

A LITTLE HELP TO THE TOP

We all know getting ahead in the Canadian business environment means making connections; find out how mentoring can help you up

By Lisa Evans

When Nadia Samji arrived in Canada a year-and-a-half ago armed with an MBA from the Institute of Business Management in Pakistan, she sought to connect with industry experts who could help move her career in brand management forward in her new country. She started her search online and found Ten Thousand Coffees.com, a networking site that connects industry leaders with new graduates and newcomers seeking advice and mentorship. Samji set to work creating her profile and browsing through the site's thousands of experts, sending out invitations to meet over the proverbial coffee. "I wanted to know how I could keep myself updated on what's going on in the industry [in Canada]. That kind of information I can only get from an insider," she says.

Through a series of informal coffee meetings, Samji has learned the best websites to visit, which magazines are valued by those in her industry and other insider knowledge. She has become more comfortable networking with high-profile individuals in her field (she even met with McDonald's CEO John Betts).

The concept of mentorship was new to Samji, who says formal mentoring doesn't exist in her native Pakistan, but connecting with industry insiders has proven to be an invaluable asset to her Canadian career and her settlement in general. "Even if you have family and friends [here in Canada], you still need someone from outside to help you grow professionally and in building a network, which is very important here," she says.

Closing the gap

"Mentorship is increasingly becoming the norm in career development," says Opreet Kang, manager of the MentorConnect program run by the Immigrant Employment Council of British Columbia

(IEC-BC). Mentorship can be particularly valuable to newcomers who are often unfamiliar with industry trends and opportunities in their new country. "Mentoring allows you to tap into a wealth of knowledge, skills and experience that you may not otherwise have the opportunity to do," explains Kang.

Mentors are often able to provide invaluable information on current industry trends, lend advice as to which courses would be most suitable to take to grow one's career potential, recommend which conferences to attend to meet the right people and provide general insight into industry culture. Although many skilled immigrants come to Canada with extensive experience, Kang says it's this specific industry knowledge that is often lacking and prevents newcomers from getting ahead in their chosen career. Mentoring is a way to close this gap and allow the mentee to get closer to connecting with their career.

There are several ways newcomers can reap the rewards of mentorship. While some organizations, such as IEC-BC, offer formal mentorship programs, informal mentorship arrangements such as those organized by Ten Thousand Coffees.com, offer the flexibility to select from a wealth of industry experts at various levels.

Formal mentoring programs

There are many immigrant-focused organizations across the country, such as IEC-BC, offer formal mentoring programs geared toward the Canadian newcomer. IEC-BC works with local employers to



find mentors and matches them with job-ready immigrants based on occupation or industry background.

"The point of MentorConnect is to assist local immigrants to be able to connect with their career in the Canadian context," says Kang. Mentors and mentees make a four-month commitment to meet for an hour a week. Mentors provide input, guidance and an opportunity to shape the newcomer's skills through exercises such as mock interviews.

Informal connections

While such mentoring programs can be invaluable to a newcomer, there are more casual mentorship opportunities available, including online options. Ten Thousand Coffees.com, for example, provides a casual, 21st-century approach to mentorship. Browse through expert profiles from more than 30 industries including small business owners, CEOs and even celebrities such as Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield. Review their profiles and take note of the type of conversations they're looking to have — from career advice to portfolio review or business ideas. Create your own online profile and send a request to meet for coffee. "Ten Thousand Coffees allows for a non-committal, one-time mutually beneficial conversation that has the potential to lead to a longer-term mentorship relationship," says founder and CEO Dave Wilkin.

Ten Thousand Coffees, which just launched in January 2014, has had numerous successes, particularly among newcomers like Samji who have found meaningful connections through the site. Although Wilkin says mentorship is beneficial to anyone, it resonates strongly with new Canadians who are able to not only meet with really interesting people and build a network, but also to discover all the different types of industries that Canada has to offer.

Traditionally, newcomers were often told the best way to network was to attend events where they were thrust into a room full of hundreds of individuals in their field and told to shake hands and chat people up — something that can be incredibly intimidating, especially for someone who struggles with the English language or is shy about meeting new people. In contrast, Wilkin says Ten Thousand Coffees is a great way for someone whose first language isn't English or who finds pitching themselves at networking events difficult, giving them time to craft their introductory request before meeting in person. Setting up a one-on-one meeting also means you don't get caught up in the congestion of a networking event.

The website has now launched a new Canadian section for newcomers and experts who are immigrants themselves and are willing to share their stories of success with others. One such expert is Tahani Aburaneh, founder and CEO of Tahani International and author of *Real Estate Riches*. Aburaneh came to Canada in 1981 from Jordan and credits her success to the mentors she had to help her in the early stages of her career. "That's where my business and my career really took off," she says. "It's a great way to fast track your way to success by learning from those who have been very successful at what you want to do," she says.

Not only did her mentors show her the industry ropes, they inspired her to work harder and grow as an individual. "It's so inspirational and motivational when you find someone who's passionate about what they do," she says. Today, Aburaneh loves meeting with newcomers who are interested in learning more about her industry to pass on her knowledge the same way her mentors did for her.

What to expect of mentors

Whether you enter a formal mentoring program or seek out mentors on your own, success in your mentoring partnership will depend on understanding these three factors:

1

A mentor is not a potential employer. Although the end goal of mentorship is to find employment, it is important to distinguish a relationship with a mentor from a potential employer. A mentor is a resource that can provide industry insights, but Kang warns mentees should not go into the relationship expecting to come out with employment. "The mentor is not obligated to provide employment to the mentee in their workplace," she says. That said, on occasion a mentor relationship can lead to an offer of employment. In one instance, Kang recalls a mentor forwarded a job posting at his company to a former mentee who turned out to be the successful applicant.

2

A mentoring relationship should be mutually beneficial. Wilkin says the most successful meetings are those that result in a mutual benefit and advises individuals making requests for mentorship to find mutual topics of interest. "That's the key to be able to unlock a relationship with a person because suddenly you have something in common and you can have something interesting you can talk about as a peer," he says. Aburaneh agrees. She says her biggest pet peeve as a mentor is someone who isn't willing to give anything back to the mentor. She advises mentees to think about ways that they can contribute to the conversation or to the mentor's business. "Ask that expert if there's any way you can do something to help them or to add value to their business. Most of them might say no, but at least you've asked that question rather than just take, take, take," she says.

3

Take your time to find the right mentor. Finding the right mentor is like finding the right home. When looking for a mentor, seek out someone who can answer all of your questions about your chosen industry. You may want to visit their company or personal website to ensure they will have the expertise you require. Spend some time on their social media profiles, especially LinkedIn and Twitter, to see if their ideas and expertise match what you're looking for. In addition to professional expertise, look for someone who can challenge, inspire and encourage you to grow and excel in your career and new life in Canada. 🍁

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