

## A SHORT COFFEE MEETING ALL IT TAKES TO HELP IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS MAKE CAREER CONNECTIONS

Wendy Au was new to Vancouver many years ago when someone took the time to help her get a career foothold in the city.

“I was a new immigrant and somebody gave me an opportunity,” says Vancouver assistant city manager Au. “Now I’m returning the favour.”

As a Connector with the Immigrant Employment Council of B.C.’s (IEC-BC) new networking program, Connector, helping a new immigrant expand their professional network was as easy for Au as meeting her ‘connectee’, a UK-trained lawyer, for coffee.

Following that meeting, Au sent an email of introduction to a law contact who in turn referred her connectee to lawyers working in his field of interest.

As the growth of major projects and retirements continue to create a labour shortage in BC, the Province predicts 306,000 international workers will be required by 2022 to meet the labour needs of employers,” says Kelly Pollack, CEO of IEC-BC. “The Connector program is one of the employer-focused initiatives that address the skills gap by increasing employer access to top talent in BC, while helping skilled immigrants integrate into our workplaces.”

A champion of helping professional immigrants establish their careers, the City of Vancouver was the first employer to partner in the Connector program. During the three-month pilot program, 27 City of Vancouver employees volunteered to meet with a skilled immigrant over coffee, helping to establish industry connections that could lead to a career in the province.

Modeled after the award-winning Connector program developed by the Halifax Partnership and replicated in 12 communities across Canada, the BC Connector program is designed to “level the playing field” for BC’s skilled immigrants by matching them with local professionals who help them build their professional network through referrals.

Job-ready immigrants are paired with local professionals based on shared industry experience, professional backgrounds or the connectees’ interest in a specific organization. Once matched, a connector and connectee meet to discuss industry-related trends, current market demands and hidden job opportunities in their desired field. Connectors also introduce the connectee to people in their network who could help them advance their career.

Opreet Kang, IEC-BC's Manager of Global Connections, says that through the Connector program immigrants gain access to a network, while Connectors garner access to local immigrant talent, come to understand the challenges skilled immigrants face, and most importantly, get the satisfaction of knowing they have helped someone integrate and succeed in the community.

"Successful and connected professionals are busy people who recognize the value of networking and connections," says Kang. "That first Connector meeting sets the tone for the referrals and network growth to follow. The ultimate goal is to get the connectee closer to employment."

Zhila Pirmoradi, a PhD candidate at SFU's School of Engineering Science, was among the first to participate as a connectee. She told her connector of her interest in sustainable development and health planning "and he was very insightful."

"The contacts he gave me were high profile and related to my areas of interest. I would never have been able to come up with those on my own."

Vancouver city manager Dr. Penny Ballem, says helping new immigrants get started in their careers has been "transformational" for city employees.

"We understand how important networking is in this world," says Ballem. "You can't get better exposure than working with and meeting people from different backgrounds. We're a big, diverse organization and we're proud that we're able to make a difference in people's lives. That's a really powerful thing."

Funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Connector program has recently expanded to the City of Surrey.

IEC-BC is seeking BC-based companies and professionals from finance, IT, engineering, urban planning and HR backgrounds to participate in the Connector program.

To learn more or to become a Connector visit [www.iecbc.ca/our-initiatives/connector-program](http://www.iecbc.ca/our-initiatives/connector-program) or call 604.629.5364.