

Making sense of immigrant work integration in Canada

- For highly skilled immigrants, commensurate employment makes them feel included.
- Drs Luciara Nardon and Amrita Hari, from Carleton University in Ottawa, have studied how such immigrants integrate in Canada.
- The outcome of their study is a book titled *Making Sense of Immigrant Work Integration*.
- They investigate the ‘wicked problem’ of immigrant integration using sensemaking – the process of organising multiple information towards reasonable actions – at individual, interactional, organisational, and institutional levels.
- Their book offers real solutions to enhance immigrants’ economic and societal contributions and their sense of belonging.

For immigrants arriving in a new country, the excitement for a new beginning can be overshadowed by the multiple anxieties that accompany integrating into sometimes vastly different living and working environments and cultures. This is especially true for highly qualified immigrants (QIs) – generally highly skilled immigrants with a foreign post-secondary education who relocate to another country to work and live. It would be fair to assume that countries looking to boost their skilled workforce would embrace such talent. However, for QIs, this is often not the case, and it could boil down to the complexities of sensemaking. Two Canadian scholars from diverse, but associated, fields of study have published research that shines a light on sensemaking amongst QIs and the multiple stakeholders they interact with. Their research could transform our understanding of the challenges facing immigrants.

Drs Luciara Nardon and Amrita Hari from Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, work in different fields. Nardon is a management scholar at the university’s Sprott School of Business, while Hari is a gender studies scholar at the university’s Feminist Institute of Social Transformation. They share a strong interest in understanding the challenges faced by immigrants that is rooted in personal experience. They are both immigrants themselves, hailing from Brazil and India, and educated in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively. As such, they understand the value of combining their experiences and areas of research into an approach that would be contextual, relational, intersectional, embodied, and politicised. The outcome of their study is a book titled *Making Sense of Immigrant Work Integration*.

The importance of work integration

Nardon and Hari know that commensurate employment is more than a

provision of income for highly qualified immigrants – it grants them a sense of belonging, recognition, inclusion, and acceptance. Therefore, the process of integrating QIs into the working environment in their new home country is critical. However, it is not easy. Examining the Canadian context, Nardon and Hari present immigrant work integration as a ‘wicked problem’ – an issue that is seemingly impossible to solve because of complex, sometimes contradictory, and frequently changing inputs that are often difficult to identify and quantify. The issue of immigration is complicated further by the highly emotional narrative that often accompanies it in political discourse and certain sections of the media. Scholarly research on immigration provides a more measured

opinion, but it can be overly analytical and disparate and siloed in focus. Nardon and Hari seek to move away from the same arguments in the stalled debate on immigrant integration and contribute to a different and hopeful perspective using sensemaking to move towards a more solutions-focused direction.

In essence, say the researchers, if we are to help facilitate immigrant

work integration, we need to measure expectations and address differences in perception; this is where ‘sensemaking’ comes in. Sensemaking is how individuals and organisations give meaning to events and make sense of their environment, and it is especially significant when events and environments are novel and ubiquitous. Immigrants face persistent challenges when entering a foreign labour market in receiving countries, including unemployment, underemployment, and downward mobility. The reasons include the non-recognition of qualifications and experiences from their birth countries, the loss of previous social memberships and networks, perceived language difficulties, and racial and gender biases. Understanding these becomes clearer if examined through the lens

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In their book, the researchers highlight opportunities for bridging differences and breaking down barriers.

of sensemaking, and because these challenges are diverse and interconnected, addressing them requires a multilevel approach.

The multiple levels of sensemaking

For Nardon and Hari, the issues of sensemaking around immigrant work integration are more than individual – it's not just about managing QI preconceptions and how potential employers view immigrants; it's much bigger than that. The authors investigate sensemaking at the individual, interactional, organisational, and institutional levels. The book covers how QIs make sense of the disruptions and interruptions in their careers and professional identities, assign meanings to the different interactions with new local actors they encounter in the process of work integration, and then take action based on the new meanings that emerge.



Commensurate employment is more than a provision of income – it also grants immigrants a sense of belonging.

And because sensemaking around immigration work integration is interactive, the researchers examine how local stakeholders – both individual actors and organisations – interacting with QIs make sense of immigrants, their qualifications, and experiences, and how that shapes their roles in integrating QIs into their novel work environments.

All this happens within a macro-environment shaped by narratives of multiculturalism and complex public sentiments around immigrants, including how QIs' integration into the Canadian labour market is entangled with settler-colonial practices and positioned within systemic narratives that differentiate immigrants and indigenous peoples. So, the book also explores how this broader context informs the sensemaking of QIs and local stakeholders and influences their experiences in a new environment.

In *Making Sense of Immigrant Work Integration*, Nardon and Hari bring novel insights into how professionally trained and qualified immigrants consistently face a complex disadvantage when entering and integrating into the Canadian labour market. However, this is more than socially useful research – their book also provides hope. By focusing on how different stakeholders make sense of this highly complex and interactive situation, they highlight opportunities for bridging differences and bringing about the necessary changes. They argue that small actions by multiple stakeholders can help to break down perceived and real barriers and facilitate a more inclusive and constructive system for immigrant work integration.

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Personal response

In terms of sensemaking, what is the biggest challenge facing QIs?

The employment outcomes of QIs are impacted by multiple agents and processes of sensemaking. As a result, QIs are faced with a large volume of information, which is delivered in multiple formats from various actors, all of whom have different goals, perspectives, and expectations. That can be confusing and creates a situation of uncertainty, ambiguity, and anxiety. In addition, the resulting situation facing QIs is often out of their control, and they may be unsure how to proceed. Hence, there is a need to understand not only their processes of sensemaking but also that of various stakeholders to inform better solution and support to the wicked problem of immigrant integration.

Where would you like to see other researchers in your fields develop the findings in your work?

Sensemaking is a perspective that has not been used to understand immigrant integration. The sensemaking framework seeks to combine the multiple levels of QI experiences and move the focus away from outcomes (QIs finding work opportunities) which is necessary but can trap immigrants in survival work, towards understanding the process and thinking about long-term solutions. The process can adapt to nuances of different and complex social identities (intersectionality) and across different spatial contexts (globally and transnationally). We hope that by highlighting the usefulness of this perspective to understand QIs experiences in the labour market, other researchers will apply this perspective to understand other kinds of immigrants, in other contexts and sectors.

How would you like to develop further on your findings?

We see a few different ways to further advance our work. First, we recognize that QIs live transnational lives and may be influenced by multiple national contexts: their country of origin, transit countries, as well as their country of residence. These different contexts and relationships with different groups of stakeholders influence how QIs make sense of their experiences and opportunities and the actions they take. We would like to further explore how these multiple national environments shape their sensemaking and their

decisions. Second, we recognize that sensemaking is an embodied experience and not just a mental activity. An embodied perspective would break down the body mind dualism and helps us understand their emotional, bodily, and somatic experiences.

How do we go about shifting the systemic narratives that negatively impact immigrant work integration?

One of our main arguments is that QI's integration is a wicked problem. As such, there is not one thing that will solve the problem. Rather, we need to look at the multiple narratives emerging from each stakeholder and their interconnectedness. For example, in order to improve job outcomes, QIs need to adjust their expectations, employers need to adjust their hiring practices, governments need to provide more accurate pre and post migration information and support, professional associations need to facilitate the process of credential recognition, and professionals need to mentor and support newcomers. A sensemaking perspective reveals that small actions can have large consequences. When each one of us takes small steps towards changing our individual approaches towards newcomers in our unique capacities, the whole system can change and become more inclusive and supportive of immigrants.

Your research provides hope that bringing about the necessary changes is possible; where is a good place to start?

Each one of us has a role to play in the integration of QIs as individual citizens and representatives of our organizations. In our individual capacities and in our many interactions, we need to become aware of our role in facilitating or hindering QIs integration. Incremental steps and our small actions can have big impacts. The sensemaking perspective allows us to get away from repeating the same arguments and relying on somebody else to fix the problems or feel like it is an insurmountable task. This hopeful approach, including mentoring newcomers, share our networks and local knowledge, and advocating within our organizations to remove biases in hiring, and support integration and belonging, can over time break down the multiple exclusionary barriers and recognize the strengths and possibilities of immigration.

Details



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Bio

Luciara Nardon is a Professor of International Business at the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University. Her research explores cultural and cognitive influences on work in multicultural environments, with a special focus on immigrant work integration.

Amrita Hari is Director and Associate Professor at the Feminist Institute of Social Transformation at Carleton University. Her research examines global labour migrations, migrant identities, and citizenship.

Further reading

Nardon, L, Hari, A, (2022) *Making sense of immigrant work integration – an organizing framework*. Palgrave Macmillan. link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-13231-5