

Understanding opportunities and barriers when employing a refugee

1. Opportunities and benefits

Refugees and migrants bring a great deal of benefits to the companies that hire them and to the communities they live in. They can be potential assets to the company where they work. Several studies and empirical survey highlight the added values which immigrants/refugees can bring to a company. Here are some overall benefits confirmed by experience and research :

Improvement of employee engagement and motivation

It is not uncommon to collect companies' testimonials highlighting that refugee workers represent an example of dedication to work for other colleagues and their mindset includes a high level of tolerance for uncertainty and determination to make change happen. So on the workplace these workers can be a good example of motivation, willingness and self-denial and their integration may have a positive influence on the business climate. In a recent survey on around 500 companies in Piemonte (Italy), 24 % declare that non-EU migrants are more motivated and flexible than natives and 17 % declared that the insertion of refugees and newcomers has encouraged a reduction in absences from work among other workers, increasing productivity. Migrants may help motivate other native employees.

Increase in retention

Research shows that in inclusive companies retention of refugee employees is as much as 15 percent higher than that of native employees. As an example according to a research of Tent Foundation US employers declare that refugees remain employed with their companies for longer periods of time than typical native employees. This is due to a good level of satisfaction perceived by the worker with regard to his or her role and the company climate. Job satisfaction can encourage the companies to recruit other members of the refugee community (from his family or friends).

Increase in productivity and innovation

Migrants enrich the workplace with new perspectives and ideas ; a more diverse workforce has positive effects on creativity and innovation. It's a known fact that inclusive companies and organizations based on diversity management usually get better performance. This enrichment has a good impact on the company core competencies pushing the whole company to reach higher level of knowledge. Managers are required to develop managerial skills needed in a multicultural working environment, as well as prepare themselves to teach others within their organizations. Qualitative research has shown that inclusive working teams have a 20 percent increase in innovation and make better business decisions 87 percent of the time¹. There are numerous success stories around the world which show that multi-cultural working team can foster innovation and development.

¹ Erik Larson "New research : diversity + inclusion = better decision making at work", Forbes, 2017 ; Bourke J., Dillon B., "The diversity and inclusion revolution : eight powerful truth", Deloitte Review 22, 2018.

Culture of diversity at the service of company strategic marketing

Migrants can help the company to tap new markets both domestically and abroad. A multi-cultural staff may be useful for a business organization to explore and meet the needs of local market, which is increasingly ethnically connoted. The presence of foreign staff may be an occasion to better analyse and understand the needs of current/potential migrant and foreign customers, fostering the access to new market segments ; so migrants can represent an expanded customer base which can generate new market opportunities for companies. A recent success story, in many EU countries, is represented by banks and credit institutes which have hired foreign people to expand their services to resident foreign customers.

Success factor for internationalization

The “double culture” of high-skilled migrants in terms of language, cultural and soft skills, may represent an added value for all those companies having an international calling. In particular exporting companies can rely on them as important “bridge” fostering economic and commercial relations between local country and their country of origin or neighbouring geographical areas.

Multi-language skills is a value added for customers

The inclusion of foreign staff facilitates users who can find multilingual and culturally open staff. The presence of multilingual staff allows the translation of communication material at no cost (website, flyers, catalogues, etc.)

Overcome of skills shortage

High skilled migrants/refugees can fill skills shortage, while less-skilled newcomers can fill jobs which natives are no longer interested in.

Recovery of handicrafts and traditional works

Hiring migrants may help to maintain many traditional works which risk to disappear in the host country.

Company brand strengthening

The brand image can be strengthened by demonstrating that the company has social values and it lives them in practice. An example of labelling as a communication tool is represented by the logo “Welcome. Working for Refugee Integration” which is awarded based on UNHCR’s due diligence requirements to Italian companies which stand out for labour market integration of refugees and their integration process (www.unhcr.it/progetto-welcome). The label can be used for communication and marketing purposes.

2. Difficulties and barriers

However the insertion of immigrants is not without difficulties, which may be absolutely foreseen and managed. Here are the most frequent risks :

Characteristics and attitude of the working group within the company

The team in which the trainee/worker is located has a strategic value for a successful or failing insertion. A multicultural group has more management difficulties and can be subject to communication and cultural problems and conflicts. Therefore the willingness to listen and the ability to handle complex situations are fundamental. Not all working groups are prepared for the difficult task. New immigrants may be perceived as a novelty to be wary of.

Recommendation : it is advisable to raise awareness and prepare the company group with regard to new entries of migrants. A well prepared on-boarding programme can avoid risks in the future.

Inadequate language skills

The knowledge of the local language is generally considered by companies as a prerequisite for the start of a working relationship and as a motivational aspect to job placement. Unfortunately many companies experience the recruitment of immigrants with a poor language knowledge, especially for those positions where it is difficult to find candidates. In these cases it is up to the employer to fill the gap directly in the workplace. Language problems require a strong commitment by the employer which not all companies are willing to implement (unless it is strictly necessary due to a shortage of candidates).

Recommendations : For migrants with poor language skills, the use of part-time internships combined with formal language courses may be the best solution to enhance their working language skills. This implies a synergies between companies, training agencies and organizations working with newcomers. When this is not possible and the company has an urgent need to hire a migrant with poor language skills, here are some practical ways to support language learning at work :

- Verify if managers, supervisors and colleagues speak English or other vehicular languages also known by the migrant.
- Use written documents in other vehicular languages or in the native language of the newcomer for all important communications (safety rules, health and protection behaviours, procedures, quality manual)
- Review the clarity and accessibility of both spoken and written communications at work
- Support peer learning, coaching and mentoring : newcomers shall be buddied with colleagues who are proficient speakers ; informal study groups shall be encouraged ; train some colleagues (native or foreign) to act as informal “language champions”
- Form pairs of native speakers and migrant staff to be sure everyone understands
- Use job shadowing to show newcomers how to communicate better in specific situations (es. call phone, work meeting, etc.) and support reflective discussion at work
- Prepare list of key terminology, use flashcards and pictures to decrypt instructions and signs
- Encourage constant corrective feedback
- Involve migrant staff in conversation at lunch time and breaks
- During meetings write key words on flip charts or use slides
- Make paper documents available before meetings
- Help managers, supervisors and colleagues how to check understanding, by using rephrasing and asking open questions that require the person to show what they have understood (e.g., “so what will you do first?”)
- Acknowledge and reward staff for their learning

Of course solutions depend on the size of the company. A large company has more resources and more capacity to standardize and formalize practices, but at the same time interpersonal relationships can be less well cared for. A small business may be less structured but may be more attentive to the relationships between people. The insertion of a refugee or migrant may be facilitated in a smaller environment.

Cultural diversity

Migrants’ good language skills do not necessarily avoid cultural problems with native colleagues and supervisors. Such problems are related to different inspiring values and different views of reality. The migrant enters the company with his/her « cultural codes » that may differ from the « corporate culture », from the « culture of the economic sector » and from the « culture spread throughout the territory ». The greater the cultural distance, the greater the problems that can be generated : the use of the veil in the workplace, the fasting of Ramadan with effects on work performance, the difficulty of accepting a responsible woman, the lack of eye contact, the difficulty of saying “I have not understood” are possible examples.

Special attention must be paid to the « work culture », which can affect time management (punctuality, speed in performing tasks...), respect for the rules.

As for poor language skills, the employer and staff are required a strong commitment and involvement, from the awareness of the existing of cultural diversity to the activation of possible solutions.

Recommendation: more awareness on cultural differences is required by the company. Information, training sessions and social events may be a tool to spread a diversity culture throughout the organization as a learning occasion for everybody.

Legal framework and bureaucratic burden

They may have a huge impact both on businesses and migrants and they can discourage companies from inserting non-EU workers (e.g., fear of non-renewal of residence permits, failure to obtain refugee status for asylum seekers, time for getting legal permits and costs of bureaucracy). In some cases paradoxical situations are generated in which it is difficult for the employer to find a solution.

Recommendation : the employers must create a stable network with (private and/or public) organizations working with migrants in order to have continuing access to right and updated information and avoid risks.



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