



AIPP: A Love Story

Is the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program the answer for New Brunswick companies short of workers? The relationship is too new to tell

BY STEPHANIE GOUGH
MALLEY PHOTOS BY KAYLA MALLEY

An Australian walks into New Brunswick—and he’s looking for a job. Have you heard this one? Now, this is a province facing some serious challenges—a critical shortage of skilled workers, not to mention ageing demographics and a shrinking population. This guy is young, he’s got a new Canadian girlfriend, he’s in love, he wants to move here. And he needs a job.

IT IS SUMMER 2018, and as luck would have it, Dieppe's Malley Industries has a position open for a metal fabricator. So, this guy—Jacob Lindgren, he applies. Malley Industries runs him through their competency test to see if he can do the work. He can. They offer him a job. It's all working out.

Just have to get his work papers.

Kathy Malley, the company's VP, is told the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program (AIPP), a new fast track to permanent residency for foreign workers, would be the quickest way to do this: "It was deemed the road of least resistance."

She starts the process. Step one: Malley Industries has to qualify as a designated employer. There is a fair amount of paperwork—an expression of interest, followed by the employer designation application. Once these are submitted, Malley and Lindgren begin his provincial endorsement application. They learn a pre-endorsement needs assessment and a settlement plan are required so they work with Moncton's multicultural association to get those in place.

There is more paperwork—an offer of employment to a foreign national, a detailed job description and supporting documents, evidence of at least one month of job postings, an employment contract, proof of candidate status, and the lengthy endorsement application itself. "Every time a round of paperwork would be filled in, I'd think, okay this is it. I've done the 15-page application, put the same code number in, business number, name of employee, job description, letter of offer, put it all in again, then we'd get a notice saying, 'Now that you've done this...'" says Malley. She calculates she has now put 30 hours into the process.

Summer drags on. In late August, New Brunswick endorses Jacob Lindgren and his application is forwarded to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Malley and Lindgren sit back and wait for a reply. It arrives a month later: as Lindgren's working holiday visa expired that spring, there is a high chance his application will be denied. "They were going to refuse him!" says Malley.

Malley and Lindgren had fallen down the rabbit hole into the world of immigration.

Less than an hour away, Blair and Rosalyn Hyslop of Sussex's Mrs. Dunster's are also navigating the



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Rosalyn and Blair Hyslop, co-owners of Mrs. Dunster's in Sussex, N.B., are in desperate need of qualified bakers, line operators and mixers. Staffing shortages are forcing them to pass on opportunities for further growth.



Alex LeBlanc, executive director of the New Brunswick Multicultural Association, says the province is on track to lose over 110,000 workers in the next seven years while only 76,000 students will graduate from high school in the same period.



Kathy Malley, VP of Malley Industries, says the federal and provincial employees she's dealt with around the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Project have been "very accommodating, helpful and encouraging." Her issue is with the system itself. "It is so flawed, cumbersome and fraught with hidden 'full stops'. It amazes me that anyone has the fortitude to stick with it."

AIPP process for the first time. But where Malley Industries has just one unfilled position, Mrs. Dunster's literally has a baker's dozen. Since the couple purchased the business in 2014, expansion has seen them grow at 35 per cent annually, and employee numbers have exploded from just 75 to 250 people. Even so, Mrs. Dunster's is just barely keeping up with orders. The company urgently needs qualified bakers, line operators and mixers. Staffing shortages are forcing the Hyslops to pass on opportunities for further growth. "Honestly, we have been down all year, and it's hard to grow when you can just barely keep up with the orders you have," says Rosalyn.

In the four years the Hyslops have owned the business, it has been increasingly difficult to find qualified workers, despite constant advertising. This is especially true for their rural facilities in Sussex. Training staff was never an option, according to Blair, who says none of the culinary schools in Atlantic Canada offer a part-time program suitable for a work/study arrangement.

That spring, the Hyslops heard about AIPP and decided to give it a try. They hired HR consultant Sherri Deveau to help them with recruitment, and she found four qualified candidates straight away. In June, the Hyslops submitted their application for designated employer status. They received it three months later.

"This was part of the frustration. You really need people, you've identified qualified people and interviewed them, and you are ready to bring them over, just to have three months go by to process the initial application," says Blair.

It's now early fall, and Kathy Malley is preparing to take on Ottawa, while Jacob Lindgren's future remains uncertain. "If I was a different kind of person, I probably would have said it's not worth it. But when I get mad, I get moving, and I was not willing to let this go," she says.

Meanwhile, the Hyslops are working on the endorsement application for their first AIPP candidate, a baker from the Philippines. Their frustration is mounting. "Even then, we found ourselves trying to justify that we needed the positions. This makes sense in a normal environment, but when we have a regional growth strategy and we create a program that is designed specifically to bring in immigrants to deal with shortages of skilled workers, having to go through the burden of proving you've advertised all over again seems redundant," says Blair.

THE AIPP is an offshoot of the 2016 Atlantic Growth Strategy, a joint initiative of the federal government and the Atlantic provinces to boost the regional economy. A key pillar is building a skilled workforce and increasing immigration. Launched in March 2017, the AIPP aims to bring in 7,000 newcomers to the region by 2020. It is open to three subsets of applicants: high- and intermediate skilled workers and international graduates of Atlantic Canadian universities and colleges, along with their families. As it's an employer-driven program, AIPP candidates must have a full-time, non-seasonal job offer from a designated employer in order to apply. Although employers are required to prove their inability to fill positions locally, they do not have to obtain a Labour Market Impact Assessment, a feature intended to speed up the process.

Candidate requirements are not overly stringent per se. At the bottom of the scale, a high school diploma is all that is needed in terms of education for C level workers, a skill category that includes food and beverage servers. Individual applicants must show they have the nominal amount of \$3,118 as proof of funds to see them through their first months in Canada (although their visa processing fees will cost them another \$1,040). To increase immigration retention rates, the AIPP also has a built-in settlement component that places the onus on the employer to support the candidate's integration in the community with the aid of settlement provider organizations. This may include providing assistance in finding housing, with transportation, in accessing services such as health care or with school registration.

AS SEPTEMBER comes to an end, Malley is still grappling with the conundrum of Jacob Lindgren's expired work permit. "Everybody's on board and all of a sudden, you've hit a brick wall that there's no way through and no way around. You have to start from square one and go down a different path," she says. "So thus went the whole rigmarole of reapplying a different way."

Malley works with an IRCC employer liaison officer to explore Lindgren's options. The officer suggests Lindgren apply for a new temporary work permit, but says he must leave the country in order to do so. Could he possibly go to New York? For Kathy Malley, it's the last straw.

"I thought, for heaven's sake, the

guy's here! Am I going to send him to New York? It doesn't make sense," she says. "Why is there a law that prohibits applying for a work permit from within Canada? And why is there this deadlock at the end of the temporary work permit? There is this tight little window to renew, and boy, once you pass that, that's it. Bob's your uncle, you're out.

Why are we making it so difficult for people to get through the system? I said to myself there's probably not enough time left in my career to fight this, but I'm going to do it anyway. Businesses struggle enough to find workers."

Down in Sussex, the Hyslops are considering making additional offers in India and the Philippines for two more bakers and four line operators. They are told they can expect their first baker in early summer of 2019—if all goes well. "To put that into context, it will be a year from the time we identified an immediate need to when they start working. It is a real challenge to plan that far ahead and to understand what our needs are going to be a year from now. It is challenging when you need people right away and it is holding you back," says Blair. "There must be some way to streamline the process."

Rosalyn says that a three- to four-month process would be ideal for their needs: "We are very excited to be part of the program. It is a great idea, and it is going to help a lot of businesses. But if they could just speed it up a little bit."

Kathy Malley manages to get permission for Lindgren to file his new application from New Brunswick. It's a small victory, but a victory nonetheless. Still, as the saga unfolds, Malley Industries is required to continue looking for someone else to fill the position.

WORKER SCARCITY has long been identified as a looming apocalypse by the governments of Atlantic Canada. The region has the nation's oldest population and its lowest birth rate, as well as high levels of outmigration in many areas. A 2017 Conference Board of Canada report said nearly 20 per cent of Atlantic Canadians were over the age of 65 in 2016, and predicted this figure would rise to 30.9 per cent by 2035. Add to this the growing wave of retiring baby boomers, and we are looking at a very sharp decline in the region's workforce over the next decade. This begs a few critical questions: namely, how will our economy grow and who is going to pay for health care?

In the 2016 census, New Brunswick

had the unfortunate distinction of being the only province with a shrinking population. A November 2018 report by the New Brunswick Multicultural Council (NBMC) says the province is on track to lose 110,200 workers by 2026, and that only a dramatic increase in immigration will mitigate the labour market crisis. For NBMC, this means welcoming 7,500 newcomers per year, equivalent to one per cent of the provincial population—nearly double the current intake.

"I find it striking that many people in our region still don't see the urgency for immigration, even as their taxes increase and businesses, schools and other institutions are closing their doors. Ironically, if we want things to stay as they are in our communities, things will have to change," says NBMC executive director Alex LeBlanc.

Policies for youth retention are no longer enough, says LeBlanc. Over the same period in which New Brunswick will lose more than 110,000 of its workers, only 76,000 students will graduate from its high schools. "It's critical that we socialize the need for much higher levels of immigration so our communities, employers and institutions are prepared to do business differently moving forward," he says.

Meanwhile, a report released in September 2018 by Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) lends credence to the claims of Atlantic Canada's small businesses that critical labour scarcity is not some dystopic future scenario, but a crushing reality in the present. Nearly 50 per cent of Atlantic Canadian SMEs surveyed had trouble finding workers in the previous 12 months, making the region the most hard hit in the country in terms of worker shortages. Furthermore, BDC found firms affected by shortages are 65 per cent more likely to be low-growth companies.

SHERRI DEVEAU, whose Moncton-based company Practical Human Resource Solutions is assisting Mrs. Dunster's and other clients across the province with AIPP applications and recruitment, says worker shortages are nothing new. "There are many, many companies in New Brunswick struggling to find people. It's something that's been happening over the last five or six years, but it's just getting more and more difficult. People who have never thought about foreign recruitment are now recognizing that this is the answer for them. It's automation or immigration, in my view, and neither option will be quick, easy or inexpensive."

30.9%

Percentage of Atlantic Canadians expected to be 65 or older by 2035

50%

Atlantic Canadian small to medium-sized enterprises that had trouble finding workers in the past year

110,200

Number of workers New Brunswick is expected to lose by 2026

7,000

Number of newcomers the AIPP hopes to attract by 2020



Sherri Deveau, owner of Practical Human Resource Solutions, helps companies across New Brunswick find their way through the AIPP application process. She says this pilot project works better than some others she has dealt with in the past.



According to Mark Osborne, VP of human resources for Hartland's Day & Ross Freight, the company was having problems recruiting workers—until they started working with the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Project. At the end of 2018, they had 18 AIPP workers in place, from as far away as India and Cuba.



There were a lot of starts and stops on Jacob Lindgren's journey through the AIPP application process, but on November 1, 2018 he was finally approved for a temporary work permit. The only thing holding him back from permanent residency status? This Australian has to prove he can speak English.

Deveau agrees the AIPP has its challenges, but feels these are par for the course for a pilot program, and that the AIPP is less lengthy and expensive than other programs she has used in the past. The main complaint she hears from clients is not about the amount of paperwork involved, but the amount of time it takes to bring workers in. "People may not find the AIPP as fast as they would like, and I agree. But I don't think there is any fast program available. It would be nice if there were."

Mike Albert of Saint John's Cirrus Garment says he founded his company in 2016 because he knew the AIPP was in the pipeline. Otherwise, he would have passed on the opportunity as the highly specialized sewing skills he needs are nearly impossible to find in Canada. Today, Cirrus Garment has 31 employees, half of whom arrived via the AIPP.

"I think it is an absolute necessity to have a program like this in Atlantic Canada. It helps drive our population growth. It helps us find employment that otherwise would not exist and it helps employers who are having a hard time staffing certain positions. This has been the only way we've been able to create this growth opportunity," says Albert.

Getting to know the AIPP process is a long learning curve, he adds, but it does get better: "For the first few candidates, we were learning as we went, but now it's a known process that we follow systematically. We understand the program better and it's much easier to find people."

Cirrus Garment has taken advantage of the AIPP's temporary work permit option, which allows candidates to first apply for a one-year permit if jobs need to be filled urgently. This way, applicants and their families can come to Canada sooner and apply for permanent residence from here. "Still, it takes months," says Albert, "depending on the candidate and on the country they are coming from."

Hartland's Day & Ross Freight was another early AIPP adopter. With 10 additional drivers coming in at the end of 2018, the transport company now has 18 AIPP workers, including three IT professionals from India and Cuba, who live and work in Hartland with their families. VP of Human Resources Mark Osborne says the AIPP has helped Day & Ross address shortages in talent resulting not only from a general dearth of drivers in North America, but also from the rural location of their headquarters, where it is a challenge to recruit staff and get them to stay.

Wait times for Day & Ross' AIPP workers have varied, says Osborne, but "the process end-to-end, in our

experience, depending on getting all the background checks, certifications, licensing and all that confirmed, is between six and eight months from the time someone applies with us and we actually get them here in the Atlantic provinces."

SO AN AUSTRALIAN walks into New Brunswick, with nothing but an expired work permit in his back pocket. You've heard this one, right? Then, he meets a woman named Kathy Malley, who needs a metal fabricator.

As of October, 2018, a year and a half into the three-year AIPP, there were 1,484 employers across Atlantic Canada with AIPP designation, according to IRCC spokesperson Rémi Larivière. Provincial governments had endorsed 2,801 candidates and 1,411 permanent residency applications had been filed, along with 1,504 work permit applications. Of these, 734 had been approved. Including their family members, this represented some 1,562 newcomers to the region.

But none of these successful applicants was Jacob Lindgren.

Lindgren was the proverbial square peg in the AIPP scheme, and for Kathy Malley, this just did not make sense. "Somebody has decided that you can come to Canada for work or you can come for travel, but you can't do both. You cannot come to this country, travel around, decide you like it and you want to stay. To me, that is logical. But there is no legal way to do that."

On November 1, Malley got an email from Jacob Lindgren, asking her to call him. She thinks, oh my God, something's wrong. But when she calls, Lindgren can hardly contain his excitement: "I got it! I got it!" He does have to leave the country to activate his new temporary work permit, but only briefly. The next day, he crosses the border. The following week, he starts work.

When Malley seeks him out on the production floor of Malley Industries to congratulate him, she reminds him to begin his application for permanent residency straight away. Yes, he says, just as soon as he is able to work and save up some money for the language test. "He has to prove he can speak English. The guy is from Australia! I just want to put my head through a wall, it's so frustrating," says Malley.

FEEDBACK

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