

Win-Win: Why Employers Should Hire Refugees

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Abstract

For a variety of reasons, including language and cultural barriers, lack of American work history, and limited social contacts, refugees have a difficult time obtaining employment when they resettle in America. By looking past these barriers and adopting a practice of employing recently-arrived refugees, employers have tremendous prospects for improving their business because refugee employees typically demonstrate strong work ethic, positive attitude, high productivity, and low turnover. Employing refugees is not only a strategic business practice; by employing refugees, employers provide opportunities that are essential for recently-arrived refugees to become economically self-sufficient, improve English language skills, begin an American work history, and form social connections. Working with refugee employment services, employers should continue to explore how to adopt a practice of including refugees in the hiring process in order to create shared value for their business and the community.

Keywords: cross-sector partnerships, employment, refugees, refugee employment services, shared value

Win-win: Why Businesses Should Hire Refugees

Ethnic conflict, war, and religious and political persecution run rampant in many corners of the world. Men, women, and children caught in the middle of these conflicts become refugees as they are forcibly displaced by their government or flee their homeland. While the vast majority of refugees remain in refugee camps or neighboring countries, a small percentage of these millions of refugees have the opportunity to resettle to a welcoming country such as the United States. They come not only for refuge, but with hope for opportunities to live in safety, to participate in the community, and to provide for their family. They come not for handouts, but for participation. Often denied the ability to participate in legal employment opportunities in their native country, they are eager to participate to the American workforce.

People who have recently arrived to America as refugees usually possess a number of attributes that benefit the American workplace, such as strong work ethic, flexibility, eagerness to work, and positive attitude. Additional benefits that employers can draw on when they hire recently-arrived refugees include decreased training costs and increased retention rates. But hiring recently-arrived refugees is not only a calculated business strategy; by adopting a practice of hiring recently-arrived refugees, employers provide opportunities for these new community members to contribute their skills to the community, establish a work history in America, develop social contacts, and become independent of government support. Additionally, American employees and consumers are increasingly demanding that employers look beyond profit-maximization and utilize their resources to develop business strategies that offer social benefit to the community. Therefore, employers should continually consider incorporating recently-arrived refugees into their workforce in order to not only hire outstanding employees

and improve the strength of their business, but to increase their involvement in strengthening their local community as well.

Though employers have a significant opportunity to enhance their business by adopting a practice of hiring recently-arrived refugees, they must not ignore the tension between profit maximization and social objectives. Business is not charity; in order to remain in operation, employers must focus on profitability. In order to do so, employers must hire employees who are qualified to perform the necessary functions of their position. If they hire employees who lack necessary qualifications for their positions, business suffers.

And yet, employers can focus on both profit maximization and social objectives, such as providing employment opportunities for recently-arrived refugees. According to Porter and Kramer (2011), employers should focus on creating shared value, “which involves creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges” (p. 64). Profit maximization and social objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Recently-arrived refugees are outstanding employees. Employers may need to adapt some employment practices for recently-arrived refugee employees, yet the net benefit of hiring them exceeds the costs.

Though countless employers have had positive experiences working with recently-arrived refugee employees, there is limited quantitative research regarding the effectiveness of hiring recently-arrived refugees. Therefore, I draw on anecdotal evidence to support my claim that hiring recently-arrived refugees is an effective business practice. Each employer I interviewed provided valuable insight into the myriad of ways that refugees have strengthened their business, as well as how they addressed challenges that accompany hiring recently-arrived refugees. As refugee employees continue to strengthen American business, it is my hope that employers will

begin to collect quantifiable data in order to further demonstrate the economic value of employing recently-arrived refugees.

I approach the topic of refugee employment as an employment specialist for a refugee resettlement agency in Kent, WA. I have had the opportunity to work with people from all over the world, such as farmers from Burma, teachers from Bhutan, engineers from Iraq, housewives from Bhutan, construction workers from Nigeria, welders from Burma, cooks from Eritrea, and clerks from Iran. Regardless of vocational or ethnic background, I am continuously amazed at the positive attitudes that recently-arrived refugees demonstrate as they seek to enter the American workforce. Many of them are so eager to work that they frequently remind me that they will take any available job. As I work with employers, I can genuinely promote recently-arrived refugees as highly-qualified candidates for employment positions. Additionally, I have the privilege of witnessing the mutually-beneficial experience that the refugee and employer experience as the refugee becomes a valued member of the workforce.

Who are refugees?

The International Organization for Migration estimates that there are 15.2 million refugees worldwide (Facts and Figures). As defined by the authors of the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees are individuals who have a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political affiliation, or social group affiliation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000). While each refugee has their own story, they all share one thing in common – the inability to live freely and safely in their native country. After fleeing persecution, some refugees spend the rest of their lives in refugee camps; others live as undocumented immigrants in a transit country; others are able to

return to their country after unrest has settled down; and others are resettled to a third country as permanent legal residents.

Countries such as the United States allow a specific number of refugees to be resettled as legal permanent residents each year. Resettlement to a third country is a significant opportunity for refugees, yet less than one percent of refugees worldwide have this opportunity; the vast majority of refugees remain in transit, waiting to be resettled or for the political situation to change in their country.

Each year, the President of the United States determines the number of refugees that will be resettled in the United States. In 2010, President Obama set the number at 80,000 during 2011 FY (Presidential Memorandum). These 80,000 refugees will come from a variety of countries, such as Burma, Nepal, and Iraq, and situations, such as political and religious persecution. One of the many recently-arrived Iraqi refugees was resettled in America in 2010 because it became too dangerous to live in her country (personal communication, February 28, 2011). And one of the many recently-arrived Bhutanese refugees who was resettled in America in 2010 came because she would never have the right to be a citizen, vote, or go to school outside of the refugee camps in Nepal (personal communication, March 7, 2011). For safety, for citizenship, and for a host of other reasons, refugees enter the United States hoping for the opportunity to not only live, but to thrive in a safe environment.

Refugees Transition to America

The United States government has cooperative agreements with voluntary agencies for refugee resettlement. Staff members at these voluntary agencies, such as World Relief, the International Rescue Committee, and Lutheran Family Services, help refugees settle into life in America. Before refugees arrive to the United States, staff members set up an apartment and

stock it with groceries. Case workers welcome refugees to the country by meeting them at the airport and taking them to their new home. During the first few months refugees are in America, case workers and other staff members support them by helping them with tasks such as learning how to ride the bus, receive medical services, and enroll their children in school.

Before they enter the country, refugees undergo extensive security checks through the Department of Homeland Security. Additionally, they undergo extensive medical examinations to ensure that they do not bring contagious diseases to the United States. Upon arrival to the United States, they have legal working status with no sponsorship requirement (USCIS). They are classified as permanent legal residents and receive a social security card and a work authorization card. After one year of living in the United States, they can apply for a green card. After five years of living in the United States, they become eligible to take the citizenship exam.

The majority of refugees who are resettled in the United States are eager to begin working as soon as possible. Refugees come to the United States to engage in opportunities; they do not come for government handouts. They come with skills they want to use to support their families and contribute to their new community. Some refugees have not been able to obtain legal employment for years; in their new country, they desire to use their skills to achieve self-sufficiency.

Hiring Refugees is an Effective Business Practice

Businesses need qualified employees and recently-arrived refugees, many of whom are highly qualified, need employment. Therefore, creating and promoting a policy of hiring recently-arrived refugees for appropriate positions can be an extremely effective business practice. Through such practice, employers benefit from the tremendous attributes of refugee

employees. The following discussion includes information about immigrants as well as recently-arrived refugees because, as newcomers to a country, these two groups share many attributes.

Refugees have a variety of vocational backgrounds and experiences, but a common attribute among refugee employees is their strong work ethic. Some refugees have spent years working multiple jobs in transit countries as they waited to be resettled to the United States, while others have been denied the opportunity to work in meaningful employment opportunities because of various forms of persecution. Regardless of their previous experience, most recently-arrived refugees are eager to start working as soon as they begin their new life in America. In a study of 30 Iowan companies and their experiences working with newly-arrived immigrants, Professor Mark Grey (2002) discovered that “managers noted that newcomers were hard-working, task-oriented, and dedicated” (p. 5). Additionally, he noted that many newcomers “were commended for their strong work ethic, eagerness to do jobs, and ability to work at top speed” (p. 6). In a survey of ten British employers noted for their positive experiences with hiring refugee employees, Hurstfield and Pearson (2004) discovered that “the employers say the benefits of recruiting people of refugee status include their high caliber, commitment, productivity, and strong work ethic” (p. 1). Additionally, Doug Guess, the Chief Operating Officer of Docufree Corporation in Atlanta, GA, noted that, in his experience, refugees have exceptional work ethic and positive attitudes. Throughout his experience, Guess has determined that refugee employees are “a cut above the general populous” (personal communication, March 8, 2011).

Not only do refugees have tremendous work ethic, many also have professional skills and experiences. According to Dan Kay, Vice President of Davis Wire Corporation in Kent, WA, some of the Russian and Ukrainian refugees that he has hired came from engineering

backgrounds. He noted that his company has benefited from hiring workers with a strong work ethic who also had the additional bonus of professional skills and experience (personal communication, March 18, 2011). Goodkind (2006) noted that “newcomers to the United States bring with them unique perspectives, skills, and traditions, which have the potential to make great contributions to our country” (p. 92). By hiring recently-arrived refugees, employers benefit not only from having employees with strong work ethic, they are also able to draw on the professional skills and experiences that some refugees bring with them to America. Crystal Mario, President of Rivanna Natural Designs in North Carolina, and an employer who has a policy of including refugees in the recruitment process, noted that a lot of employers do not realize the enormous talent in the refugee community. She said that “for a living wage, you can get people with extraordinary talent” (personal communication, February 14, 2011). Many refugees arrive to America with extensive experience and valuable skills, including machine maintenance, construction, teaching, care giving, and computer skills; yet because of their limited-English proficiency or lack of American work history, they start working in entry-level positions. Employers should recognize the skills and experiences that recently-arrived refugees possess and provide appropriate employment opportunities for them to use their skills while developing experience working in America.

Another benefit of hiring recently-arrived refugees is that they are interested in staying with a company for an extended period of time. Having recently arrived to America, refugees are eager for opportunities to gain experience as well as an understanding of the work culture in their new country. Additionally, many are interested in staying with a company in hopes that there will be opportunities for growth and development. This longevity can lead to decreased recruiting and training costs, as well as an increase in cross-training and promotion. In his study

on Iowan companies, Grey (2002) discovered that “managers reported that they preferred spending time on workers that would likely stay with the company (like newcomers with very high productivity and low turnover) than continually training employees who would be more likely to leave within six months” (p. 19). All of the 20 refugees that hiring managers at Docufree have hired since summer 2010 have stayed with the company (D. Guess, personal communication, March 8, 2011). Additionally, at Bakery Express in Orlando, FL, owner Mike Remsberg is “proud of his extremely low turnover rate, due in large part to the strong work ethic and commitment typically displayed in refugees entering the U.S. job market” (Refugee Works, “Bakery Express”). Recently-arrived refugees value the opportunity to gain work experience and are therefore often dedicated to staying with a company for an extended period of time.

The financial benefits of hiring refugees expand beyond reduced recruiting and training costs. Through the Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit, the federal government provides tax incentives for participating employers. For example, in Washington state, many employers receive tax credits by hiring people who qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and food stamps. Since many refugees qualify for one or both of these programs, employers who hire refugees can potentially earn up to \$9,000 per employee in tax credit.

According to Crystal Mario, another significant benefit of having recently-arrived refugees on staff is that it fosters a learning environment within the workplace. She stated that “having a refugee on your staff essentially makes everyone a teacher” (personal communication, March 16, 2011). This can boost morale as non-refugee employees realize that they can create positive working environments for people who have recently arrived to the country. As they work with people who have recently arrived to the country, these non-refugee employees have the opportunity to learn new skills, such as explaining procedures, training people with low

English, and recognizing transferrable skills. Additionally, non-refugee employees have the opportunity expand their understanding of the world by developing relationships with refugees who have come from a variety of situations.

In addition to entering the American workforce, refugees also become a part of the American consumer base. In order to retain a competitive edge in the market, employers should hire employees who reflect the new consumer base. Shelly Williams, Associate Relations Manager at Hannaford Groceries, noted that employing workers who speak different languages is essential in Portland, ME, a community where 65 languages are spoken in high schools. By employing recently-arrived refugees who speak multiple languages, employers in customer service industries have the opportunity to create a more positive experience for limited-English proficiency customers who may require interpretation while shopping (personal communication, February 22, 2011). In a bakery at a large chain grocery store in the Seattle area, a recently-arrived Iraqi refugee employee noted that she occasionally speaks Arabic with Arabic-speaking customers (personal communication, February 28, 2011). As communities become more diverse, employers benefit from hiring employees that reflect the changing population of the community because these employees can respond to customer needs in a variety of languages.

By hiring recently-arrived refugees, employers will be able to provide better service to their consumer base through not only language, but by adapting products and services to a multi-cultural community. At Hannaford Groceries, a meat cutter who came to America as a refugee suggested adding goat heads to products offered by the meat department. Adding goat heads as a meat department product was well-received because customers began buying the product (S. Williams, personal communication, February 22, 2011). Recently-arrived refugees have insights

into ethnic communities; employers can draw on this insight to adapt their services and products to appeal to the changing consumer base.

Potential Costs for Incorporating Refugees into the Workplace

Employers should recognize, though, that there may be initial costs for incorporating refugees into the workforce. Employers should address potential challenges, such as language and cultural differences, when they begin hiring refugees. Nancy Johnson, Vice President of Petschl's Quality Meats in Tukwila, WA, noted that the first few years of hiring employees with limited-English proficiency were difficult. But after nearly ten years of habitually employing people who had recently arrived to the country, the employer has developed effective infrastructure to overcome the language barrier. Nearly every employee with limited-English proficiency has a co-worker who can help translate for them because there are many employees who are bilingual. The employer rarely needs to obtain or pay interpreters because employees are able to interpret for co-workers (personal communication, February 22, 2011).

At Davis Wire, a wire manufacturer in Kent, WA, Dan Kay noted that it was initially an expensive venture to hire recently-arrived refugees. The employer had to hire interpreters because many of them spoke no English. However, Kay further mentioned that though the initial investment was significant, the result of hiring recently-refugees was the development of a stronger workforce. At Davis Wire, managers have a difficult time finding employees because the work schedule is 12 days on and two days off. According to Kay, recently-arrived refugees have been more willing to adapt to this schedule than other groups of workers (personal communication, March 18, 2011). The initial investment in recently-arrived refugees was valuable because the employer trained employees who were willing to stay with the company despite the challenging work schedule.

Another challenge that some employers encounter is that, since many refugees do not have access to adequate medical services either in their native or transit country, some refugees arrive in America with medical complications. While most refugees address their medical complications before they begin looking for work, some may have medical concerns that take longer to address. In these cases, for employers who provide healthcare to their employees, they may have an initial increase in health care premiums for recently-arrived refugees. But these medical complications often decrease after refugees have the opportunity to receive medical services. In Crystal Mario's experience, when refugees have been in the country for at least one year, most of their outstanding medical needs have been met and they do not require special medical attention any longer. Though it may add an initial cost to healthcare payments, providing medical care for her employees is beneficial because, in the long-run, her employees are not only healthier and happier, they also recognize the value of their healthcare, which increases retention rates (personal communication, February 14, 2011). For employers like Mario, offering healthcare is a cost in which the benefits outweigh drawbacks.

Though employers may need to invest in initial costs if they hire recently-arrived refugees, these costs usually pay off in the long-term as employers benefit from the tremendous attributes of recently-arrived refugee employees. Porter and Kramer (2011) noted that businesses often "continue to view value creation narrowly, optimizing short-term financial performance in a bubble while missing the most important customer needs and ignoring the broader influences that determine their longer-term success" (p. 64). Including recently-arrived refugees into the workforce is a strategic long-term business practice because these recently-arrived refugees add tremendous value to the workforce. Overcoming and adapting to challenges such as language barriers and medical considerations may require initial investments from employers, but,

according to Grey (2002) “once the infrastructure and processes are set up to accommodate newcomers of certain cultures and languages, it will be easier and cost effective to hire more of these workers” (p. 16). If employers are willing to invest in creating infrastructures that will help recently-arrived refugees succeed, they will benefit from the outstanding attributes that the refugees bring to their company.

Creating Value for the Community and Business Simultaneously

Government and nonprofit organizations continuously attempt to solve challenges such as unemployment, environmental destruction, and youth disenfranchisement. And yet, while many government programs and nonprofit organizations demonstrate successful gains in combating these challenges, they face limitations such as policy restrictions, lack of funding, and lack of expertise. According to the Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist Mohammed Yunus (2010), “nonprofits alone have proven to be an inadequate response to social problems” (p. 10).

Though traditionally focused exclusively on profit maximization, employers are in a unique position to provide solutions for social challenges because of their freedom to experiment and use resources creatively. In an examination of why employers should participate in providing solutions for social challenges, Hess et. al. (2002) concluded that “businesses are adept problem solvers with knowledge bases and stocks of resources that may far exceed those of governments or nonprofits in addressing a particular problem” (p. 116). Employers are in a unique position because of their freedom to use their resources creatively; unlike nonprofits and government agencies, employers are able to experiment with solutions to social challenges with no limitation from grantee requirements or policy restrictions. Constrained only by lack of creativity or resources, employers can approach social challenges with innovation and ingenuity.

While such involvement in addressing social challenges may be in the form of financial donations or employee volunteerism, businesses have the opportunity to positively impact their community through practices that not only benefit the community, but business as well. Van Duzer (2010) stated that “pursuing an approach that seeks to serve the community and one’s employees is quite often a pathway to enhanced profitability” (p. 197). Profit maximization and social concern are not mutually exclusive endeavors. According to Porter and Kramer (2011), employers should embrace the principle of creating shared value. They stated, “Shared value is not social responsibility, philanthropy, or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success. It is not on the margin of what companies do but at the center” (p. 64). In the model of shared value creation, social objectives are inextricably linked to business outcomes; as business outcomes improve, so does the opportunity to increase positive social outcomes, and vice versa.

In addition to the opportunity that employers have to address social challenges, many employees, consumers, and community members are increasingly expecting business to provide positive returns for the community. Van Duzer (2010) stated that “societies around the world are already expecting more of business than just maximizing returns or increasing share value” (p. 180). Additionally, according to Samuelson (2010), “a growing number of critics . . . observe that the rule of profit maximization is out of sync with consumers, Web-enabled transparency in business, and a generation of job seekers demanding meaning and work” (p. 27). Researchers in a 2001 Cone/Roper Corporate Citizenship Study discovered that around 65 percent of Americans think that companies should participate in social causes (as cited in Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 11). Employers have the opportunity and expectation to no longer exist for the sole purpose of profit maximization, but rather to adopt practices of social concern within their business models.

Through such practices, employers have a tremendous opportunity to creatively address social challenges.

Additionally, by specifically folding social objectives into business practices, employers appeal to prospective employees and consumers who demand that business address social challenges within its practice. By publicizing social initiatives, businesses have the potential to benefit from increasing the consumer base and attracting prospective employees. In a discussion on corporate social initiatives, Hess et. al. (2002) determined that “through corporate social initiatives, firms can take a proactive role in shaping their reputations and demonstrate commitment to their espoused values” (p. 119). Focusing on social objectives, however, takes time and effort, so the sole objective of providing solutions to social challenges should not be improved public relations. However, employers must recognize the potential benefit that such publicity will yield for profitability and leverage it when possible.

If employers do not adopt a practice of connecting social objectives to business practices, they forego the opportunity to participate in creating a healthy and vibrant community for their business to operate in. Porter and Kramer (2011) stated that, “at a very basic level, the competitiveness of a company and the health of the communities around it are closely intertwined” (p. 66). Businesses are not isolated entities; they function as a part of the community. Goldsmith (2010) stated that “a community determined to produce transformative social value would look to innovations that improve outcomes, regardless of whether the interventions involved reforming existing organizations, importing new ones, or devising hybrids” (p. 220). In order to contribute to healthy communities, which in turn lead to healthy businesses, employers must focus on developing innovative ways to intertwine social objectives with business practice. It is in the employer’s best interest to consider how to tie practices that

address social challenges into business practice. In doing so, they create a positive environment for both the community and their business.

Work is Important for Refugees

Upon arrival to the United States, refugees receive a limited amount of government financial support specifically allocated to help them transition into life in America. After the resettlement period is over, refugees no longer have access to such financial support. As the resettlement period comes to an end, most refugees have had the opportunity to take care of medical concerns, enroll their children in school, learn how to navigate around town, improve their English skills, and address a host of other issues that refugees encounter when they to a new country. They are ready to work and ready to be economically self-sufficient.

But work is not only important for recently-arrived refugees to obtain economic self-sufficiency; there are a plethora of other benefits for refugees who participate in employment opportunities. Refugees usually improve their English when they are surrounded by English spoken in a natural context at work. Additionally, through employment, refugees have the opportunity to build and expand their social network and begin an American work history which will help them get future jobs. Finally, by working, refugees are able to contribute their skills to the community and have opportunities to adapt to their new culture.

Refugees come to the United States with a range of English-language abilities. Some refugees are illiterate in their own language and speak no English, while other refugees are fluent in English and hold doctorate degrees. According to the authors of *Gateway Jobs*, a publication from the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians highlighting the importance of initial employment opportunities, “for a limited English speaker, the benefits of working with native English speakers is invaluable” (p. 8). Regardless of previous English-language ability, working

with English speakers is a priceless opportunity for refugees to improve their English or learn how to speak the local dialect of English. According to a study conducted by staff members at Refugee Resource, an organization that provides employment support to refugees and asylum seekers in Oxfordshire, “an individual’s ability in English improves dramatically once they start work since this is often the first time they have been able to move outside relatively isolated communities and use English regularly with native speakers” (p. 13). Refugees who live with family members or in ethnic enclaves often do not have frequent opportunities to speak English with native English speakers. Not only does working with native English speakers help recently-arrived refugees improve their English, by working in settings with co-workers from a variety of language backgrounds, recently-arrived refugees must draw on their English skills to communicate. According to the authors of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2002) report:

Providing day-to-day opportunities for communicating in the language of that society, [work] also speeds the process of achieving language proficiency, with obvious benefits for reducing social isolation and increasing the overall competence, control and independence of new refugee arrivals. (p. 173)

Working in an environment with other English speakers is an invaluable opportunity for recently-arrived refugees to learn and improve their English skills, which are crucial for successful adaptation into their new community.

Some refugees are resettled with other family members; however, others come to the United States as free cases, meaning that they have no connections in the United States prior to arrival. Regardless of their situation, all refugees come to the United States with a limited social network. They leave family, friends, and vocational contacts as they resettle in the United States,

and they must begin the task of building their social network from scratch. Recently-arrived refugees receive support from their resettlement agency and ethnic community, but in order to achieve self-sufficiency, they need to build a social network independent of their resettlement agency. Participating in employment opportunities is a significant avenue for refugees to develop connections and form community. In his discussion of the theology of work, David Jensen (2006) stated that “to be a human person is to seek out others: we grow into fuller personhood as we are supported by others in communities such as the family, friendships, churches, communities, and governments” (p. 118). Participating in employment opportunities not only allows recently-arrived refugees opportunities to practice English in real-world settings and learn vocational language, such participation also provides networking opportunities. Throughout his 15-year work history in America, Vladimir Sidorko, a Belarusian refugee, has had three jobs. Each of these jobs he obtained through connections he made either at school or, more commonly, at work (personal community, February 13, 2011). Since people often learn about employment opportunities through social connections, it is valuable for refugees to build these connections by participating in employment opportunities.

When refugees arrive to the United States, some of them bring professional vocational experiences, such as dentistry, financial services, welding, teaching, and engineering. However, obtaining a job equivalent to their job in their native or transit country is nearly impossible because of the lack of American work history. Though obtaining equivalent professional credentials must be addressed through professional recertification processes, starting a work history in America is the best step for recently-arrived refugees to make as they begin their life in America. The authors of *Gateway Jobs* determined that the initial job a refugee obtains after they arrive to America, sometimes called a gateway job, “represents the all-important U.S. experience

for (refugees) to put on a resume, and a vital opportunity to learn firsthand how the American workforce functions” (p. 6). Though refugees may enter the United States with years of vocational experience, initial entry-level employment opportunities are essential for them to start their American work history.

The authors of *Gateway Jobs* additionally noted that “the best preparation for being in the American workforce is to be in American workforce” (p. 7). Waiting to enter the workforce after acquiring specific language or vocational skills is not the best approach for recently-arrived refugees. Rather, acquiring a work history while simultaneously participating in English language courses or other vocational trainings or recertification is the best approach. As the authors of *Gateway Jobs* pointed out, “Building an employment history tends to occur in parallel with activities to break down other barriers, such as learning English, acquiring employer-recognized credentials, etc.” (p. 7). Recently-arrived refugees should participate in initial employment opportunities in tandem with educational opportunities.

While there are many logistical benefits for participating in employment opportunities, in addition, employment provides opportunities for recently-arrived refugees to integrate into the community. According to the authors of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2002) report, “being able to realize their personal potential in the labour force is a significant factor in successful integration” (p. 173). Work provides opportunities for meaningful engagement in the community and, potentially, improved mental health. According to Captain John Tuksan (2004) of the Refugee Mental Health Program, “people are productive, satisfied, and mentally healthy when provided opportunities for achievement, recognition, challenge, responsibility, and learning” (p. 1). Some refugees enter the country with a host of traumatic experiences. Through employment, they have the opportunity to be productive, challenged, and

satisfied. Tuksan (2004) further mentioned that, in addition to a host of stress factors that refugees face, “employment is one of the most critical factors for successful long-term adaptation, good health, and overall well-being – for the individual, family, community, and greater society” (p. 2). Participating in employment opportunities can improve refugee mental health as refugees become integrated into the community.

Employers are poised to provide valuable opportunities for these newly-arrived community members to become active, thriving members of the community. According to van Duzer (2010), business is “the dominant institution (although obviously not the only one) equipped to provide organized opportunities for meaningful and creative work” (p. 41). While participating in other community activities, such as education and recreation, can help recently-arrived refugees become a part of their community, employers have a particularly significant influence in creating opportunities for recently-arrived refugees to participate in the community.

By participating in employment opportunities, recently-arrived refugees build their social contacts, learn about their new culture, and become a part of the fabric of their community. According to Vladimir Sidorko, when he started working in America, life became more interesting because he started to meet new people, he felt useful, and he felt like he was a part of his new community (personal communication, February 13, 2011). Instead of sitting at home, joining the workforce provides recently-arrived refugees engaging opportunities to participate in their community.

Refugees Encounter Employment Challenges

Obtaining employment, however, is a tremendous challenge for recently-arrived refugees. Most recently-arrived refugees are exceptional candidates for employment positions, and yet there are many challenges that they encounter as they attempt to enter the American workforce.

Refugees who do not speak English well have a challenging time communicating with coworkers and supervisors; qualifications and educational experiences refugees have acquired in other countries do not easily transfer into American credentials; some recently-arrived refugees have a steep learning curve for understanding American culture; and some logistical issues, such as transportation, create limitations in availability. These challenges are difficult to overcome, especially because refugees must start looking for work soon after they arrive to the country and usually do not have the finances to participate in lengthy vocational programs or English language courses. However, employers have discovered a number of approaches for mitigating these barriers and creating ideal employment opportunities for both recently-arrived refugee employees.

While most refugees come to America with a plethora of work experience, some have never had the opportunity to engage in meaningful work. According to the authors of a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Refugee Resettlement handbook, “while refugees are generally very motivated to seek employment in the receiving country, some may have never worked in the paid labor force or may have endured a prolonged period of economic dependency in a refugee camp” (p. 179). Employers, then, are in a unique position to provide opportunities for recently-arrived refugees to learn how to work. At Petschl’s Quality Meats, a manager (a former refugee himself), was at first hesitant to work with a recently-arrived refugee who had no formal work experience. But after learning that this refugee had not had the opportunity to work prior to arriving to America, he realized the unique position he was in to teach this individual how to work and decided to give him an opportunity (N. Johnson, personal communication, February 22, 2011). By providing opportunities for recently-arrived refugees to gain work experience, employers can unleash the potential in workers who have been denied the

basic right to use their skills to work. In 2011, a recently-arrived Bhutanese refugee started working as a housekeeper, even though she had never used a vacuum before. At first, the employee had difficulty cleaning six rooms, but she was soon able to clean the standard 17 rooms per day (personal communication, March 7, 2011). An employer gave this recently-arrived refugee an opportunity to gain new skills even though she did not have experience as a housekeeper or in any other formal work experience. After an initial training period, the employee was able to perform the functions of her job well.

While many refugees have limited-English proficiency, employers have discovered that there are creative solutions to communicating with people with limited-English proficiency. One solution that many businesses have utilized is hiring multiple employees who speak the same language, making sure that at least one of them is bilingual in English. This employee can then translate for others employees who have lower English-proficiency. This practice ensures that employees with lower English abilities are able to understand safety measures, rules, and expectations. Another suggestion that Grey (2002) outlined in *Welcoming New Iowans* is for employers to create a buddy system. Through such a system, new employees are paired with experienced workers who speak the same native language. This allows new employees to learn rules and expectations from an experienced employee who speaks their native language (p. 19). In addition to utilizing a similar kind of buddy system, employers at Davis Wire have overcome the language barrier by adapting required written tests into oral tests. Some recently-arrived refugees have a difficult time passing required written test but are able to pass the tests if they are administered orally (D. Kay, personal communication, March 18, 2011). This is yet another example of the abundance of ways employers can creatively overcome the language barrier that many recently-arrived refugees face.

Additionally, employers can utilize alternate forms of communication, such as visual images, to communicate with employees who have limited-English proficiency. Staff members at ConMed, a global medical technology company that employs refugees, recognized that employees with limited-English proficiency were having a difficult time in the plant because they could not read English well and were therefore unable to identify all the products in the plant. With 13 languages spoken throughout the plant, putting images onto products was a more cost-effective approach than translating labels into each language, so ConMed staff members devised a system of labeling items with simple images in order to overcome the language barrier (Gregory, 2009). This practice of using images allowed employees from all language backgrounds to understand how to succeed in their job. Rebecca Armstrong, a refugee employment consultant, noted that while many employers may be hesitant to hire employees whose English is limited, when they witness the hard work ethic of these employees, they realize that the language barrier is not as significant as it may seem (personal communication, January 19, 2011).

In order to overcome the language barrier, some employers provide opportunities for refugees to participate in English language courses while working. At Rivanna Natural Designs, refugees receive company-sponsored English language courses for the first six months of employment. Following this six-month period, the employer allows the refugees to work within a system called “flex time,” meaning they can come to work early or go home late in order to continue to participate in English language opportunities (personal communication, February 14, 2011). The employer does not suffer because the employees still get their work done; in fact, the employer benefits because their employees are improving their English ability, thus improving their ability to cross-train and assume more responsibility within the organization.

Another significant barrier to refugee employment is the difficulty in translating experiences gained in other countries. Employers should recognize the rich experiences that refugees bring with them as they resettle in America and actively seek ways to bridge the gap between experience gained in other countries and opportunities in America. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006) noted that “the loss of skills is regrettable not only as a loss for individual migrants and families but also as a loss for both sending and receiving countries, and refugees seem to be especially susceptible” (p. 214). Employers who creatively seek how to utilize refugee experiences and skills will benefit from the diversity of skills, experiences, and education that refugees bring with them when they resettle in America. For example, landscaping companies can hire subsistence farmers who may have never landscaped a front yard before, but know how to care for soil and plants and companies that offer welding services can hire former welders who may not have all the necessary qualifications, but can perform some services while they obtain necessary qualifications.

Alternatively, some refugees are overqualified for employment opportunities. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006) discovered that “some people reported frustration at being told they were overqualified for jobs they applied for, but not being considered for an interview when applying for a job at a higher level” (p. 211). These situations cannot be avoided entirely because some qualifications are nontransferable without recertification, such as medical and teaching credentials. However, employers can still capitalize on professional skills and experiences by employing refugees in positions that do not require American credentials while the refugee goes through the recertification process. For example, foreign-trained teachers could work as bilingual teachers’ aides while they go through teacher recertification; loan officers could work as bank tellers as they develop an understanding of the American economic system; and engineers can

work in hotel maintenance in order to build American work history. De Vroome and van Tubergen (2010) conducted a questionnaire of refugees in the Netherlands and determined that “refugees have potential resources from which both refugees themselves and society at large can benefit more when the recognition of foreign qualifications is facilitated” (p. 396). Employers can benefit from the professional experiences and qualifications of refugee employees through offering on-the-job shadowing opportunities in order for employees to learn vocational vocabulary or by offering employment schedules that allow employees to attend schooling required for recertification.

Another challenge that recently-arrived refugees occasionally face is the inability to fulfill each requirement for an open position. Employers should recognize that they may need to slightly alter their recruitment practices in order to ensure that they include ideal refugee candidates in their employment pool. The authors of *Gateway Jobs* suggested that “business owners can increase the likelihood of locating loyal, long-term employees by making sure that their initial screening processes do not unnecessarily exclude qualified candidates” (p. 15). Perhaps an employer requires that candidates have a high school diploma for an employment position. They may miss an exceptional candidate who, because he left his country when he was 16 years old and has been living in a refugee camp until he was resettled to America, has not had the opportunity to complete high school. By waiving this requirement, the employer may recognize that this applicant is an ideal candidate and can finish his GED while simultaneously working.

In order to successfully integrate recently-arrived refugees into the workplace, employers must be mindful of how to not only overcome language barriers, but potential cultural barriers that may arise. Because the workplace is increasingly diverse, the employer may already have

existing practices in place to accommodate employees from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Crystal Mario had a difficult time communicating the importance of safety to her refugee employees because many of them were used to living in dangerous situations and did not see the need to adhere to certain safety procedures. When she communicated to them that if they did not follow safety rules they were disrespecting authority, they quickly understood the importance of following the rules because respecting authority was a strong cultural value for them (personal communication, February 14, 2011). She found a way to communicate the requirements of this work procedure in a manner that made sense to her refugee employees.

Additionally, working with a variety of cultural groups may lead to cultural miscommunication. Through these situations, employers have the opportunity to intentionally foster environments of cultural understanding. At Petschl's Quality Meats, a Ukrainian manager had a difficult time communicating with his kitchen staff; the Ukrainian staff members responded to his directive management style, but his Vietnamese staff members wanted more autonomy. Through a mediation session organized by the employer, the manager learned about the different cultural values of his kitchen staff (N. Johnson, personal communication, February 22, 2011).

A significant logistical challenge that recently-arrived refugees encounter is transportation to places of employment. According to a study conducted by staff at Refugee Resources in Oxford, "Our employment advisors have identified another important barrier to employment as lack of a driving license. Much of the unskilled work that refugees and asylum seekers seek is in places or at times not served by public transport" (p. 13). Public transportation is limited not only by location, but schedule as well. A refugee with no personal transportation is not able to work at job if they are required to be at work at 5:30am but the earliest bus will get

them there at 5:45am. Some refugees end up in a vicious cycle: they need a job in order to acquire the capital to buy a car, but they need a car to be able to get to work. Employers can help refugees overcome this barrier by offering creative solutions, such as starting them off on a different shift for a few months or beginning their shift 30 minutes later. An employer at a university cafeteria allowed a recently-arrived refugee employee to begin his shift ten minutes later than originally planned because the earliest bus the refugee could take arrived at this time (personal communication, March 1, 2011). Additionally, C & S Grocers in New Jersey procured a few vans and created two driving positions for refugees to transport other refugee employees to work. Each employee pays \$25 per week to utilize this transportation service (Refugee Works, “C & S Grocers”). With subtle shifts and adaptations, employers will be able to benefit from qualified candidates who may not otherwise qualify for jobs based on transportation challenges.

Additionally, employers should consider how to organize work schedules so that employees can benefit from participation in English-language courses. If a refugee employee goes to class on Monday and Wednesday evening from 6:00 to 8:00pm, the employer should consider scheduling her to work the morning, afternoon, or graveyard shift on those two days. This is advantageous to the employer because as employees’ English improves, they will be better able to communicate with their supervisor or customers. Additionally, they will be better prepared to cross-train for other positions within a company.

Despite subtle alterations that employers may make, Sagawa and Segal (2000) reminded employers not to expect less from employees who may require special considerations, stating that:

Employers may assume that hiring employees with special needs, whether they are people with disabilities, a history of public assistance, or a nontraditional education, will

force them to lower their standards. Social sector organizations serving these populations, as well as experienced employers, argue that this is not the case. (p. 149)

Employers should consider if certain parameters, such as the specific time the morning shift starts or fluency in English are absolutely necessary, or if they could make subtle shifts to these logistical concerns with no detriment to the company. If employers determine that small alternations will not negatively impact the company, they should recognize that making small changes may lead to the strengthening of their workforce with the addition of highly-qualified refugee employees.

Cross-Sector Partnerships with Employment Services

When most refugees are resettled in the United States, they have the opportunity to access employment services at refugee resettlement agencies and other refugee support agencies such as World Relief and the International Rescue Committee. At these agencies, employment specialists provide employment services for recently-arrived refugees. Employment specialists teach refugees about American workplace culture, job vocabulary, how to get to and from their job, how to find jobs, and other necessary skills and information for succeeding in their first job in America; simultaneously, employment specialists learn about hiring needs from employers and connect recently-arrived refugees with these opportunities.

Many employers and employment specialists have developed successful long-term partnerships. In these partnerships, employment specialists function as staffing agents for hiring managers or human resource professionals. Poe (2000) noted that “most HR professionals find that working with a local refugee organization is the best way to hire refugees” (p. 1). Employment specialists understand the skills, experience, and language ability of refugees and are therefore able to provide employers with appropriate candidates for open positions. Sagawa

and Segal (2000) noted that “Human resource partnerships enable social sector organizations to further their own missions by assisting businesses in recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining employees” (p. 140). The employment specialist’s objective is to help refugees succeed in finding appropriate employment, so they have a vested interest in providing employers with qualified candidates for open positions. Dan Kay noted that the World Relief Seattle employment specialists have brought well-mannered, very qualified, and nice candidates to his company (personal communication, March 18, 2011).

Additionally, through hiring refugees through employment specialists, employers are able to reduce their recruiting and training expenses. Instead of searching through hundreds of applications, hiring managers can connect with an employment specialist when they have an open position. When Crystal Mario started Rivanna Natural Designs, she connected with the International Rescue Committee employment program. After nearly ten years in business, she still works with the IRC in order to connect with qualified candidates. This relationship is so significant that she does not even post jobs – she just calls up the employment specialists at the IRC when she needs to hire a new worker. Thus far, she said, the employment specialists at IRC have never let her down and always provide excellent candidates for open positions (personal communication, February 14, 2011). Additionally, if an employer needs to do a mass hiring of workers, they can ask an employment specialist to bring a large amount of candidates to the employer at the same time. Butler (2006) noted that these partnerships can “save critical resources, reducing duplication and waste of money, people, and other assets” (p. 11).

An additional financial benefit of partnering with employment services is the ability to better access financial incentive programs such as the Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit. By partnering with employment services, employers have a better understanding of potential

candidates who fulfill the requirements of the incentive program. According to the United States Department of Labor, “The success and growth of this federal income tax credit for private-sector employers depends on a strong public- and private-sector partnership to help those most in need find and retain jobs and gain on-the-job skills and experience” (p. 5).

Partnering with employment specialists is free of charge to both recently-arrived refugees and employers. These services are funded through government contracts, private grants, or private donations. As a result, refugee employment services function as a complementary staffing agency and support resource for employers.

Not only is partnership with employment services free of charge, it is also more comprehensive than traditional staffing agency services. Poe (2000) noted the benefits of partnering with employment specialists, stating that: “By working with refugee organizations, HR professionals get the benefits of candidate screening, training and testing programs, the services of an interpreter and any special support an employer needs. All of this comes free of charge to employers” (p. 1). Employment specialists can provide specific, tailored services for employers. If an employer needs interpretation, employment specialists can provide bilingual volunteers who can interpret for new employees; if an employer needs their new employees to pass a food handler’s permit test, the employment specialists will help them study for the test and get to the testing location; and if an employer is having a difficult time communicating across cultures, the employment specialist can provide strategies for navigating through cross-cultural communication.

In addition to understanding how to match refugee skills with employer needs, employment specialists help refugees address logistical concerns to ensure that refugees overcome logistical barriers as they participate in employment opportunities. Some of these

barriers include navigating transportation systems and overcoming language barriers. Nancy Johnson from Petschl's Quality Meats stated that a benefit of working with the World Relief employment services is that the employment specialists go to great lengths to help refugees succeed as they participate in employment opportunities. For example, the employment specialists ensure that refugees know how to use the bus system get to work. Additionally, she mentioned that if she has any challenges with refugee employees, she can call the employment specialists and they will provide support to troubleshoot and solve the challenges (personal communication, February 11, 2011). Doug Guess of Docufree Corporation stated that the employment specialist he works with at World Relief is incredibly responsive and will come to the company immediately in order to solve questions or challenges (personal communication, March 8, 2011). Because they are eager to see refugees succeed in the workplace, employment specialists support employers in order to create positive working environments for both the employer and the recently-arrived refugee employees.

While some recently-arrived refugees have the skills to find their own job independently, they usually benefit from working with employment specialists because the employment specialists help them navigate the gap between their skills and experiences from other countries and existing opportunities in the American workforce. Refugees bring tremendous skills and experiences with them, but because they gain them in a foreign context, it is sometimes difficult for employers to understand how they may transfer into existing employment opportunities. According to a study conducted on refugee employment services in the United Kingdom, Tomlinson and Egan (2002) determined that refugee employment programs "make refugees more employable, through rendering them and their experience less unfamiliar and foreign" (p. 1040). Through working with refugees, employment specialists understand how to help refugees

communicate how their skills and experiences translate into American employment opportunities. They are then able to help employers understand how they can incorporate recently-arrived refugees into appropriate employment positions.

Partnering with employment specialists is a low-risk method for employers to access qualified candidates. Employers can choose to hire employees on a trial run basis in order to test the compatibility of the employee with the position. If the employer is not satisfied, they can either try the candidate in a different position or request a different candidate from the employment specialist. Additionally, if they face challenges, employment specialists are available to troubleshoot and provide support resources.

Partnering with employment specialists is an innovative model not only because of the financial benefits for employers, but because of the significant social implications of such partnerships. According to Sagawa and Segal (2000):

In an operational partnership, a social sector organization helps a business produce quality goods or services more competitively by acting as a supplier, improve training or recruitment services . . . In some ways, this kind of cross-sector partnership closely resembles typical business alliances. However, it brings added dimensions, including philanthropic elements, marketing potential, and the opportunity to further a social mission. (p. 23)

Developing cross-sector partnerships allows employers and social sector agencies to draw on their respective strengths in order to create mutual benefits for both employers and recently-arrived refugees. Porter and Kramer (2011) determined that, “while some shared value opportunities are possible for a company to seize on its own, others will benefit from insights, skills, and resources that cut across profit/nonprofit and private/public boundaries” (p. 76).

Employers and employment specialists must continue to explore how to develop cross-sector partnerships that benefit both business and recently-arrived refugees.

Before employers create partnerships with refugee employment services, they should ensure that the employment specialists understand the qualities they are looking for in potential candidates. The more information the employer provides to the employment specialists, the better the employment specialist will be able to serve the employer. Sagawa and Segal (2000) noted that “social sector organizations can demonstrate impact through evaluations or testimonials from clients” (p. 188). Since employment specialists often work with a variety of employers in diverse industries, employers who are interested in exploring a partnership can request testimonials from other employers who have partnered with the refugee employment service. Such testimonials will prove the effectiveness of the employment specialists.

Conclusion

With little risk, free services from employment programs, abundant opportunities to recruit talented, hardworking, and loyal employees, and a wealth of testimonials regarding the effectiveness of hiring refugees, employers have multiple compelling reasons to hire recently-arrived refugees. Not only can employers benefit from the tremendous qualities of recently-arrived refugee employees; they also can utilize their unique position to foster a supportive working environment that encourages learning and provides opportunities for recently-arrived refugees to participate in employment and build their work experience, improve their English, make connections, pay taxes, and become contributing members to the community. Van Duzer (2010) noted that “business need not be just business as usual” (p. 20); employers can create economic value while simultaneously employing recently-arrived refugees. This is a practice certainly worth exploring.

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