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PEYMAN SOHEILI FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Ana Gabriela Garcia Murillo took a leap of faith by relocating from Mexico to Canada. Thanks to a bridging program, it's paid off.

Building a bridge to Canadian career

Program helps immigrants adjust to culture and find relevant employment

JACLYN TERSIGNI
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Ana Gabriela Garcia Murillo was a trilingual, cultured, well-educated woman when she came to Canada seeking better opportunities.

The then-29-year-old Mexico City native had studied in France, lived in India, and had just left a job in her hometown as category manager with one of the largest retail stores in Latin America.

"I knew I wanted to build a life abroad. . . I knew Canada was a good country to build up my life," says Murillo, 33.

"My boss said I was crazy for leaving and that I didn't know what it would be like starting everything from scratch. I thought, 'Well, it's just another country,' but it was harder than I thought."

Once in Canada, Murillo found another retail manager job, but was let go when her contract came up for renewal. The termination was a blow to her confidence; a straight-A student and successful career woman at home, here she felt dejected and lost. "My boss told me he wasn't expecting to have to teach a manager gram-

mar," she recalls. "That broke my heart."

That's when, after a recommendation from a friend, she applied to York University's bridging program for internationally educated professionals (IEPs). The innovative 18-month certificate program helps immigrants trained abroad adjust to Canadian business culture, and find employment that matches their credentials and experience.

"Many of these people have master's degrees when they apply to the program. Many of them have years of experience and have held good positions in their home country," says Art Noordeh, the faculty lead for the IEP program. "They tried to get a job in their own field but they're faced with the challenge of not having Canadian experience. That's the number one challenge they're facing."

That challenge was the catalyst for the York program, which launched as a pilot project in 2009. Four years later, there have been about 100 IEP graduates.

"Big organizations like banks and government organizations recognize to some degree the experience and work [of immigrants]. It is small- and medium-sized companies that have difficulty recognizing their background," Noordeh says. "By going through our program, to a large

extent, we eliminate these challenges."

IEP students choose one of three disciplines — business, human resources or information technology — and take a 10-week pre-qualifying session before starting foundation courses and then specialized skill courses, where students may have the opportunity to complete internships.

"The core components of this certificate are three mandatory courses designed to ensure newcomers will learn how to work in Canada," Noordeh explains. "One is in business communications, one is in Canadian business culture and the third is about business ethics."

Admission to the program isn't easy. Applicants must be permanent residents, landed immigrants or Canadian citizens, and cannot have been living in Canada for longer than three years. They need to have a minimum of a recognized foreign bachelor's degree in business, human resources, information technology or a related field, and they need to have had a minimum of three years professional work experience outside of Canada. Plus, a good command of English is required; applicants will need to have achieved a specific level with the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks.

> WHERE TO STUDY

York University isn't the only school providing continuing education opportunities to new Canadians. The University of Toronto offers several different programs for professionals who trained abroad in specific fields like dentistry, law, business, medicine, pharmacy and biotechnology. George Brown College has bridging programs for career and work counsellors, college teachers, nurses and construction managers. Hamilton's Mohawk College offers a certificate program for internationally trained nurses and a diploma program for internationally educated medical laboratory technologists.

New for the 2013-2014 school year

is a certificate program in entrepreneurship and multiculturalism at Ryerson University's Chang School of Continuing Education. The program is designed to help both immigrants and long-standing Canadians develop the skills necessary to launch and run a business within a multicultural context. "Ryerson felt there was an opportunity to both assist newcomers to Canada to better understand entrepreneurship in Canada, as well as help Canadian entrepreneurs understand the opportunity that a multicultural mosaic provides," says Sean Wise, academic chair for the program. For a list of Ontario bridging programs, visit ontarioimmigration.ca.

For successful applicants, the program has proven to be a boon. Noordeh says there were 25 graduates in 2012, but 75 students found employment before they even completed their studies.

That's what happened to Murillo, who graduated last fall. "I was still doing the course when I got my job," she says. "I was about to finish the program in three months."

She's now a central buyer for Estée Lauder, living in Whitby, Ont. She credits the IEP program with helping launch her Canadian career. "It helped me gain back my confidence. It was good for networking," Murillo says.

And those grammar problems are mostly a thing of the past.

"Now I help my colleague to draft her emails. And she's from here!"

Online offers great flexibility

EDUCATION from U1

It helped he was already comfortable with the model of online learning; Dubeau did his master's program and now this certificate program online.

"To be honest, there is no way I could have taken this course if it weren't delivered online with the flexibility to put in the time late at night," he says.

Having an equally accommodating employer is also key.

"If you're in a role where your employer expects you to put in time after hours, you'd have to make sure they understand the time you're putting in after hours is being spent on a course," he adds.

Dubeau, who says he's about three-quarters of the way through his Ryerson certificate, estimates he spends about half an hour per night doing course work. That workload will increase to about an hour a night

and more time on the weekends as the courses come to an end and final projects are due.

Dubeau feels the addition of the Ryerson course fleshes out his resume and would consider similar certificate programs down the road. Especially given the heat his industry is experiencing.

In a recent review of careers with budding futures, Money Magazine noted that computer security is one of the fastest growing job markets in North America.

The magazine estimates it will grow at a rate of 27 per cent over the next 10 years.

"Even though, through my master's, I have an educational background in information security, this course is more focused and more hands-on, adding value to my career," says Dubeau.

"In a nutshell, really this course is helping me and my staff better defend CCO."

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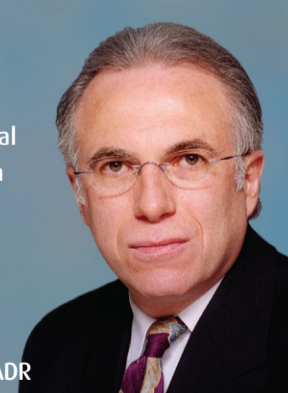


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