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## ACCES Employment helps skilled immigrants find work

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In a city where newcomers make up half the population, finding work in Toronto — or the GTA for that matter — is a full-time job for skilled immigrants.

Among them is Jordanian-born Barraq Hajhamad, who came to Canada with his wife six months ago. A commercial banker and financial analyst, he's eager to put his skills to work.

That's easier said than done, despite international training and experience working in England, Belgium and Dubai, an impressive resumé and impeccable language skills.

Lack of Canadian work experience and recognition of foreign credentials are stumbling blocks, even more so in an unstable economy.

ACCES Employment is bridging gaps, offering new Canadians the support to find work in their fields, said executive director Allison Pond. It's vital because as newcomers prosper, so does the city.

A United Way Toronto agency, ACCES — Accessible Community Counselling and Employment Services — has been helping immigrants transition into the workforce since 1986, offering a range of free services for clients and employers. More than 16,000 job seekers are served each year at locations in Toronto, Scarborough, North York, Mississauga and Brampton, all of which have high populations of new Canadians.

ACCES offers job workshops and occupation-specific programs for those in fields such as engineering, financial services, information technology, sales and marketing as well as human resources. One program supports women getting back into the workforce. Another sharpens communication skills.

Established four years ago, the highly successful speed mentoring program connects newcomers with Canadian professionals who help guide them through the system. More than 1,600 people take part every year in speed mentoring, a program that has been recognized by the Ontario government for excellence in service innovation.

The program is "marvelous," Hajhamad said as he waited to join the rotation and meet volunteers from RBC Financial who had come to ACCES recently. The value of their guidance and expertise is immeasurable, he noted.

"You don't feel left alone," Hajhamad said, adding mentors help candidates polish interview skills and hone resumes.

Hajhamad, 35, is working part-time for a major retailer to gain the all-important Canadian work experience. He's confident it's only a matter of time before he's back at work in his field.



Louisa Ng, a senior financial analyst in accounting at RBC, offers job hunting tips to Barraq Hajhamad during a speed mentoring session at ACCES Employment. Hajhamad, a new immigrant with professional skills and experience, is looking for work in the banking industry.

Leslie Ferenc/Toronto Star

Ruby Bhasin arrived in Canada a year ago. Her work experience includes eight years in retail banking in Dubai.

The 38-year-old began her job search online, but was unsuccessful. According to Pond, 80 per cent of jobs are not found by traditional means such as newspaper ads or the Internet. "Making connections is what we bring to our clients," she said. "We focus on building relationships with employers."

Through ACCES, Bhasin enrolled in the Canadian Securities course, bringing her one step closer to her goal. "And speed mentoring helps connect you with employers which would not be otherwise possible for new Canadians," she said. "It's an opportunity to meet with senior executives, department heads and branch managers in the banking industry who see your true potential. ACCES opens doors for us."

As it happened, each of the seven mentors at the recent speed event were once immigrants themselves. Iranian-born Mana Nikaeen, a financial advisor with RBC, volunteers because she wants to use her expertise to help others.

"We can relate to how people feel and how difficult it can be to find one's place in Canadian culture and the banking industry," she said.

RBC has hired more than 100 ACCES clients as a result of speed mentoring.

Nikaeen's advice to newcomers is to be patient and be prepared to take a job in a related field — even if it isn't their dream job — to gain experience. "It's important to get a feel for the Canadian (work) culture."

Taking part in the ACCES speed mentoring "is a tremendous opportunity."

To support programs like ACCES, make a donation to United Way Toronto by calling 416-777-2001 or go to [unitedwaytoronto.com](http://unitedwaytoronto.com).