

DILEMMAS

Immigrant job ghetto can turn into a velcro rut



SUSAN PINKER PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan:

I am an engineer from China. Since I arrived in Canada two years ago, I have not been able to find a job in my field but have been working as a foreman in an electronics business owned by a Chinese family and staffed by mostly Asian workers. I know that as an immigrant I may never be able to get a job in my profession, but want to know if working in my own community is a good plan. I am in my thirties, I can communicate in English and would like to move up.

--Mechanical not Electrical

Dear Mechanical,

Many immigrants get their start in occupational ghettos. My grandparents sewed ties "by the piece" (garments were a Jewish thing), while my Italian neighbours cut grass and laid bricks, and my Greek and South Korean students helped out in their parents' restaurants and dry cleaners after class. Ethnic enclaves are a way to get a toehold in a new place if immigrants don't speak the language fluently, have few local contacts and discover when they arrive that a foreign degree is not fully recognized.

Their children easily break through these barriers -- through assimilation and education -- but the question is whether you should try it right now.

"The No. 1 barrier is Canadian work experience," says Naomi Alboim, a

fellow at the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University. "People find it difficult to apply their skills, even in unregulated professions, because employers are not prepared to take a chance on someone." She says research shows that, once in Canada, it is what you do, not where you do it that counts. So, working in an ethnic enclave matters less than getting job experience relevant to your occupation. In your case, that means deciding whether management is where you're headed.

If so, it's easier to rise among your own as there's less discrimination and there are shorter ladders to the top, says Ryan A. Smith, an associate professor of public affairs at Baruch College at the City University of New York. Using census data and surveys to look at white, black, Asian and Hispanic managers working in mainstream businesses, Prof. Smith and co-author James Elliott discovered that managers can get trapped on a "sticky floor." That happens when they are matched with employees of their own background at the entry level of a big organization. They're hired, in part, to reduce cultural friction between the ranks. Then, the managers get stuck there if the level over their heads is more ethnically diverse.

"Our study provided strong evidence that many minorities never get close enough to the glass ceiling to butt up against it because they are stuck at the bottom with no decision-making authority, or restricted to supervising other minorities," Prof. Smith said.

This wouldn't happen in a business that is ethnically homogeneous and, of course, shouldn't happen anywhere at all if a meritocracy prevails. Combined with multiculturalism, it's supposed to open doors for you. But there's a basic disconnect in the system. While

immigration is a federal-provincial jurisdiction, education and professional licensing are provincial. So, bridging programs that would allow foreign-trained doctors, dentists, pharmacists and engineers to work in their professions exist in some provinces but not others.

If working in engineering is not that important to you, by all means stay where you are to get managerial experience. But there's one caveat: Familiarity diminishes the isolation of the immigrant experience but, as per the cliché, it also breeds contempt. Recent immigrants who don't know local labour standards and who may feel beholden to the familiar face who gave them a break are easily exploited.

"My mother doubled her hourly wage when the son of someone from her hometown [in Italy] gave her a job," said a psychiatrist friend (who broke through the barrier). "But at the plant, he was unbelievably bad," he added, recalling how this slave-driving manager shocked his compatriots with his lack of compassion. The employees expected more loyalty from one of their own. "My family has this mythology that this wouldn't happen in other ethnic groups."

I'm skeptical: The grass is always greener outside the occupational ghetto.

Dear Susan:

Several months ago, I was promoted from sales rep to manager and have a lot of new responsibilities and more work than there is time in a day. One of my children has recently developed a serious problem that requires me to take time off (I am a single parent). I have already used up my sick days and am now using up my vacation days. It's something private that I don't want to discuss with anyone at work. If this

keeps up I'll have to quit. What do I do now?

--Nobody's Business But Mine?

Dear Nobody's Business,

You have to talk to someone if you want to keep your job. The person you report to is the place to start, but if you feel you cannot approach your supervisor, human resources is the place to go next.

Flex time, working from home or requesting a personal leave of absence are all options you need to discuss

before you throw in the towel. You don't have to divulge many details to ask for this flexibility. If these benefits are not spelled out in your plan, ad hoc arrangements can be made, especially if the relationship with your employer is a co-operative one. It seems to me that anyone who was recently promoted is a valuable employee, so what are you afraid of?

Feeling that you're the only one with a unique problem is an illusion you'll have to give up. Last year, women working full time took an

average of 10.8 days off to look after personal and family needs, according to Statistics Canada; (men took off 8.6 days). In the United States, 49 per cent of working mothers stay home when their kids are sick, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Any employer worth his or her salt expects the unexpected. Given you've already missed many days, it will be no surprise if you 'fess up that you need more flexibility and support than you're getting.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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