

Wasted human resources: employers ignore refugees' potential

by Berend Jonker

Many refugees experience great difficulty finding employment. When they do find work, it is often well below their capacity. Doctors, lawyer and teachers work as cleaners, taxi drivers or sales assistants. How can refugees find suitable jobs and how can employers benefit more from refugees' skills?

Across Europe, employers are experiencing difficulty in recruiting both skilled and unskilled staff. The overall employment rate in the EU stands at 63.4%, significantly below the level of 72% in the US. Meeting the EU's goal of raising this to 70% by 2010 requires the creation of 20 million jobs. The number of elderly persons in Europe is set to grow dramatically - from 61 million persons aged over 65 in 2000 to an estimated 103 million in 2050. At the same time the European Union receives over 350,000 asylum applications per annum. It thus makes both economic and social sense to better utilise this huge potential.

The RESOURCE Project

The Refugees' Contribution to Europe (RESOURCE) Project is a joint initiative of European refugee agencies in all (pre-expansion) EU states except Denmark. Through desk research and interviews with employed refugees in 14 countries, the project analysed practices and policies affecting refugees' participation in the European labour market. It has particularly focused on how refugees' skills, qualifications and working experience are being used in sectors of the labour market - health and social care, IT and engineering - currently experiencing skills shortages.

The Project interviewed 297 refugee professionals (up to 25 in each country). They were asked about their pathways to employment and how they had overcome difficulties. Two thirds of the interviewees were male, 138 were between 30-39 years old,

44 were younger and 105 were older. The majority came from Africa and the Middle East but also included refugees from the borders of Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Almost all interviewees were educated before they arrived in their host country. 76% had studied at a higher professional or academic level, of which 63% had completed their studies and 14% were still studying. Before arriving in the EU, four-fifths of interviewees were using their skills in their countries of origin - 33% were working in health, 14% in engineering and 5% in IT. Many had built up considerable working experience. In the host countries, 260 refugees (88%) were in paid employment at the time of the interview. (It should be noted that this does not necessarily represent the usual situation of refugees in Europe where many refugee professionals are unemployed or under-employed.)

Although conditions for refugees vary from country to country, there is great similarity in successful pathways to employment in each country.

Personals skills and networks

Almost unanimously, those interviewed believed that their own skills, competence and personality were the most important factors that helped them find suitable employment. The characteristics mentioned include determination, perseverance, motivation, positive thinking, self-confidence, initiative, patience, flexibility, sense of humour, good social and communication skills, expertise,

occupational skills, language skills, dedication and having a strong work ethic. They stressed the importance of taking every job opportunity and setting realistic goals.

We learned how to persevere and endure. This is our most important skill, which should be valued more. We learned how to survive.
(Kenyan teacher in the UK)

Many refugees suffer from a lack of confidence when they first arrive in the host country. They often feel isolated and unable to compete with locals for jobs. To regain their confidence it is important that refugees start integrating into society by following language courses or doing voluntary work, for example, as soon as possible after arrival. Social networks and moral support from family, friends, community, social workers and careers advisors are also seen as important factors. In many cases, social and professional networks led directly or indirectly to job opportunities.

Language skills

Most interviewees agreed that adequate language skills are essential when seeking work or trying to continue training or education. Good communication skills are particularly important in the health and social care sector, and speaking the host language fluently is therefore vital. Many of the interviewees at times still felt insecure and vulnerable in their current jobs because of their language skills.

80% of the interviewees had skills in three languages or more - an advantage in many jobs, in particular in health and social care services and IT. In Ireland, many interviewees found employment in the voluntary sector working with immigrants because of their knowledge of other languages. Engineers and IT specialists stressed the importance of

Learning the language is the most important thing of all in Finland. Many think they can cope with using English. Yes, they can cope in everyday life but not in working life.

(Iranian health professional in Finland)

learning the technical or business language in their profession. Unfortunately it is not always possible to access appropriate language courses. Many courses are too slow or simplistic for highly educated people. Additionally, in some countries, such as the Netherlands, there were long waiting lists for languages courses.

Additional studies in the host country

Many interviewees mentioned additional studies in the host country (vocational, higher education and practical training on the job) as key to finding suitable employment. Through such studies they became accustomed to the ways and standards of working in the host country and, more importantly, obtained qualifications that were – in contrast to their third country qualifications – recognised by employers. Those interviewed also found that studying gave them confidence through updating their knowledge and building up networks in their professional field. Unfortunately in many countries there is a lack of free or affordable training courses; those on offer are often aimed at less skilled work and do not build on refugees' prior skills and working experience. Accessing higher education is also difficult. Most higher education

Only Finnish education is valued here... if you have a certificate from somewhere else, however valuable it may be, the Ministry of Education will not accept it and employers will not value it either.

(Refugee from Somalia working in IT in Finland)

institutions have strict requirements and procedures for allowing foreign students to enter their courses; these requirements may not take into account the fact that refugees cannot always prove their qualifications, or produce original documents.

Particularly in countries with less developed welfare systems, the need

to earn a living interfered with any study plans and in countries where interviewees could access unemployment benefits, the obligation to apply for any kind of job seriously hindered training possibilities. Furthermore, lack of accessible scholarships or grants to pay for fees, books, equipment, travel, childcare and basic living costs prevented many interviewees from studying.

Support from voluntary organisations and refugee community groups

Many interviewees mentioned that support from NGOs and refugee community organisations (RCOs) was essential in helping them find employment. Initially, many benefited from services such as information provision, housing support, legal assistance, financial support and language courses. Later on, services such as careers advice, job search courses, support with job applications, grants for study/training, arranging job placements or voluntary work and mentoring programmes were helpful. NGOs and RCOs also played an important part in giving moral support and providing relevant networks that sometimes indirectly led to employment.

The job search process in host countries is often different from in their home countries. In many cases those interviewed had failed to get jobs because they did not have enough knowledge of the recruitment process (such as applications and job interviews). Therefore schemes that offered individual employment support were particularly helpful in the job search process.

In contrast to support from the voluntary sector, most interviewees (in all countries) receive no or little useful support from governmental organisations in their attempts to enter the labour market. Employment agencies in many countries were considered ineffective because of their lack of knowledge of refugees' specific needs and the value of their diplomas, their focus on the low-income sector and their strict

regulations that are not designed for refugees.

Prior qualifications and work experience

It is up to the employer to assess whether a particular individual is qualified to meet workplace requirements. The problem is that most employers are not familiar with foreign qualifications. Some professions – such as the medical profession – are known as 'regulated' or 'registered' professions. Access to these requires a process of recognition and registration with the appropriate authority. The systems of recognition vary from country to country but are often complex, expensive and, above all, time-consuming. These procedures may involve periods of further training or study, working under supervision, examinations or a combination of all of these. Most interviewees who have been through recognition procedures have found that their diplomas were not recognised or only partially recognised.

For such reasons most interviewees felt that their prior education and work experience were underestimated by employers and therefore of little value in the job-seeking process. What really counted were additional studies and working experience in the host country. Once they were working, however, their employers started to value their prior skills and experience which had given them, for example, self-confidence and skills of communication and management.

Work experience in the host country

Most interviewees agree that it is very difficult to get into suitable employment without work experience in the host country. One interviewee said: "You cannot get a job because you do not have working experience – but how can you build up working experience without a job?" This vicious circle is difficult to break but most interviewees eventually found ways to do so.

Many mentioned volunteering as a successful way to build up work experience in the social sector. In other sectors, interviewees had to take a couple of steps down the ladder. Experienced engineers, who back home had been supervising many employees, started working on the shop floor again, working their

way up within the company. Others were able to gain some experience through work placements as part of their studies or through recruitment agencies.

In countries where refugees are not entitled to welfare benefits (such as Greece, Italy and Spain), the interviewees were often forced to accept low-skilled and badly-paid jobs. In countries where refugees receive unemployment benefits, some interviewees were not allowed to accept voluntary work or work placements. Many interviewees were in a situation where they had to do manual jobs during the day while trying to improve their chances by studying at night.

Bureaucracy and discrimination

Many interviewees were confronted with lengthy asylum determination procedures and poor reception conditions. In most countries they were not allowed to work as asylum seekers, or could only apply for a work

permit after a certain period. During the asylum procedure, opportunities to undertake language tuition, vocational training or education were often limited. Financial difficulties and finding a place to live were additional obstacles. Clearly, this long waiting period had a damaging influence on their self-esteem and confidence, seriously hindering their integration process.

Many interviewees experienced prejudice in the job-seeking process as well as in the workplace and in daily life. Being responsible for a family in combination with a lack of childcare facilities (especially for single mothers with young children) were mentioned as barriers to employment. Some older interviewees found that their age presented an additional barrier. The combination of age and the inevitable gap in their employment record because of becoming a refugee made their position as job seekers even more disadvantaged. Finally, red tape and bureaucracy in general were mentioned as further obstacles.

Conclusion

Refugee agencies need to make the business case for refugees. European member states need to take on board refugees' experiences in the job market and develop policies and measures that make the pathways to employment quicker and easier. Instead of considering asylum seekers and refugees as a threat or a burden to society, we should acknowledge that these new citizens may contribute substantially to their host country. This approach requires a major change in attitude and policy towards these new immigrants: to encourage rather than discourage, to include rather than exclude.

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