

The Chatham Daily News

Attracting immigrants 'all starts with a job'; expert says Chatham must boost employment

ELLWOOD SHREVE

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Growing the local population and economy will take a great selling job.

Chatham-Kent has the amenities to make it attractive to immigrants with its small-town atmosphere and safe, clean communities. But the trick is making it worth their while to move here.

"It all starts with a job," said Dominic do Forno, president of the Portuguese Canadian Social Club of Chatham-Kent.

If people can't support themselves, he said they will be gone within months.



Ilker Kaptan, right, and his wife, Ayben, are building a new life in Canada after immigrating from Turkey. Both university-educated, the couple found jobs in their fields of expertise, bringing skills to their local workforces.

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Portuguese immigrants moved to Chatham-Kent in large numbers as early as 1956, but do Forno recalls they stayed here because there were plenty of opportunities to work.

"The jobs were available at the time in the factories," he said.

With a reputation for having a good work ethic, do Forno said many Portuguese immigrants were hired on the spot without filling out an application. He added several construction companies were also formed by Portuguese Canadians at the time.

Do Forno believes the employment picture needs to improve drastically before Chatham-Kent is going to attract a significant number of immigrants.

However, good jobs are available for immigrants such as Ilker and Ayben Kaptan, who have specialized skills that are in demand.

Less than a year after immigrating to Canada from Turkey, the couple are both working in their respective fields of expertise and have brought valuable skills to their new workplaces.

Ayben, 32, an agricultural engineer, had a job arranged before she arrived, after transferring to the Monsanto facility in Chatham from the global company's facility in Izmir, Turkey. She is currently working as a seed quality supervisor.

Ilker, 36, who has a degree in food engineering, only recently found work in his field. He just began a newly created position as a food safety co-ordinator at Schinkel's Sausage & Deli Products when he and Ayben were interviewed by The Chatham Daily News.

Prior to landing a job in his field, Ilker worked at Wal-Mart to help bring in some money.

Having worked in management and operated his own consulting business for years, he admitted to growing discouraged at doing a job so far removed from his expertise.

"The motivation starts dropping as the time passes," he said.

However, he got a bounce back in his step after landing a job at Schinkel's in Chatham, which processes various meat products for wholesale.

Ilker's experience in food engineering has been a good fit for the local operation, said owner Tim Schinkel.

"Anybody who has any experience in the food industry is hard to find in this area, especially of his calibre, we don't see them. Period," Schinkel said.

He said the food safety program, HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point), which has been Ilker's background since university, is an international safety standard that is taking off right now.

"That's why his skill sets appealed to us," Schinkel said.

The company is currently in the midst of a pilot project with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, but was falling behind on it, Schinkel said.

Noting there is grant money available to do the project, Schinkel said he looked at Ilker's resume and thought: "This guy could really help us out."

Ayben's skills were also welcomed at Monsanto's Chatham facility.

"With Ayben's excellent experience in Turkey, where she was working in the quality department . . . she was a great fit to move into the role here," said Scott Hopper, site manager.

He said Ayben brings the type of seed quality skills employers are not going to find from someone just walking in off the street.

Although the Kaptans have brought valuable skills, they didn't get a free ride into Canada. They paid their own way here along with shelling money for landing and processing fees to immigrate.

"It was my dream to live abroad," Ilker said. "I don't have any bad reason to leave my country, we had good jobs there.

"Maybe we're adventurous a bit," he added.

"We like the Canadian lifestyle," Ayben said. "You can ride everywhere in five minutes (in Chatham)."

She added they also considered immigrating to Australia and the United States, but decided on Canada for the safety and economic opportunities.

Maureen Geddes, president of the Cultural Coalition of Chatham-Kent, believes all Canadians need to view immigration as economic opportunity.

"We think of immigrants coming and being afraid that maybe they're taking away the jobs for the people who are already here," she said. "The truth is, in my view, things have changed so much, for us to find sustainable jobs to take us forward as a community, we must bring . . . new skills, new entrepreneurial ability here to link us to this global economy."

She said newcomers are the critical part to ensuring Chatham-Kent is connected to the global economy.

"Our children are not staying (in the community)," Geddes said, citing recent census data from Statistics Canada that indicates Chatham-Kent's 20 to 40-year-old population has declined.

She said this is where most of the entrepreneurial energy comes from that links a community to the newest products and services and the way the economy is clicking.

"We have to bring some of that in," Geddes said.

This is the second of a three-part series focusing on immigration and the changing face of Chatham-Kent.

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