



Insight for international students: Learning Canada's workplace culture

By **Guest Contributor** in **At Work, Etiquette, Exchanges, Travel** on **August 13, 2010**

By **Arwen Kidd**

Friendly. Respectful. Bilingual. A true team player. Open to new cultures. Humble. Peaceful. Loves the outdoors.

If Canada were a job applicant, this could be an excerpt from her resumé. But as a potential employer? The question is: what is she looking for?

As an international student or recent grad hoping to break into the Canadian job scene for the first time, there are a number of things to keep in mind. That doesn't mean you have to learn to be "more Canadian" in order to compete (e.g., have no fear if you can't stomach a plateful of maple syrup, or if the idea of freezing your butt off in an ice rink sends shivers of dread running down your spine).

Being different is okay – celebrated, in fact, as the country prides itself on strong diversity and multiculturalism – but you should still be prepared to be flexible and understand the unique traits that make Canadian work culture what it is.

How to search for the right job

One of the biggest hurdles in finding yourself happily employed is knowing where to look. In Canada, besides the sometimes elusive but always present 'invisible market' (think **networking!**), job ads are typically found in both local and national newspapers (keep an eye out for Saturday editions), and online (along with TalentEgg, visit **Job Bank** or **Monster.ca**).

Alternatively, you can also try going through a **recruitment agency** or **employment company**.

What is valued by Canadian employers?

Abide by the general “Canadian-isms”: be polite (open doors for others, stand up when introduced to someone new), have a positive can-do attitude, and always greet people with a smile. Oh, and never be afraid to say “Sorry!” – a favourite pastime nation-wide.

Teamwork and communication skills are also important to Canadian employers, who value a mix of creativity and professionalism – all the while expecting their employees to remain ever flexible. Sound like hard work? That’s because it is!

How to interact – Canadian workplace and business etiquette

Whether you like it or not, learning to embrace (and practice) being Politically Correct (or “PC” – if you’re unfamiliar with this term, [click here](#)) is generally considered a Canadian workplace prerequisite. Now that doesn’t mean ‘lose all sense of humour’ – Canadians certainly appreciate a good sense of humour, when appropriate (again, think “PC”) – but you should gauge each new situation to determine what is acceptable.

Drinking alcohol while on the job is strongly discouraged, even during lunches (other than perhaps a single drink...maybe), and smoking indoors has been widely banned across the country. Personal hygiene is also taken quite seriously – with some offices publicly declaring themselves as “scent-free” zones, limiting allergies as well as annoyance. In other words, you might want to rethink spraying on your favourite perfume, at least until you’ve figured out the lay of your new work place.

And in general – if you’re ever unsure of your “office appearance” (e.g., dress, make-up, hair), it might be worth asking a friendly new colleague for a second opinion.

Want additional tips? Visit canadianimmigrant.ca for more specially tailored points on business etiquette.

Realizing (and adapting to) different workplace cultures.

Different workplaces, like different countries, tend to have distinctive cultural ‘norms’ – and often, the line between what is acceptable and what is not varies greatly from job to job. For example, company policies often fluctuate on such issues as tattoos,

piercings, dress codes, break-taking, personal use of office resources such as fax machines or photocopiers, scheduling of medical appointments during working hours, personal email use or internet browsing during office hours, leeway for family obligations, etc. So realize that even though something may not be stated outright in your contract, that doesn't mean it's a 'non-issue'.

Any of these things sound like potential 'deal-breakers' for you? Then be sure to enquire about them during any job interviews you have.

Perks ... and realities

Dream of starting out your new Canadian career as a powerful executive, free to take month-long breaks to luxurious five-star destinations?

Well, you might want to wake up and smell the coffee. As the typical 9-5, five-day-a-week job grows more scarce, employees need to brace themselves for the prospect of longer hours – and be prepared to work their way up the ladder, as an entry-level position (with entry-level pay) is where most people start out.

As far as 'time off' is concerned, if you're expecting European-style vacation allotments, it's time to think again. The average Canadian employee, in addition to standard **statutory and provincial holidays**, receives two weeks of paid vacation per year. It is possible to negotiate extra unpaid time off, but again, this is something you might want to consider before you sign your name on any dotted line.

In general, Canadians are well-known to be friendly, easygoing people – a trait largely reflected in the workplace as well! So as long as you can learn to balance your time effectively between working hard and playing hard – while remembering that key word, "flexibility" – then you're sure to fit in well.

Arwen Kidd is the Communications Director at the **Canadian University Application Centre**, which represents member Canadian universities and their select degree programs in order to better serve international students around the world.

Insight for international students: Using your “foreign experience” to its full potential

By **Guest Contributor** in **Exchanges, Launch Your Career, On Campus, Travel** on **August 13, 2010**

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Getting a degree, developing skills, gaining experience – no matter what school you choose, or where you come from, university is a time that allows students to get a head start on their careers.

For all students – from abroad or not – the basic techniques to achieve this are generally the same: earning good grades, gaining the most valuable career-relevant “experiences” you can, and polishing up on all those job-marketable skills. Then, to show these accomplishments off, building (and writing) an appealing resumé. It’s a proven formula.

Where the extra challenge for international students comes in, however, is in learning how to adjust to the Canadian labour market. If you do it well, you can embrace and emphasize what makes you special as an international student.

It’s a tricky balance, but for those students who manage to use their ‘international student status’ to its full potential, it can lead to substantial career benefits later on. And it’s a learning process that can begin right from the start of your university experience – or, for some, even before.

Today, Enrique Chacon is an international student advisor in southwestern Ontario’s **University of Windsor**. But 15 years ago, Chacon – a native of Colombia – was a newly arrived international student himself, intent on pursuing a master’s of international and intercultural education at the **University of Alberta**.

Before he started classes for his degree, Chacon says he concentrated first on improving his English – something he encourages all international students to do.

“That’s number one on the list – to improve your English,” he says. Bilingual (and particularly multilingual) skills are extremely attractive to Canadian employers, but if you don’t have sufficient working English, you simply won’t be able to compete.

Although Chacon took formal ESL and TOEFL courses himself, he also believes strongly in the value of informal practice – in just getting out and meeting new people to practice your English with.

Besides language skills, Chacon says the only other real challenge some international students have in finding jobs is a general lack of awareness for their greater communities – even after they've already been living in Canada for a number of years.

“Some international students get so involved in their programs,” Chacon explains, “that they never really get out of their dorm rooms or off campus. It’s good that they’re concentrating on their studies, but [not if] they miss out on everything else. So I would say to them to ‘expand your horizons. Get to know the environment – the city, as well as the campus. It will help you in the long run, when you’re trying to go out and apply for jobs later on.’”

In general, Chacon says many Canadian employers are eager to hire international students and/or graduates, as, according to him, they have a strong overall reputation for being hardworking, bright individuals. But these same employers, he warns, also want to see that the students understand and fit in well with the Canadian culture and work environment – so the more experience you have working or volunteering in the country to prove this, the better off you will be.

“Volunteering is the best way to start out getting Canadian experience,” Chacon says. Although he knows that many international students come from countries where volunteering doesn’t hold the same ‘career value’ as it does in North America, he urges them to “be prepared to volunteer.”

“Come with an open mind. This is not something you will get paid for, but it can lead to jobs later on. Think long-term vision, rather than immediate results.”

Like other universities and colleges across Canada, Chacon’s employer, University of Windsor, also offers special opportunities for students to gain work experience through its [Centre for Career Education](#). A wide range of [volunteer internship and co-op programs](#) are specially tailored for students to spend time gaining hands-on experience in their fields of professional interest.

Chacon says Windsor has a long history of sending its students for placements all over the world, providing them experience with such well-respected companies as

Bell, Microsoft, and General Motors.

Through any of these experiences, Chacon stresses the importance of building up a list of potential references – people in Canada who are willing to speak about your abilities to any interested future employers. And don't forget one of the greatest (and simplest) reference resources of all – your own professors.

“Get yourself known to one of your professors,” says Chacon. “I don't just mean show up and say ‘sign my letter’ **when you need [a reference]**. Be a good student and participate in class, obviously, but also speak with the professors individually, visit them during their office hours.”

Overall, Chacon says the best way to improve your chances for employment in Canada after graduation – besides studying hard! – is getting out and experiencing the country. Whether that be through the help of university-organized events for international students, through joining campus clubs or societies, or by simply exploring the community around you, this extra perspective and “Canadian understanding” will be sure to help you show off for new employers.

“You should realize that coming to Canada could be a great experience, but you need to make sure you come with an open mind,” he says. “Realize the culture is different – which is a good thing! – and be ready to take on a lot of challenges. If you do these things, and keep that open mind, then you can have an amazing experience, and it really can lead to great opportunities.”

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Insight for international students: Taking advantage of work entitlements while studying in Canada

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Working during university is not only a great way to gain valuable job experience in Canada, but also to become more comfortable in your new surroundings – and of course, to help cover some of those bills!

However, first things first: make sure you know what your work entitlements are! In general, if you are: 1) a full-time international student, 2) registered at an officially authorized university or college, and 3) are in possession of a valid study permit, then you can qualify to legally work in Canada. To find out if your school qualifies, [click here for a list of participating institutions](#) under the Canadian government's Work Permit Program.

Read on to find out what you need to know before you start searching for each of the different types of legally-permitted employment opportunities.

Step 1: Working on campus

Your first opportunity as an international student is to work on campus – which is a great way to get to know your new university or college, and, best of all, you don't need a separate permit to do it. You can apply for jobs on your school campus from the moment you arrive!

Although some schools put limits on the number of hours that you can work per week, the main idea is that you must keep your grades up. The average wage starts at between \$10 and \$15 an hour, and most school campuses have a wide variety of positions available. From staffing the desk at the school fitness centre, to working at the university library or campus restaurants, to helping professors conduct in-depth research for their fields, the options are plentiful.

Step 2: Working off campus

Once you've been a full-time student for at least six months, you can apply for an Off

Campus Work Permit. This document, which is typically valid for as long as your study permit lasts, allows you to work anywhere in Canada that you wish – so long as you maintain a satisfactory academic standing in your studies.

However, similar to on-campus work guidelines, hours of work are strictly limited under this permit, to a maximum of 20 hours per week during study periods, though full-time employment is possible during school vacations.

Also, in Canada, study during the summer term (May to August) is usually optional, so it's possible for international students to work very long hours during this entire time period if they wish.

Co-operative work/study (Co-op) and internship programs

For some programs, work experience – either through a co-op or internship program – is mandatory for graduation. However, even if it's not mandatory, it's still an excellent option – and one which most Canadian universities and colleges offer.

The **University of Victoria (UVic), for example, is home to the country's third largest co-op program.** Started in the 1970s, this program enables students to experience multiple co-op work terms during their academic studies, in jobs related to their degree program. Jobs that, for some students, can lead to exciting career opportunities after graduation.

Take UVic graduate Cambria Hanson, for example, who spent her final co-op work term as a research and development intern at the California Institute of Technology's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) – the lab where NASA develops their Mars rovers.

"The experience was phenomenal," Hanson remembers. "It was twice as interesting as all the other jobs I've had combined."

Like many employers, JPL keeps a constant flow of co-op students on staff – many of whom they consider for future employment, according to Hanson's JPL supervisor, Kim Aaron: "Hiring co-op students puts us in a much better position to assess potential permanent employees' skills.... It gives us a real reference point to decide if we want to make them a permanent offer when they graduate."

Which, in Hanson's case, is exactly what happened – she was made a full-time job offer with JPL, to commence after graduation. And according to the university, hers is not an unusual success story – as about one-third of co-op graduates are hired by their previous co-op employers after graduating from UVic.

It's easy to obtain a work permit for such a program. You must be able to provide a letter of support from your institution, and be able to prove that the co-op or internship requirement takes up no more than 50% of your total academic program. Universities and colleges in Canada have offices that supervise the application process to make sure it's done correctly. To learn more about this type of permit, [click here](#).

Working after graduation

You may be happy to hear that graduating from an eligible Canadian university or college does qualify you to gain valuable work experience in Canada after you complete your studies! Through the Post-Graduate Work Permit Program, you can legally work in Canada for up to three years, depending on how much time you spent on your studies.

For example, if you studied at least two years full-time, you could then qualify for a work permit lasting one to two years – so long as it is less than the total time you spent on your studies. After which point, if you wanted to stay, you could then look into applying for permanent residency and even work your way towards obtaining Canadian citizenship.

For more info on the Post-Graduate Work Permit Program, [click here](#).

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To find out more about working in Canada as an international student, be sure to check out [Citizen and Immigration Canada's page on work permits for students](#), where you can also find information on other related issues such as employment entitlements for spouses of foreign students, application processes for permanent residency, and (something you might want to consider later on), how to qualify for Canadian citizenship after your studies are through.

Have you already made up your mind to apply for an off-campus job, co-op program, or post-graduation employment? Visit the online [student guide](#) to start the process!

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