

Transforming Employment Narratives (TEN): Survival vs. Meaningful jobs

Background:

A key tension discussed in the TEN sessions was the notion of "survival" jobs. These jobs may not be aligned with the skills, knowledge, work experience, and goals that refugee claimants have. However, they are often more easily attainable and may include labour focused roles and "entry level" positions. It is important to recognize that these jobs are important, often essential, and careers of choice for some people.

We also recognize that "survival" is a subjective term, and what may be surviving for one person, can be meaningful for another. That said, we are using the term "survival job" to represent the portion of refugee claimants who are pushed into those roles as they are less competitive and satisfy immediate financial needs, leaving claimants with little choice but to accept them. For refugee claimants who have other skills and education they would like to apply and goals they would like to achieve, these positions can often feel like a trap or "survival" job.

While there are various words that could be used to describe these jobs, we use "survival" here to recognize this distinction between jobs that support only surviving versus thriving.

Key tensions discussed during the TEN sessions:

1. Navigating employment paths: The primary tension for refugee claimants emerges from the need to balance immediate need for survival jobs with the pursuit of more fulfilling and meaningful employment. Survival jobs often provide necessary financial stability but may not align with their skills, qualifications, or career goals.

2. Undervaluing skills and credentials: Refugee claimants often find themselves in survival jobs due to systemic barriers like unrecognized credentials, the need for Canadian work experience, and cultural differences. Another important reason for landing survival jobs is that they are considered less competitive and more available, whereas job postings for meaningful jobs typically get hundreds of applicants and are more competitive.

3. Contradictory pathways: Participants discussed the challenge of navigating the employment landscape, where survival jobs act as both a necessary stepping stone and a potential trap that can delay or derail their pursuit of meaningful employment.

4. The power dynamics of employment: The sessions highlighted the power imbalances in the employment process for refugee claimants. It includes the struggle to gain agency in a new job market and the need for refugee claimants to lead or take initiatives that address these imbalances.

5. The challenges of moving from survival to meaningful jobs: Stories shared by participants underscored the personal challenges faced in the job market. These narratives highlighted the emotional and practical difficulties in transitioning from survival jobs to roles that fully utilize their capabilities, work experiences, and fulfill their career goals. Participants told stories of how a lot of them started in survival jobs before securing meaningful careers, which included those who were born Canadian and those who moved to Canada at a young age; Keeping in mind that refugee claimants arrive to Canada in an already disadvantaged position in comparison to Canadian-born and Canadian educated people, as well as economic migrants, which further exacerbates the barriers claimants face.

6. Advocating for change in employment practices: There is a recognized need for systemic change, advocating for employment practices that better recognize the qualifications and potential of refugee claimants, facilitating their transition to more meaningful employment. It is also worth noting that there are refugee claimants who prefer survival jobs as their chosen careers, which then raises a need to ensure employers of survival jobs are supporting and caring for the wellbeing of staff.

7. Mental health and the role of community: The mental toll of navigating these employment challenges was shared by participants. The importance of community support, mentorship, and spaces for sharing experiences was emphasized as crucial for managing these tensions. Also, having more networking opportunities provides that support system that *Refugees and Refugee Claimants lack as they arrive into Canada.

8. Strategizing the path forward: The discussions also revolved around strategies to transition from survival jobs to more fulfilling roles. This includes leveraging any job as an opportunity to learn, adapt, and gradually move towards roles that align with their skills and desired career.

The TEN sessions and the facilitated Soft Shuffle activity highlighted the complex experiences of refugee claimants caught between the necessity of survival jobs and the desire for meaningful employment. The insights gathered presents the need for supportive systems that recognize their unique challenges and potential, and advocating for systemic changes to facilitate a smoother transition into Canada and its workplaces to fulfilling employment opportunities.

Survival Jobs

Survival jobs are usually low-paying, often physically demanding jobs taken out of necessity to make ends meet. They are frequently exploitative, isolating, and mentally and physically taxing, impacting one's ability to support their family and achieve personal goals. These jobs are seen as traps because they can decrease self-esteem, immobilize individuals, and make it difficult to break free from a cycle of poverty. Despite being necessary, they are often viewed as temporary solutions and should ideally be stepping stones to better opportunities. The system that necessitates survival jobs is critiqued as being exclusionary, particularly towards marginalized groups such as refugee claimants, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and exploitation.

Survival jobs examples include construction work, factory jobs, restaurants, and other forms of manual labor. These jobs are typically characterized by high turnover, challenging hours, and a lack of upward mobility.

Tensions around Survival Jobs, its Pros and Cons:

What participants found beneficial about survival jobs?

- They provide refugee claimants and others working survival jobs with immediate income necessary to meet their immediate needs (ex. housing, food, etc.).
 - Some refugee claimant participants noted that they found a sense of purpose and structure through their survival job, because it enabled them to get off of income assistance.
 - One refugee claimant participant shared that they found pride and a sense of accomplishment by preserving through the survival jobs they have done. They found the experience built up their resilience and strength.
- They provide an easier entry into the Canadian job market.
 - Some refugee claimant participants recognized that these jobs helped them better understand Canadian workplace culture.

- Some refugee claimant participants also noted that survival jobs provided them with the Canadian work experience that they needed to find more meaningful jobs.
- Survival jobs in tandem with a supported career pathway can be stepping stones to better opportunities.

What participants found challenging with survival jobs:

- **Low wages and job insecurity:** Many survival jobs offer low wages, making it difficult for refugee claimants to meet their long-term financial goals and achieve stability. Also limited job security leads to uncertainty and anxiety about the future along with isolation:
 - It was noted by participants (refugee claimants and others) that it takes time to find meaningful employment while being busy doing a full-time survival job and integrating into a new country.
- **Limited advancement opportunities:** TEN participants found that survival jobs frequently lack clear pathways for career advancement, making it challenging to move into more meaningful or higher-paying roles.
- **Lack of benefits:** Many survival jobs do not offer benefits such as health insurance, paid leave, or retirement plans, which are crucial for long-term security and well-being.
 - Refugee claimants find it important to receive benefits and paid leaves which help them find time to integrate into their new lives and self-care.
- **Limited EDI:** Survival jobs are often exclusionary and not designed for inclusivity or equity. Survival jobs can also create multigenerational trauma, affecting not just the workers but their families as well.

Meaningful Employment

Meaningful employment usually provides individuals with a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and personal satisfaction beyond just financial compensation. Meaningful employment can be any desired form of employment that brings its worker the wellbeing and joy they seek personally and professionally.

Meaningful employment also means that employees receive at minimum, a living wage, which ensures:

- Long-term security: mentally, physically, and financially.

- Employees can meet their basic needs such as housing, food, healthcare, and education, reducing financial stress and allowing them to focus better on their work
- Job satisfaction with higher productivity and quality of work which also helps employers to reduce turnover and ensure staff loyalty.

Meaningful employment offers:

1. **Feeling of purpose and contribution:** the job offers a sense of purpose, allowing individuals to feel that their work makes a positive impact on their family and community.
2. **Positive work environment:** a supportive and collaborative work environment where workers feel valued as part of a team.
3. **Personal growth:** the work provides opportunities for personal and professional development, allowing workers to learn new skills, gain knowledge, and advance in their careers.
4. **Values:** the work aligns with an individual's personal values and beliefs.
5. **Recognition:** employees feel recognized and appreciated for their contributions, which enhances their sense of self-worth and job satisfaction.

Transforming Survival Jobs into Meaningful Employment:

The TEN program highlighted the complex experiences of refugee claimants caught between the necessity of survival (but low-paying) jobs and the desire for meaningful (and higher-paying) employment.

Steps employers can take to make survival jobs more meaningful:

- **Provide training and professional development:** Offer opportunities to help employees advance their careers and build various skill sets. Such opportunities should be offered to all employees at all levels. This would ultimately be beneficial for employers as they would have more motivated, skilled and ambitious employees and at the same time employees would feel fulfilled at the workplace.
- **Create career pathways:** Develop clear career paths within the company to facilitate growth and moving ahead. When an organization creates a pathway for growth for employees, it helps with mutual trust-building and makes employees feel that they are valued. In turn, the employer would be able to have higher employee satisfaction and retention.

- **Enhance work environment:** Improve workplace conditions and promote a positive work culture. When employees feel they are treated with care and respect at a workplace, there is a direct correlation to higher productivity, which results in better results and achieving goals for employers and organizations.
- **Offer fair compensation and flexibility:** Provide living wages and benefits to improve financial stability for employees, as well as offering flexible work schedules and support services like childcare and transportation assistance. Employees have varying financial and life responsibilities, especially in the context of rising costs of living and inflation. When employees don't have to worry about financial stress and feel that they can maintain a healthy work-life balance, they are better able to focus on their jobs and tasks at hand. This would also benefit the employer in having staff who are focused, proactive and productive.

“We can build something (an employment system) that is beneficial for everyone.”

- TEN Participant

Appendix

Definitions

Refugee Claimant: a refugee claimant is a person seeking refugee protection, yet has not had their claim definitively evaluated

Refugee: a refugee is someone outside their country of origin unable or unwilling to return to or seek protection within their country of origin protected because of persecution based on their religious belief, political opinion, ethnicity, nationality, and/or social group.

- 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Art. 1A

Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs): Privately Sponsored Refugees are individuals identified as refugees overseas and brought to Canada through the efforts of Canadian citizens, organizations, or groups and receive Permanent Resident status upon arrival. These sponsors commit to providing financial and settlement support to the refugees for a specified period, typically one year. This support includes housing, food, clothing, and help with accessing services such as healthcare and education.

Government Assisted Refugees (GARs): Government Assisted Refugees are identified as refugees overseas and brought to Canada by the Canadian government. Upon arrival, GARs receive immediate Permanent Resident status and are provided with financial and settlement support by the government. This support is typically managed by settlement organizations and includes housing, financial assistance, and access to essential services for up to one year, or until the refugee becomes self-sufficient.

Resettled Refugees: Both PSRs and GARs are resettled refugees who, once they arrive in Canada, immediately receive Permanent Resident status. They have access to housing and settlement support to help them integrate into Canadian society and start rebuilding their lives in safety and security.