Institute for Work & Health

Research Excellence
Safe Work
Healthy Workers

Immigrant workers and language diversity at work

What can employers do to keep workers safe?

Introduction

Immigrants play a vital role in Canada's labour market. They are a source of economic growth, helping fill critical job shortages in many sectors. Immigrants make up one in four workers in Canada and bring diversity in skills, perspectives, and access to new networks to the Canadian economy. However, they can also experience challenges in the labour market, such as a lack of recognition of foreign credentials, limited professional networks, and unsafe working conditions.

A significant issue facing many immigrants is language barriers. Language difficulties can impact all aspects of work. For example, immigrants who have professional expertise, but limited language proficiency, may not find jobs in their profession. As a result, they may have to work in manual or entry-level jobs where they are more likely to be exposed to hazards. In addition, struggling with the predominant language used in a workplace can impact workers' ability to access occupational health and safety (OHS) information, understand OHS practices and participate in making decisions related to workplace safety. Also, when workers cannot communicate easily, they may be unable or feel unsafe to speak up about hazards or take steps to avoid risks on the job.

Language and communication are closely linked to culture and societal values. The cultural background of immigrant workers may shape their relationships to authority and perspectives on power and gender dynamics in a workplace, for example. This can translate into different attitudes towards speaking up about safety issues or interacting with supervisors from different cultures or genders.

Language barriers can impact workplace operations across many aspects, from hiring and onboarding to health and safety. Workers' low language proficiency can affect not only their daily interactions with supervisors and co-workers. It can also shape the extent to which they understand health and safety training, report hazards, incidents or near-misses, or take part in safety discussions.

Supervisors, managers and small business owners play a key role in supporting the safety of immigrant workers, especially those who have limited language proficiency or are unfamiliar with OHS practices and information. Employers may vary greatly in their capacity to manage a diverse workforce and to provide OHS training to newcomers. That was why, between 2023 and 2024, our research team at the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) spoke to employers, OHS professionals, settlement service providers, policy-makers and immigrant workers across Canada. We wanted to understand how workplaces can support and protect immigrant workers.

How the study was conducted

We conducted focus groups and interviews with 115 participants from six Canadian provinces and five stakeholder groups: 25 employers, 21 OHS professionals, 21 settlement service providers, four policy-makers, and 44 immigrants from over 15 countries. Immigrant participants included permanent residents (economic immigrants or those sponsored by family), refugees, temporary foreign workers and temporary work permit holders. To be inclusive, our focus groups were conducted in eight different languages. Employer participants represented a wide range of business sizes, number of languages spoken in the workplace, and industries. These included manufacturing, landscaping, agriculture, not-for-profit, facilities support services, healthcare, educational services, construction and retail.

Throughout our project, we worked closely with an Advisory Committee that included representatives of each stakeholder group. They helped inform our research through their expertise and relevant experience. They provided feedback and guidance on considerations that emerged from our research and on ways to articulate key messaging based on our findings.

Who is this resource for?

Whether you're a small business owner, a manager or a supervisor, you may have immigrant workers in your organization with varying levels of proficiency in English.

This document is intended to provide you with concrete ideas that may help address language barriers when recruiting and hiring, onboarding, and communicating with immigrant workers, especially those who struggle with English.

The strategies and considerations come from employers and other stakeholders who participated in our study. We supplement them with additional suggestions from study participants and Advisory Committee members in response to our study findings. We also included questions you can reflect on, all aimed at keeping workers safe in the workplace.

The overall picture

Most employers in our study recognized that immigrant workers helped them fill their skill gaps and meet workforce demands. Some mentioned that immigrant workers reflect the diversity of Canada's population and workforce, bringing diverse cultural and professional experiences to their workplace. Employers consistently emphasized the positive impact immigrants have on their workplaces, bringing skills and dedication to their roles.

However, employers continued to face challenges around safely integrating immigrants into their workplaces. That was the case even for those with many years of experience hiring immigrants and maintaining diverse workforces. Employers recognized that varying levels of proficiency in the predominant language at work, as well as the diversity of languages spoken in the workplace, can have impacts beyond OHS training, hazard reporting and other OHS practices. They can shape the social environment at work, which also matters for OHS outcomes. For example, employers have sometimes found it difficult to assess immigrant workers' understanding of safety training and protocols. Some employers also recognized that immigrant workers may have had previous experiences in workplaces with different safety standards. In addition, language diversity can shape communication styles, influencing how openly people express themselves. New immigrants' attitudes about authority can affect their willingness to speak up without fear of repercussions.

Employers also widely recognized the impact of the migration and settlement journey itself on the mental health of immigrants. These can include the toll of settlement difficulties, financial pressures and isolation, especially in rural areas where newcomers may have no access to their cultural and linguistic communities. In addition, language challenges can lead to feelings of exclusion, which can harm immigrants' psychological health and safety in the workplace. Despite a willingness to support their immigrant employees, some employers felt limited in how much they could do. Many said they were not even sure how to connect workers to appropriate healthcare or community supports.

A supportive workplace built on trust was described as essential for immigrant workers to feel they could speak up about safety concerns without fear of negative repercussions from their employer. Employers noted this was one area where they had influence and they could improve the social environment they provided to new immigrant employees. Maintaining open and consistent communication, showing empathy towards workers, and offering explicit support around settlement, workplace or mental health challenges were all practices described by employers – ultimately with the potential to foster psychological safety in the workplace.

In addition to individual practices that employers described below, stakeholders emphasized the need for system- and policy-level supports to further strengthen employer capacity, by:

- providing accessible and industry-specific resources that go beyond basic language training
- improving access to community support services
- offering tailored tools, training, and incentives to safely integrate immigrant workers in workplaces, especially for small or rural businesses.

Employer practices

In this section, we outline the employer practices that we heard about in our study. We describe real-life examples of the practices that the employers implemented in their recruitment and hiring, OHS onboarding and day-to-day safety communication. We highlight considerations that employers shared around the practices they used. We also include additional suggestions that emerged in our study. These include both ideas shared by participants that are not yet widely implemented and suggestions from the Advisory Committee in response to our study findings. Finally, we developed a list of questions that you can reflect on to guide your practices when supporting immigrant workers with limited language proficiency. Please note that more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the different practices and strategies, so, whenever possible, seek expert input to build clear, safe communication for everyone in your workplace.

1. Recruitment and hiring

Practices that employers used:

- Provide language supports during recruitment. Some employers hire interpreters or rely on in-house staff, use translation apps, or translate formal documents like employment contracts.

- Connect with a local community organization or settlement agency to help recruit qualified immigrants and receive support from these agencies to adapt language requirements to the needs of the job.

Considerations when using these practices:

- Immigrant workers may not be familiar with the job or what the work may entail, so a realistic, detailed job description is important.

- Immigrant workers who have English as a second language may communicate differently and might not respond to interview questions in expected ways. For example, they may be more modest about their skills and individual achievements, compared to Canadian-born workers. This might be misunderstood as a lack of skills.

Additional suggestions:

- Use simple and concrete language, short sentences and common words and avoid slang or informal language that workers might not be familiar with.

Questions to reflect on:

- What languages are currently spoken in your workplace among staff?
- What level of English do you think is needed for the job you are hiring for? What other languages are useful or necessary for the job?
- How do you usually get a sense of someone's English level during hiring?
- Do you consider the reading or writing skills (literacy) of someone you're thinking of hiring? If so, how do you approach that?
- What local community and settlement organizations could support your staff with language? How can you build a relationship with them?

2. Onboarding

Practices that employers used:

- Translate safety training and materials into the languages of newcomer immigrant workers, with the help of translation apps, bilingual in-house staff or local communities or organizations. If there is specialized or technical language used as part of the job, get expert advice on language terms (e.g., legal terms, policy language).
- Bring in bilingual staff or outside interpreters to translate conversations during onboarding to ensure comprehension.
- Simplify the language and vocabulary used when the training is in English.
- Use videos and hands-on demonstrations to show task instructions, especially for manual jobs.
- Use visuals and graphics to reinforce safety messages, making sure to first explain the meaning of signs and icons to workers.
- Implement "buddy systems" and other peer-based strategies to encourage learning through observation and hands-on experience.
- Repeat safety information through different means: demonstrations with staff, refresher sessions and daily reminders around safety practices.
- Check how well workers understand safety information through different methods to confirm comprehension. For example, some employers ask workers to repeat back the information, ask them to show how they would do the task safely or run mini-safety quizzes using visual information.

Considerations when using these practices:

- Immigrants, due to their newness to Canada and/or their jobs, might have limited knowledge of health and safety and may need basic safety information to be explained.
- Canadian safety norms and expectations may need to be emphasized when developing workplace protocols and delivering safety information.
- A buddy system can help new workers communicate and learn, but it may also spread unsafe practices. Pair new hires only with well-trained workers who are consistent in their safety behaviours.
- Translations of OHS material that comes from staff or apps can sometimes be inaccurate. Check the accuracy of translations of OHS terms and processes with safety professionals, if possible.

- Not all safety icons and visual information are universally understood. The meaning of icons should be explained.

Additional suggestions:

- When communicating about safety in the predominant language in the workplace, keep the communication short, concise and clear; make sure also that one instruction does not overlap with another.
- Explain to workers the reasons behind safety practices and norms that might be unfamiliar to immigrants, like the legislative right in Canada to refuse unsafe work.
- Check if new staff need to learn specific safety terms or processes for their job, and if their language skills affect how well they understand them.
- Connect with settlement or community organizations for language support for workers during onboarding to ensure better comprehension.

Questions to reflect on:

- What do you do to help immigrant workers understand work tasks, safety and what's expected at work? For example, do you give written and verbal instructions or demonstrate how things work in your workplace? What languages do you use to share this information?
- Do you use any translated materials during onboarding or safety training? If yes, how do you translate materials? For example, do you rely on staff to help you, do you use an app or a translation service?
- How do you make sure that the translations you use are accurate and clear?
- What do you do to check that new workers understand the instructions or safety information you've shared?
- Have you noticed any patterns in how workers from different cultural backgrounds communicate about safety at work? Does this shape how you think about training?

3. Everyday workplace health and safety

Practices that employers used:

- Get help from multilingual staff (like peers or supervisors) to help with daily safety communication by creating “buddy systems” and having the “buddies” act as go-betweens.
- Provide OHS information in various formats, especially using visual information like icons. Some employers display safety signs or offer video safety trainings in multiple languages.
- Offer alternative opportunities for communication and feedback. Some employers provide safety reporting channels based on photos of hazards, rather than just written descriptions.
- Have regular safety talks and check-ins.
- Foster trust by showing immigrant workers there are no repercussions for speaking out. Some employers create confidential channels for feedback and reporting to encourage workers to “not stay silent”. Some encourage workers to be part of workplace safety committees.
- Use technology like free translation apps for direct communication on the job.
- Establish clear zero-tolerance policies for any form of discrimination and make sure that these policies are clearly explained to all staff during training.
- Support immigrants’ language development by encouraging practice in the predominant language in the workplace, being patient with language learners, offering language classes in the workplace or providing accommodations to attend language classes in the community.

Considerations when using these practices:

- Critical health and safety information should be professionally translated and checked for accuracy of terms.
- Don't wait for workers to come to you. Be proactive and have frequent checks-ins with staff.
- Encourage participatory approaches that involve immigrant workers in designing safety protocols.
- Compensate workers who take on additional tasks, like translation or mediation.

- Provide additional health and safety training and checks for staff who are in translator roles.
- Provide continuous support for bilingual supervisors, not only to improve safety, but also to strengthen their linguistic, leadership and cultural competency skills.
- Offer or facilitate access to language training programs for workers with limited proficiency in the predominant language in the workplace.
- Connect with community organizations to help provide integration, healthcare, and settlement resources for immigrant workers.

Additional suggestions:

- Create a culture where individuals who raise safety issues are rewarded and recognized, not silenced.
- Do not ask a supervisor or co-worker to help with translation if the conversation involves confidential or sensitive information (for example, HR matters).
- Consider how differences in power between workers, supervisors, and coworkers, such as discomfort around authority figures or reliance on multilingual peers for translation, might affect the worker and their willingness to share information.
- Some languages might not have exact words for certain health and safety terms, which can make translations inaccurate. If needed, get professional advice and consider longer explanations or examples to help convey information. For example, the word “hazard” might not have a clear translation and may need a simple explanation like “something that can cause harm.”
- Pay attention to how social and cultural factors can affect language use in safety communication and training. Share safety-related stories and anecdotes relevant to immigrants or encourage immigrants themselves to share such personal stories with their peers. Success stories and examples of change can be helpful.
- Train all staff on the potential language challenges faced by immigrant workers. That’s one way to discourage discrimination based on language and to encourage empathy and mutual understanding.

Questions to reflect on:

- Do you have materials to use as daily reminders of safety standards? Are they available in different languages?
- How do you make sure immigrant staff understand what is expected of them in terms of safety in the workplace?
- How do you address cultural differences in the way immigrant staff may perceive authority, workplace hierarchy, or worker rights?
- How do you encourage workers with limited English to come to you with safety concerns or complaints? How do you communicate to staff that there are no repercussions for raising safety concerns or reporting a hazard? What is the process when they do come to you?
- How do you handle misunderstandings caused by language barriers?
- How do you support the staff who help you with translations to ensure they are not overworked?

Conclusion

As a supervisor, manager or small business owner, your day-to-day presence and direct relationship with workers puts you in a key position to support the safety of immigrant workers, especially those with limited language proficiency or who are unfamiliar with OHS practices and information. We hope the range of potential practices and reflection questions in this guide help you strengthen safety for all workers, particularly when hiring and managing immigrant staff.

There is no single way to improve health and safety information with immigrant workers who have English as a second language, and best practices are still being developed. Many different approaches may be helpful, but more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies. Expert input should always be sought where specialized language and safety practices are needed.

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