

PowerHack: Moving from Credentials to Competencies

PowerHack is a social initiative incubated by the Refugee Livelihood Lab at RADIUS SFU and implemented by the Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) through funding from Ryerson University. Powerhack provides opportunities for skilled immigrants to showcase their problem-solving and collaboration skills in front of employers in a hackathon setting.

What are we trying to solve?

Given the lack of recognition for foreign work experiences and credentials, most skilled immigrants have to settle for unpaid work to fulfill their “Canadian experience”. It is estimated that the growing wage gap between Canadian-born workers and immigrants is costing the Canadian economy \$50 billion.¹

The standard practice for a skilled immigrant to obtain a job is they need to have Canadian experience. However, to get Canadian experience, they need to find a job. This frustrating dilemma occurs in part because employers fear that skilled immigrants competencies are not transferable to a Canadian context. While working to overcome this systemic bias over the long-term, PowerHack asked what shorter-term solutions are available?

Through a two-day hackathon setting, employers and skilled immigrants have the chance to get to know each other in an environment that requires little commitment from both parties. PowerHack allows employers the opportunity to see the skills of skilled immigrants up front before any hiring takes place. It allows skilled immigrants to network in their own field, gain Canadian experience, and stay connected to the work that is their passion.



Figure 1. PowerHack across its different stages of maturity (from left to right): Daisy Quon, Senior Manager Programs and Stakeholder Relations at IEC-BC; Dr. Stella Lee and Shivam Kishore, implementation advisors to PowerHack, Farizan H Razie, founder of PowerHack; Holden Bonwit, mentor during the PowerHack ideation stage from RADIUS SFU.

What does PowerHack mean?

PowerHack is short for 'Hacking the Power Dynamic for Skilled Immigrants Accessing Employment'. It is meant as a tool to equalize information between employers and skilled immigrants where it enables the validation of experience to be done up front, thus reducing the risks associated in hiring skilled immigrants for employers.

Skilled immigrants gain networks and confidence as they're able to showcase their skills, which they normally would not have an opportunity to do unless they're invited for an interview. It creates a context for disconfirming bias, building effective networks, and finding strong employer-employee matches.

How does it work?



1. Employers identify job vacancies and provide problem statements.



2. Participants are pre-screened based on employers' hiring requirements.



3. Participants form into teams depending on their skill sets and interests.



4. Teams problem solve, and employers have opportunities to interact with participants.



5. Teams pitch their solutions to a panel of judges.



6. Participants will network and receive feedback from employers through a speed mentoring session.

Implementation

PowerHack currently focuses on the IT industry given the commonality of IT problems across the world. Java is Java whether you do it in Canada, Kenya, Brazil or other countries in the world. Upon successful implementation, the PowerHack concept can be implemented across industries and geographies.

After 4 iterations, 59 skilled immigrants have participated in the PowerHack event with more than 20 countries represented and 6 employer partners (Microsoft, xMatters, Vancity, Traction on Demand, Perfect Mind and Sherwa Online) taking part in our events.

We received support from YWCA Metro Vancouver, ISS of BC, Mosaic BC, Douglas College, S.U.C.C.E.S.S, Red Academy, CodeCore, Lighthouse Lab and Brainstation.

In our last event taking place on February 28 – 29, we had our first female-majority PowerHack event where skilled immigrants solved problems

proposed by Microsoft and xMatters.

As of this writing, 25% of our past participants were considered for an interview. Although none of our participants were hired directly by our employer partners, 6 of our past participants found employment on their own and have attributed PowerHack as one of their sources of confidence.

We have also expanded the application of PowerHack to help employers and skilled immigrants connect in Halifax, Nova Scotia through Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS).

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As a recent newcomer to Canada, PowerHack enables me to discover my self-confidence in solving problems and collaborate with other people. I feel so empowered when I can contribute to my team and leverage my programming skills that I have used back home.

- February PowerHack Participant.

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Figure 2. One of the many team discussions that took place during the Beta PowerHack event in July 2019.



Figure 3. A discussion among employers from Sherwa Online and participants working on their problem statement during the October PowerHack event.

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PowerHack is a great program!! I love the purpose of the program and the value it adds to immigrants who don't know how to get a job in Canada or have the experience in the Canadian job market. They provide them with amazing opportunities. Coming from an immigrant family, I know how hard it was for my parents who were experienced but had so much trouble getting a job. Wonderful program!

- Rifaadh Saif, Systems Support, EDU Engineering Experiences, Microsoft

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Figure 4. After being presented with problem statements from Vancity, participants discussed strategies on how to leverage their respective skills to solve the problems during the November PowerHack event with Vancity.

Get Connected

For PowerHack to scale, we need to attract more skilled immigrants in IT who are currently looking for a job and are eligible to work in Canada. We are looking for people who can help solidify our network of skilled immigrants who can participate in our next event to meet the hiring requirements of our employer partners.

Please contact powerhack@iecbc.ca to connect!