

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU CAN'T BE WHO YOU ARE?

When professional identity and local reality collide



For many medical professionals new to Canada, existing regulatory barriers can lead to a professional identity crisis.

What you need to know

Our professional identities are a major part of who we are and how we set out on our chosen career paths. Though research already exists on the connection between professional identity and work, much less is known about how immigration plays into this. Newcomers with an established professional identity must suddenly try to understand a new and unfamiliar labour market that they join as 'outsiders'. For them, re-entering a profession in a new country often means coming to terms with both what they can no longer do and who they can no longer be.

What is this research about?

Comparing medical and information technology sectors, this research explores identity and professional paths for newcomers. It looks at existing barriers for professional immigrants found in the local rules and procedures to re-enter a profession in a new country. It then goes further to understand the effects of any such barriers on newcomers and how they might respond in re-thinking how to move forward, either within their professional context or otherwise. This work looks closely at the direct experiences of immigrant professionals as they try to figure out how to leverage their prior professional experience and status in a new labour market with fundamental differences.

How was the research carried out?

From 2009 to 2011, researchers carried out 45-90 minute interviews with 58 immigrant professionals in Ontario including 32 from the medical sector and 26 from the IT sector. They were recruited through immigrant and professional agencies serving clients in the province. The interviews were flexible and mostly used open-ended questions that asked about their immigration experiences, their perceptions on the new local labour market and career opportunities, and any impacts on their professional identity. They were recorded and later transcribed. All the data was later analyzed and categorized to better understand the themes that were mentioned and discussed in the interviews.

What have we learned from the research?

For immigrant medical professionals, the strong regulatory environment greatly influenced their ability to “re-enter” the field in Canada and to be themselves again. The barriers placed on their re-entry often led to a kind of identity crisis and personal struggle. Many found it nearly impossible to understand what was required to practice and felt that so much contradictory information was being shared by institutions and regulatory bodies. Even when medical professionals felt they were doing all that was required, they still felt an inability to overcome a variety of entry barriers. The barriers preventing them from practicing again and the prospects to have to settle for something outside of their professions often led to great anxiety and the possibility of having to give up their professional identity all together.

Though IT professional immigrants also faced certain requirements to work in their field, however, a much less regulated environment allowed them to deal directly with local employers where international credentials and experience could be more valuable. In this sense, they found themselves often “negotiating” with employers rather than regulatory bodies or institutional bureaucracy. In contrast to immigrant medical professionals, they talked more about “facilitators”, or ways they could get through the local requirements to enter the IT industry. Though they did sometimes have to work at a lower level or start off in a junior position and put their professional identities on hold, there were more opportunities for them to grow inside of their own sector and contribute to identity growth.

How can you use this research?

This research has both important policy and industry considerations. Policy makers must understand that some professions, like medicine, continue to pose serious barriers to entry. It not only affects the sector, but it seriously impacts individuals' well being and their professional identity as well as local economy by continuing to under-utilize valuable foreign human capital. On the other hand, in more flexible environments such as the IT sector, challenges can actually lead to eventual growth and a strengthened professional identity. Such resilience as a source of professional growth can be of great use to immigration consultants, employers, and job search consultants who might be key people in looking for ways to enhance prospects for immigrants.

Who is leading this research?

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Learn more

For more on this study, read the full article: Zikic, J. & Richardson, J. (2016). What happens when you can't be who you are: Professional identity at the institutional periphery. *Human Relations*, vol. 69 (1), pp.139-168.

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