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Challenges in the land of hope: Phoenix area refugees and the recession

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CHALLENGES IN THE LAND OF HOPE: PHOENIX AREA REFUGEES AND THE RECESSION

**Challenges in the land of hope:
Phoenix area refugees and the recession**

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PIM 68

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master
of International Education at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont,
USA.

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ABSTRACT

Refugees in the United States today have greater access than ever to training programs and specialized service providers who assist with cultural adjustment to the U.S. as well as pre-employment training, job placement and retention services. Service providers develop job opportunities in the local community through partnerships with dedicated employers who see value in hiring new Americans and purpose in collaborating with voluntary agencies to overcome barriers for employees. During the recession there has been greater challenges for employment specialists to find employment for refugee clients and employers have noted some reluctance in hiring employees with low or non-existent English language skills. Once hired, refugees present other types of challenges for supervisors tasked with training these employees with language and cultural barriers.

Lutheran Social Services Refugee and Immigration Services (LSS-SW) program in Phoenix, Arizona is a voluntary refugee resettlement agency providing employment services and training programs to assist with job placement and retention. This inquiry sought to determine ways LSS-SW staff might collaborate with potential employers to increase the number of refugee clients hired while maintaining job retention for hires. The inquiry also sought to better understand the experiences of employers to determine improved training for employees, as well as what industries are hiring locally during the recession. Employers were asked to assess their own needs for training, whether or not there was a presence of discrimination for refugees in their companies and about the misconceptions of supervisors and non-refugee co-workers. Eleven employers who currently employ refugee clients from the agency as well as three employment specialists were interviewed as a part of this inquiry.

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Final Capstone Paper for Master's Thesis

Introduction

Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest (LSS-SW) Refugee and Immigration Services of Phoenix, Arizona provides resettlement services for refugees from countries throughout the world. LSS-SW is affiliated with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, Church World Service and Episcopal Migration Ministries. I came to know this agency through an internship in 2010 working with the Women's Empowerment program. At the time, this program provided leadership training, social outings in the Phoenix community as well as a micro-enterprise program offering a supplemental income to refugee women who made handcrafts.

I have had the privilege to get to know clients and co-workers from countries such as Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda, Bhutan, Burma, Iran, Iraq, and Cuba. Through these relationships I have come to know the personal struggles, the barriers to employment and education, the unique cultures and personal triumphs of refugees. This knowledge has enabled me to raise awareness in the Phoenix community through partnerships with churches, university and community college students as well as individual volunteers.

I have always been fascinated with other cultures and committed to working to bridge cultures through education. What I have learned is diversity exists in this country, in our cities and even in our neighborhoods more than many Americans are aware. One does not have to travel far when there is a major city nearby to have an international cultural experience rich with family, religion, beloved food, and stories of persecution and bravery, fear and courage to begin new lives in a foreign land. Refugees are parents who come to the United States without ever being students in a classroom but know the value of education for their children. Some are professionals from countries whose certifications do not transfer to the United States and require

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families to sacrifice and work minimum wage jobs for survival. Some are people from rural places who do not understand traffic, keeping time, giving birth in a hospital or parental laws.

In Arizona alone, as many as 3,000 refugees may resettle in Phoenix and Tucson each year. Some live in low-income housing, large apartment complexes, and eventually purchase homes in our communities, many times going un-noticed by Americans in the area. Specifically in Arizona, many of these ethnic populations are assumed illegal immigrants from bordering Mexico. This assumption can lead to difficulty finding employment when employers are fearful of raids on illegal workers from the state police and the fines and legal consequences they would incur.

Refugee clients are entitled to all services provided by LSS-SW for up to five years, including assistance with acquiring employment and working through barriers on the job. LSS-SW has experienced slow arrivals due to newly enforced security measures that model the aftermath of 9/11. The final number included just 351 employable individuals by the end of September for the 2010-2011 fiscal year. The LSS-SW employment department reports in addition to the number of newly arrived clients, approximately 50% of clients return for services in the first year resulting from lay-offs and terminations, those who decide to leave their jobs without a back-up plan, and clients who were pregnant upon initial arrival. Although unusual, the recession has brought back clients for services who have exceeded the five year mark as well.

Prior to the completion of my six-month internship I was offered a newly created position at LSS-SW as the Adult Skill Builder and Volunteer Coordinator. One of the duties of this position included designing classes to educate adult refugees from all ethnic populations served on topics related to employment and American culture, navigating the city's public transportation system, supplemental English language learning, parenting and more. The

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volunteer coordination piece initially required the design of a formal system for recruiting, orienting, providing support and documenting volunteer efforts for individuals, universities and community colleges as well as some local organizations.

As a student of international education I was excited by the challenge of designing and managing my own international program. Newly arrived refugees not only needed to understand the process of searching, applying for and retaining employment but to know how the economy would impact the time it would take for job-seekers to obtain employment. Refugee job seekers would need to build skills allowing them to compete with the thousands of others who were unemployed and applying for the same entry-level positions. Native-born American applicants would have a likelihood of more work experience, fluency in English and a better understanding of the American work culture. Considering all of the potential barriers to employment, not only would refugees need unique preparation, the employment and skill building staff would need strategic planning to bridge the transition from refugee to desired American employee.

LSS-SW has several major positions collaborating to provide direct service to clients. There are 11 full-time case managers who administer all social services to clients provided through federal and state government programs. The majority of LSS-SW Refugee and Immigration Services case managers are former refugees and immigrants from the ethnic groups of the populations served. Their qualifications provide appropriate language translation for clients during appointments, a first hand understanding of the home cultures, and the experience of trauma, loss and life in countries where civil strife and war fare are a part of daily reality. Case managers are the refugee client's initial contact when they step off the plane at the airport, provide an immediate orientation to apartment life, help clients to apply for eligible social services, enroll children in school, transport clients to job interviews and doctor appointments.

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Each case, composed of a family or individuals over the age of 18, is assigned an employment specialist who determines a plan for employment, and an initial budget for the household based on the education, work history and health of the employable adults. Specialists form relationships in the community with local employers who often partner to hire refugees in large numbers. During these tough economic times there is a need to creatively seek employment, demonstrate patience when challenging clients demand immediate results in their job search, and maintain persistence when continuing to place refugees in positions at an impressive rate of approximately 50 individuals per month.

Employment is one of the very first steps towards a family or an individual's self-sufficiency. A job will provide when temporary benefits end and rent needs to be paid to keep refugees off the streets and moving toward a better life. For this reason, all refugees must have the ability to search and apply for as well as retain employment. This may sound like a reasonable achievement but considering the differences in culture that make Americans look like the model for a formal system that many do not understand, simply knowing if a business is hiring requires training. Assumptions are made by well meaning employers and service providers alike when working with people from diverse backgrounds and the desire to see humanness as sameness can have negative effects on truly helping refugees to progress.

Understanding the uniqueness of training refugee groups comes with time spent working within the cultures and many employers do not have this type of experience. Skill building classes offered through resettlement programs can help bridge gaps in understanding for clients, but employers must also be part of the equation. Resettlement staff must also better understand the challenges of employers in hiring and supervising refugees to provide helpful training

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education and collaborative systems that will encourage these employers to continue working with staff for job placements.

Research Question

In what ways might Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest Refugee and Immigration Services staff collaborate with potential employers to increase the number of refugee clients hired while maintaining job retention for hires: focus on the Phoenix area.

Sub-questions:

- 1) What experiences have employers had with refugee hires that show positive qualities in employees?
 - 1a) What challenges have come up on the job that might require improved training for employees?
- 2) How do employers define eligible candidates for their respective companies?
 - 2a) How has LSS-SW assisted in providing these types of candidates to the respective employers?
- 3) What industries are currently hiring refugees in the Phoenix area?
 - 3a) Do the employers feel they need more training to be effective supervisors?
- 4) Do employers recognize discrimination of refugees in the workplace?
 - 4a) What misconceptions might supervisors and non-refugee co-workers have?

Literature Review

Connections Between Education & Employment

Much of the literature regarding refugee adult skill building initiatives often focuses more on English language learning or improved methods for teaching English to adults from a variety of cultural, educational and employment backgrounds. It is important to understand the issues

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associated with teaching refugees English and how lack of second language fluency affects the prospects for employment in order to design and implement training programs that address other skills needed by refugees entering the American work force. During an economic recession, such as the one refugees are currently enduring in the Phoenix area, looking at the problems with learning, language and cultural barriers will provide a context for the need for more training directed at helping refugees to acquire jobs and retain that employment. Further, it is important to understand the need to provide education about the job market in the United States and in their respective resettlement cities to help refugees navigate and compete in the current market.

Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, & Wilkinson (2000) explain that even refugees who enter a country of resettlement with professional qualifications such as advanced degrees and years of work experience are bogged down because of limited language skills and discrimination by employers. This was later echoed by Bevelander and Lundh (2007) who added that the changing composition of sender countries was also an issue. A difference in the labor market in Sweden shows that low-educated immigrants had an easier time integrating economically in Stockholm due to the need for low-educated workers in the private sector. They also note that Africans were the least likely of resettlement groups to arrive with postsecondary degrees. Canadian labor statistics showed that refugees experienced more than three times the amount of unemployment as Canadian citizens at 16% versus the 5.7% unemployment rate in Alberta. One theory suggests refugees do not have as much knowledge of the Canadian Labor market and fewer contacts to find good jobs. 97% of refugees reported that learning to speak English was an important issue. Tollefson (1985) reported that for one third of refugees the ESL class is the only opportunity to speak English. He notes refugees will learn more quickly if students feel the topics are related to their life experiences and if the focus is on topics rather than language structure.

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As Haugg and Valglum (1983) reported, later waves of refugees from a single ethnic group will be generally poorer, have a lower education level prior to migration and will be less urbanized than the first wave. Ethnic groups that have been arriving for years will show these declines and present a need for more education and skill building, especially during a recession, to help clients acquire jobs. Egan and Tomlinson (2010) note that employers may also favor language superiority over less experienced job applicants which displays the need for more skill building in the areas of ESL, self presentation in an interview setting and on paper to combat the discrimination. They also state the need for refugees to be able to verbalize their qualifications in an interview, as the most qualified applicants will be disqualified because of a lack of self-promotion. Egan and Tomlinson also address the importance of being realistic with clients about their goals for employment when considering their professional and educational backgrounds with age. This concept would be important to explain to refugee clients as a facet of American work culture and the current job crisis.

Common Barriers to Employment

There are other common barriers highlighted by Feeney (2000) which include lack of information about employment and training services as well as knowledge about job search culture and the labor market and problems related to discrimination by employers. She reports the suggestion of employers to provide refugees with skills on proper work attire and appropriate work behavior along with application and interview skills. Hilpern (2005) interviewed refugees who echoed back their need for such cultural training in order to join the workforce in Britain. She noted the unemployment rate for refugees to be 6 times higher than the national average in 2005. In an article entitled “Obstacles to freedom for refugees” by the New Zealand Herald (2005), a supervisor of refugee employees cites inability to understand workplace language as a

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barrier to success in the workplace. The article also recommends volunteer work as a helpful part of the learning process. Feeney (2000) also names the inability to locate work as a most significant barrier. Lamba (2003) notes the first places refugees seek help finding employment are through family networks, service providers, sponsors, and ethnic-group members. Because refugees have no pre-existing contacts and limited knowledge of the language, this separates them from some other immigrant groups who historically relied heavily on kinship networks of migrants who arrived in chains. Paired with a lack of confidence, potential loss of skills and mental health issues, refugees have to overcome many barriers. Doughney et al. (2004) says recent arrivals are also more likely not to have worked the year prior to resettlement and are less likely to have worked in skilled occupations in their former countries due to more time spent in dangerous and disruptive environments. This article also declares statistics showing that refugees have more barriers to employment than offenders and the homeless.

Combating Unemployment in Arizona

- The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports an unemployment rate of 9.3 % for Arizona in August 2011.
- Data for unemployment rates in Phoenix specifically for August shows a rate of 9.4% including the towns of Glendale and Mesa.
- The unemployment rate in September reduced to 8%.

The Refugee Employment Task Force (RETF) includes Phoenix area resettlement agencies, refugee employers and other local organizations. The group reported the largest number of refugee hires in February to come from staffing agencies.

- Staffing agencies accounted for 40 refugee hires in February
- The hospitality industry had the next largest number of hires at 24

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- The grocery industry 16.

These numbers were compiled from reports by all four refugee resettlement agencies in Phoenix including LSS-SW, International Rescue Committee, Catholic Charities and Refugee and Immigrant Relief Center. The RETF suggests expanding refugee hiring to include industries such as food and beverage, discount retail, clothing manufacture, heavy construction and janitorial services in private education and health care companies. The group compiled a list of companies within these industries seeking to hire en masse for March 2011. The RETF has recommended hosting an employer-networking event with the goal of recognizing outstanding employers in the community and deepening those existing relationships as well as generating new employer contacts.

Another goal would be to increase awareness for refugees as potential workers and to have resettlement agencies viewed by employers as one united front. Additionally the group has recommended an employer targeted refugee website that would include sections for both employers and refugee job seekers. The RETF has experienced challenges with employer participation in such endeavors, resulting in time, energy and money spent only to yield the support of the same handful of employers.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/index.html>) reports success with On the Job Training (OJT) for refugee job seekers benefitting employers and refugees alike. In this model the employer and the resettlement agency (or service provider) will split the cost of an employee's salary while training is provided for a period of 6-8 weeks. Resettlement cities including Houston, Miami and Sacramento participated in reporting these endeavors. OJT was used more frequently in Sacramento than in Houston or Miami. Sacramento employers and

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service providers both report the majority of OJT employees received permanent positions after the training period commenced. Phoenix has begun to form their own OJT program with the help of state funding and continues to seek opportunities for training initiatives and resources that could be provided directly to refugees and employers. OJT funding recently helped to provide a refugee specific culinary training with available on site translation services as well as assistance with job placement from a local NGO partner. The training program is available to refugee clients from all voluntary agencies in Phoenix.

Resources for Refugee Employment

Refugee Works (<http://www.refugeeworks.org/>) is a national think tank organization for refugee employment sharing strategies and promoting promising practices throughout the national refugee employment network. By providing assistance to partners, the organization strives to reach their goal of helping refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency. Refugee Work's website provides resources such as quarterly newsletters with advice for employment specialists and job developers for breaking through barriers and best practices for working with existing and potential employers. The "Hire a Refugee" section of the site highlights the positive work attributes of refugees for potential employers as well as some of the benefits to working with a resettlement agency. The services are marketed as free of charge and include: pre-screening and assessment, a consistent source of reliable workers, job readiness training, on-the-job counseling, mediation and retention support, bilingual coaches, and administrative support with employee paperwork. Employers are also encouraged to learn more about eligibility requirements for the Work Opportunity Tax Credit or the Welfare to Work tax credit that provides a federal tax incentive to employers up to \$8,500 for hiring refugees.

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Literature, reports and data regarding refugees and employment point to a need for more information about the barriers of working with refugees from the employer's perspective. Many refugee clients can pose a challenge to a supervisor who lacks the cultural competencies to understand why their new hire cannot comprehend the policies and procedures of the company or the tasks associated with specific employment positions. Employers must have a voice for resettlement agencies to more adequately provide training for refugees to meet the needs of the job industries and to maintain employment. As my research question on page 7 suggests, I will specifically seek to understand the unique perspective of refugee employers for better collaboration by service providers and improved training for clients before obtaining employment and through their transition becoming American employees.

Methodology, Approach and Rational

I used a qualitative approach to this research project in order to gain more insight to the issues faced by refugees in the work place from the perspectives of the employers. Qualitative research provides the researcher with an opportunity to maximize his or her optimal potential when capturing data through an active approach; the researcher is a part of the process. As Miles and Huberman (1994, p.p. 11) describe "Words, especially organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful, flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader-another researcher, a policymaker, a practitioner-than the pages of summarized numbers". For this purpose I conducted nine interviews with Phoenix employers and three employment specialists at LSS-SW, totaling 12 interviews.

Employers of Refugees

Employers interviewed were those who currently employ refugees and work directly with LSS-SW employment staff to hire clients in their companies. Referrals to the interviewed

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employers came from both employment specialists at LSS-SW and from refugee clients themselves. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete and all interviews were tape-recorded and backed-up with field notes. As shown in Appendix B, each employer was asked about current statistics related to refugee hires to better understand the ethnic populations they work with and the number of refugees who make up their staff. The goal is not to quantify the research overall but to gain perspective on the work environment and the collaboration with LSS-SW.

I also asked questions about employment retention, the needs for specific refugee employee trainings, the problems refugees face working in various positions within the company, and the suggestions of the employers for improved relations with LSS-SW for better successes when working with refugee clients. I asked employers if they too might benefit from training for supervising and working with refugee employees. The information gained from these interviews will provide guidance to LSS-SW Refugee and Immigration Services program when systematically designing new employment initiatives for refugees in the form of trainings and recruiting employers. All answers were recorded as field notes and clarification was provided as needed. I hoped the in-person interviews would also help to form a relationship with the participants for improved comfortability when answering questions honestly.

The questions were asked in-person rather than as a survey questionnaire to improve the quality of the answers and to provide clarification from the participant about what was being asked. This method also allowed me to schedule appointment times with participants for faster results. Lastly, applicable stories about the clients working in the companies of these employers provided accounts of successes and characterized the challenges for refugee individuals on the

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job. Listening to the stories of the employers provided more information than maintaining a strict regimen of question and answer as interviewees spoke more candidly and in greater detail.

Employment Specialists

As shown in Appendix C, I interviewed three employment specialists about their professional experiences to better understand the collaborative relationships and the challenges of placing refugee clients with American employers. These interviews were conducted one to one based on interview questions that took approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete. All responses were tape-recorded and backed-up with field notes. I asked the questions in a private environment to increase the comfortability of the participants separately. By interviewing these three staff I hoped to gain insight to all of the ethnic populations served by LSS-SW as some specialists work with specific populations. The differences in the ethnic groups of the clients served by the specialist may provide different kinds of information about the challenges and potential solutions for working more effectively. Individual specialists may also be able to share more about specific strategies for working with employers and clients. Finally, several employment specialists are involved in the RETF group and were able to provide resources in the form of task force notes and accounts regarding the upcoming activities being planned, such as an employer- networking event.

Site and Population Selection

I chose to interview nine different employers in an effort to include those from a variety of industries who regularly hire refugees. Research indicates there are certain industries known for hiring refugees throughout the country. These industries can be based on location in the country but may also be determined by the skills of the ethnic populations within the area of resettlement. Some of these industries included hotels, restaurants, factories, airports, retail

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stores, janitorial and landscaping services. Because I am an employee of LSS-SW, I had better access to employers through our staff and refugee clients and was able to provide a comfortable environment to openly discuss the issues faced by supervisors. I explained my position at LSS-SW as the Adult Skill Builder and the connection of skill classes to employment. I first made contact with employers by phone to explain the research project and the commitment for their participation. Because participation of employers was voluntary and many had concerns about the amount of time involved, I also scheduled interview times at their convenience in an environment of their choice. I selected employers through referrals from the LSS-SW employment staff with the goal of speaking to managers with at least six months experience supervising refugees. I also received two referrals from refugee clients. I only interviewed one manager per company in an effort to represent multiple industries with a variety of companies.

I chose to interview three co-workers from the employment team as a part of this study to provide a range of perspectives on challenges and possible solutions for assisting refugees with successful employment. This included some of the more senior members of the team as well as one newer staff member. One to one interviews provided a more in-depth understanding of the challenges of each of the specialists as well as representing the knowledge and experiences they bring to their positions.

Data Presentation

The employers surveyed as a part of this research represent one of two experiences; those who are extremely happy with the quality of the refugee employees found through LSS-SW and are willing to work through the challenges and those who struggle to navigate cultural differences and on the job challenges. To characterize these groups, I have selected the stories of three out of the nine employers who best represent themes of triumph and highlight the

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complexities of supervising refugee workers from a variety of ethnic groups. Some of the themes, such as “challenges with language barriers”, were discussed by all nine of the employers surveyed.

The three employers characterized below provide examples of how these common challenges affect the workplace and the role of the supervisor. The reader will encounter a supervisor who has worked diligently to mitigate these challenges with a solutions based approach and two employers who continue to struggle. The names of the employers have been changed to maintain confidentiality and are mentioned only by their general work industry. Of the three employers highlighted, only one spoke specifically of the affects of the recession on hiring practices. Although the other two employers did not share this experience, the third employer spoke to the hardships of many Phoenix area employers, some of whom were interviewed as a part of this study. Another inescapable theme discussed by many of the employers surveyed were the ever present cultural differences requiring supervisors to be accommodating and effective in strategizing for a productive multi-cultural team.

The employers represented provided detailed accounts of how these differences can affect the workplace and one employer recounts the process of integrating refugees to an already diverse team. The reader will gain an understanding of how a supervisor’s personal perspective on multiculturalism in the United States and the experiences working with the refugee employees can affect the workplace and the individuals supervised. One example of the differences in perspectives is characterized in two of the subtitles below; “Collaborative Solutions for Best Practices” and “Cultural Adjustment to an American Workplace”. Use of the words ‘collaborative’ and ‘American’ provide insight to the perspectives of these two very different supervisors when describing the philosophies of managing diversity.

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The voice of the employment specialists are represented as the liaison between the employer and the refugee employee, offering ideas for better collaboration and insight to their own challenges. All of the interviews with the three employment specialists uncovered similar themes and the most poignant responses are highlighted below. I felt this was the most beneficial way to present their responses rather than separating the responses by individual.

Employer #1: Victoria C.

Victoria C. is the Recruiting Manager for a Phoenix 4.5 star luxury hotel. She is a Caucasian American who previous to her work as a recruiter had little knowledge of refugee cultures and their presence in Phoenix. She has been in her current position for 5 years and began hiring refugees back in 2006. She explains,

“When I first started at the [name of hotel] they hired my position just solely to do recruitment to fill the 200 plus positions that we had available here. I don’t know if you’re aware but we have over a thousand employees here. So coming from a property that was probably half the size and I did the employment but I also did the recruiting, this position was just recruitment. I had worked with Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services and IRC before and I guess on a small scale level I had maybe hired one or two here and there. I thought, well maybe this could be a great opportunity to really reach out to these refugee organizations to see what opportunities they would have for me as well as what I would have for them. It was just that simple phone call, people coming in bringing the refugees, interviewing. I think we filled 200 positions, to be exact I think 187 and they were mostly housekeeping, stewarding, janitorial. It didn’t matter if they spoke English or not. It was basically the movement, the rhythm doing the different skill sets in a timely manner and just showing them what needed to be done. We have so many refugees who are still here with us today from 2006, 2007 it’s really cool to watch them develop over the years.”

Hiring During the Recession

The onset of the current recession beginning in 2008 changed hiring patterns and even the screening process for this luxury hotel. Rather than hiring the almost 200 candidates in a hiring frenzy just 5 years ago, Victoria C. reports hiring freezes for the summers of 2009 and 2010 as well as the number of new refugees hired in the past year down to just 60 individuals. On the

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positive side however, this recruiting manager reports 60 out of just 200 positions company-wide is still a “large chunk”. Her staff represents the diversity of the Phoenix refugee community at large with individuals from Burma from multiple tribes, folks from the Middle East and various countries in Africa. The only group she does not currently have on staff from the major ethnic groups is Bhutanese. Further she reports no terminations from her refugee staff. Some have moved on to other opportunities in and out of state, but a good many have also been promoted in the hotel.

“From not really being able to speak any English to now able to carry a conversation with them. It’s just so cool! I love that! Within their own position or being promoted or being transferred to another department within our property. That part for me is really gratifying. Just building those relationships over the years with not only your company [LSS-SW] but the other refugee organizations. It’s just a win win for both of us.”

Challenges with Language Barriers

The excitement Victoria has for her continued work with refugee employees and their resettlement agencies is not intended to portray the experience as completely seamless and without challenges to overcome. When asked if she has had problems with language barriers, she replied,

“ I would be lying if I said no. That’s expected. We expect that. In the beginning we would have one of the refugee organizations come and translate or they would bring a translator for us. Especially in orientation. So we would hire a certain amount of refugees in a month and then we would have them all in an orientation once and then you all would just have to provide that one interpreter or whatever. So you wouldn’t bring them back every week and we would probably just do that like once a month kind of thing. We have interpreters come in for special trainings just to ensure they understood their job responsibilities and what is expected of them, which is important.”

Victoria went on to describe more specifically how the language barrier can present as a problem on the job.

“ Maybe they use the wrong chemical, they put the wrong chemical in the dish washing machine. Maybe in our public attendants, we just require they take a little bit of English. The public area attendants have a designated area in part of the resort, for example the

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lobby. They would be responsible to make sure the area is clean, the tables are wiped down, there's no..it's free of debris. Just kind of tidy and in order, make sure the bathrooms are nice and clean and what not. The reason why now we are thinking maybe a little English isn't so bad is we have had guests (they are visible to guests) that have asked questions and they just have that blank stare. Like I don't know what you're saying. I would say those are the challenges that we have overcome. We have learned and bring in translators or training just to make sure. Instead of showing them, verbally saying step by step, this is what you do. So this is helpful on their end too."

Practical Solutions for Communication

Victoria has a number of resources she and the hotel staff utilize when managing the challenges that arise because of the language barrier.

"One cool thing I have seen in both the housekeeping and the stewarding, one of the refugee team members we have hired on, which is more fluent in English, will interpret for the team. The different information or the VIP guests that are in the house. And we definitely give kudos and we recognize those individuals you know thank you for taking that extra initiative to help the team out so we are all on the same page."

She goes on to explain that some of the resources can be credited to the collaboration with LSS-SW.

"You all had established some verbiage that we use in hospitality and are incorporating they can learn not only language but we have donated so much stuff. Including towels and linens and vacuums, showing them how to fold. That was kind of neat when the program first started we donated a lot of old linens and vacuums so they could show them ok this is how we vacuum or this is the verbiage, this is the language that we use for hospitality. That was really cool to see on you all's end to be that you have kind of put this together to help them. To set them up for success before they are even hired, that's totally fantastic".

When asked about what else clients learned in the pre-employment training LSS-SW provided, Victoria remembered a client who highlighted some of the issues that arise on the job due to cultural differences.

"I know we hired one gal who had never even seen a vacuum before. Which you know for us it's like really? But we need to put our feet in her shoes. Where did you come from? Well of course, you're probably right, you've never seen a vacuum. So when one of the house maids was telling her to vacuum, she was kind of like what the heck is this. And the supervisor was showing us what she was doing. So we are kind of taking steps back, regardless if you know what you're doing with the vacuum. This is how you do it;

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this is how you turn it on. Kind of taking more steps involved rather than saying ok, clean and vacuum the room. Really taking the time to show every individual, not just refugees, that they know their job, they can do it.”

Integration Strategies for a Multi-Cultural Team

Victoria was also asked if she had any further ideas for collaborating more effectively with LSS-SW for managing the relationships with the refugee employees and had this to say;

“I just wish I had more positions to offer. Really, it’s just a seamless process. I just pick up the phone and say ok I have 10 room attendant positions we are looking to fill, do you have any clients. Oh we have great clients! Let me send you some names and we will have them go on and apply. It’s that easy. When I go to my housekeeping managers and tell them we have 10 applicants from social services they love it because we have had such success in the past with other individuals that we have hired.”

Don’t misunderstand Victoria’s confidence as an assumption that she doesn’t have anything to learn after five years of working with refugee staff. When given a list of options for trainings she might be interested to attend from LSS-SW she was equally as excited to participate in a refugee 101 class and a presentation about the cultures of current employees.

“Absolutely. I’ve learned just from hiring these individuals from the different refugee camps. I’ve just learned so much. I didn’t even know some of these languages even existed. I didn’t even know the difference between I think it’s Burma, Karen and Burmese. It’s like ok. We’ve tried our hardest in the past to translate some of this material information in their language so they have access to that. We do that for other languages too. Of course Spanish is a huge population, we have Serbo-Croatian. We have such a huge population in this area so we try to accommodate their needs as well.”

Victoria also elaborated on refugee employees understanding of time management.

“Well with the whole time management thing, there’s times the housekeeping supervisor has had to explain you have this much time to do a room because you have 15 other rooms. So when you have 8 hours of the day, time management is huge. And if you only finish this amount of rooms in this amount of time, you could affect the business. Other team members might have to be pulled to do rooms. I think once they are told and they are shown, after a certain amount of time and training, they get it.”

Finally when asked about the existence of discrimination by management or non-refugee employees she had this to say,

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“I don’t think here because we have promoted it so well in the beginning. And it’s so interesting to me on the application because they are ex-teachers or farmers or doctors or whatever coming here to start 8 dollar jobs washing dishes. I give them so much credit. It’s not someone that is just anyone off the street looking for a job. These people are bettering their lives and finding safe housing for them coming to the USA, starting their life over again. Being able to assist in that process, giving them a job is so awesome. I think a lot of people; maybe it’s not discrimination but not understanding who these people are and where they’re coming from. And why they are here now. Again with the whole language barrier thing it’s hard to explain.”

Of all of the positive qualities Victoria was asked to apply to refugee employees she said she has seen all on the list. She wanted to emphasize the work ethic she has observed.

“Some of these individuals are such hard working people. There are some that I see who are just working their little booties off. They are such great workers! There are times where we do have an employee luncheon once a month, where I will recognize a couple of these individuals. It’s called [name of hotel]’s Best. And we call them up to the front and they are so shy but we want to say hey, thumbs up for working so hard. And I think that sometimes they think they are just doing their job but they don’t realize they are working their tails off to make it the best they can make it.”

Employer #2: Maria K.

The co-owner of a local “mom and pop” restaurant and an immigrant who arrived to the U.S. over 36 years ago, Maria K. shared her experience hiring refugees in the past year. She and her husband have owned the restaurant for the past 19 years and began hiring refugees at the suggestion of her tenant. Maria explains,

“I thought the refugees would be more lasting, would last longer with the company. The local people are just passing through or they just want for a job for a short period of time. The refugees, in the beginning, they seem more eager to work. Because they are new, they have no experience and they have a language problem. When you hire people that are green, raw, don’t have no experience, it’s more to my advantage. Because they don’t have nothing to refer to.”

On the Job Challenges

Maria talked about some of the challenges on the job refugee employees face with various tasks at the restaurant.

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“The big challenge is making the change. They don’t understand money and the language is a huge challenge. Some of them are not willing to take the chance to answer the phone. They draw back because they think they won’t speak properly.” Maria had concerns about one specific employee who she says colored her perception of others negatively. “I learned from them that they have to take the job. Two or 3 of them told me this. I don’t want to specify any names. My husband told me don’t mention any names. The one fella said I really don’t want to work this job. But I have to interview for this job and worse yet I have to take it if you offer it to me. I asked if he was serious and he said yes. I asked why are you wasting my time. He said because if I don’t come for an interview, I will get problems with my benefits. Which I didn’t even know they get because I wasn’t familiar with what the government gives them. I am now because they told me. I was told by Lutheran staff at least 3 months that they get housing, food stamps and medical. Everything that most American people do, benefits from the government. So they are not really anxious to work. They have to work because they say they will deny their benefits because they have a job and they don’t take it.”

Despite the negative account of this one employee, Maria has hired approximately 7 other refugees in the past year. When asked what ethnic groups the employees were from, Maria was unsure about some. “Iranian, Africa, um one was, oh we actually had another girl, she was I want to say Bernise?” When asked how many of the total number of refugees hired were still employed, she said no refugees were currently on staff. Several weeks prior to this interview the last refugee on staff quit without notice. According to Maria, of all staff who were not terminated, only 1 left with the standard 2 weeks notice. When I clarified that there were indeed no refugee employees employed at the present time she replied “No because we got tired of it and I give up. I’m spending too much time to teach them, and they’re not staying and they lose their enthusiasm after the first week.”

Maria had been mentioning a gentleman who she had to let go for what she called “misconduct with the other employees”. I asked her to tell me more about him and she said,

“I don’t think he has his heart in the work. A lot of them I noticed, I think 3 of them they come here and when they come from [name of country] they are highly educated. Some of them claim that they are doctors and this one actually said he was a surgeon. The one I let go said he was an electrician working with TV radio thing. I think in his mind this was beneath him because he would say how big of a job he had in [name of country] and now he had to take a demeaning job. Like he was a doctor and now you have to be a mop

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cleaner or something demeaning. That's the impression I got. He didn't say anything but that's the impression I got."

I asked Maria for the specific incident that led to the termination of the employee and she said that he had a physical altercation with a member of the staff. She was out of the country and her husband was managing the restaurant with a short staff when it happened. Maria's husband did not react to the problem and instead waited for her to come back and interview the staff who witnessed the altercation. She immediately terminated him. Later in this interview when asked if she thought refugee employees had a good understanding of American work culture she spoke of the incident again. "No. Because if they did, that fella wouldn't have done what he did to that girl when I wasn't here. I don't know if they do that in [name of country] but you don't physically go and mess with people. Especially not with women."

When asked about the different types of positions the refugee employees had held in the business Maria said,

"One we had was a cook. We had one that was a cashier. Then we had one that was kitchen prep. That was the one that worked in the kitchen. We had another guy that does all the cleaning like a janitor type thing. But I try, when we're not busy, I find work for them to do. But I find one of the biggest challenges is they don't ask questions. I used to work before in California before I became an employer, so I'm lucky I see both sides of the fence. And I'm a really strong believer in if I don't understand something, I didn't hear it good, I would ask instead of make a mistake. And sometimes I would go to my supervisor and say I know I asked you this before but I didn't remember, show me again. But they don't ask questions. They assume to do it the wrong way than ask questions."

Challenges with Language Barriers

I asked Maria specifically about the language barriers on the job. She explained, "The language barrier is very difficult because they don't understand some of the words used. And if they don't understand some of the words used they will either ignore it or do what they think to do is right instead of ask the question." She provides an example of a time an employee made an assumption of a direction,

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“My husband told the guy who left for South Dakota to drain the oil at the end of the night. And the guy came and he said take the 2 buckets of oil and take it into the back because I left the lid open. He said he told him that. That’s what he said, I left the lid open. I don’t know if he explained it to him but he takes the 2 barrels of oil and he throws them into the parking lot.”

When asked about policies and procedures refugees seem to have difficulty understanding, Maria responded “Like when you show them something to do they should take notes. That would be very helpful because when I was an employee, when I would ask questions, I would always have notepad with me.” Maria was open to employees writing the notes in their home language and even offered to write notes for them if needed. But she feels the employees didn’t want to study the notes. She says

“Going to a new job is like going to school. I think agencies need to emphasize on them, when they go for a job it’s the same as they are going to school only they are getting paid. When they are getting paid for a job, whether it’s this job or any job, they do need to do some kind of studying. They have to study whether it’s a menu. It don’t matter whether it’s a dollar shop, they have to study.”

Collaborative Solutions for Best Practices

Maria was asked how the refugee resettlement agency could help with some of these issues. She says,

“At this point I’m discouraged because as much as we need more help, I am discouraged. I don’t feel that they are willing to learn. I don’t feel they are willing to study. There’s another one, I have told him...he said he worked in Scottsdale or something..and he wasn’t getting enough hours. And I had guaranteed 40 hours or more. I always guarantee 40 hours or more. I never give less than 40 because most of them have to go to school. They have days they have to go to school and I know that up front and I hire them with that intention. They have to let me know up front. When they go for a job let the employer know that these days I can’t work rather than wait until they got the job and then say those days I can’t work. Because then you get upset because why didn’t you tell me when I am hiring you so you can match my schedule.”

Maria was willing to accept any services LSS-SW could offer her. She was interested in translation services, American work culture for refugees provided by the refugee resettlement

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agency for her new hires, as well as policies and procedures training specifically for her restaurant. She added

“Yeah, they do need to know that and they need to know boundaries.” She goes on to say “They should have somebody [from Lutheran] and they should have somebody when you have an issue with the refugees that you can talk to at Lutheran and they can meet with them and straighten out what those issues are. Because those times, only the first batch that we hired, the first 2 we hired, they came back a few times to see how they are doing.”

When asked if she would benefit from trainings from LSS-SW, she replied,

“I’m not quite sure. It would probably help the refugees to some degree; it would probably help to some degree. Because I don’t know their background when they come to United States and I’m not from United States, I have been here for 36 years. And I had an advantage above them; I spoke English so I didn’t have that problem.”

Maria didn’t think information about the cultures of her current employees would be particularly helpful because “their culture or their religion don’t have any bearing on work that they are doing. But they do need to speak up.” She goes on to recount a story of a woman working for her who didn’t eat or drink while at work for 4 days. This was becoming an increasing concern for Maria while the employee was working long shifts without even a glass of water. Finally the woman explained she was fasting for religious reasons. Maria adds,

“They need to understand they have rights, they come into this country, they have bigger rights. They are not here to be abused, they are here to do a job and they have to speak up. Employers are not going to fire you or jump down you throat, just speak up. And this one didn’t say anything after day 4. You don’t drink water, you don’t eat nothing. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Despite the feelings of discouragement Maria expressed during the interview, she did see many positive qualities about the refugee employees including loyalty, good quality of work, positive attitudes about their job and the ability to work as a team. She seemed to recognize that the negative attributes did not include all past refugee employees when she answered these questions she would say, “sometimes” or “all but that one guy”. Finally when asked about how

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Lutheran has already helped her she said “The one thing they provided all the service that I asked. The one, all the employees that I got, only one of them stayed for 11 months.” Maria was disappointed this employee could not commit to the completion of a year so she could benefit from the tax incentive the federal government offers for employing refugees. She says,

“After that incident I was very discouraged. Because I felt like they need to know that that’s why these people need to be trained before, they should take a week or 2 of American culture and about American work habits and how people conduct themselves at work. You can’t go into a work place and do what you please. You have rules and you have to follow rules.”

Employer #3: Gregory C.

Gregory C. is the Regional Hiring Manager for a large janitorial servicing company providing workers to businesses throughout Phoenix with contracts at local airports, medical and financial companies as well as schools. He is Caucasian American and grew up with a father who participated in the international business world, regularly travelling to Asia to meet with clients. He began hiring refugees back in 2005, working with multiple resettlement agencies in Phoenix. Gregory reports that he began hiring refugees because,

“janitorial notoriously has an extremely high turnover. Industry standard is probably 150% per year. And our turn over is approximately about 65%. But when we have 30,000 employees, it’s about 18,000 we are having to hire. Not out of this office alone, country-wide. We are in 42 states.”

In the past year Gregory has hired about 150-200 refugee employees from countries such as Somalia, Bhutan, Iraq and Burma. Today about 75% of those hired in the last year are still employed. Gregory says,

“One of the issues are that a) we pay minimum wage. For the most part. b) They also, when they get their badge for the [name of airport] airport, it’s a portable badge so they’re able to apply at different contractors at the airport. They have about 18,000 employees at the airport. So a lot of different contractors work there and they apply for Starbucks or HMS host and they can probably find a better paying job there. So that’s probably a good portion of it. I’d say another portion is probably poor understanding of our work rules.”

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The poor understanding Gregory reports leads to termination. Those who stay may move up to a supervisory position.

Challenges with Language Barriers

When asked about issues related to the language barrier Gregory says,

“We require that they pass an English test to facilitate things we have asked the refugee organizations to give employees the test ahead of time to the candidates. There is some questions whether that is being done ethically or not. I mean that other people are giving them the answers.”

When asked if the company re-tests these employees when they are hired Gregory says, “Well it’s kind of obvious when they come in and they can’t speak a lick of English and they get a 98% on an English test. There’s probably a question.” When I asked Gregory to elaborate about how the language barrier presents challenges on the job, he says, “They are twofold. a) They are not understanding the request from the supervisor lead manager. b) They are not understanding the customer. In the case the customer has any involvement or asks them to help out somewhere.”

Gregory was asked to explain the policies and procedures that are difficult for refugees on the job and says,

“I would say refusing reasonable requests. Well the manager will say I need you to do this and they say no I’m not going to do that. I didn’t know I was going to be cleaning a restroom. I thought I was going to be vacuuming. Things like that. We explain to them in depth and give them the job description of what the job is. And you guys provided the job description as well in addition to a copy of the handbook that you provided as well.”

Gregory also had some insight into why there is some of the confusion on the job.

“I think the other issue we face, especially at the airport, because that’s the most predominant place they are being sent, is that they are not given one task to do over. They are not sent to one area or one terminal. They can be sent to any of the terminals, sometimes different shifts, different requirements, different jobs. So sometimes they work in terminal [number] 4 for 6 weeks and then we need them to go to terminal [number] 3 and they won’t go. I’d say they get comfortable doing one job and they want to keep doing that job. And then there’s probably fear factor, new manager, new supervisor, new co-workers maybe that don’t speak their language. I think the fact that

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they don't utilize the translation services provided by the refugee organizations causes a great deal of problems. We have IRC [International Rescue Committee] come out and do translation for us. Then we can call that number. We tell them if you have a problem and you don't understand, ask your supervisor to give a call to the translator so you can understand exactly what we are requiring."

Gregory suggested that follow-up with the employees from the resettlement agencies would be beneficial.

"I think it would be helpful to have them come in as a group and discuss what the challenges are. What they don't understand about the cleaning or what's required of them, or whatever issues they're having, things like that. Some kind of post work follow-up. And then I don't know if you do any kind of exit interview when they do quit, I think that can be helpful to find out the kind of challenges they have so we can try to mitigate those things in the future."

Cultural Adjustment to an American Work Place

Gregory mentioned that American customs training would be helpful for the refugee employees. When asked to elaborate about some of the problems on the job he explains, "Well hygiene is definitely a big one. Obviously coming from their countries they don't have the opportunity to take showers all the time or whatever it is." Another challenge Gregory has observed for some refugee men is having a woman as a supervisor. "In the janitorial field you have a lot of Hispanic women that have moved up through the ranks, you have Hispanic men too. So when you have a woman ordering them to do something, it doesn't come across well." One of the policies that has been difficult for some employees to follow is utilizing the structure within the company when dealing with on the job complaints. Gregory explains,

"They don't need to go to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), they don't need to go to the attorney general, they don't need to go to the workforce commission or anything like that. If they have any issues, bring it to you supervisor. If your supervisor doesn't help, bring it to the manager, if the manager doesn't help, bring it to HR. We are an open door policy here. We tend to get several EEOC suits." Some of the confusion that leads an employee towards complaints with commissions like

the EEOC are things such as pregnancy Gregory reports. Employees are not educated about

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things like the Family Medical Leave Act that require an employee to have worked for a certain length of time to qualify for leave. Prior to leave employees are also requesting special accommodations for their job that would mean not being able to perform the contracted position due to problems bending and carrying heavy loads. Gregory explains, “It has nothing to do with the company being mean to them, they just can’t do the job.”

Gregory was open to all of the training opportunities that LSS-SW could provide to potential employees and also suggested the agency develops a training room and

“show them what’s going to be required. I know we can have them escorted on site so they can see what they do in certain areas and the cleaning and the level of cleaning. That way they can explain it better to the refugees that come in. It’s a very fast moving job. It’s not; a lot of refugees that come in are very slow moving I think in their culture. In American culture speed is almost everything.”

One of the possible cultural differences at the work place for some refugees is the lack of social time. Gregory says when refugees from the same ethnic group see one another in the airport “then they start a discourse there and then a couple other people join in. Then we have 4 of our janitors standing around. Then we have customers, passengers, walking around wondering why our bathrooms aren’t clean. The fast moving part really needs to be stressed.” Employees also need to be careful that breaks are taken out of the public eye to avoid resting or sleeping and making personal phone calls at the gates where customers wait for flights.

“They have to understand that perception is reality. If our clients, customers, passengers see stuff going on, they are not understanding that people are on their break. That’s fine they take a break, the problem is they are still in the public eye. So when they are in the public eye, perception is these people are just not doing their work.”

When asked if any training for managers offered by LSS-SW might be helpful, Gregory replied,

“No, I think I have a pretty good understanding of what goes on. We actually asked a couple of refugee organizations how their program works, how it starts, what people go

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through, what they are trained on. I wouldn't want a follow-up class. I think it would be good for our managers. Just to understand what their cultures and some of the things are.”

Gregory thought it might be valuable to bring the training to the workplace for managers. “We have a meeting every other week the day before payday. You guys, you know, you are more than welcome if you want to come down and speak about cultures. We can have a 15 minute quick thing with the managers.” In terms of additional trainings that might be helpful, Gregory suggested,

“I think they need to get a better understanding of the Hispanic culture. Because especially in the janitorial field, Hispanic is a predominant culture too. Maybe understand some of the dos and don'ts. But also how to communicate. You know you have a person that's predominant Hispanic and one predominantly Somali, obviously there 's going to be even more of a barrier than there would be with an American person and a Somali because of the difference in the languages.”

Employment Specialists

As I noted before, the employment specialists surveyed provided great insight to the process of finding employment for refugees and their specific challenges working as the mediators between potential employees and the potential employers. These individuals continue to work with refugees and their supervisors after hiring is complete. The themes highlighted in this research were mentioned by all three of the employment specialists. The themes outlined below provide accounts of how the present task of finding and retaining employment are very much tied to the personal history of the refugees. These themes include “Challenges in the Pursuit for Employment”, “Effects of Life in a Refugee Camp”, “Cultural Differences and the Application Process”, and “Challenges Retaining Employment”. The experiences of all three of the employment specialists surveyed represent the challenges of other specialists working not only throughout the United States, but in some of the countries of resettlement throughout the world as noted in the literature review. The most poignant responses from the employment

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specialists are provided below to highlight the challenges of working with refugee adults whose former lives so clearly define their struggles with employment in the United States today.

Challenges in the Pursuit for Employment

The employment specialist is tasked with the challenge of finding willing employers to work with the resettlement agency to mitigate barriers to employment for refugees and work through the challenges of hiring new Americans who may or may not speak English. When asked what has been most difficult about searching for entry-level employment for clients each of the three employment specialists had similar concerns. The most senior of the employment team explained,

“I guess it’s most employers are not familiar with refugees. When you mention refugee they usually think they maybe illegal immigrants or that maybe they don’t think they have any English at all. Or maybe they don’t have education. A lot of things that we try to explain to them. That’s why meeting them in person is very important so we can explain more what we do and what type of clients we do have. It’s actually a myth that they don’t have any education and that they don’t speak some English. No, all of them do.”

Another employment specialist spoke to the challenges presented by the recession,

“I think the ball is definitely in the employer’s court. They have the luxury or the ability to be choosier about who they put in to even minimum wage positions. Whereas before no one ever wanted to do a minimum wage position because they had options. People with high skill level or education are now accepting the positions that used to go to refugees or other immigrants. So I would say there are still positions out there but it’s a challenge sometimes to meet the qualifications that they are looking for. Positions that don’t seem like they would need any kind of English level or skill, they are requiring them to have a high level of English or previous experience in that particular field or in the United States.” She goes on to explain, “I heard it used to be where people [employers] would even call the agency and need 20 people at a time. It wasn’t too difficult to get people employed quickly in low skill industry, entry-level positions.”

When it comes specifically to partnering with employers one specialist explained,

“What’s been difficult mainly is, if you find employers are willing to serve the community and they are more willing to help. But mostly employers that don’t is because of the fact they don’t want to...if they don’t have that same intention, that feeling of

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helping or partnering, they are just straight business. In the past you had to tap 10 employers to get one to work with you, now you just have to double that number.”

The employment specialists were also able to articulate some of the skill issues that clients struggle with and pinpoint some of the possible reasons.

“We have clients that have worked their whole lives but they have been farmers or maybe laborers of some sort. But they have never worked for a company or a business following certain schedules or set of expectations put upon them by management. They don’t really have anything formal to show for themselves so that can be a challenge sometimes. You also see it in the other way where people have experience, it might be professional experience where maybe they were a teacher or professor, translator, or engineer. But they have never done anything physical before so employers are skeptical or weary of hiring someone without manual labor experience to do a job that is physically taxing.”

Effects of Life in a Refugee Camp

Living in a refugee camp itself can pose an issue for job seekers,

“the gaps in employment, especially for example with the Bhutanese. Many of them haven’t had any type of employment for fifteen plus years. They are out of practice working at a certain pace or working at all. So their willingness is there but their skill or stamina is kind of down.”

So how might employment specialists address the lack of skills with their clients?

“We always try to make sure and follow-up that they are at least attending the free English classes at the apartment complexes on a weekly basis while they aren’t working. On top of that we have tried to create different training classes for different industries. So we have had a hospitality training that has assisted our clients in learning the basics of housekeeping and working in a hotel. We have also done trainings for assisting our clients in passing that food handler’s card test so they have the proper documentation and skills to work in the food industry. It seems whenever there is a new position that requires pre-training we have assisted with it but most companies have their own training that they provide.”

Despite the efforts of the employment and even the English Language Training (ELT) Coordinator to offer employment trainings, staff report there is simply not enough time to devote to the educational needs of the clients with heavy case loads and helping clients to gain employment through job development pursuits. Clients themselves experience difficulty

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attempting to fill out paper job applications that ask unfamiliar questions in English that seem out of context to many clients.

Cultural Differences and the Application Process

Sophisticated clients from metropolitan cities such as Iraq struggle to search and apply for jobs online as well. Beyond this point, clients face an enormous challenge when participating in face-to-face interviews. One employment specialist explains,

“Clients just simply don’t do well in an interview and it really turns an employer off. Either they answer the questions incorrectly or they don’t know how to answer them. Or they show disinterest, or have poor body language or behavior. I think that when an employer sees something in the attitude of the applicant that they don’t really like or they see as a negative thing, it definitely decreases the ability for that applicant to get hired.”

These traits may sound textbook when conducting an interview and selecting qualified applicants but how does this change when other cultures come into play?

Many clients who attend the interview skills class at LSS-SW report that they have never been required to participate in a meeting before being hired by an employer. Many have only had to rely on networking or attending academic programs as their entrance to both a labor job and a professional job. Some cultures are taught not to look superiors in the face and many are managing the traumatic effects of being forcibly turned away from their homeland by their own governments and starting life in a new culture, not to mention the shy and quiet demeanor of some of the client’s cultures. An interview is not a place to be modest or soft spoken but when finding a job is amongst the first priorities taught to refugees by their resettlement agencies, there is little time to learn and change behavior. For these reasons having access to employment services at the resettlement agency, along with training is integral to the success of clients. Without this assistance, many clients would not be hired at all let alone over a longer period of time.

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Challenges Retaining Employment

When asked about the issues on the job that result in loss of employment for refugees, employment specialists spoke again of speed.

“I worked a lot with the hospitality industry since I started working, that’s probably the one I’ve had the most experience in. I would say in that industry the complaints are the speed of work. In an industry like that, in any industry we work with, the pace of work is very important. And when you are expected to do 18-22 rooms a day, if you don’t accomplish that, then you’re not doing your job. We’ve had a lot of clients get fired for that reason. I have realized I need to do more follow-ups with clients after they are hired. That I need to take that pre-emptive step of calling the employer and asking how they are doing. Which sounds so simple but really we just don’t have the time to do that with every client. I have found that employers don’t call you until it’s too late. Until they have already let them go.”

When asked if the adult skill building classes could assist in increasing the number of clients hired, one employment specialist said, “I think the more training people have, the more exposure they have to the work force and what’s going to be expected of them, the better prepared for the job they are going to get.” In terms of topics that could be newly introduced to the employment trainings the same employment specialist mentioned,

“Personal problem solving, we have a lot of clients who just make really poor decisions. And part of it is that they just don’t understand the system. But I would like to see them think through the steps they should take when they encounter a problem that they are really unsure about. For example we had two of our clients quit a job that they really enjoyed at a factory because the first paycheck that they got, they thought they had been ripped off. Really what it came down to was that they didn’t understand how pay periods worked.”

When asked what kind of misconceptions supervisors or non-refugee employees might be operating under about refugees, an employment specialist explained,

“An employer will say we hired a refugee and they quit so they won’t hire a refugee ever again. But you would never say that about a Caucasian. You know, I hired a Caucasian one time and they did a poor job so I’m never going to hire a Caucasian again. So they tend to lump refugees together in one big group and expect them to be the same good or bad rather than seeing them as individuals.”

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Discussion

The experiences and specific information about the industries of the employers read above, along with the insights and recommendations of the employment specialists can be synthesized for future strategy and program planning to accommodate the unique educational and employment needs of refugees. Below you will find the recommendations organized into categories including; “Partnerships for Refugee Self-Sufficiency”, “Training to Overcome on the Job Challenges”, “Challenges Associated with Language Barriers”, “On Staff Translators”, and “Intervention and Termination Prevention”.

Partnerships for Refugee Self-Sufficiency

This research demonstrates the importance of partnerships between LSS-SW and Phoenix area employers when assisting refugees towards self-sufficiency through employment and even their education of American systems and culture as well as their continued learning of the English language. The employers surveyed in this research each provided relevant accounts of the positive and negative attributes of the refugee clients they personally hire, train and supervise. Because of the limits of the study we can only conclude that there will be many similar stories, both positive and negative representing the process of becoming an American worker as a refugee from countries that are both rural and metropolitan. Those who have sophisticated education systems that bring individuals with years of professional experience, those who have been left with minimal work experience while living in camps for years, and those who fall everywhere in between.

Training to Overcome On-the-Job Challenges

The positive research shows that all employers named multiple positive qualities they have seen when working with clients from LSS-SW.

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- All mentioned the challenges they have sought to overcome through conversations with LSS-SW employment and case management staff as well as through training of their own design.
- All but one employer surveyed feel that the refugee employees in their company would benefit from further on the job training, some of which could be provided prior to beginning their work.
- The majority of employers surveyed believed LSS-SW could be of assistance in both designing and implementing the desired training.
- The majority of employers also showed an openness and willingness to participating in refugee 101 training as a manager as well as learning more about the cultures of their current staff.
- Several employers felt that they would like other managers working with the refugee employees to participate as well.

Challenges Associated with Language Barriers

The challenges most mentioned by employers were related to the language barrier and the cultural differences in the systems associated with finding employment and following the structure of company guidelines.

- The majority of employers mentioned the language barrier affecting the employee's understanding of policies and procedures, misunderstanding of duties and instructions, the speed of the employee's work and communication with customers and with the supervisors themselves.
- The employees were unlikely to communicate with supervisors about how they felt about their jobs, any concerns they had regarding job duties or expectations, or reporting problems on the job.

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- All employers believed it would be helpful to implement a system for follow-up meetings by LSS-SW employment staff with employees for better communication with the supervisor. These meetings could address the concerns of the supervisor with translation available and help the employer learn about the perspective of the refugee employee(s).
- Thus far this research has shown that eligibility for employment with Phoenix area companies is changing due to the number of over qualified applicants for entry-level positions.
- Employment specialists and employers alike agree English proficiency has emerged as an urgent need for companies to provide optimal customer service through employee responsiveness to needs as well as completing duties with quality.
- Employees must be able to receive directions from their supervisor and assist their team in carrying out urgent needs as situations arise.

On-Staff Translators: A Strategy for Success

Some employers have created a system where other staff who are more proficient in English with the same home language as other team members can translate as needed and solve immediate issues. The translators are regularly used at staff meetings and recognized appropriately for their contributions by the management. Eligibility in some cases means hiring employees without experience so employers have the ability to train staff according to their preferences. Several of the industries, including janitorial and retail employers, felt they would be better qualified than LSS-SW staff to train new employees on the specific duty requirements of their work. These were the same employers who preferred employees without experience. Employment staff report meeting with the employer prior to selecting candidates to determine pre-screening needs. One of their strategies is initially placing higher-level clients with more English proficiency with new partnering employers. These are the employees who will take the

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necessary leadership to help refugee employees with lower English proficiency to better understand expectations, carry out duties and effectively communicate with supervisors. The hospitality and janitorial industries stand out as hiring the most in Phoenix. Of the employers surveyed, the majority are open to some or all of the training that could be provided to them to more effectively manage their refugee staff. This would be in addition to systematic changes to include follow up by LSS-SW employment staff and assistance with translation needs and specific follow-up when challenges arise on the job for clients that require immediate attention.

Intervention and Termination Prevention

Currently the employment staff reports they follow-up as needed and would like partnering employers to let them know as soon as there is a problem so they can intervene and prevent termination. One of the biggest challenges for follow-up remains lack of time to devote to each of the employers while new cases continue to arrive and require the same level of care with seeking open positions and all of the tasks associated with the hiring process. Of the employers surveyed, there were mixed feelings about possible discrimination on the job. Several employers felt they had done a good job promoting the inclusion of their refugee staff or that the refugees represented the majority on their team and consequently did not have concerns. Others mentioned issues with co-workers having a lack of understanding about refugees that lead to some tensions between groups.

Employment specialists themselves have experienced problems during job development with employers who are simply not interested in hiring refugees. Some have been inconsistent about their willingness to hire staff who does not speak English or Spanish fluently and employment specialists have received concerning feedback from their clients about possible discrimination from lower level management or co-workers. When I asked employers whether or

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not they felt they adequately understood how a refugee employee's culture might affect areas such as hygiene, understanding of American work culture, work ethic, problem solving on the job and sense of time management many said yes. Some of these same employers could not identify specifically which cultures their staff represented or spoke of how their lack of understanding affected other areas of work earlier in the interview. One example was from the restaurant owner who had concerns about an employee who was not eating or drinking only to learn the woman was fasting for a religious holiday. The contradictions seen in some of the answers provided by participating employers illustrated that many simply did not know what they did not know. Some believed they could learn about the cultures or complex backgrounds of the refugee clients in just a fifteen minute meeting with LSS-SW staff. One in particular felt refugees would benefit from being advised about the "dos and don'ts" of the Hispanic culture. A cross-cultural communications training for supervisors and team members could help address strategies for more effective and respectful communication in the work place.

Practical Applicability

The results of this inquiry would benefit the staff of LSS-SW who work with clients to obtain employment and assist with on the job challenges. This would include case managers, employment specialists, training staff, volunteers and administrators who supervise resettlement staff. This information would also benefit other resettlement agency's staff.

- Training programs can be expanded and ESL instructors can be included in solution-based discussions and in systematic changes to play a meaningful role in the refugee's transition to work. Some of these collaborations already exist on a small scale but could be built in a more solid framework that would include support from the federal and state governments to fund training programs for refugees through the voluntary agencies.

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- This inquiry could be provided to the state and federal refugee coordinator's offices as well to provide perspective regarding what is working and where we might be able to grow in our endeavors to help refugees attain self-sufficiency in the United States.
- Funding is needed to hire qualified staff who can carry out the training needs of refugee adults and partner more closely with current and potential employers. Supervisors can be educated about who refugees are and how they can work with resettlement agencies and refugees alike for a smoother hiring transition. The trainers would also be able to provide the follow-up stakeholders believe is needed that the employment specialists do not currently have the time to provide.
- Another concern regarding the potential for expanded training for refugee workers would be providing financial benefits during the training period. This may be more available through reception and placement funds for larger families as money is provided per individual. Smaller families and individuals will have less funds upon arrival for resettlement agencies to manage over time. These clients may benefit from changes in the way funds are granted during the reception and placement period. This also might point to the need for more immediate placement in this type of training program before reception and placement funds cease. Trainers themselves would benefit from the results of this inquiry when designing future training programs or when evaluating existing programs.
- Finally, this study could be made available to Refugee Works for ease of accessibility to service providers from voluntary agencies. Refugee Works can utilize this information when designing future trainings for refugees and service providers.

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Recommendations for Further Research

As mentioned earlier, there is limited research about the perspective of the employer in the United States or other countries when working with the unique needs of refugee employees. A larger inquiry could be conducted to determine best practices in training and collaboration with resettlement staff. This should also include any outside agencies, organizations, companies or schools in the communities surveyed to determine if training provided outside of the voluntary agency and the employer company could be part of a more effective model for successful employment integration for refugee adults. Research may also include refugees themselves who have been in the country for two years or more to determine best practices for training topics and a model for providing information accessibly to refugees from diverse educational, social and professional backgrounds.

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List of Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Employers

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Employment Specialists

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Informed Consent Form

Dear _____,

You are invited to participate in a small qualitative research study that will help to fulfill the requirements for my M.A degree in International Education at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont. I also represent Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest Refugee and Immigration Services as the Adult Skill Builder and Volunteer Coordinator. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about it to make an informed decision. If you have any questions, please ask me. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to participate in the study.

The purpose of the study is to understand more about the challenges faced by refugees in Phoenix with finding and keeping employment. I will interview employers and employment specialists as a part of the study. I would like your permission to interview you one to one about your experience.

If you are an employer, I will ask general questions about your involvement supervising refugees, the challenges this has presented in your place of employment, the training needs of the employees you work with and for suggestions you may have for better collaborating with LSS-SW Refugee and Immigration Services in the future. I expect the interview to take approximately 15-30 minutes of your time. If I have questions after reviewing the data, I ask your permission to contact you briefly by phone.

If you are an Employment Specialist, I will ask general information regarding your work with refugees. The question topics will include information about challenges you have perceived with the clients you work with, changes you have noticed in the numbers of clients you are serving, the skills set of clients, barriers and challenges, as well as the positive outcomes of clients with whom you are working. I expect the questionnaire to take no more than thirty minutes of your time. If I have further questions for clarification after reviewing your questionnaire, I ask your permission to follow-up for clarification.

If you wish to have a copy of your completed interview questionnaire or of the final results of the study, please ask. I will not share your name or other personal information with any staff at LSS-SW without your permission. The final results of the study will also not include your name. Any quotes used will not identify you personally in any way. You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time.

I thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in this research study. It is my hope that the information obtained by the subjects in the study will assist resettlement staff in better helping refugees to prepare for and retain employment through skills education. Please let me know if you have any questions before you decide to participate.

Sincerely,

Valerie E. Nightingale (602) 248-4400 x133

____I have read the above, understand the study and agree to participate.

Signature of participant:

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Interview Guide for Refugee Employers**Position Title:** _____**Industry Type:** _____**Company Name****(optional):** _____**How long have you been in your current position:** _____**Gender:** _____

1) Why did you begin hiring refugees?

2) How many refugees has your company hired in the past year?

2a) If known, which ethnic groups are represented on your staff?

3) How many of the total number of refugees hired in the past year are still employed?

4) If answers #2 and #3 differ, what are the reasons for the employee leaving?

Lay off Employee left with notice
 Terminated Employee left without notice
 Other

5) In what types of positions are refugees currently working?

6) In what types of positions have refugees worked in the past?

7) Have you experienced problems on the job with language barriers?

yes no

7a) Please explain your answer:

8) What solutions do you see for any problems you mentioned above?

9) Do you feel refugee employees have difficulty understanding the policies and procedures of your business?

yes no

9a) If yes, please explain which policies and procedures are challenging:

9b) Do you know why these policies and procedures are challenging for refugee employees?

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9c) How could the employee's resettlement agency assist with handling these issues before the client is hired?

9d) While the employee is employed?

10) Have you noticed particular problems with the type of tasks employees are expected to perform? If so, what specifically are the problems?

11) Do you have suggestions for collaborating effectively with LSS-SW to better manage relationships with refugee employees? If yes, please describe.

12) Which of the following would be beneficial to your company when employing refugee clients:

- A translator to work on an as-needed basis
- A training class on American work culture for refugee employees
- A training class on the particular policies and procedures for your company
- A training class on specific job duties for new hires
- A contact person from LSS-SW to provide assistance for on the job challenges
- Other, please explain: _____

13) Which of the following trainings for you as the manager would be beneficial to your continued work with refugees

- Refugee 101
- Information on the cultures of current employees
- Other: _____

14) Do you feel you adequately understand how cultural differences might effect a refugee employee's understanding/behavior in the following: areas: (Please answer yes or no)

- Hygiene
- Benefits (medical and other types of insurance)
- Work ethic
- American work culture
- Problem solving strategies on the job
- Communication on a work team
- Sense of time and time management

15) Please elaborate on any answers from above:

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16) Do you believe there is discrimination for refugee employees on the job?

16a) Why or why not?

17) What concerns might you have about hiring refugee employees in the future?

17a) What about your experiences have influenced your answer?

18) What positive qualities can you say you have seen in refugee employees you have worked with? (Please check all that apply)

- Loyalty
 - Dependability
 - Good work ethic
 - Good customer service
 - Good quality of work
 - Good attitudes about their job
 - Good team player
 - Others:
-
-

19) What negative qualities have you experienced as a manager?

- Tardiness
 - Poor work ethic
 - Un-dependable
 - Difficulty working with customers
 - Difficulty working s a team
 - Poor attitudes
 - Not understanding job duties
 - Poor work qualities
 - Others:
-
-

19a) Describe some of your answers:

19b) Do you feel there are challenges that could be solved with employee training?

20) How has LSS-SW staff already assisted you as a manager?

21) Is there anything else you would like to say?

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Questionnaire for Employment Specialists

Name _____

Date:

Start date at LSS-SW _____

- Have clients on your caseload experienced more difficulty finding employment during the recession? If so, please explain.
- What has been more difficult for you when searching for entry-level jobs for clients?
 - Working with employers?
- What industries are refugees finding jobs during the recession?
- Has the number of clients on your caseload increased/remained the same or decreased each month since you began working with this agency?
- What skills have been most lacking in clients seeking employment?
Ex. Something that would present a barrier to that client obtaining employment.
 - How have you/the employment program sought to address this lack of skills?
- What problems do clients report in seeking employment independently?
- What reasons do employers typically give you when they do not hire a client for an entry-level position?
- What problems do employers report with employees they have let go?
Ex. Problem with skill level, understanding of work culture, need for lay off, or other.
- What new strategies have you implemented for better assisting clients in obtaining employment?
 - Retaining employment?
- Have you made any systematic changes in your department that have better assisted refugees in obtaining employment?
 - Are there systematic changes you would recommend moving forward?
- Do you think adult skill building classes could assist in increasing the number of clients being hired and retaining employment?
 - Why or why not?
 - What topics/strategies/other ideas could be addressed in adult skill building classes?

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- What changes from the current curriculum would you recommend?
- Have you seen positive effects on clients who have attended:
 - Employment Orientation
 - Interview Skills
 - Cultural Orientation
 - Resume Help
 - Other classes offered by Adult Skill Building
 - If so, how would you describe the positive effects?
 - Are there any negative effects you have noticed?
- Have you seen discrimination by employers against refugees?
 - If so, please explain.
 - What misconceptions might supervisors or non-refugee co-workers have about refugees?
- Anything else you would like to share?