



SECTOR INSIGHTS BRIEF

Unlocking Immigrant Talent in BC's Manufacturing Sector

What the sector needs, what newcomers bring,
and what needs to change



Unlocking Immigrant Talent in BC's Manufacturing Sector

British Columbia's manufacturing sector is one of the province's largest employers and a critical driver of economic activity, exports, and regional prosperity. Yet manufacturers across the province are facing a growing labour challenge that threatens their ability to grow, innovate, and compete. At the same time, internationally trained newcomers are arriving in BC with relevant skills, strong work ethic, and a motivation to contribute, and are not yet being fully tapped as a workforce resource.

For the purposes of this brief, internationally trained newcomer talent refers to individuals who completed their highest level of education outside Canada and arrived within the last ten years, recognizing that this includes workers across the immigration continuum, from international students and open work permit holders through to permanent residents.

RBC Economics found that bringing immigrants up to the wage and employment levels of those born in Canada could produce gains of as much as 2.5% in annual GDP, approximately \$50 billion. The Conference Board of Canada found that 844,000 Canadians are unemployed or underemployed because their credentials are not adequately

recognized, more than 60% of them immigrants, at a cost of up to \$17 billion annually in lost earnings. In BC alone, the province welcomed approximately 70,000 permanent residents in 2023, while facing over one million job openings projected between 2025 and 2035. The gap between arriving talent and employer need is not a small problem. It is a significant and measurable drag on BC's economic potential.

This brief draws on primary employer research conducted across BC's manufacturing sector in partnership with the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium (EMC), Canada's largest manufacturing consortium. EMC's established relationships with small and mid-sized manufacturers across the province made it possible to engage employers in a direct and meaningful way, ensuring the findings reflect what is actually happening in the sector right now rather than relying only on dated data or static labour market snapshots. IEC-BC partnered with EMC to understand what employers are saying about their workforce needs, how internationally trained newcomer talent (ITNT) is already contributing, and what governments, employers, and workforce partners need to do to close the gap.



Executive Summary

Labour shortages are the top issue facing BC manufacturers today, with 81% anticipating employment growth over the next three years and 41% already experiencing active shortages. Internationally trained newcomer talent (ITNT), workers who completed their education abroad and arrived in Canada within the last ten years, is already a meaningful part of the solution: 79% of manufacturers currently employ ITNT and describe them as reliable, adaptable, and technically strong. Yet a “Canadian experience” filter alone drops employer willingness to hire ITNT by 19 percentage points, screening out qualified candidates before they get a chance to prove themselves. Closing this gap requires coordinated action: government needs to streamline immigration pathways and restore BC’s Provincial Nominee allocation, employers need practical, low-cost ways to shift toward skills-based hiring, and training institutions need to deliver workplace-relevant bridging and language programs. This brief lays out what employers told us directly, and what each of these three groups can do next.

Top Priorities



For federal government: Simplify and accelerate the LMIA process for sectors with documented, persistent shortages. This is the single biggest lever the federal government controls that would directly speed up hiring.



For provincial government: Restore and expand BC’s Provincial Nominee Program allocation, cut from a requested 11,000 to 4,000 nominations in 2025, severely limiting the province’s ability to bring in the trades and technical workers manufacturers need.



For employers: Move beyond “Canadian experience” as a hiring filter. It is the single biggest reason qualified ITNT get screened out before they can demonstrate what they can do.



For training institutions: Deliver workplace-based, occupation-specific language training. Generic ESL programming does not address the communication needs of manufacturing floors.

BC's Manufacturing Sector: Labour Market at a Glance

The Sector

Manufacturing is a major pillar of BC's economy. It contributes approximately 6% of provincial GDP, generates roughly \$53 billion in annual revenue, and accounts for a significant share of BC's exports. The sector spans wood products, food processing, machinery, primary metals, electronics, aerospace, pharmaceuticals, and medical equipment, with close to 20,000 manufacturing businesses operating across the province.

178,562

manufacturing workers in BC (2024)

~20,000

manufacturing businesses in BC (2024)

50,150+

projected job openings 2025–2035

\$3

in local economic activity generated per \$1 in manufacturing

The Labour Shortage

Labour shortages are the top issue facing BC manufacturers today. Shortages span entry-level production workers, skilled trades, maintenance staff, supervisors, and operators, making this a sector-wide challenge, not an isolated one. The pressures are compounding: an aging workforce is driving retirements, youth attraction to manufacturing careers remains limited, and competition from other sectors for skilled workers is intensifying.

Primary research conducted with over 500 manufacturers across six economic regions of BC reveals the scale of the challenge directly from employers:

81%

of employers anticipate full-time employment growth in the next 3 years

41%

are already experiencing active labour shortages today

54%

have unfilled positions requiring specific skills or experience

“

“We’re not seeing the right candidates come through, even though we know people are out there looking for work.”

BC Manufacturer, Workforce Insights BC Survey 2026

Shortages are not limited to one region. While the Lower Mainland and Southwest account for approximately 65–70% of BC’s manufacturing employment and show the highest concentration of challenges, manufacturers in Thompson-Okanagan, Vancouver Island, and other regions also report persistent vacancies and recruitment difficulty.

Occupations Most Affected by Shortages

- Production workers and machine operators
- Industrial mechanics and maintenance technicians
- Welders and fabricators
- Machinists
- Manufacturing supervisors and managers
- Food and beverage processing labourers
- Material handlers and logistics support



How Immigration and Immigrant Talent Can Help

Newcomers Are Already in the Manufacturing Workforce

Internationally trained newcomer talent is not a new or untested resource for BC manufacturers; it is already an active part of the workforce. Research shows that 79% of manufacturers employ ITNT when defined as workers who have arrived in Canada within the last 10 years. Employers who have hired internationally trained workers consistently report positive experiences.

79%

of manufacturers employ ITNT (arrived within 10 years)

18%

cite work ethic and reliability as a top ITNT strength

14%

cite adaptability and willingness to learn

14%

cite strong technical and hands-on skills

“

“Newcomer talent is a MUST, not an option.”

BC Manufacturer, Workforce Insights BC Survey 2026

Employers also point to the broader organizational value that ITNT brings beyond immediate task performance. Multilingual capabilities, international market knowledge, diverse problem-solving approaches, and cross-cultural communication skills add value that domestic talent alone cannot provide, particularly as manufacturers look to expand into new export markets.

When Available Talent Goes Untapped

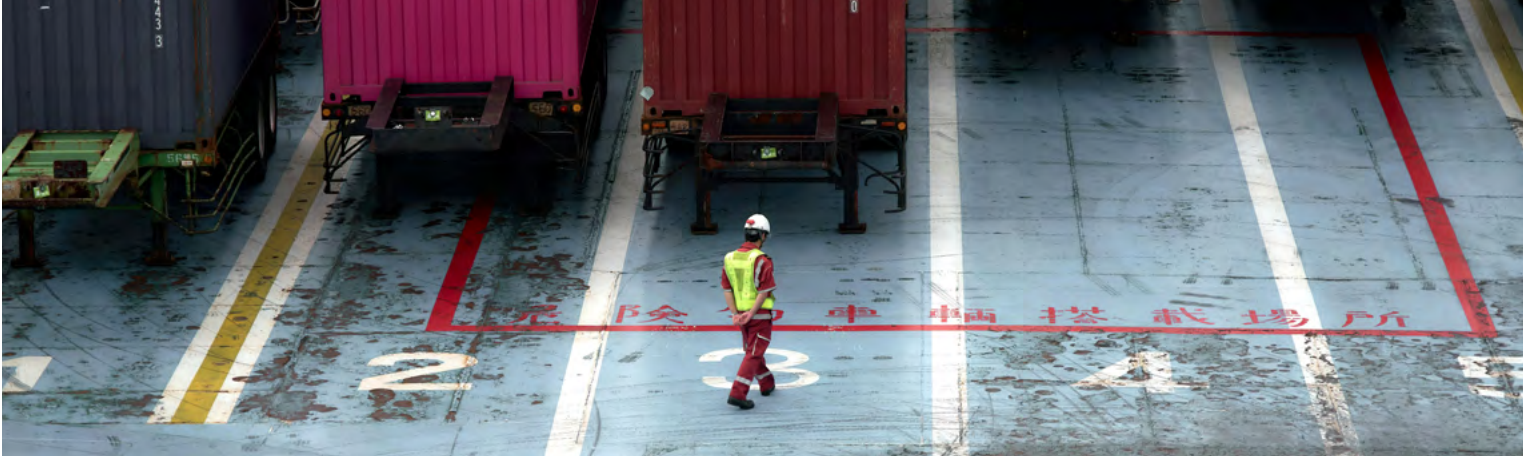
Despite strong engagement and positive employer experiences, a significant gap exists between the availability of internationally trained talent and its full utilization in BC's manufacturing sector. This gap is not driven by a lack of capability among newcomers; it is driven by systemic barriers that prevent employers and talent from connecting effectively.

The clearest evidence of this gap is the "Canadian experience" effect: employer willingness to hire ITNT drops 19 percentage points, from 79% to 60%, when candidates have no prior Canadian work experience. This single proxy is screening out qualified people before they have a chance to demonstrate what they can do.

What Employers Identify as the Biggest Barriers to Hiring ITNT

- Work permit and residency constraints, cited by 21% of employers as the most influential hiring factor
- Difficulty assessing transferable skills and international credentials
- Reliance on 'Canadian experience' as a proxy for job readiness, even when it does not reflect actual capability
- LMIA process complexity, cost, and lengthy timelines that cause employers to lose candidates to faster-moving competitors
- Limited internal HR capacity, particularly in small and mid-sized firms, to navigate immigration or support onboarding
- Indirect licensing and certification barriers (e.g., Canadian driver's licence requirements) that delay workforce entry





This pattern is particularly pronounced for workers who are still on temporary permits or post-graduate work permits, where employment uncertainty compounds the credential and experience barriers employers already cite.

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“After struggling to hire welder fitters for some considerable time, it took almost two years to eventually hire ONE overseas welder fitter.”

BC Manufacturer, Workforce Insights BC Survey 2026



What Employers Say They Need to Make It Work

When asked what supports would most improve their ability to hire and retain ITNT, employers are clear and consistent in their priorities:

22%

Wage and training subsidies

20%

Support navigating work permits and immigration status

19%

Streamlined immigration pathways

Employers also point to the value of mentorship and onboarding resources, sector-specific language training, and community partnerships with settlement agencies. These are not complex asks, they are practical, targeted supports that would meaningfully reduce the cost and risk of hiring internationally trained workers.

Recommendations

Addressing the disconnect between labour demand and immigrant talent supply requires action across three levels. No single actor can close this gap alone, but coordinated action across government, employers, and workforce partners can. Recommendations below are organized by federal and provincial government, since these are the two levels with direct authority over the immigration and funding levers this brief addresses.

Federal

- **Streamline immigration pathways:** for manufacturing occupations, with faster processing times, clearer permanent residency routes, and bridging permits that allow workers to continue employment during status transitions
- **Broaden wage subsidy eligibility:** to include temporary residents and recent newcomers, and reduce the administrative burden for SMEs to access these programs
- **Simplify and accelerate the LMIA process:** for sectors with documented, persistent shortages, or create sector-specific exemptions where evidence of shortage is clear
- **Invest in credential recognition infrastructure:** for applied and trades-based skills, including practical assessment frameworks that go beyond formal education credentials
- **Recognize the full immigration continuum in program design:** extend wage subsidy eligibility, job placement program access, and settlement supports to international students and workers on open and temporary permits, intervening at the point when employers are actually making hiring decisions rather than waiting until permanent residence is achieved



Provincial

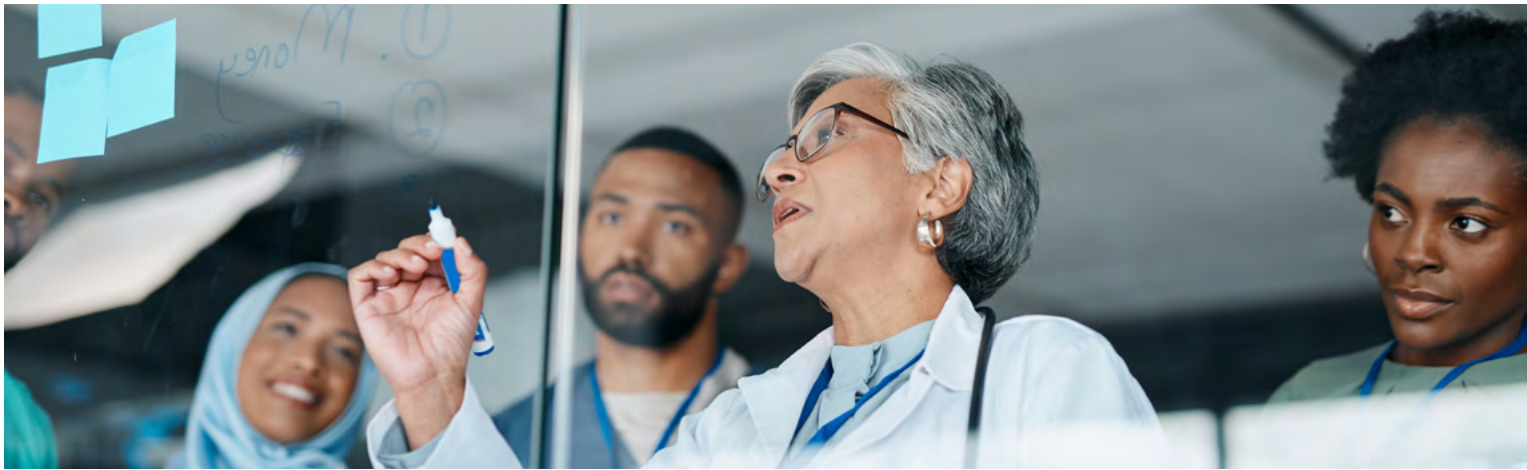
- **Restore and expand BC's Provincial Nominee Program allocation:** to reflect the province's actual workforce demand. BC's 2025 PNP allocation was cut from a requested 11,000 to just 4,000 nominations, severely limiting the province's ability to attract the trades and technical workers its manufacturing sector needs; allocations must be set collaboratively and based on documented sector evidence, not unilateral federal caps
- **Require settlement, housing, and community services to function as a connected system:** with clear accountability for whether internationally trained workers can access what they need, stay in roles, and remain in the regions where employers need them, not just fund services that operate in parallel and call it integration
- **Improve coordination between immigration, employment, and settlement systems:** so that employers and newcomers can navigate a less fragmented landscape



For Employers

- **Move beyond "Canadian experience" as a hiring filter:** Adopt practical, skills-based assessment approaches, including trial periods, work samples, and competency demonstrations. EMC's Manufacturing Essentials Certification and IEC-BC's SME Workforce Readiness Diagnostic Tool can both help formalize this shift.
- **Invest in structured onboarding: using a phased 90-day model:** safety and orientation in weeks one and two, role-specific skills development in months one through three, and formal check-ins at 30, 60, and 90 days.
- **Access wage subsidies and training supports through EMC:** EMC's B.C. Youth in Manufacturing Initiative offers eligible manufacturing employers up to \$3,500 per youth placement to help offset onboarding, training, and wage costs, an accessible entry point for bringing on new talent, including newcomer youth, into entry-level trades and manufacturing roles. (Note: eligibility is limited to B.C. residents aged 16 to 30 who are within 1 month of start date and eligible to work in Canada)
- **Build supervisory and leadership capacity:** through EMC's Harvard Supervisory Certificate Program, particularly useful for supervisors managing increasingly diverse floor teams.
- **Engage with IEC-BC's learning platforms and the IECC Learning Hub, and EMC's Resource Hub:** for practical tools on inclusive hiring, onboarding, and retaining newcomer talent.

- **Implement buddy systems and mentoring:** that pair new ITNT hires with experienced colleagues to accelerate integration and reduce early turnover.
- **Use visual, task-based training materials:** that support diverse language and literacy levels without compromising safety or quality standards.
- **Benchmark compensation regularly:** against regional and sector comparators, and address wage gaps that drive ITNT to move between employers after gaining initial Canadian experience.



For Training Institutions and Settlement Partners

- **Deliver workplace-based and occupation-specific language training:** that addresses the communication needs of manufacturing environments rather than generic ESL programming
- **Develop and expand bridging programs:** co-designed with manufacturers and EMC, that translate international trades and technical experience into BC-recognized competencies
- **Build pre-screened talent pipelines:** that connect job-ready ITNT directly to employers, reducing screening burden on both sides and improving job match quality
- **Provide employer-facing resources:** on inclusive hiring practices, available supports, and how to navigate immigration processes, reducing the information gap that prevents many SMEs from engaging
- **Offer cohort-based, applied learning models:** that build technical and workplace readiness skills while simultaneously creating professional networks for newcomers entering the sector
- **Strengthen coordination with manufacturers and industry associations:** to ensure training programs reflect actual job requirements, not generic sector profiles

IEC-BC Programs and Resources

Employers and newcomers in BC can access supports through IEC-BC's own programs including FAST (Facilitating Access to Skilled Talent), ASCEND, and MentorConnect, which connect internationally trained professionals with inclusive employers and field mentors. These programs are open to international students and newcomers with open work permits, reflecting IEC-BC's commitment to supporting immigrant talent across the full immigration continuum and not only those who have reached permanent residence.

The Opportunity Is Now

BC's manufacturing sector cannot wait for the talent pipeline to fix itself. With over 50,000 job openings projected in the next decade, an aging workforce driving retirements, and internationally trained newcomers arriving in BC ready to work, the conditions for meaningful change are in place. What is needed now is the system alignment, across immigration, employment, and workforce development, to turn that potential into real economic impact.

About This Research Summary Brief

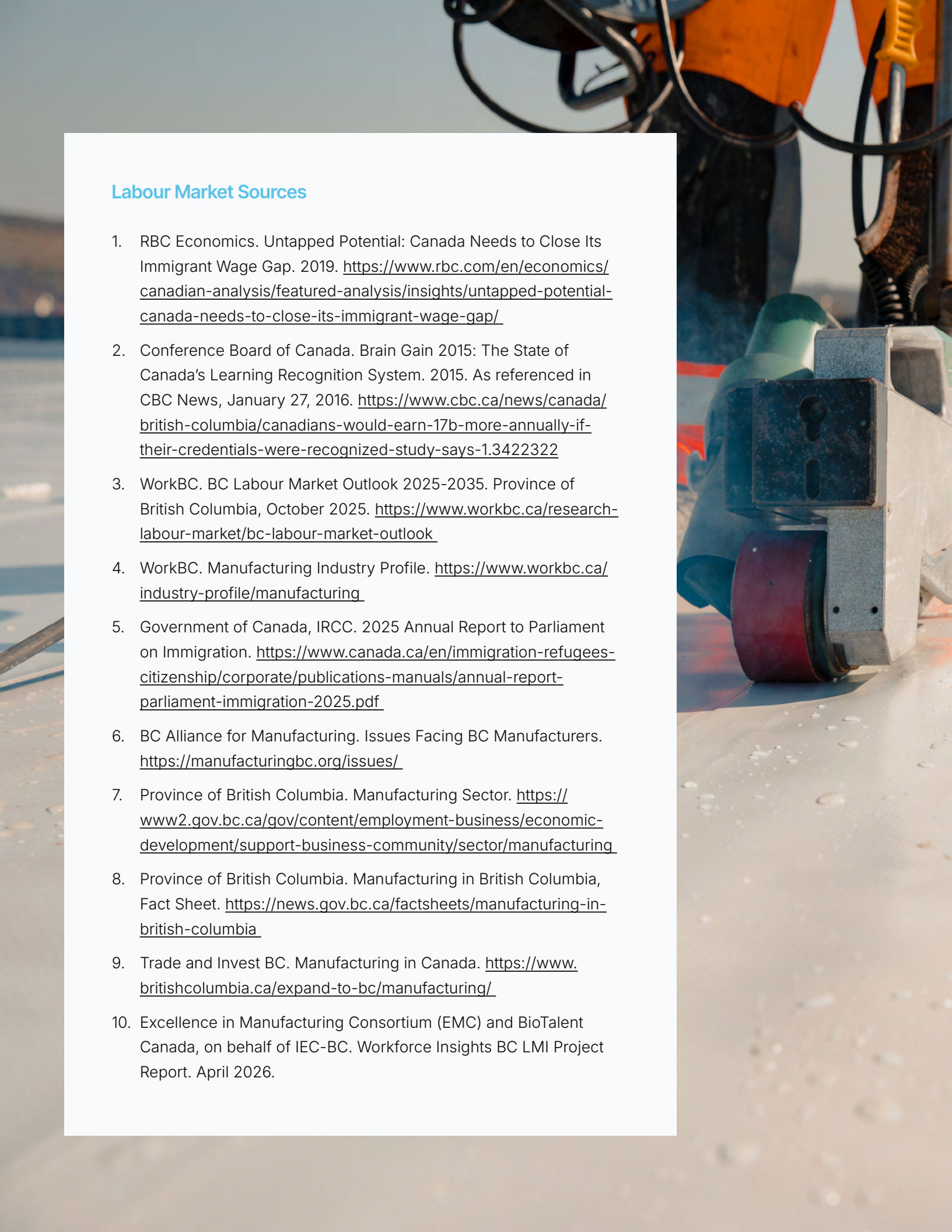
This brief was developed by drawing on what we learned from labour market information and a focused study IEC-BC conducted in partnership with the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium (EMC). The research engaged over 500 manufacturers across six economic regions of British Columbia through employer surveys, stakeholder interviews, and in-person industry sessions. In total, 180 complete employer survey responses were received, and an additional 30 manufacturers participated in consultative sessions and roundtable discussions. Ecosystem stakeholders, including economic development organizations, industry associations, government agencies, and training and employment service providers, contributed system-level perspectives across five regions.

To complement the primary employer research, IEC-BC also drew on a review of publicly available labour market information for BC's manufacturing sector, including data from WorkBC, the BC Alliance for Manufacturing, and provincial sector sources. Key findings from the labour market scan were woven into this brief to provide broader context on sector size, employment trends, and projected job openings, and were compared against what employers told us directly to identify where employer experience aligns with or differs from published labour market data.

Primary research conducted by the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium (EMC) on behalf of IEC-BC. Learn more at <https://emccanada.org/>



CANADA'S LARGEST
MANUFACTURING CONSORTIUM



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