

Supporting recently resettled refugees in the UK

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Organisations supporting recently resettled refugees to find employment should focus on providing them with the tools to navigate the employment market in a sustainable way that leads to their personal development.

Our organisation supports refugee families who have recently been resettled in the UK. We help them navigate the welfare system, claim relevant benefits and we also set up a support plan that takes into account their objectives in terms of professional development. We accompany adults to their first appointment at the job centre, where the discussion with the centre's work coaches is about employability and being job-ready. The question for our organisation is always about expectations – do we encourage the people we support to dream big or to lower their expectations and look for a source of steady income? In the first weeks and months following resettlement they are eager to find a job, to reconnect with that part of their identity as providers for their families. The initial excitement, however, is slowly replaced by bitterness and a feeling of failure as obstacles emerge. From our experience of supporting refugees in their search for employment we present some lessons relating to the following areas:

Continuous support to navigate a new system: We run weekly outreach surgeries where we discuss the frustrations that families encounter in their daily life in the UK. We discuss the importance of work contracts, national insurance and tax systems, minimum wage and living wage, expectations versus reality, and personal development. We respond to doubts and anxieties in a group conversation environment and also offer individual conversations with the help of bilingual support workers as we have found that addressing issues and working on personal development plans in refugees' first languages helps them better assimilate information. In the group environment, people share their strategies for looking for work. For example, making door-to-door

calls to potential employers is the main tactic used by our group of adults (initially in the local diaspora, although promised jobs often do not materialise); as this is their preferred approach, it seemed unrealistic to suddenly change their approach so we instead helped them prepare CVs and print enough copies to take on their door-to-door visits.

Language as an asset, not an obstacle: When discussing work opportunities for recently arrived refugees, we tend to focus on their low level of English. But what if the combination of two languages compensates for lack of fluency in English? A refugee's first language could well be an asset in bilingual positions, for example as teaching assistants in schools where there is a need for professionals to liaise with parents and to support the pupils who speak that same language.

Professional mentoring: We try to find mentors who have a similar background. This allows the refugees to have conversations about their interests and to tell their stories of past work to someone who can relate to them. Through this relationship they can adapt their expectations to the reality of what that job entails in the UK (for example, working as a lawyer in a country in the Middle East is not the same as in a city such as London in terms of earnings, working hours and laws). Where possible, it makes an even greater impact to foster peer mentorship between members of different families who arrive through the same resettlement scheme. When there is a success story within the community, people are able to feel more inspired by it. And it's a win-win situation: the peer mentors feel empowered by their positive impact on newcomers and can tangibly measure how they have progressed since they themselves arrived. For their part, the newly settled

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refugees can project themselves into the future through their interactions with their mentors and aim to reach a similar level of independence and initiative.

Universal vulnerability: For adults who have spent their lives being independent, providing for their families and taking on different roles in their societies, it is difficult to find themselves suddenly reliant on other people to provide them with support and on agencies to provide them with means of subsistence. In this context, it is important to embed the support provided to refugee families within a framework of universal vulnerability. We are all vulnerable to differing degrees and our vulnerability is situational. Although we as practitioners act as role models and respond to the questions and requests of the families we support, we should find ways to share reflections with them on our own vulnerabilities. Doubt and self-consciousness are an inherent part of entering the job market, no matter what our background.

Time to heal: It is important to acknowledge that, sometimes, although a person presents all the skills necessary to find employment, they might not be ready to enter the labour market. Traumas endured and the upheaval of displacement can require long processes of healing. Mental health provision is an essential aspect of support that goes hand-in-hand with restoring the ability to provide for the family. Therefore we should be able to encourage those individuals who require respite, and create support plans that take into consideration their mental and physical health needs. This might mean focusing on restoring confidence and building resilience through different activities, all of which contributes in the long run to preparing the person to re-join the search for employment.

Challenging perceived failure: Having an application rejected can be very distressing and discouraging. It is good to encourage feedback from employers or partner organisations so the person understands the reason for it. For example, the application of a client whom we had referred to a business

incubator to help him develop his idea and build skills in business administration was unsuccessful, and the client considered the rejection email from the organisers as a failure. On contacting the organisation for feedback, however, they explained that the person's business plan was not clear and his level of English insufficient for the project but that they were keen to offer him other options of training within their structure. We then discussed those programmes with the client, and how their requirements fitted with his ambitions.

Motivating employers: Many of our clients seem to be ready to enter the labour market but the market is not ready for them. Taking time and employing creativity to attract employers' attention therefore becomes essential. By building on the current momentum around citizens and organisations interested in helping refugees we can harness the interest of institutions, agencies and individuals and potentially turn them into employers.

Exploring new opportunities: In their attempts to reconstruct their lives, sometimes refugees remain attached to the positions they occupied in their home countries and hope to be able to do the same thing again. This is completely understandable but it can also pose an obstacle in terms of forming realistic plans. The process of obtaining equivalent professional status in the host country can be very complicated and difficult, and refugees should be encouraged to consider what skills they have that could be used in other roles. For example, many people we support show great initiative in terms of supporting other families, offering peer mentoring and guidance that improves the quality of life of many others, although they have no experience of working in a charity or in the community care sector. It is important to explain to these community champions that their initiative and sense of empathy are great skills that could be used in a professional setting.

One example of our organisation's work illustrates these recommendations. A child resettled with their family needed a one-to-

one assistant at the nursery but the nursery struggled to meet this child's specific needs. We saw that if this support were provided in the mother tongue of the family, it would allow the assistant to be of greater use to the child and enable greater communication with its parents. Furthermore, having an understanding of displacement and resettlement would also be beneficial.

We identified a candidate among the group of people we work with who had a lot of experience in teaching and early years work. The obstacles to this person filling the position were several: lack of work experience in the UK, insufficient level of English and lack of appropriate training. However, we acted as facilitators, working with the child's parents, with health professionals and with the nursery to agree on the core skills needed for the position. We demonstrated that our candidate had them and then worked on a plan to address the missing elements. We contacted partner agencies to help with the required training and arranged suitable

ESOL classes around the working hours. We provided support throughout the induction and stayed in close contact with the employer, providing, for example, a character reference.

Ultimately, it was the promise of on-going support to both the employer and the candidate that reassured them. The creation of the position of nursery assistant was also made possible through a Home Office provision specifically for the educational needs of children resettled within this refugee scheme. In this way, a refugee was offered a paid position to support another refugee and the local authority facilitated this by applying for the appropriate funds allocated to the project. The results changed the life of the child's family, the nursery improved the service it was offering, and the person employed secured a stable and stimulating job matching their skills and aspirations.

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