

# ONBOARDING AFGHAN REFUGEES



**A TOOLKIT FOR EMPLOYERS**

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

is to assist British Columbia (BC) employers to effectively recruit, hire, onboard and retain a diverse workforce that includes Afghan refugees.

To effectively create a welcoming and inclusive workplace and successfully integrate new employees who can contribute productively, employers can find the most success with a planned approach that follows practical steps.

**EMPLOYERS** who use this Toolkit will:

1. **Increase their knowledge** of culturally savvy and inclusive interviewing, onboarding, and retention practices.
2. Learn how to promote a more **inclusive workplace**.
3. **Nurture an environment** that is respectfully curious about and accommodating of newcomer's cultures.

Individuals who have lived and worked in Canadian workplaces for most of their lives have likely adopted a general understanding of Canadian workplace practices and norms. However, newcomers to BC may not have the cultural context of work experience in Canada and often benefit from employer support and guidance to integrate into the workplace. ***Employer support and guidance enables newcomers to quickly become productive members of the labour force***, contributing to their community and the overall economy.

**THROUGHOUT THIS DOCUMENT,** the terms **'newcomers'** and **'immigrants' are used interchangeably** and include both immigrants and refugees. It is important to note that Afghan refugees are the focus of this Toolkit; however, many of the practices and resources enclosed could be applied to other newcomer groups.





# THE BUSINESS CASE FOR HIRING AFGHAN REFUGEES

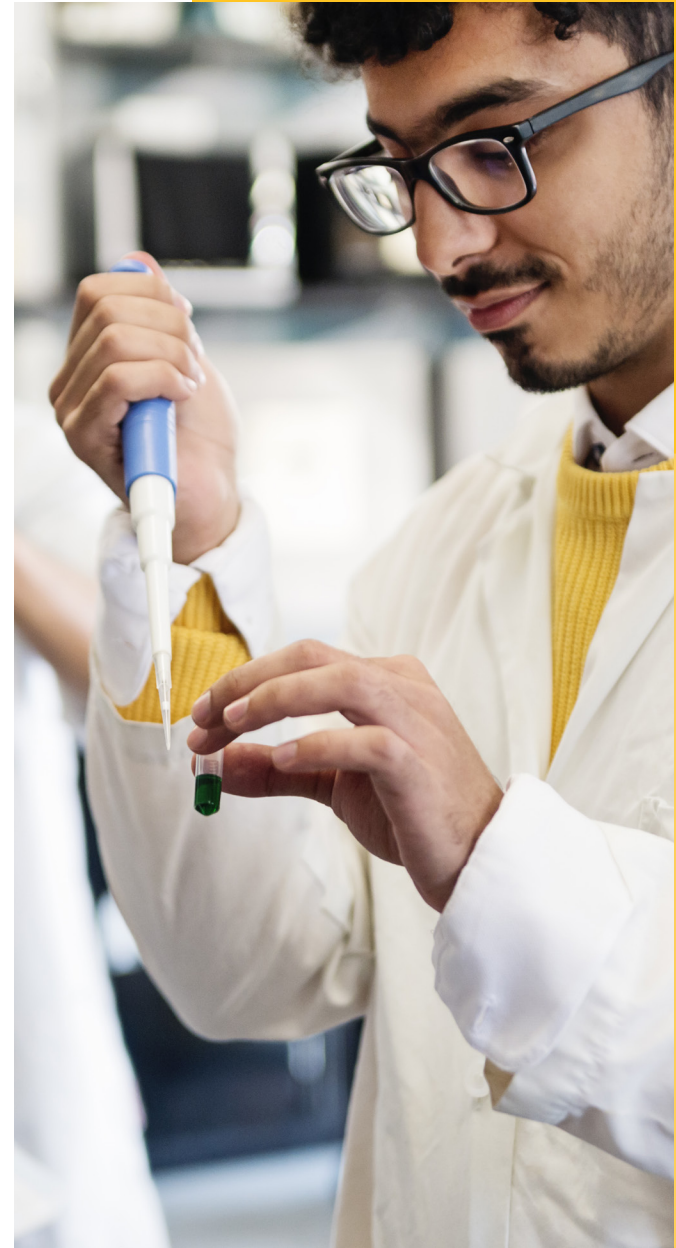
**FACT:** An aging workforce, declining birth rates, and fast-growing sectors in the economy are straining talent availability for BC businesses and employers. Without enough new entrants into the workforce, employers will need to look at expanding their talent pool to meet their workforce needs.

Immigrants are a critical part of the solution to BC's skills and labour shortages and fill important roles within our economy. Businesses that can attract, integrate, and retain a diverse talent pool benefit from an expanded knowledge and skills base. Moreover, businesses that continue to thrive and grow understand how imperative it is to adopt hiring practices and policies that will increase their ability to hire and retain newcomer employees.

**Relevant Resource:** Want to source talent or post a job opening? Check out IEC-BC's free resource [BC JobConnect](#).

## Did you know?

The Government of Canada is committed to welcoming a minimum of 40,000 refugees from Afghanistan. [Find out more](#) about the steps the Government of Canada is taking to welcome Afghan refugees.



# PREPARING YOUR WORKFORCE:

## CREATING A WELCOMING AND SUPPORTIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT FOR REFUGEES



As part of broader inclusive workplace values and strategies, employers intending to interview Afghan refugees should first focus on equipping their existing workforce with the training and resources to create a welcoming and supportive work environment for refugees. Using Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) approaches to prepare the workforce to welcome newcomer refugees improves the employee onboarding, retention, and the workforce's overall inclusivity. A suggested course of action is outlined here.

1. Provide DEI-focused workplace training for all employees.

**Relevant Resource:** Looking for training funds? Check out the [BC Employer Training Grant](#)

2. Provide DEI-focused workplace unconscious hiring bias training for managers and supervisors.

**Relevant Resource:** As a starting point, check out the National Network of Immigrant Employment Councils' "[Decoding Unconscious Hiring Bias](#)" webinar.

3. Respectfully educate the workforce on Afghan culture using information found in the Appendices of this Toolkit.



# CONDUCTING CULTURALLY SAVVY INTERVIEWS

**INTERVIEWING** across different cultures requires **knowledge** and **awareness** of cultural differences and norms.

The **INTERVIEW PROCESS** can be **intimidating for anyone, especially for new immigrants**. Consider the difficulties you might experience trying to understand questions in an interview environment while speaking a language that is not your mother tongue.

The **FOLLOWING SUGGESTIONS** support an employer's ability to **create an inclusive interview environment** for Afghan refugees and conduct culturally savvy interviews.



## FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH CULTURAL DIFFERENCES.

**CULTURE** can have a strong influence on interview question responses, and information interviewees are typically asked to provide may be considered inappropriate in certain cultures. For example, identifying personality traits or promoting oneself may be perceived as impolite, or even interpreted as bragging by some cultures. Likewise, identifying a weakness could be considered “losing face,” described as losing a sense of dignity, honour, or good reputation.





## RESPECT PERSONAL SPACE.

**DIFFERENT CULTURES** *have varying comfort levels regarding personal space.* For Afghan refugees, the typical personal space may be **larger** than what is generally accepted by most Canadians. Some who may identify as **practising Muslims refrain from all physical contact with unrelated persons of the opposite gender**, which could include handshaking. If unsure, it is appropriate to ask someone if they are comfortable shaking hands before engaging in the practice. Check out IEC-BC's [Culturally-Competent Awareness of Body Language at Interviews](#) tool for more.



## ADDRESS THE SCOPE OF THE INTERVIEW.

**AT THE BEGINNING** of the interview, take some time to **explain the process**. Tell the candidate that you are going to ask some questions, take some notes, and mention to the candidate that they will also have an opportunity to ask questions.

## USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

**Always use language that is immigrant-friendly and allows for differences in communication styles.**

Avoid using slang. As English or French is not the primary, or in some cases, the secondary language of the newcomer, misunderstandings are common and should be anticipated. **Avoid slang, jargon, acronyms and unnecessarily technical language,** and be alert to the pace of the conversation, as well as body language and expression. Check out IEC-BC's [\*\*Culturally-Competent Communication for Interviews\*\*](#) tool for more.





## USE PRACTICE-BASED ASSESSMENT.

If language or communication is a barrier to accurate assessment, use practice-based ways of determining a candidate's ability, creating the opportunity for them to demonstrate their skills rather than verbalize them. Further, ask what experience the candidate has that is relevant and valuable to the role, instead of asking about their specific Canadian experience. This is a common way to evaluate new workers in skilled trades in Canada, and it can be extended to other industries, where appropriate. **For example**, asking an administrative candidate to demonstrate how they would organize a filing system, rather than asking them to verbalize how they would do so.



## INVITE QUESTIONS.

Typically, we end interviews by asking a candidate, ***“Do you have any questions for me?”*** Afghan culture **may associate the question as a challenge to authority** and many will not be accustomed to it. Assure the candidate they can ask any question about the job or the interview process. For example, you can say, “Now that we have discussed your knowledge and skills, you must have some questions about the job or about what it is like to work at our company. You can ask me any question that you have.”

**Relevant Resource:** Check out [IEC-BC’s Hiring Immigrant Talent Webinar Series](#) — learning opportunities which boost employers’ capacity to find, hire and retain skilled immigrant talent.





# EFFECTIVE ONBOARDING: EQUIPPING AFGHAN REFUGEES TO SUCCEED



**THE ONBOARDING PROCESS** consists of 4 essential components: **orientation**, **training**, **setting expectations**, and **onsite support**.

Regardless of a new employee's skill level or previous experience, newcomers come with varied cultural backgrounds and relatively limited understanding of Canadian workplace behaviours, practices, and communication styles. Since newcomers can face challenges integrating into the workforce because of cultural differences, managers and colleagues should provide guidance and support to newcomers and all parties should **remain adaptable and flexible**.



## 1. ORIENTATION

### **Make health and safety paramount.**

Most immigrant workers experienced less regulated working conditions in their home country; therefore, it is critical to provide an extensive health and safety orientation to prevent workplace accidents and minimize safety-related issues. Newcomers have the right to know about health and safety hazards on the job. It is important for newcomer refugee workers to understand that they have a right to refuse unsafe work and that it is completely legal and appropriate to refuse work that they believe may cause harm to themselves or another worker.

### **Address workplace culture.**

Cultures vary widely in their approaches to verbal and non-verbal communication. Personal space, hierarchy, teamwork, initiative, formality, punctuality, and privacy are just a few of the factors that can vary from culture to culture. It is useful to recognize examples of cultural differences in the workplace to avoid confusion and improve relationships with co-workers. What are the norms of behaviour, communication, and dress code? What is the etiquette around breaks, social conversations, or meetings? **Note, the employer's mission, vision and values should be used to situate workplace culture.**





## 2. TRAINING

### **Provide health and safety training.**

To mitigate language or communication barriers, the health and safety training needs to be **simple but comprehensive**. It is useful to provide visual aids and have information translated into additional languages. Some employers will have employees who are fluent in the newcomer's language and can assist with explaining the most important concepts. For safety training opportunities, check out the [Government of BC Safety Training](#) resources.

### **Provide job-specific training and organizational information.**

***Employers have an obligation*** to provide employees with adequate training and help employees obtain the required knowledge, skills and abilities to perform their jobs and work-related tasks. **Job-specific training should also encompass learning to use any required systems or equipment.** Further, providing the newcomer employee with information about the organization's structure and mission, vision and values supports their understanding of how their role fits in and supports the bigger picture.



### 3. SETTING EXPECTATIONS

#### **Ask if the employee requires accommodations (never assume).**

While many Afghans are Muslim, one **must not assume that an Afghan newcomer employee is Muslim**, and it should be noted that not all Muslims practise their faith. An employer should ask the Afghan newcomer employee **what accommodations they may need, if any**, to be able to fully participate in their new environment and the employer should never make assumptions about what those needs may be. The employer is required to adjust policies or practices so the employee can fully participate in the workplace. **Note** that what is deemed to be reasonable differs from workplace to workplace.

#### **Set clear job requirement expectations.**

It is important to explain the main requirements of the job, key performance issues, and goals of the team and/or organization. **Expectations need to be clear**, concrete, and current. Here is where you will continue to use plain and simple language to indicate the key success factors required in their role.

**FOR EXAMPLE**, instead of saying, “shifts start at 8 AM,” **use language that communicates your expectations directly**, such as, “you start your work shift by 8 AM.” Also include behaviour expectations, such as, “I expect you to come to talk to me if you have any concerns or questions”.





### **Discuss mutual expectations.**

The process of **establishing mutual expectations** with any new employee is a powerful tool to develop a positive professional relationship. **Consider the following** simple process to establish mutual expectations with new employees:

Take a piece of paper and create two columns. Label one column with your name and the other column with the new employee's name. In the column with the manager's name, list what the new employee can expect from you, their manager. After discussing and listing several items that the new employee can expect from you, begin to create a list in the column under the employee's name and list what you expect from them.

### **Share your management style.**

**Use clear statements** such as “you can expect me to provide you with support to do your job” or “you can expect me to provide you with

feedback on how you are doing in your new role.” **Avoid using jargon** that we may understand but would be unusual to a newcomer. Instead of saying, “I have an open-door policy,” you can state, “please come to see me anytime if you have questions. I will try to make myself available to answer any questions you may have.”

### **Systemize an open dialogue.**

**Create recurring opportunities for open dialogue** with the new employee to provide input and feedback. Many immigrants may be more familiar with hierarchical leadership styles where authority is not questioned, so their input or feedback may have to be directly requested. **Maintain ongoing discussions** about job responsibilities, office culture, performance monitoring, professional development, and work to support their professional growth and development.



## 4. ONSITE SUPPORT

### Facilitate introductions.

Many immigrants come from countries where relationships must be developed before work can get done, Afghan culture included. To start out on the right foot, facilitate introductions with peers and colleagues. Employers often encourage new hires to make themselves comfortable in their new workspace and to ask questions when needed, but the newcomer may not know whom to ask or may be hesitant to approach busy colleagues.

### Establish a buddy system.

The buddy system is a simple yet effective way to align current employees with newcomers. By assigning an existing employee to act as the primary contact person for the newcomer employee during the orientation and onboarding period, it helps the new employee integrate into the workplace faster and with more ease. It is best to assign an existing employee who works in a similar role and job function who can share company insights as well as act as a positive ambassador for the new employee.

**Relevant Resource:** Want to learn more about how to start a buddy program? Check out [Designing a Buddy Program](#) to get started.





### Create mentorship opportunities.

Mentorship is a highly effective way to **address or prevent onboarding challenges** and an excellent way to help a new hire integrate into the workplace. Mentorship opportunities have also ***proven to be beneficial to both the mentor and mentees***, as they allow for professional growth and development.

Mentoring and networking opportunities can expand outside your organization. Consider introducing refugee workers to IEC-BC's **MentorConnect program** which provides opportunities to learn best practices, acquire industry information, and build local professional networks.

### If applicable, practice reasonable accommodation measures.

Religion is a protected ground under BC Human Rights Law, as well as under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Under these laws, ***employers have an obligation and a “duty to accommodate” an employee’s religious observances where doing so would not cause the employer undue hardship***. An employer must consider how workplace behaviour norms, communication and dress code may clash with the core beliefs of a specific group. **For example**, head coverings such as the Hijab may pose safety threats to the employee in a factory work setting. However, employers should make utmost effort to support the beliefs of their employees and meet their accommodation needs. Please reference Appendix B — Religious Background Information of this Toolkit to learn about how practising the Muslim faith can be accommodated in the workplace.

# BEYOND ONBOARDING:

## PROVIDING CONTINUOUS SUPPORT TO AFGHAN REFUGEES IN THE WORKPLACE

### **Prioritize team building opportunities.**

For newcomers, social engagements are an opportunity to practice their English or French and build relationships with their peers — consider hosting a monthly luncheon or engaging a social committee of employees to help plan social activities. Social engagements should be inclusive of all employees' cultures. Some Afghan refugees may not be comfortable taking part in religious celebrations of other faiths, or in social engagements where alcohol is served.

### **Delegate tasks.**

Supervisors typically delegate work and expect their staff to take initiative on further items. However, immigrants from some cultures **may expect firm direction from their bosses**. Finding the right balance between providing direction and encouraging an employee to take initiative will take time, patience, and encouragement.





### **Provide conflict-management coaching or training as needed.**

For some immigrants, it may be customary to ask supervisors to deal with issues with other team members. It is **important to facilitate and coach** immigrant employees on how to raise questions and discuss issues directly with their peers and colleagues.

### **Grow language and communication skills.**

Some refugees will have obtained a reasonable level of proficiency in written and oral English or French, suitable for the work environment. If a higher level of English or French proficiency in oral communication, reading or writing is required to support the employee's role and growth, employers should be prepared to

**provide ongoing language training and support.** Perfect English or French is not needed to perform every role. ***Employers can provide sector-specific English or French language training or subsidize the cost of language training outside the workplace.*** Employers with a large enough employee base may wish to consider providing or subsidizing customized, in-house, workplace-specific language and communication training.

**BEYOND LANGUAGE TRAINING,** the employer should **support the employee to build communications skills** that are relevant to their work role in Canada, including understanding the context of sayings and idioms typically used on the job, or developing other communications skills such as public speaking.



### Consider hosting family-friendly work functions.

To provide support beyond the workplace, **consider holding informal work functions such as social events where family members are welcome.**

When extending the invitation to an employee's family members, be mindful that in Afghan homes, **family extends to children, spouses as well as the senior generations.** This will allow the family members to make connections with their peers so they can be better supported and alleviate some of the familial pressure the worker may feel, allowing them to be better workers.

**As noted,** some Afghan refugees may be reluctant to take part in social gatherings that celebrate religious holidays of other faiths or where alcohol is served, so keep these accessible to all.

**Relevant Resource:** Ready to learn more about how to retain immigrant talent? Check out IEC-BC's [immigrant talent retention resources for employers.](#)







# APPENDIX A

## GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### What do we know about refugees?

A refugee is a person who has left their home country because they fear persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion. They are **unable to obtain sanctuary or protection from their home country and are forced to move elsewhere** in search of home and safety.

Resettling refugees is an important part of **Canada's humanitarian tradition**. It demonstrates to the world that we have a shared responsibility to help people who are displaced and persecuted.

### Political and economic context of Afghan refugees.

Afghan refugees are the **third-largest displaced population in the world** — following Syrian refugees and displaced Venezuelans. In August 2021, the Taliban invaded the country, took over and replaced a duly elected democratic government by force. As a result, most of the Afghans fled from their home country.

**AFGHANS HAVE SUFFERED MORE THAN 40 YEARS** of conflict, natural disasters, chronic poverty, food insecurity and, most recently, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Violence in Afghanistan is worsening in intensity and spreading in reach — causing even more human suffering and displacement.



Today **nearly 6 million Afghans have been driven out of their homes and their country** by conflict, violence, and poverty. The Government of Canada is working to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan nationals as quickly and safely as possible.

**BEFORE THE CONFLICT,**  
Afghanistan's ***economy was based on agriculture, animal husbandry, manufacturing, and foreign aid.***

Agriculture was Afghanistan's most important source of employment; more than 60% of Afghanistan's population worked in this sector, although it accounted for less than a third of GDP due to insufficient irrigation, drought, lack of market access, and other structural impediments. Manufacturing was also based on agricultural and pastoral raw materials. **One of the most important industries was the cotton textile industry.** The country also produced rayon and acetate fibres. Other manufactured products were cement, sugar, vegetable oil,

furniture, soap, shoes, and woollen textiles. Foreign aid has played a huge role in the country's economy for years as well.

**Education.**

Afghan refugees come from a variety of levels of education and socio-economic backgrounds. **Many Afghans have had their education interrupted** and some may have completed post-secondary education. However, due to refugees fleeing their countries with only the bare necessities — which do not include educational certificates or related documents — comprehensive data on their education and skills are not currently available.

**Age.**

**More than 50%** of the resettled Afghan refugees in Canada ***are of working age between 19 to 64.*** About 10.8% are 13–18 years old, 16.4% are 7–12 years old, and the rest of the refugees are under the age of 12.





### **Family units.**

Afghans have a **largely patriarchal society**, in which a man, usually the oldest, is the head of the household. **Families are often large**, extended family units with two parents, three or more children, as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins.

**Learn more: Afghan Refugees in Canada** — <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/afghanistan/key-figures.html>

### **Language.**

**90% of Afghan refugees will speak Dari and Pashto** Afghanistan is a multilingual country in which the two official languages are spoken. As part of their settlement activities, Afghan refugees are likely to obtain basic language instruction from the Government of Canada or through various settlement organizations.

# APPENDIX B

## RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND ACCOMMODATIONS

**AS NOTED EARLIER** in the Toolkit, many Afghans but not all are of Muslim faith, and one must not assume that an Afghan newcomer employee is Muslim. It should also be **noted that not all Muslims practise the faith.** The following section provides basic background information on the Muslim faith and offers guidance for supporting workplace accommodations.

### **Friday, the holy day.**

In the Muslim faith, Friday is the holy day. For employees working shifts, possible **accommodations** could include scheduling the employee for an evening shift on Friday, after the midday prayer, or scheduling the employee on Saturdays or Sundays instead of Fridays.

For organizations that follow a Monday to Friday workweek, it would not be reasonable to change operating hours to accommodate an employee. However, **allowing for an extended Friday lunch break** for the employee to attend the Friday prayer service could be a possible alternative. If it is not possible to alter working hours, then the employee would not participate in the Friday prayers.





## Prayers can be accommodated in any workplace.

Another important aspect of the Muslim faith is the **Salah, a short meditation practice** which occurs **five times a day**. In a typical workday, there would be one or two Salah prayers. Prayers take approximately **10 minutes to complete**, including the pre-prayer Wudu — which means washing the face, hands, arms and feet. Because the prayer times follow the trajectory of the sun, the daily **prayer times shift throughout the calendar year**.

In most work environments, Muslim employees will be able to **pray during their typical break times**. In an organization where breaks are flexible, the **Salah prayers can be simple to accommodate** by allowing the employee to take short breaks during prayer times and providing a private quiet place for them to pray.

In companies that are more rigid in their break schedules, such as a factory or a construction site, it is

**reasonable for Muslim employees to expect prayers to be done only during scheduled breaks**. It would not be reasonable to require a pause in the assembly line or change schedules for the entire work group to meet specific prayer times. Instead, the employee would conduct the prayer at a later, more suitable, time and location, even if that means waiting until he or she has gone home after work.

## The prayer location is flexible.

It is ideal for the **prayer to take place in a private space** where the employee can wash prior to the commencement of the prayer. Sometimes this can be done in a private room on the work site or even in the First-Aid room on construction sites.

## Safety first.

During the prayer, the employee may not respond to verbal discussions. However, prayer can and should be **interrupted in the event of an emergency**.



## Religious holidays and observations.

**Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar**, is observed by Muslims worldwide as a holy month and **requires fasting during daylight hours**. It begins and ends based on the lunar cycle; therefore, the dates vary from year to year.

Muslims also celebrate the festival of **Eid al-Fitr**, known as the celebration, that **marks the end of Ramadan**, and **Eid al-Adha**, known as the festival of sacrifice, which is the second and the bigger of the two main holidays celebrated in Islam. Eid al-Adha is the **day celebrated at the end of the hajj** or the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca, and is celebrated by all practising Muslims, not only those performing the ritual of the hajj.

**Relevant Resources:** To learn more about supporting reasonable workplace accommodations, check out the [Government of BC's Manager's Guide to Reasonable Accommodation](#). To learn more about Islamic religious practices, check out this [employer's guide](#).





The **Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC)** is a not-for-profit organization that provides BC employers with solutions, tools and resources they need to attract, hire and retain qualified immigrant talent. IEC-BC believes the successful integration of skilled newcomers into the BC labour force is critical to both their success and the province's long-term economic performance.

**Explore some of IEC-BC's programs, tools and resources:**

### **Employer Tools and Resources Library**

A compilation of best practices from employers, partners, and key organizations across the country that support organizations to successfully navigate the employment cycle and create more inclusive workplaces.

### **MentorConnect**

A program bringing together skilled immigrants and established professionals in occupation-specific mentoring relationships.

### **FAST**

A free, comprehensive set of online tools and resources that supports skilled immigrants to assess their competencies, become better prepared for work in Canada, and connect with employers.

### **BC JobConnect**

BC JobConnect links BC employers to job-ready newcomers. This free, easy-to-use website provides a platform for job-seekers to showcase their skills, education and work experience to BC employers looking for workers.

### **Connections Events**

IEC-BC collaborates with employers and a wide range of service delivery partners to offer Connections Events linking employers with skilled newcomers. Activities include speed mentoring, networking events and hackathons, and can be tailored to meet an employer's interest and needs.

### **ASCEND**

An innovative blended learning program cultivating newcomers' essential interpersonal, communication and soft skills. ASCEND uses a strengths-based approach that integrates online and in-person learning to support the employment readiness of newcomers and help BC employers recruit, hire and integrate immigrant talent.

**Looking for an immigrant employment council outside of BC? Start your search with the Immigrant Employment Councils of Canada (IECC).**

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EMPLOYMENT  
COUNCIL OF BC

720-750 West Pender Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 2T7  
T. 604-629-5364 | E. [info@iecbc.ca](mailto:info@iecbc.ca) | [iecbc.ca](http://iecbc.ca)

[in](#) @IEC\_BC   [twitter](#) @IEC\_BC   [youtube](#) @iecbc   [facebook](#) @iecbc



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