

MAPLE 2.0 Client Turns Steel to Gold

By Gwen Pawlikowski



You never know what will happen when you're shopping for shoes.

Early in the summer of 2013, Oscar Ruiz Elias, 28, was at a Langley retail shop searching for steel-toed boots. His employer had offered to reimburse him for the boots he needed to perform his part-time job safely. Shopping carefully, Ruiz Elias asked questions of the manager in order to get the right fit, the best quality and the perfect price.

As the two talked, another shopper was listening closely. Intrigued by Ruiz Elias' accent, the man started chatting, asking where he was from and what work he was doing in Canada.

Ruiz Elias, a newcomer from Peru, had two jobs to discuss. One was part-time work at a warehouse where he operated a forklift. That's the job he needed the boots for. His other job was a MAPLE 2.0 internship at a Port Coquitlam marketing company. This part-time position was his first work in his field in several months after immigrating to Canada at the end of 2012. Sadly, the 12-week internship was temporary. Ruiz Elias wanted to continue sales and marketing, which he had studied in an undergraduate degree in his home country. He hoped to stay in his chosen field where he had gained five years of experience which included inside and outside sales, graphic design and implementing marketing strategies.

At the same time, he also knew he had to keep searching for paid work to supplement his warehouse job. While loading palettes wasn't his target job, he could easily handle the responsibility and it helped him to contribute to his family's income. He had immigrated to Vancouver with his father, mother and younger brother.

Back in the shoe department, Ruiz Elias received a tip from his fellow shopper: it would greatly improve and simplify his life. The shopper's employer, a Surrey company that sells industrial gas and welding equipment, might just need someone for sales and marketing work. Ruiz Elias was instructed to send his resume that afternoon. He did.

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For two weeks, nothing happened. Ruiz Elias called to check with his new network contact, but there was no position available yet. He called two weeks later; still nothing. But he continued the pattern of calling, checking, waiting and starting the process again. Two months after the shoe store meeting, Ruiz Elias was invited for an interview. Soon, Ruiz Elias was hired and by early autumn, able to work full time in his field.

This story ended happily. Like many newcomers, our sales and marketing representative had arrived in Canada with few resources other than his training, home country experience and openness to accepting physical work. Growing a network takes time, but the Peruvian powerhouse, lean and strong, found work as quickly as he could.

“The attitude was: I will take the first opportunity,” he said in an interview, as he reflected on his first few weeks in Canada.

After responding to any and every lead for jobs, he began moving furniture, working with New Westminster's Labour Ready agency at on-call jobs, and eventually operating the forklift in the Langley

warehouse. While these opportunities gave him pay and Canadian experience, it wasn't the marketing work that he desired.

Fortunately, MAPLE 2.0 was able to provide that. About two months after landing in Vancouver, Ruiz Elias heard about Immigrant Services Society of BC and dropped in to find out more. He became a client and received some orientation about the local labour market: an employment counselor helped him with a resume and some interview training and practice. Four months after arriving in Canada, his internship began. He walked into an office environment and began the work he knew so well from his home country.

On the first day, he met his mentor who showed him around the office and introduced him to his co-workers. Returning to an office environment felt satisfying.

“It was more relaxing for me because my other job [was] physically demanding. So I enjoyed to be sitting in the office and working with my mind, designing and other things – not just physical jobs.”

The culture of the office was surprisingly similar and comfortable for the intern. “Definitely it's another culture,” he said, “but there [are] also a lot of immigrants in the office so I [felt] very comfortable because I was enjoying them. And the office environment was pretty much the same, in general.”

Newcomers need to connect to job search services such as ISS of BC for help with resumes, interviews and workshops about culture, Ruiz Elias says. It can really help with integrating and with feeling a sense of belonging. An internship extends that learning.

“Know more the culture here. Be interested in the culture because you need to know more about Canadian society. You cannot avoid that. When you came here, maybe you didn't want to know a lot, but the time passed and you realize that you need to be part of this, the culture, the team that you work. You have to belong.”

Similarly, he encourages employers to be open to the skills of newcomers. “If they don't give us the opportunity to develop ourselves in our professions, we are destined to work in other jobs to survive and I think that's not the idea [of immigration]. We can do other things maybe in our professions and be useful for this society, for Canadians.”

The MAPLE 2.0 internship provided an important link for Ruiz Elias between the survival jobs that he was able to attain and the marketing job that was just out of reach. The internship allowed him to include Canadian marketing experience on his resume and the possibility of saying “yes” when asked in his interview about Canadian experience in sales and marketing. The internship “was a big part of the whole process,” he says.

Twelve weeks of interning was just the alchemy he needed. He was able to take a casual conversation that began with steel-toed boots and turn it into gold.