

Transforming Employment Narratives (TEN) - Summary and Takeaways

Background:

Employment is crucial to refugee claimants' flourishing. The research report, [From Humanitarian to Human: Changing the Way We Welcome Refugee Claimants](#), found that, "the ability to work was identified as a critical component of providing for oneself/one's family and living with dignity." (pg. 20) Beyond the financial stability and dignity of employment, it also provides connections and community. As one refugee claimant panelist at the [Oct 25, 2023 Transforming Employment Narratives public event](#) said, "employment is community."

But refugee claimants face unique challenges in the job market, often leading to underemployment despite significant education, work, and life experiences. The challenges are systemic in nature, as they are not tied to individual shortcomings, but instead are embedded in employment structures and discriminatory preconceived notions about refugee claimants. These challenges include:

- Legal and immigration status uncertainty: unlike other newcomers who may have permanent residency or work visas, refugee claimants often face uncertainty regarding their legal status, which can make employers hesitant to hire them due to potential future legal issues or disruptions.
- Lack of documentation: Refugee claimants may not have access to essential documents such as academic certificates, work experience letters, and other credentials from their home country. The arrival of refugee claimants to Canada is often unplanned or limited to carrying some belongings, not everything. Another relevant key point is the resume gap in employment history, particularly the gaps between jobs while figuring out how and where to seek safety and refuge as asylum seekers.
- Social isolation and lack of support networks: Refugee claimants often have smaller social and professional networks compared to other newcomers, which can limit their access to job opportunities, references, and mentorship. Other newcomers are often coming through private or governmental sponsored programs which require the provision of wraparound support that refugee claimants do not have access to.

Transforming Employment Narratives (TEN) program works toward changing the employment system with and for refugee claimants so that workplaces are diverse and inclusive, refugee claimants are meaningfully employed, and where employers and refugee claimants flourish together.

On Feb 2, 3, 16, 17, and 23, 2024, 18 participants made up of refugee claimants, employers, HR specialists, and settlement workers came together for the pilot TEN program. The diversity

of participants helped to bring the different perspectives and experiences needed to explore in depth the issue of refugee claimant underemployment and to envision new ways to break down the employment barriers for refugee claimants.

Below are the key takeaways from the pilot TEN program.

Takeaways for Refugee Claimants:

A variety of perspectives were shared during our sessions. For some, survival jobs are often a trap that exploit and isolate refugee claimants. The system is rigged against them. Meaningful jobs exist as far-reaching dreams and are not easily accessed when the system does not support refugee claimants' access to them. Others can see survival jobs as a first step into professional life in Canada. As those jobs were most likely an entry point to the workforce for people who were born in Canada, even if it most likely not at the same stage in life. Coming away from these discussions, some actionable takeaways for refugee claimants include:

- Seek training, mentorship, and networking opportunities as well as allies who can help break into meaningful jobs and careers. RCs can also take advantage of resources and workshops on building resumes, cover letters and interviewing skills.
- Understand the importance of skills and knowledge beyond what is typically on a resume and cover letter such as life-skills, communication abilities, multicultural expertise, etc..
- Learn to navigate the system and the definitions and processes related to status (e.g., Refugee Claimant, Protected Person). This knowledge helps in accessing the necessary resources and knowing your rights.
- Find and build a supportive community. Sharing experiences and feelings with others can create a sense of belonging and collective strength.
- Prioritize mental health and wellbeing by acknowledging the challenges and seeking support when needed. Trauma and stress are common, and addressing them is important for overall wellbeing. The refugee claim journey can be a great contributing factor for burnout and depression, so it is important to find the resources and support to overcome such struggles.
- Recognize the importance of lived experiences. The refugee claimants' lived experiences are valuable and sharing these can help in influencing and changing systems, and they should be recognized and valued in professional and community spaces.

- Stay committed to learning and unlearning; this includes understanding new cultural contexts, systems, and your own biases and assumptions.
- Maintain hope and optimism. While challenges are significant, positive changes are happening, and your efforts contribute to transforming employment narratives.

Takeaways for Employers:

To improve employment for refugee claimants (and other newcomers), employers can center refugee claimant (and other newcomers) voices and experiences. This can include:

- Having refugee claimants (and other newcomers) at the management level of the organization. Employers are also encouraged to create an advisory committee made up of RCs and other newcomers.
- Regularly collecting feedback via surveys (and other tools) on employee experiences, with an emphasis on getting feedback from refugee claimants and other newcomers.

Improving employment for refugee claimants (or any other marginalized group) will also benefit non-marginalized staff. For example:

- Being trauma informed is significant for employing and working with refugee claimants, but non-marginalized staff also face various traumas that would benefit from their managers and organizations being trauma informed.
- Having an understanding of power and position at the leadership level at an organization will ensure that all staff, refugee claimant or otherwise, will be working in a supportive environment that recognizes the various experiences, needs, and barriers they face.

To enhance employment opportunities for refugee claimants, employers should examine their hiring practices for biases and barriers that disadvantage any individuals. Making minor adjustments to job postings, screening, and interview processes can have a significant impact. For instance:

- Explicitly encouraging refugee claimants to apply can help alleviate concerns about Canadian employers not hiring refugee claimants. A part of this is also explicitly asking applicants if they have any accessibility needs.
- Regularly gathering feedback on employee experiences through surveys and other tools, with a particular focus on input from refugee claimants.

- Take into consideration the stories and experiences of refugee claimants, such as gaps in their resumes, which might otherwise be overlooked during the initial screening of their job applications.

To maximize the potential of refugee claimants, employers should recognize their value as significant assets when given support and opportunities. This can involve:

- Shifting the focus to the potential of refugee claimants rather than making assumptions.
- Involving refugee claimants and employees with lived-experience in development and growth opportunities that could pave the way for them to hold management positions within the organization.
- Regularly checking in with refugee claimant employees to see how they can better be supported at the workplace.
- Planning ahead for development and mentorship opportunities.

Employers have the power to transform their part of the system within their organizations, networks, and communities. While government and global forces present challenges, employers can still enhance access and foster a sense of belonging in their workplaces. This can include:

- Implement inclusive hiring practices and policies.
- Actively participating in community initiatives that promote inclusivity.
- Create support systems for employees from diverse backgrounds such as refugee claimants.
- Encourage others in your sphere of influence to hire refugee claimants.

Takeaways for HR Professionals:

To improve employment opportunities for refugee claimants, HR professionals should critically assess and potentially revise traditional hiring practices that advantage "ideal" candidates and disadvantage those with non-traditional backgrounds such as refugee claimant. This can include:

- Critically reflecting on current practices, assumptions, and biases. One of the major barriers that keep refugee claimants underemployed is the various biases that advantage "ideal" candidates and disadvantage marginalized groups, including refugee claimants. Examples include:

- Relying on degrees from Western education as a primary qualifier when the skills needed for a position is often learned and gained through other routes for marginalized groups including workforce training, certification programs, job experience, and others.
- Other key barriers identified include the lack of Canadian work experience, absence of connections and references, and unconscious biases in hiring practices. Common unconscious biases include:
 - Name bias: Preference for Anglo-sounding names.
 - Halo effect: Positive impression based on one trait, such as graduating from a prestigious school.
 - Affinity bias: Favoring individuals with similar interests or backgrounds.
 - Status quo bias: Hiring from the same demographic group.
 - Perception bias: Judging based on stereotypes about a group.
- Regularly check organizational hiring and employment policies and practices for biases.

Ensure that recruiting focuses on skills, aptitude, and experience just as much as it does on credentials and job application. This involves critically examining what job requirements are truly essential. For example:

- Determine the actual level of English proficiency needed to perform the job effectively.
- Expand the boundaries of accepted credentials and certifications to go beyond what is known for Canadian employers and HRs.
- Consider the competitive advantage of refugee claimants being bilingual and multicultural.

By shifting the focus from traditional credentials to the relevant skills and experiences that candidates bring, employers can create a more inclusive and equitable hiring process.

- Ensure that hiring practices promote inclusivity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression by incorporating strategies such as blind screening*, being intentional with having a diversity of people and abilities at the workplace, considering lived experiences as valuable assets, recognition of biases, power, and identity, offering paid interviews or work trials, and establishing mentorship opportunities. For example:
 - Implement blind screening to minimize bias during the initial candidate review.
 - Actively seek out and encourage individuals from marginalized groups and diverse backgrounds to apply, promoting equitable access to opportunities.
 - Develop core skills in cultural competency, anti-racism, and anti-oppression. Self-reflection on bias and power dynamics is crucial.
 - Offer work trials to provide fair opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their skills.
 - Offer paid interviews to compensate applicants for their time, further promoting equitable access to job opportunities.
- Establish mentorship programs or plans to support the development and integration of both new and existing employees. These programs can pair staff members at the same level with new hires for guidance and support.

**Blind screening is the act of screening candidates without subconscious bias. This is done by removing any unnecessary information. When blind screening, an employer/HR cannot see information like name, age, racial background, gender, and sexual orientation.*

Enhance the effectiveness of resume and cover letter assessments as measuring tools for hiring beyond the traditional ways by implementing several key strategies:

- Look into the future and consider candidates' potential for growth, learning, and development within the organization. Look beyond immediate qualifications and assess candidates' adaptability, willingness to learn, and alignment with the organization's values and long-term goals.
- Expand diversity and inclusion by actively seeking candidates from underrepresented groups and diverse backgrounds, for example, consider the different job application styles beyond Canadian settings. In addition to being able to do the job, look for candidates who bring unique perspectives, experiences, and skills that contribute to a diverse and inclusive workplace culture.
- Customize evaluation criteria and tailor evaluation based on the specific needs and expectations of the role. HR professionals can develop a scoring system or checklist that prioritizes key competencies, qualifications, and cultural fit indicators outlined in the job

description that helps increase refugee claimants' chances of getting hired.

- Acknowledge and value transferable skills that candidates may have acquired from diverse experiences, such as volunteering, internships, or non-traditional career paths. These skills, including leadership, problem-solving, and communication, can be highly relevant to the job despite not being directly related to the industry.

Remove potential barriers. Hiring processes need to change to remove barriers for refugee claimants, such as over-reliance on Canadian experience, cultural bias in recruiting, and arbitrary credential requirements.

Recognize that refugee claimants have immense resilience, skills and experience to contribute. With support, they can be leaders in transforming employment systems.

Takeaways for Settlement Workers:

Understand that refugee claimants often come from countries that have significantly different employment systems; refugee claimants often need time and accompaniment in understanding and navigating a new employment system.

- References and connections based on trust hold more influence in hiring decisions than solely relying on resumes and cover letters, which tend to be more of a formality than a requirement. Relationship-based hiring practices and word of mouth are the systemic norm in many cultures and countries.
- There are invisible expectations/requirements in what to include in a cover letter, which are often not accessible or transparently presented to refugee claimant applicants. For instance, having specific formatting, structural, and writing styles.

Employment programs need to balance both short-term needs and long-term career goals. (A blend of pragmatism and aspiration.)

- Recognize that refugee claimants often come with significant education, work, and life experiences. They often come with career goals (ex. continue in the careers they held back in their home country), and struggle with barriers that hinder them from continuing with their career goals.
 - One strategy to help refugee claimants is to help them identify both short-term and long-term goals, especially as they will likely have immediate financial needs that have to be met.
 - This requires working with refugee claimants on a one-to-one basis, recognizing where they are at and what their needs (both short and long

term) are, as opposed to larger workshops (ex. resume and cover letter workshops).

Employer engagement and direct connections:

- Conduct informational sessions and workshops for employers to educate them about the unique challenges and strengths of refugee claimants. Highlight the diverse skills and experiences refugee claimants bring. This step can be as simple as 1:1 meetings with employers within the organization and settlement workers' networks.
- Share success stories and case studies of refugee claimants who have successfully integrated into the workforce, demonstrating the potential benefits to employers.
- Organize job fairs and networking events where employers can meet refugee claimants in person. This direct interaction helps humanize the issues and breaks down stereotypes.
- Set up mentorship programs where employers can mentor refugee claimants, providing guidance, support, and potential job opportunities. This can be helpful for employers as well where they can possibly have future employees who are familiar with their workplace and culture.

Customized support and training:

- Work with employers to develop tailored training programs that address specific needs of refugee claimants, such as language skills, cultural orientation, and job-specific skills.
- Encourage employers to offer internships or trial employment periods, allowing refugee claimants to gain Canadian work experience and employers to assess their potential.

One-on-One career counseling/advice:

- Provide individualized tailored career counseling for refugee claimants to identify both short-term employment needs and long-term career goals. This helps refugee claimants navigate immediate financial challenges while working towards their professional aspirations.
- Assist in creating personalized action plans, including steps for skills development, credential recognition, and job search strategies tailored to their career goals.

Advocacy and policy engagement:

- Advocate for inclusive hiring policies within companies and at a broader policy level. Highlight the importance of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.
- Collaborate with employers to develop policies that support the hiring and integration of refugee claimants, such as flexible work arrangements, English language level required, and support for further education and training.

Settlement workers are often caught between the needs of clients and restrictions of the system (grants requirements - quality vs. quantity). Self-care, boundaries, and community are essential for sustainability.

In summary, the TEN program sparked important reflections, connections, inspirations, and motivations for change among refugee claimants, settlement service providers, employers, EDI experts, and HR professionals. While the barriers are systemic, each stakeholder group has a role to play in dismantling them and creating more equitable, human-centered approaches. Sustained effort and solidarity as a community will be key in helping refugee claimants achieve financial mobility.