challenges, we have few skills but we do share them. When someone dies in hospital, that concerns all of us. There is no ethnic issue there. There is an individual who died just because the system is not working in the best way possible. We have to learn to work together, put our cultural differences aside, and draw strength from the things that bring us together, as human beings and individuals. What do we want to achieve for the province of New Brunswick over the next 10 years? How can we build it together? I am sure that there will be something for everyone, regardless of where they come from, or the language they speak. Because sometimes, people cannot even speak the language, Jason, but they can nevertheless do a job that does not necessarily need them to develop well-developed skills in linguistics or in communication because it is very transactional. There is a way of making this immigration plan succeed that is societal, we just have to give ourselves the resources to do it.

Jason: Yes. And Julie, we have talked a lot about challenges, but we don't want to be negative about it. I certainly think there are many people who support immigration in general, even in small rural centres where people don't think about it. As Moncef said, these are homogeneous provinces and we are in the process of increasing diversity. In my view, this is an extremely good thing. Moncef also said there is immigration for New Brunswickers, that is new but it is part of our history. In the past, we had major immigration programs in rural centres to develop all our industries. We have examples of this, so I think we have to bring in all skills, we have to centralize to some extent.

Personally, I find that the pilot program, or when control is given to the provinces, the government of New Brunswick, and the federal government is out of the picture, we can go much more quickly. With that, we can work on what we want to work on. It means one government fewer that has to be persuaded to change, so pilot programs are really a good tool. At the same time, I think that with pilot programs, we bring people together.

It begins to build a knowledge centre, a skills centre, where we can start to share best practices. And we can start to attract small business, other businesses, to the province, and do more training in the professional skills we need. With the provincial policy, I think we can achieve our goals fairly easily, and that will really be a good thing for the province.

Moncef: That's an excellent point, Jason. I would add that we are beginning to see many municipalities getting involved in the immigration process – many of them. That is something I love to hear and see. In the Moncton region, now, that is an integral part of economic development, and the city of Dieppe has a department for that, the city of Moncton has done it, but there is also a strategy. What do we want to accomplish in the next five years in terms of workforce and other components, the immigration aspect is an extremely important one, and what do we do to be able to attract and retain people in the cities? I think Moncton is now attracting over 58% of the total of immigrants coming into the entire province, just because there is a plan and there are people who are extremely dedicated and motivated for it. What I hope to see eventually is each municipality, large or small, with a population growth plan aligned with their economic development plan, because the two things go hand-in-hand. If they do that, at least, it provides them with a dashboard so that they can eventually define their long-term, mid-term and short-term objectives and work on that with their partners, including the employers.

Jason: Moncef has a lot of experience in an urban centre like Moncton. I personally have a lot of experience in small villages like Chipman or Saint-Quentin, a village of 1,500 people who have population growth plans, and immigration programs, but it constantly requires a champion. It takes a champion to help communities make plans. Companies have the skills, the skills to manage a big project like that, and can help with resources.

So it is those groups, Savoie in Saint-Quentin, who are bringing in people from the Westco Group in the North West, or us, or Mrs. Dunster's in Sussex, it is they who can be the champion for the community. I encourage other businesses to get involved either in immigration or with their community, whether urban or rural, to become a champion and contribute their skills to the planning of a project in the communities where they operate. If we build partnerships like that, with non-profits, the OMCE or anyone, we will certainly move much more quickly.

Moncef: Absolutely right. The perfect example of that is Saint-Isidore, a small village in New Brunswick that is going to take in more than 250 families of Moroccan origin, if I'm not mistaken. The project was piloted by the local company. I forget the name, but they produce blueberries. Now, once the company has the mission to go and get these workers, the city is mobilizing, nearby municipalities are mobilizing, and builders are mobilizing.

They want to establish Moroccan restaurants and make sure there are eventually couscous flavours that will be shared by all residents. That is the beauty of it, because the community is mobilizing together just because an employer is the driver and the champion of the initiative, it impacts everyone and brings everyone in.

Julie: Excellent. To close the discussion, are there targeted skills development programs that can help prepare these newcomers to meet the needs of local employers? I'll start with Jason.

Jason: What is certain, Julie, is that we are looking for people who already have skills, so it is not our priority at the moment to have training programs in the skills specific to the roles we are looking for. I think we certainly need training programs, the skills you need to live in New Brunswick, how to do business in New Brunswick or how to pay taxes in New Brunswick.

It is not really cultural skills, so to speak, but skills for life in Canada that we have need of most. There is no doubt that the multicultural centres it was resources, but when we think about more rural centres, we do not always enjoy the benefits of a multicultural centre. I think that is something we still need in this province.

Moncef: Absolutely. There are provincial programs. One that comes to mind is "skills launch." I think that Jason has perhaps heard of that, it is a program that has a provincial plan. The main objective is to take people who do not necessarily have the skills when they arrive in New Brunswick, and match them with the necessary skills according to the demands of industry as such. I think it is a 12-month program, it is spread over 6 to 12 months. The main objective is to expose people to extremely crucial skills and eventually placed them in the respective industries.

I believe that the universities, colleges and cultural and multicultural centres have an extremely clear mission there. A good many of the people who come from other countries do not necessarily have the skills that match local needs. That is the biggest challenge: aligning the skills of people from elsewhere with the requirements, as Jason has already mentioned. When you come from Morocco or Africa, you are not exposed to the culture of fisheries or forestry, and that is a substantial requirement for industry here.

So you have to build bridges, bridge programs to train people coming from elsewhere in a very limited time, so that they can meet workforce requirements, because employers do not necessarily have a lot of time. Some employers, like micro-businesses, do not even have the means to invest in training. They need something ready-made, so that people can fit into jobs as soon as possible, because the need is extreme in those areas.

Julie: Thank you both, Moncef and Jason, for this very interesting exchange that really helps us discover and understand the specifics of immigration in New Brunswick, and the specific requirements of the economy with respect to newcomers. It helps us understand to what extent the needs of the economy in terms of sectors and technical skills are essential, but also to see that social and everyday life skills are also important in enabling newcomers to start a new life in the province, and be able to become long-term residents of the province. You talked a lot about retention, which is so important. Since employers cannot manage that integration of their new workers, it is essential to have integration or occupational development programs provided by the province, the federal

government or other sectors of the economy. Many thanks to both of you: Moncef Lakouas, President of the Cultural Council of New Brunswick, and Jason Limongelli, Vice-president, J.D. Irving Group. We are delighted to have been able to benefit from your experience and lessons learned about the situation in New Brunswick that will certainly be helpful to many employers in Canada. Our thanks also to those who are listening to us today. Keep following us and sharing these podcast episodes. I am your host, Julie Cafley, and have a great day. Thank you very much.

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