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Bridging the Gap: Training Needs Assessment of the Immigrant Workforce in Onondaga County, NY

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Bridging the Gap: Training Needs Assessment of the Immigrant Workforce in Onondaga County, NY

Abstract

[Excerpt] This report addresses one small facet of the skills dilemma facing Onondaga County; that is, can the growing immigrant/refugee population in Syracuse satisfy local employers' demand for labor? With support from a grant provided by the Economic Development Administration (U.S. Department of Commerce) University Center at Cornell University, members of the ILR School's Extension faculty interviewed employers, immigrants and other English-as-a-secondlanguage (ESL) workforce newcomers, service providers, labor unions, and government planners during the winter of 2007 to assess the training needs of the county's immigrant and ESL workforce. Our research was facilitated and aided by the Onondaga County Office of Economic Development.

Keywords

training, immigrant, workforce, assessment, globalization, syracuse, industry, economic development

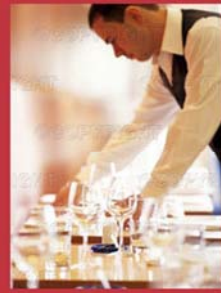
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Comments

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BRIDGING THE GAP:

TRAINING NEEDS
ASSESSMENT OF THE
IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE IN
ONONDAGA COUNTY, NY

JUNE 2007



Cornell University
ILR School

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Introduction

Like many older urban areas throughout the United States, Onondaga County in upstate New York is grappling with the challenges posed by globalization. Its once-ample manufacturing base has dwindled over the past two decades and the remaining producers of auto parts, electrical components, medical devices and the like face relentless pressure from lower-cost foreign and domestic competitors. The exodus of numerous businesses meant a corresponding decline in

the number of jobs – particularly those offering a chance at upward mobility and a wage and benefits package sufficient to keep a family comfortably in the middle class – and not surprisingly, the departure of residents in search of brighter employment prospects.

But now the county, whose economic, political, and cultural capital is Syracuse, may be on the come-back trail. Local officials and business leaders have crafted an economic development plan¹ that aims to transform the region into a knowledge-based economy sustained by five sectors – education and health services, leisure and hospitality, professional and business services, engineering and high-tech, and environmental services/technology and renewable energy. A coalition involving many of the same individuals and organizations involved in the economic development initiative, in addition to local educational institutions and the city school district, organized labor, and area non-profits, is focusing on workforce development under the “Journey To Jobs” banner. Meanwhile, the region's population has stabilized at about 460,000, buoyed by a small surge of immigrants and refugees arriving from countries as far afield as Burma and Ukraine. A volunteer-driven marketing campaign, “Come Home to Syracuse,” is trying to woo former residents and other high-skill workers and professionals to the area.

The skills issue is a sensitive topic around Syracuse. Several years ago, Bristol-Myers Squibb Co., one of the county's largest employers, decided against locating a new pharmaceutical facility in the area because of doubts about the available supply of skilled and well-educated workers. Concern about workforce skill levels is widespread. Economic development planners and employment specialists report hearing numerous comments from area employers about the dearth of qualified and motivated workers in the local labor market. ***Indeed, the success of the county's economic growth strategy depends***

¹ “The Essential New York Initiative: Transforming Central Upstate to a Knowledge-Based Economy”

in part on the ability of all stakeholders (government, business, workers, service providers) to collaboratively tackle both the perception and the reality of the workforce skills shortage.

This report addresses one small facet of the skills dilemma facing Onondaga County; that is, *can the growing immigrant/refugee population in Syracuse satisfy local employers' demand for labor?* With support from a grant provided by the Economic Development Administration (U.S. Department of Commerce) University Center at Cornell University, members of the ILR School's Extension faculty interviewed employers, immigrants and other English-as-a-second-language (ESL) workforce newcomers, service providers, labor unions, and government planners during the winter of 2007 to assess the training needs of the county's immigrant and ESL workforce. Our research was facilitated and aided by the Onondaga County Office of Economic Development. The findings are detailed in the report that follows.

Methodology

For this project, we gathered qualitative data through stakeholder interviews, most of which were arranged through contacts made by the Onondaga County Office of Economic Development. We also reviewed census data and other public documents pertaining to workforce and economic development in the county, and collected general information about immigration.

We conducted group interviews, through translators, with refugees from Burma (two men and two women), Somalia (the group included six women and one man from Somalia, one woman from Burundi and one from Liberia), and Liberia (four teenage girls), and with nine Russian Turk women. We also met with one immigrant couple from Mexico and 12 women and two men who are migrants from Puerto

Rico. (Although people born in Puerto Rico are American citizens, their experience upon moving to the mainland is much like that of immigrants.) Most of the interviewees were unemployed, some having arrived in Syracuse within the past few months and some who have resided in the area for years. We had limited opportunity to speak with people who are currently working, although many we did meet had family and friends who were employed. We also did not have occasion to interview members of the Vietnamese or Hmong communities, which are the most settled and arguably the most successful among the refugee groups. Our results may therefore be biased by the limitations (gender, work status, ethnicity) of our informant base.

We also conducted group and individual interviews with a total of 17 employers. These enterprises represented a wide range of economic activity in the county: large and small employers in the retail, manufacturing, job shop, warehousing, and health care sectors. Most of these employers are generally considered "enlightened" and have experience with immigrant and refugee workers; in several facilities these new Americans comprise a sizeable percentage of the company's workforce. Again, the non-random selection of these interview subjects may have affected our conclusions.

Service providers and advocates from eight organizations were also interviewed -- several in one large group, a few through three-way conference calls, and a couple in individual conversations. We obtained input from employment and workforce development specialists, ESL providers, and service agency directors. We also interviewed three workforce development professionals from local labor organizations and one from a major manufacturers association.

In order to encourage participation in this study and candor in the interviews, we have omitted individual and company names.

Highlights

Analysis of the qualitative data gathered for this study yields no simple or conclusive answer to the underlying research question: can the growing immigrant/refugee population in Syracuse satisfy local employers' demand for labor? The interviews revealed that some foreign-born residents and migrants from Puerto Rico can and do qualify for entry-level production and construction jobs if they are literate in their own language, have a modicum of conversational English, and are familiar with or can easily adapt to technology. The data also indicated that some newcomers lack even these fundamentals and initially, at least, are eligible only for entry-level service jobs in housekeeping, food service, and laundries and in the most basic production jobs, such as packing boxes or filling sample bottles. Other newcomers face logistical and cultural barriers that inhibit their ability to land any job at all. Most tellingly, *few of the immigrants or migrants from Puerto Rico who choose the area to be near family and friends or the refugees who are sent to Syracuse by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' refugee resettlement program are prepared for the high-skill positions needed to fuel the knowledge-based economy at the heart of the region's development strategy.* Although the immigrants, refugees, and Puerto Rican migrants now settling in the greater Syracuse area do not augment the upper tail of the labor supply, they do add welcome depth to the bottom half. Employers who hire these newcomers generally praise their industriousness and loyalty and often rely on this cohort to fill critical entry-level positions. Meanwhile, other employers struggle to find willing and able workers for such positions and other immigrants, refugees, and newcomers remain without gainful employment. *The occasional failure of supply and demand to intersect at this end of the labor market may be partially explained by a mismatch between the skills employers require and the skills the newcomers present. But other factors also intrude,* such as transportation

constraints that make it difficult for the newcomers to get to and from work and inadequate knowledge among employers of ways to tap into the pool of immigrants, refugees, and new arrivals from Puerto Rico. These and other issues are discussed below.

It is important to note that the workforce skills situation is not static. The report sets out a number of recommendations that could help bridge the gap between employers seeking workers and immigrants and non-English-speaking newcomers wanting work. Employers, immigrants/refugees, service providers, and government planners alike have a stake in the outcome. It is up to these groups, alone and in collaboration, to pursue initiatives that would lead to mutually beneficial outcomes and a thriving local economy.

Report Outline

The report that follows provides the details and supporting evidence for the highlights noted above. It is divided into four sections: "Foreign-Born Job Seekers and the Supply of Labor" discusses the different experiences of distinct groups of newcomers to the Syracuse area and the barriers that often thwart their chances for successful employment; "Employers and the Demand for Labor" explores local employers' perspective on the workplace suitability of the newcomers and the challenges employers face in trying to absorb these job-seekers; "Training and Job Preparation" offers a brief overview of the role played by service providers who help newcomers acclimate and find work; "Recommendations" proposes a variety of initiatives that the stakeholders (newcomers, employers, service providers, and government planners) might consider in an effort to narrow the gap between the skills supplied and the skills demanded in certain sectors of the local labor market.

Foreign-Born Job Seekers and the Supply of Labor

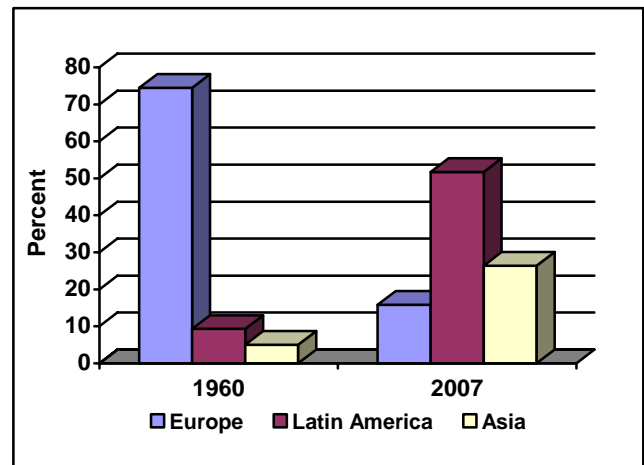
Immigration is a front-page story these days. Congress and the president are debating how to handle the millions of immigrants living and working in the United States without proper documentation and how to manage future demand for entry into this country. Large cities and small towns alike are reeling from the influx of unskilled immigrants whose presence strains local social services and schools while a handful of locales are implementing innovative programs designed to integrate the newcomers into the community's political, economic, and social fabric.² Employers, by and large, favor few restrictions on immigration because it inflates the supply of labor and occasionally helps fill specialized job openings. Some minority groups and their advocates complain that excessive immigration, particularly of the low-skill and illegal kind, suppresses wages and takes away jobs from native-born Americans.

Economists have long studied the effects of immigration. Economic theory suggests that immigration produces net gains for domestic residents of a country due to increased production of goods and services and the resulting tendency among domestic workers to specialize in more value-added occupations. This sanguine forecast holds so long as immigrants bring a different skill set from that of U.S. workers and if that skill differential prevails through succeeding generations. The theory nonetheless concedes that immigration produces winners and losers: employers benefit from a larger supply of labor and lower wages while domestic workers who compete directly with immigrant workers may struggle to find jobs that pay a living wage. Using actual data to test these theories has yielded equivocal results, and researchers continue to assess the economic and labor market impacts of immigration.

² Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees. 2006. "Investing in Our Communities: Strategies for Immigrant Integration (Toolkit for Grantmakers)".

One piece of data is clear, however: the changing demographics of the immigrant population. Immigrants accounted for 12.4% of the U.S. population in 2005³ compared with 4.7% in 1970.⁴ They constituted 14.5% of the civilian labor force in 2004 compared to 9.8% a decade earlier and in cities such as Los Angeles and Miami, immigrants make up more than half of the local workforce.⁵ As the immigrant population has swelled, so has the proportion of newcomers from non-European countries. The relative share of immigrants from Western Europe has been decreasing while that of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa has been rising; many of these individuals arrive without legal documentation.

Changing Composition of Immigration
Figure 1



Source: Ray, Brian K. 2004. "Building the New American Community." Migration Policy Institute.

The vast majority of the newer immigrants hail from countries with underdeveloped economies and weak educational systems. Many have few

³ Paral, Rob. August 2006. "The Growth and Reach of Immigration: New Census Bureau Data Underscore Importance of Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Force." Immigration Policy Brief. American Immigration Law Foundation.

⁴ Gibson, Campbell J. and Emily Lennox. (February 1999) "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the U.S.: 1850-1990." Population Division Working Paper #29. U.S. Bureau of the Census.

⁵ Congressional Budget Office. November 2005. "Role of Immigrants in U.S. Labor Market".

skills that can be readily transferred to industrial settings and inevitably wind up taking jobs at the bottom of the pay and skill ladder with little chance of upward mobility. Indeed, the wage gap between foreign-born and native-born workers has widened over time – from 10% in 1970 to 24% in 2004⁶ – and is most evident in “gateway” states where immigrants tend to cluster (i.e., New York, New Jersey, Florida, Illinois, Texas, and California).⁷ Although the economic status of many immigrants does eventually improve as their skills increase, growing wage inequality in the U.S. labor market in general is slowing and hindering this progression.

The make-up of the immigrant and refugee cohort in the Syracuse area is likewise changing. According to the Census Bureau, the foreign-born population in Onondaga County includes approximately 25,929 individuals, of whom more than 11,000 are recent immigrants. The three main sending regions are Europe (41% of all foreign-born), Asia (37%), and Latin America (10.2%); Africans account for 3.4% of the foreign-born population. Social service providers report swelling ranks of immigrants and refugees from Africa and parts of Asia, and some from former Soviet-bloc republics and regions, who have left behind less industrialized and/or turbulent societies and arrive in the county with fewer skills and less workforce-readiness than their predecessors.

Although immigrants represent only 5.6% of the county’s population, they are a boon to the region. Their numbers surged 20.5% from 1990 to 2000 while the native-born population decreased 3.4%. The sizeable growth in the foreign-born demographic group, however, was not sufficient to stem the decline in the county’s total population, which decreased 2.3% during the period.⁸ Population decline is a phenomenon Onondaga County shares with other areas of the northeast and Midwest,

⁶ <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2006/07/ressum.pdf>

⁷ Smith, James P, and Barry Edmonston, eds. 1997. *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration*. Washington D.C.: National Research Council/ National Academy Press. 176-179.

⁸ <http://www.censusscope.org/>

which have also experienced dramatic deindustrialization during the past 20 years. The impact on the labor supply is obvious. “The city is looking to encourage high-level immigration,” said one government planner, “but we also need lower-level immigration because Americans just don’t want these jobs.”

The Refugee Experience

Syracuse has always welcomed immigrants, and skilled workers from Germany, Italy, and Ireland were vital to the city’s industrial development in the early 20th century. Over the years, immigrants from other European countries trickled in and were eventually joined by Hispanics from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and other Latin American countries. Migrants from Puerto Rico have also flowed into the area.

Following the end of the wars in Southeast Asia in the 1970s, Syracuse entered the refugee business. Under the auspices of the federal Health and Human Services Department’s Office of Refugee Resettlement, Catholic Charities and the InterReligious Council (now known as InterFaith Works) have assisted more than 15,000 refugees from countries with unstable political systems and weak economies (e.g., Vietnam, Laos, Burma, Bosnia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Cuba, Sudan, Somalia, and Liberia) to settle in the county. In fact, apart from several thousand non-Cuban Hispanics who moved to Syracuse since the early 1980s, most of the foreign-born arrivals have been refugees. (This legal classification entitles people to special benefits such as cash and medical assistance, employment preparation and skills training, and general help in social and cultural adjustment.) “We’re seeing a very diverse population now,” commented one personnel specialist. “Fourteen years ago the immigrants were almost all Spanish-speaking.”

In the absence of hard statistical data and speaking in gross generalizations, government planners and social service providers stated in

interviews for this study that the first refugee contingents arriving from Southeast Asia and former Soviet-bloc countries have fared relatively well, as have the Cubans. Many of these people arrived with intact families, attended school at least through ninth grade, and have prior work experience and some technical skills. The Cubans and Eastern Europeans are also advantaged because their race, religion, and culture are similar to the dominant social milieu in the county and because they are comfortable in urban, industrialized settings. Many of the men have found jobs as engineers, in the medical field, and in relatively skilled positions in manufacturing and construction, although some with master-craft skills (plumbers and electricians, for instance) may not initially work at that level because they arrive without documentation proving their expertise. Eastern European women are less prevalent in the workforce, partly because they tend to seek work only when forced by financial necessity and partly because their options seem more limited by dint of gaps in their education and/or work experience.

The Vietnamese also settled in quickly, helped in large measure, according to social service providers, by a strong and cohesive community. Typically, adults found work at factories and then taught relatives and friends how to perform the tasks, thereby helping to train and recruit additional workers to the job site. Employers said they value Vietnamese workers' dexterity, attention to detail, motivation, and willingness to attend technical training programs. It is not uncommon for the father to work one shift and the mother another so that someone is always home to care for the children, and perhaps an aging parent. "Sometimes we see them passing the children off in the cafeteria," commented one human resources (HR) director. These days, many of the nail (manicure) shops in Syracuse are owned by Vietnamese refugees.

But the newest refugees require more support and pre-employment preparation than previous cohorts, according to social service providers and government planners. About six years ago,

the county began receiving refugees with less "human capital" than earlier waves of new Americans. Many left behind economically undeveloped countries and have limited or no work experience. Some, including the Somalis and Sudanese, endured years of violent ethnic strife, lost family members, and spent long periods of time in refugee camps before arriving in Syracuse. The Burmese and African cohorts have yet to forge strong communities with indigenous leadership that could help them navigate the transition to life in upstate New York. The Eastern Europeans and Russian minorities often present with health problems, including high blood pressure, varicose veins, migraines, or injuries sustained during the brutal breakup of the former Yugoslavia. Few of the new Americans speak English and some are illiterate in their own language; some have never seen or used modern conveniences, let alone industrial technology; some are single mothers with many children; and some are physically slight and struggle with the brute demands of manufacturing or other physically stressful jobs. ***"Job readiness," summed up one public sector jobs specialist, "is a function of nationality."***

The refugees, by and large, are eager to work. Many have found stable jobs – on assembly lines, in commercial laundries, in housekeeping and food service at hotels and health care facilities, doing manual and semi-skilled labor in construction. These jobs typically pay \$8-\$11 an hour and often come with benefits, including health insurance, vacation days, and 401(k) plans. Some, however, eventually find themselves jobless because of slack demand, and some are underemployed because the work is seasonal. "The refugees have strong effort and desire," said one service provider, "but are often stuck in a hire-layoff cycle." Others lose jobs because they are not culturally or technologically ready to work. "It takes longer to prepare them," said another service provider.

Indeed, some refugees remain unemployed even months after arriving in the U.S. During the group interviews, many expressed frustration about their job situation and a

parallel longing to find a place for themselves in American society. They spoke of severe financial need, the loss of self-esteem that accompanies dependence on public welfare, and confusion over jobs that disappear from one day to the next and employers' unwillingness to accommodate personal illness or that of their children. They acknowledged that lack of English is often a handicap, and for many refugees from Africa and Burma, so too is the inability to read and write. And yet, the refugees insisted, with a little good will on employers' part and perseverance on theirs, they would be valuable employees. "Just help me get a job and I can do it," asserted one Somali woman. "Employers need to understand that we're here forever," said a woman who is a Russian Turk. "We're hard workers, we want to earn money, and we don't jump from job to job."

The Immigrant and Puerto Rican Experience

Immigrants (mostly non-Cuban Hispanics) and Puerto Ricans left their homes and moved to Syracuse primarily to reunite with family and/or to seek better opportunities for themselves and their children. And yet, social service providers reported, most have not successfully integrated into the local economy. The Hispanic and Puerto Rican populations are concentrated on the city's west side where unemployment is widespread, poverty pervasive and English proficiency limited.

Most of the Spanish-speaking population in Syracuse is Puerto Rican. Like a disproportionate number of Hispanics and African-Americans throughout the U.S., many are stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty, limited education, and low expectations. According to social service providers, few adult Puerto Ricans living in the city have finished high school or earned a GED. Many are single women with children and many have held jobs (mostly of the unskilled variety, such as housekeeping or in laundries) only sporadically or not at all. One job developer noted that most

of the clients he serves do not know how to look for a job or land an interview. "You don't write 'anything' when they ask what kind of job you're looking for," he said, "or 'ASAP' when they ask about availability. And you have to know what clothes to wear. First impressions are important."

The apparently weak connection of Puerto Ricans' to the labor market is also evident in what service providers reported as their oft-stated inability or unwillingness to seek work outside the neighborhood or take jobs if the schedule conflicts with times the children are home from school. "I'll work anywhere, but only in the day," said one woman. Attitude is often a stumbling block. "If I get hired for a minimum wage job in the suburbs, then I spend all my money on transportation," explained another woman. "But I have to take it even if I don't like it (because of welfare rules) and then the boss sees that and I get laid off." Several women in the interview group expressed a preference for ESL classes over work but qualified their readiness to attend by insisting there must be child care in the building.

Reliance on welfare among Puerto Rican newcomers in Syracuse is not uncommon. Most of the interviewees for this report have bounced on and off public assistance for years. Currently they are enrolled in JOBSplus!, a partnership between the county's Department of Social Services and Onondaga Community College that seeks to prepare welfare recipients for labor market success and requires 35 hours of work each week as a condition of receiving benefits. The women said they are pressured to fill out job applications but stymied because they don't know enough English, frustrated because of inadequate transportation, and anxious when expected to conduct job searches after their children's school day ends. If they fail to satisfy the JOBSplus! requirements, public assistance is suspended. "I have little kids and it takes 45 days to reopen my case," one woman said, adding that she often turns to a local food pantry for help.

Complaints by participants about JOBSplus! are legion and largely center on the absence of meaningful skills training and work experience. “We’re shelving books and packing boxes to help P.E.A.C.E. (a community action organization) move,” grumbled one woman. Refugees on public assistance must also participate in JOBSplus!, although ESL classes may count as part of their work obligation. Nonetheless, the refugees’ comments echoed those of Puerto Rican interviewees. Several refugees cited a desire to acquire sewing skills and learn how to use computers. Instead, groused a Somali refugee, “we learn to clean at JOBSplus! I want a real job.”

Barriers to Employment

But finding, and then qualifying for, that open position has become an increasing challenge for refugees, immigrants, and Puerto Ricans alike. Especially for the newest group of refugees and immigrants, the barriers to employment are high.

- **Fewer entry-level jobs:** Coincident with the downward slide in basic skills among recently-arriving newcomers is a decline in the availability of basic entry-level jobs. As noted above, a substantial portion of the area’s manufacturing base disappeared during the past two decades and the economic effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks were keenly felt. Among the unskilled jobs that remain, the requirements have gotten stiffer. More and more technology has been incorporated into the workplace – even at the entry level – and with fewer jobs to go around, employers can be choosy. One job developer who works exclusively with refugees said he pushes harder now to place an individual than he did before 9/11 and then repeats the exercise a month later when the match did not take or business slows and the person is laid off. “Before, we could send someone with no skills to one of the electrical components factories,” noted a colleague. “But now they require more

English and some pre-existing competence. Even cleaning services insist on some knowledge of English for safety with the chemicals and machines.”

- **English and computers:** Proficiency in English is rarely required for entry-level jobs, but many foreign-born newcomers and migrants from Puerto Rico do not speak enough to answer questions on an application, undergo training, follow health and safety instructions, or communicate with a supervisor. In some workplaces, use of specialized vocabulary and slang complicates the language issue. As the number of entry-level jobs falls, some employers are raising the bar for English comprehension. “Our intermediate-level students are getting those jobs now instead of the beginners,” said one ESL provider. Language competence may also be a stopper in the search for a second, better job. “It’s quite a challenge to work a full shift and maybe some overtime and then go to class and, if you’re a single mom, also manage the home,” commented another ESL provider. Minimal language skills often accompany lack of computer literacy. The combination inhibits newcomers’ ability to apply for jobs that require an on-line application, a common practice among large retailers in the area. Even when the application is available in Spanish, Puerto Rican job seekers often miss out on the opportunity because they do not have ready access to computers.
- **Pre-industrial background/no work experience:** Many African and some Asian refugees come from agrarian societies and have never worked in a wage economy. Some have trouble grasping the meaning of schedules and time clocks, productivity, accountability, and teamwork. Many lack the experiential foundation for performing repetitive tasks and may not respond to standard training pedagogies. “Some employers teach through pictures but the refugees may not be used to looking at pictures,” noted one social services provider. Although immigrants, refugees, and Puerto Rican migrants often qualify for

entry-level positions even with these deficits, they face a slow and uncertain climb up to second-tier jobs; becoming an office assistant or nurse's aide, for example, requires the type of upskilling that could take six to eight years, said one training provider.

- **Culture and customs:** Refugees in particular sometimes run into resistance from potential employers because of reluctance to speak up, ask questions, show initiative, or acknowledge a blunder; a few are uncomfortable with having a female boss. "One guy quit because he made a mistake," said one employer. "It was all about his pride. They have needs we don't even think about." Native-born co-workers in some facilities have expressed concerns about refugees' standards of personal hygiene, unfamiliar food odors in the lunch room, and their work ethic. "My employees resent the Cubans because they're better workers," said another employer. And sometimes they just do not understand or have confidence in U.S. laws. "I know of cases where the refugees don't trust the company to put money into the 401(k)," said one human resources specialist.
- **Attendance:** Newcomers sometimes run afoul of strict attendance policies that make no allowance for the needs of sick children or child-care crises (two major problems for single parents), personal health issues, or transportation breakdowns. "I worked at a place for more than a year until I got sick and was fired," said a woman from Liberia. "How can employers treat people like this?" Small companies may be less willing or able to accommodate because there is not enough slack in the work process to adjust to an absence. But sometimes, employers said, refugees are reluctant to explain the situation or ask for assistance.
- **Transportation:** Few newcomers own cars and many do not drive; public transit is not always reliable or feasible. Centro, the regional public transit system, provides refugees and immigrants with a free six-month bus pass so they can travel to and from that all-important first job. But the

routes do not always go where the jobs are (service to the suburbs is spotty) or as frequently as workers need; night-time service is either limited or non-existent and many employers do not want employees hanging around the property waiting for a bus. Centro is usually willing to add service in response to demand, but "it's a catch-22," said one employer. "I can't hire without transportation to my facility and Centro won't give me the transportation until I hire."

Employers and the Demand for Labor

Ondaga County has a mix of large and small employers spread throughout a diversified economy. There are mom-and-pop stores, branches of national and regional retail chains, nursing homes and hospitals, public and private educational institutions, commercial laundries, hotels and food service establishments, construction companies, manufacturing facilities, and government offices. Although employment opportunities in the area are becoming increasingly professionalized and more technology-based, employers and economic planners alike say there still are, and always will be, entry-level jobs for individuals without many skills.

And yet, employers assert the supply of qualified employees at the lower end of the skills ladder is tight. Speaking in gross generalizations, employers interviewed for this study talked about the deterioration in math, language, and communication skills among younger native-born workers, their lackadaisical attitude about work, and their sense of entitlement. "There's not a lot of 'want' in 18-year-olds today," observed one HR director of a large manufacturing plant. "They lack commitment and focus." Several employers also said that older native-born workers who lost jobs when companies downsized or closed now hold unrealistic expectations about current working conditions and wage and benefit levels.

“Finding employees occupies more of our time than it used to,” commented one small employer. “It takes a bigger and bigger pool to find one fish.” Another noted that for each employee that “sticks,” he has to hire three. Generalized concerns about the work readiness of the younger generation are aggravated by the expected retirement of 45% of the area’s labor force – most notably among the skilled trades –over the next five to ten years.

Local employers are turning to the newcomers, particularly the refugees, to fill existing holes. “The refugees have been a terrific source of steady employees,” said the HR director of a mid-sized manufacturing plant where about one-third of the workers are foreign-born. “When I look for new employees, I call the refugee program (affiliated with Catholic Charities, InterFaith Works, and the Syracuse City School District) first,” said the president of a small company. Employers interviewed for this study expressed near unanimous admiration for the refugees’ work ethic. “They take pride in their work and are self-motivated,” observed the plant manager of a small manufacturing facility who has Thai and Cambodian workers on the payroll. “They show up on time, they’re courteous, and they’re highly productive.” Added the president of a parts distributor: “They’re awesome workers.” Employers also assert the refugees are appreciative of the opportunity to work and less likely to job-hop than their American counterparts.

Such constancy and loyalty save employers the hassle and expense of continuous turnover; in a relatively short time, refugees generate a positive return on the time and money invested in their training. Many of the employers interviewed for this report said their *modus operandi* was some variation on the theme of “hire for attitude and teach the rest.” Despite the perception of job developers who work with refugees and immigrants about the increasing difficulty of finding placements for people without observable skills, these employers generally insisted they could transmit the requisite know-how through on-the-job training.

“I prefer to hire someone without any skills,” said the owner of a small job shop. “They’re easier to train. Basically, I’m looking for someone who’s excited to be here.”

But training someone with minimal or no comprehension of English who also has no experience with modern technology or the conveniences Americans take for granted requires a different type of commitment from employers. “We do a lot more training with the refugees,” said the HR director at a company with a long history of hiring immigrants, “including an extensive new-employee orientation that includes matters like how to read a paycheck and what the bells mean.” The particular training techniques employers use vary by company, the tasks to be completed, and the language and skill proficiency of the new worker. In some settings a supervisor spends several hours or a couple of days working one-on-one with the individual. Some employers rely on co-workers from the home country to translate and train, while others request and receive on-site assistance from the organizations that helped place the refugee or immigrant at the worksite. Employers also use sign language, color coding, and/or pictorial aids to teach operational tasks and health and safety practices. “See, do” is how several recent immigrants explained their training at factory and construction jobs.

Only a very few employers are willing to hire people with no work experience, knowledge of English, or technical skills – and then only for first-rung entry-level service jobs or one-step assembly jobs. Concerns about quality, health and safety, and communication with co-workers and supervisors typically underlie employers’ demand for some rudimentary skills and language facility. Knowing how to measure or read a blueprint is often a minimal requirement for entry-level machinist jobs, and some facilities will settle for evidence of visual comprehension for basic assembly work. Several employers said they offered health and safety training in employees’ native language, a feasible approach when the workers speak one of the more common languages, such as

Spanish or Bosnian. Still, some employers said they insist that regular workplace communication be conducted in English. The motivation here seemed to be preventing inter-ethnic conflict (“Some employees worry about what others might be saying about them,” explained one HR director.) and encouraging assimilation and upward mobility (“You need to know English in order to succeed,” said the president of a small manufacturing company.). A few of the larger employers facilitate this process by offering ESL classes on site several times a month or flexing a schedule to accommodate employees who attend language classes elsewhere in the county.

As much as employers seem to value and appreciate immigrant and refugee workers, knowing how to tap into that labor pool remains somewhat of a mystery. Quite a few employers rely on employment agencies to recruit and screen all applicants; refugees, immigrants, and other Hispanic newcomers are often introduced to the agencies by the job developers who work with the refugee resettlement program and with the social service providers in the Hispanic community. Some employers expressed interest in recruiting newcomers but conceded they were not familiar with the hiring channels. “We struggle to find entry-level employees,” said the HR director of a health services company. “We’d work with immigrant groups if we knew whom to call. We would like to establish an ongoing relationship that we can feed and foster.”

Challenges for Employers

Employers troubled by the prospect of labor shortages in Onondaga County will find only partial relief in the refugee, immigrant, and Puerto Rican workforce as it is presently constituted. For the most part the newcomers lack the language, literacy, and technical skills needed to fill the jobs that planners expect will be created as the local economy is transformed and older workers retire; some are barely prepared for entry-level service and production jobs. Just as the newcomers have hurdles to

overcome before they can join the economic mainstream, employers likewise face challenges in being able to draw on the energy, desire, and capabilities of the area’s newest workforce.

- **Training and ESL:** Employers generally expressed a willingness to provide the job-specific training that immigrants and refugees require, and some have devised creative approaches to training a diverse workforce. But few companies are willing or able to start from scratch; that is, to train people who have absolutely no understanding of English or who have no prior work experience. Among those companies that do their own job training, creating opportunities for non-English speakers to burnish their language facility is not a high priority. The Onondaga-Cortland-Madison counties BOCES offers ESL classes at the employer’s job site at no cost and/or develops customized and contextual ESL curricula for a fee; these services are not used to full capacity partly because some employers do not know they exist and partly because some employers are reluctant to lose production time. An investment in language training can pay off, however. A joint labor-management training and upgrade fund involving six health care providers in the county and 1199SEIU (Service Employees International Union) recently launched a contextualized ESL and cultural issues course for six Sudanese refugees in the dietary department at one of the hospitals. “The goal was to ensure people retained their jobs and acquired enough verbal communication skills to move up,” explained the curriculum developer. “Management loved it and people really blossomed.”
- **Job ladders and skill upgrading.** Only some companies have developed the kind of job ladders that would enable refugees to move into positions demanding more advanced skill. As the population ages and more seniors choose to remain in their homes, for example, the health care sector anticipates steadily increasing requests for

highly-skilled aides who can provide hospital-like levels of care in personal residences. “That’s our new challenge,” said the HR director of a health care facility. “We’ll have to look for more skill or we’ll have to invest more in training people and mentoring them.” But training providers reported that most employers speak only in generalities when talking about their need for workers with more technical skills and have not plotted out training and career paths for workers eager to improve their skills and advance their occupational standing. “There’s a big gulf between knowing how to turn on a computer and knowing computer-aided-design,” said one workforce developer. “But few employers take the time to assess what they really need.”

- **Supervision:** Managers and supervisors typically lack functional literacy in the languages of the people reporting to them. Supervisors can and do communicate successfully with non-English speakers through sign language and by relying on the ability of other workers to translate. But where there are pockets of immigrants who speak the same language, efficiency could be enhanced if supervisors also shared some common vocabulary with the workers. Cultural sensitivity is a related issue; hand gestures, mixed-gender work groups, and personal hygiene are just some of the potentially loaded matters that supervisors must deal with. Managing a multicultural workforce requires nurturing and attentive supervision. An HR director at a components plant, for example, carefully matches supervisors with new foreign-born hires and avoids assigning any to one particular supervisor who just does not like immigrants. One of the area’s largest manufacturers tries to maintain a multiethnic supervisory staff that at least partially reflects the workforce. “We like to have people employees can relate to and who serve as role models,” said the HR director.
- **Workplace environment:** For some employers, concern about the overall atmosphere and tone in the workplace

looms large. “The immigrant work ethic is better, but before I hire any I have to ask if the work environment is right,” said one employer with a small manufacturing plant. “I worry the old-timers could feel threatened by new and different cultures and that one nationality might be the sworn enemy of another. Any animosity could affect attitudes and productivity.” Employers with large numbers of immigrant and refugee workers, however, said there was little or no inter-ethnic animosity at their facilities or problems between immigrants and native-born workers. One HR director explained that management at this company actively encourages the new Americans to share their food and culture with coworkers, often at small parties sponsored by the work units. Another HR director noted that some refugees prefer to remain within their own ethnic circle while others choose to mix, but that everyone was focused on getting the job done. “We’re all here for the same purpose,” he said, “and that’s to learn a skill and provide for our families.”

- **Flexibility:** Employers’ need for on-time production and service delivery, for cost control and profitability, inevitably trumps employees’ need for time to care for children, study English, or visit the doctor. But people, particularly new Americans or migrants from Puerto Rico who may be overwhelmed by work and family obligations while struggling to acclimate, also have lives that sometimes demand immediate attention. Some employers are responsive to these intrusions with no-fault attendance policies based on points and bonuses or ad hoc accommodation based on frank discussions between worker and supervisor. “I’m willing to work with them so long as it’s transparent and there’s no abuse,” said one employer who has a small production facility. Others do not leave room for unexpected events or offer creative flex-time or job-sharing arrangements. “Employers will run out of people to hire if they’re too strict,” cautioned one personnel specialist. “We try to educate employers that they may need to accept flexibility.”

Conceding the point, one plant manager said he is beginning to think about creative shift hours. “You can’t just do 8-5, Monday through Friday, and get the people you need,” he said.

Training and Job Preparation

Syracuse has no shortage of social service organizations that work with and advocate for refugees and immigrants. Some are essentially government agencies, such as the one-stop job center CNYWorks, and others are private-sector non-profits that rely on government funding and private donations, such as Catholic Charities and Interfaith Works/Center for New Americans. The variety of organizations, each with its own mission and structure, enables the community to offer a range of services to foreign-born residents and migrants from Puerto Rico, including ESL classes, skills training, job search assistance and on-the-job coaching, and help with housing, health, family issues, and transportation. Key service providers also include West Side Learning Center, Spanish Action League, P.E.A.C.E. Inc., Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES, and JOBSplus!, the county’s public assistance program.

Immigrants and Puerto Ricans find their own way to the community organizations, which maintain their own contacts with employment agencies and employers and can refer people to training opportunities. Refugees are assigned to either Catholic Charities or the Center for New Americans, which take primary responsibility for their resettlement. The agencies are under pressure, by contract with their sponsors, to secure employment for workable adults within six months. But for many of the refugees, particularly those from undeveloped and war-torn countries, even determined effort by advocates and the best of intentions on the refugees’ part can fail to turn up stable job opportunities. “These are people with no urban experience,” said one program

director. “And what do you do for the single mom with five children?”

Service providers often expressed frustration with the “system.” They bemoaned the lack of sufficient and consistent funding for skills training and grumbled about the short time frame during which the refugees, in particular, are expected to acculturate and find work. Noting that the work requirements built into the system were designed for people with western backgrounds, “the refugees have no time to get grounded,” said one service provider. “Four to six months is just not enough. We’re dealing with groups of people who are not ready to work.”

Some job-readiness services are available only to refugees but many are also open to immigrants and Puerto Ricans. Anyone can take the day or evening ESL classes offered by BOCES at its Liverpool and East Syracuse locations – although these sites are not particularly convenient to the would-be students’ neighborhoods – and employers are entitled to ask BOCES to provide on-site ESL instruction. BOCES, like other service providers, also helps students develop an ‘employability’ plan that charts out a course of learning that could lead to a first or better job. The West Side Learning Center (WSLC), which works in partnership with the Syracuse City School District, runs ESL classes and vocational training, helps immigrants and other newcomers deal with cultural stresses, maintains an employment division, and is affiliated with a child care center. Since the mid-1990s, WSLC has offered vocational programs in child development and office technology. Students must be at least at the intermediate English level and must commit to six months of training, which includes an internship. About 400 people have passed through each of these programs and almost all have found jobs. The center is now adding a health careers program that involves an eight-week preparatory course intended to qualify students for training programs elsewhere in the city; each student will be supported with semi-weekly tutoring. And P.E.A.C.E. has been talking with a health

care organization about developing a program to train Hispanic women as certified nurse's aides; ESL would be included in the curriculum.

Some of the labor unions with members in the county are also prepared to help train newcomers. UNITE HERE! offers ESL classes for Hispanic members who hold jobs in local commercial laundries. The Central New York Area Labor Federation maintains a workforce development center that can train people in a variety of skills, ranging from computers to welding. Given the region's expectations for growth in the service sector (from new hotels and restaurants, and a new mega-mall), the center is using a grant from the Metropolitan Development Agency to develop a hospitality school focused on customer service. The center expects the school will attract immigrants and refugees and provide the foundational skills that would enable them to climb up the career ladder. It is also planning a class in conversational Spanish for managers in the hotel industry and is considering opening the course to managers from the health care sector. And the joint labor-management training initiative involving 1199SEIU and health care employers is now beginning to reach out to its immigrant and refugee population – about 200 of the 6,000 or so 1199SEIU members in Syracuse – with specialized language and culture programs.

Recommendations

Refugees, immigrants, and migrants from Puerto Rico are critical and welcome participants in the Onondaga County workforce. They hold a variety of unskilled and semi-skilled positions in manufacturing, health services, hospitality, construction, and other sectors of the local economy. Based on interviews conducted for this report, the perceived and demonstrated strong work ethic of the refugees in particular often makes them preferred candidates for open slots. Earlier waves of new Americans – that is, from 1980 until 2002 or so – brought with them enough of

an educational and industrial background that they were able to find a place within the economic mainstream without great difficulty. Indeed, some have moved on to supervisory positions in factories and to running their own small businesses.

But the latest cohort of arrivals is often lacking many of the fundamental skills employers expect for even basic entry-level jobs. Some manage to compensate relatively quickly and join the workforce within a year, but others are disadvantaged by constraints ranging from illiteracy and health problems to inadequate transportation and child care. Enabling these newcomers to join the workforce will require a sustained investment by service providers and the business community: training is needed in life skills and job skills. It will also require patience.

For the most part, these immigrants, refugees, and migrants from Puerto Rico will not be able to satisfy the demands for the higher-level skills that will fuel what regional planners expect will be a knowledge-based economy. The gaps here may be filled in the near- and medium-term by a sustained and collaborative community/business/government campaign to attract well-educated professionals and technology experts to the region. In the long-run, the Journey To Jobs initiative may lead to the development of a homegrown workforce that will continuously feed and replenish the skill needs of the local economy.

Meanwhile, there are action steps all stakeholders could take to ensure a mutual-gain outcome at the less-skilled end of the labor market; that is, stable jobs and economic assimilation for the foreign-born and other Hispanic newcomers and productive and capable workers for local employers. A match between labor supply and labor demand is a necessary precondition for a viable and thriving economy.

Suggested initiatives for employers:

- Workshops for company owners and executives on creative and value-added human resource management policies and practices, including but not limited to “managing a diverse workforce” and “immigration and the new economy”
- Supervisor training focused on methods to train workers and how to manage a diverse workforce
- Diversity training for the existing workforce
- Functional foreign-language training for company executives and supervisors
- Service-provider “fairs” held semi-annually to familiarize employers with the organizations that facilitate employment and training opportunities for foreign-born and other newcomers
- Periodic presentations of best practices (recruiting, training, supervising, and retaining immigrants, refugees, and other minorities) by area employers for other area employers
- Individual consulting with employers to identify specific skills needs for now and five years out to encourage human resource planning and development of job ladders
- Collaboration among employers in the same industry to identify common skills and contextualized language, and to train jointly when feasible; collaboration among employers within the county to create cross-company job ladders that would facilitate the movement of workers among jobs and companies while fostering their upward mobility and retention in the community; collaboration among physically proximate employers for joint child care and transportation arrangements
- Job fairs in immigrant and refugee neighborhoods where job seekers can get on-the-spot help filling out applications and then sit for interviews
- Revive apprenticeship programs, particularly for skilled trades

Suggested initiatives for service providers:

- Extend hours for neighborhood centers, especially those offering child care
- Organize translation referral and/or hotline service; ditto for emergency child care facilities and/or child care referral service
- Encourage and aid development of leadership and institutional infrastructure within immigrant, refugee, and Puerto Rican communities, including designation of mentor families
- Help build relationships between leaders of these communities and civic, government, and business leaders
- Offer lessons in entrepreneurship and help in finding capital

Suggested initiatives for government planners:

- Convene coalition of employers, service providers, relevant government agencies, and grass-roots community leaders to identify priorities for immigrant/refugee/ Puerto Rican workforce development, devise action plan, and launch pilot initiatives
- Merge focus on workforce issues of foreign-born and other Hispanic minorities into Journey To Jobs
- Survey employers on their needs concerning ESL and other skills training
- Help employers and service providers secure funding to support new initiatives

Suggested initiatives for immigrants, refugees, and migrants from Puerto Rico:

- Designate families/homes within ethnic communities as (paid) providers of child care with subsidies from public and private sources, as needed
- Develop mutual assistance associations and indigenous leadership, with help from service providers
- Mentoring by families that have successfully made the transition to their new lives in Syracuse

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