

MAPLE 2.0 Internship Gets Engineer Back to Industry after Long Absence

By Gwen Pawlikowski

Carlos Vasconcelos and his family arrived in Canada from California on December 6, 2010, the day that his daughter turned four.

“We arrived on purpose on that day so we could have a better remembering of our arrival in Canada,” he said.

It seemed symbolic. They were giving themselves and their daughter a safe, positive, limitless future in a new country.



But the El Salvador engineer had no idea of the difficulties he would face finding work in industrial engineering. He had no clue about the stunning disappointments that would confront. And he had no idea his daughter would be almost seven by the time he returned to his profession.

Like many newcomers, Carlos encountered an entry into the Canadian labour market that involved sending resumes into what seemed like a void and from which there was rarely a response. When he did hear something, it was usually from a company big enough for an automatic email response saying, “thanks for the application; only successful applicants will be contacted for interviews.”

After a few months, money was getting tighter and Carlos faced the reality of finding a survival job. Following the advice of people in his network, he opted for serving work in a restaurant. He didn't feel too overqualified since his co-workers were also highly-educated immigrants, some with advanced degrees. Later, someone told him about a government-sponsored job search program. He participated in it, and found a different possibility: working as a financial advisor.

In order to qualify for this job, he had to study and take several tests. He began but was struck by how wrong the opportunity seemed for him. He backed away and instead opted for work at a mushroom farm. While it was physically demanding work and completely unrelated to what he'd done as an engineer in a medical equipment company in San Salvador, he kept positive. He trusted that every job was meaningful, every job involved some essential knowledge that he needed to learn.

Approximately two years after arriving, Carlos heard from a friend at church about an opening in a warehouse. Once again, he felt renewed hope; the job wasn't engineering, but it was at least in an industrial space. Maybe it was the wrong job, but it was in the right place, he reasoned. At an interview for the job, he was asked several questions from the three interviewers about his engineering experience. He realized that some kind of shift had occurred in the interview. They confirmed they were considering him for an engineering position. Carlos' heart must have leapt. Later that day, they called him and said they wanted to hire him. Hope coursed through his veins along with the satisfaction of being professionally visible. His skills had been recognized.

Unfortunately, the happy feeling didn't last because that was almost the final communication he had from the company. He waited patiently to hear about his start date, but as weeks

turned into months, his hope drained away, to be replaced by incomprehension and disappointment. No communication ever came. Two months after receiving his offer, he finally reached by phone one of the women who had interviewed him. She hinted that the job had been put on hold, but wouldn't confirm it. She promised someone higher in the company would call him to let him know within a week.

No one ever called.

Carlos brushed off the disappointment, picked himself up and went to ask again for his job at the mushroom farm, where the employer gladly rehired him. But two months later, a similar setback landed upon him. This time, he had been hired in a maintenance job and had just signed documents accepting the position. Only three hours later, bad news came in another call: the General Manager of the company had issued an edict. There would be no new hires.

“I felt frustrated. I felt it was not as we had been told,” he said.

Amazingly, this second blow didn't completely crush him. In fact, through some sheer paradoxical thinking, Carlos said he felt slightly better. He believed that the job may not have been right for him and he trusted that something better was in the works.

In the meantime, mushroom farming resumed its prominent place in his work life.

By now, it was the spring of 2013 and he had been referred to ISS of BC's MAPLE 2.0 program. Soon, he was interviewing for an internship at VIA Rail where his first task would be analyzing a complex mix of data to determine a change in the frequency of train maintenance. At the internship, he was not getting paid. Nevertheless, he was doing the work he loved. Stacks of paper and Excel sheets brought back the familiar engineering identity that he had not experienced for months. He was happy.

He was also gaining Canadian engineering experience. As he got to know co-workers and participated in the life of the office, he observed differences between that Canadian workplace and his earlier employer in El Salvador. He noticed less informal communication than he was used to and saw less enthusiastic handshaking between colleagues. As well, he observed that Canadians ended their work punctually, without excessive overtime stays into the evening. He listened to the direct style of Canadian workplace communication. He felt the subtle cultural differences and made mental notes for the future.

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At the end of the summer, the internship was drawing to a close. Carlos felt he had learned so much, along with gaining professional Canadian experience. With the continued support of ISS, Carlos applied for an engineering job with a manufacturer of industrial kitchen equipment. He got the job and started in September of 2013.

Two years and nine months after his daughter's fourth birthday, and two years and nine months after landing in YVR, Carlos feels the optimism of that first day on Canadian soil. He feels a new kind of welcome and a new kind of belonging. MAPLE 2.0's internship helped to reunite the man with his work and gave his daughter back her engineering father.