

MAPLE 2.0 Internship Opened Locked Doors for Microbiologist

By Gwen Pawlikowski

Aman Kahlon could appear on a poster advertising everything positive about Canadian immigration.

Well-spoken, well-educated, well-everything, Kahlon has a Ph.D. from an American university. His skills have been developed in science, microbiology to be exact, with hands-on research in bacteria and mammals. Considering humans belong to the latter group, you might think his knowledge would make him like Cinderella at the ball, with a bunch of biotech princes waiting in line for a dance. As immigrant desirability goes, Aman Kahlon is *it*. He is the fantasy of immigration policymakers. His potential contribution is obvious.



And yet, surprisingly, Kahlon struggled for almost a year to find work in his field.

Arriving in Vancouver in April 2012 after a decade of living in the US, speaking with fluent English, this science professional struggled – despite a proliferation of biotech companies that offer abundant opportunity:

“Vancouver is the core of one of the fastest growing life sciences clusters in North America, with particular strength in biotechnology.” (See <http://www.vancouvereconomic.com/page/life-sciences.>)

That’s from the webpage of the Vancouver Economic Commission, an agency of the City of Vancouver. You will read there are 100 biopharmaceutical companies, 60 medical device manufacturing and distribution companies, and 30 bio products companies in British Columbia, with 70 percent of those in the Greater Vancouver area. To a fresh reader of these statistics, that sounds promising. The problem is that the promise is hard to attain, as Kahlon learned.

“I think mostly it is that it’s hard to get your foot in the door at any place and B.C. is especially competitive,” he said in an interview.

“That was the main challenge: to get past the locked door.”

Did Kahlon perform the due diligence tasks required of all job seekers? These would include:

- Crafting a Canadian-style resume and cover letter
- Learning an appealing interview style with culturally-appropriate answers to questions
- Creating and monitoring a network
- Researching about the companies in his field.

In a word, yes. In fact, he started researching companies and contacting his network of friends and family here even before arriving. Within a couple of months of settling, Kahlon participated in a job search program, which introduced each of these job search requirements. Furthermore, he was also placed with a mentor, who provided additional specialized guidance in his career development. But this did not lead to work in his field. Instead, Kahlon accepted alternate work selling life insurance in a bid to contribute to the family income, while still continuing his job search. At the same time, He was also teaching a temporary part-time biology class at a Vancouver college.

Through summer and early autumn, the patient Ph.D. kept going, kept churning out resumes, kept going to lectures to meet others in his field and kept hopeful. By November of 2012, he learned from his network of family and friends

about MAPLE 2.0, an innovative federal government program administrated through the Immigrant Services Society of BC in the Vancouver area. He joined the program and following the Christmas-New Year break at the end of 2012, was placed in an internship at a Greater Vancouver biotech company.

That internship offered Kahlon’s big break. From the first day at work, he plunged into a full-throttle job search, which he says the company’s culture accepted and supported. He talked to his supervisor. He talked to Human Resources. He got advice from co-workers. Success came quickly. Within three weeks, he saw the kind of job opening he’d been struggling for: a Project Manager position, a permanent job with the possibility of advancement and growth. He applied, interviewed and got it.

As a new immigrant to Canada, Kahlon didn’t really have to overcome any significant cultural barriers; he had already done that through years of living in the US.

Furthermore, although he moved from academia to industry, that’s not terribly unusual or difficult and he says it wouldn’t have been a major challenge in the US. He believes what held him back was his lack of Canadian experience because of the added risk imposed on employers.

“If you put yourself in the shoes of a company, or the person who is hiring for that company, you would obviously want to mitigate your risk because it takes a lot of time, and effort, and investment to hire an employee,” he reasons.

MAPLE 2.0, by providing him with an internship, mitigated the risk. The internship allowed him to gain short-term Canadian experience and let him get a foot in. Once his foot was in, this temporary life insurance sales rep knew how to edge in more, politely, assertively, successfully.

Interning is the key factor that could get you in the job faster...

Now that he has secured his biotech job, Kahlon is able to enjoy the other aspects of his immigration. “If you have to worry about what to eat, you can’t go and explore Stanley Park,” he says, reminding us that survival needs are paramount. Similarly, it’s hard to feel a sense of belonging when one is outside one’s previous professional community.

The return to his field allows him to feel he can return the investment that the community has made in him.

“Once you are educated, it’s time to get back to the community and start contributing in whatever ways you can... I can better contribute in my own field than moving to another field completely.”

While Kahlon remains a possible skilled newcomer poster candidate, he is not unique. To others experiencing the gap between immigrating and connecting to jobs in their fields, he recommends MAPLE 2.0. He believes that an internship “...is *the* key factor that could get you in the job faster.”