While hiring refugees has many advantages, there also can be challenges for employers if particular barriers are not understood and mitigated. Companies may need to make modest investments up front to facilitate the recruitment and retention of refugees to yield the benefits of a vibrant and diverse workforce.

Out-of-Date or Lack of Skills

Living outside of their home country, refugees may have a skills deficit due to changing fields, gaps in employment due to displacement, and different technologies. Alternatively, refugees may not have the experience or education a position calls for, but can still do the job.

Potential Solutions:

* Provide job shadowing, before and during employment
* Utilize interviews so refugees can demonstrate their hands-on skills
* Provide on-the-job training [contact your state’s Department of Labor to potentially leverage funds to provide the on-the-job training]
* Partner with community colleges to offer skills-based courses employees need to start work and move up

Lack of Credentials

Refugees may arrive with their educational documents in a foreign language. Other times, due to the urgency with which they left their home, refugees do not have their documents.

Potential Solutions:

* Refugees can have their documents translated into English- states often have a list of approved translators
* Refugees can have their credentials evaluated by an independent agency which determines if the education received overseas is equivalent to the same level of education in the United States, such as World Education Services. [Credential evaluation is most likely paid for by the individual refugee; employers should consider these costs. It is also possible that some state refugee employment programs pay for credential evaluation costs (permitted under Refugees Social Services and Targeted Assistance Programs by the Office of Refugee Resettlement Regulations.) Most states do not cover these costs.]
* For refugees lacking credential documents, evaluate skills during on-the-job training or offer competency-based promotions.

Limited English Proficiency

Many refugees arrive in the United States without the skills to communicate fluently in English. This language barrier can create difficulties for refugees and employers during the recruitment process as well as on-the-job at first.

Potential Solutions:

* Have refugee resettlement agencies assist with interpretation and paperwork completion for initial screening and interviews.
* Hire one bilingual “Tem Lead” to serve as an interpreter. [Make sure to compensate this additional work.)
* Host on-site English as a Second Language classes
* Translate important documents, such as safety signs and holiday schedules, into major languages.
* Off advancement training as incentives to employees who have reached a certain level of English proficiency.
* Communicate clearly with refugees by speaking slower, not louder.
* Ensure directions are clear and don’t employ idiomatic languages. For example, avoid phrases like “give it a shot,” “it’s a piece of cake,” “let’s catch up.”
* Do not ask yes/no questions but check for understanding with clarifying questions. For example, “What time will your shift start tomorrow?” instead of “Do you know what time you start tomorrow?”

Cultural Differences

Cultural practices or traditions of a refugee’s home country may not align with expectations in the American workplace. Employers need to be aware of key cultural differences and ways to successfully mitigate negative effects of cultural differences.

Potential Solutions:

* Allow time off for religious holidays or accommodate holiday needs. For example, allow Muslim employees – who request time off in advance – to take off for Eid holidays or allow for different break times during Ramadan to accommodate breaking the fast and prayers.
* Reconfigure break times to align with religious needs, such as daily prayers. For example, allow Muslim employees to take different break times to complete daily prayers.
* Understand and accommodate for various cultural events. For example, Bhutanese funerals are week-long processes.
* Be open with employees about American business culture. For example, emphasize the importance of arriving on time for shifts and professional appointments.

Differing Communication Styles

Other cultures may utilize a more passive form of communication, while the assertive verbal communication style or body language typically practiced in the United States might be viewed as disrespectful or rude.

Potential Solutions:

* Make sure to solicit information from employees, so you understand clearly their point of view; no response on a topic might be covering up a miscommunication or misunderstanding.
* Give employees a chance to give feedback anonymously.
* Understand that some cultures do not practice direct eye contact and lack of eye contact is not a lack of confidence or sign of dishonesty, as an American might interpret.

Lack of Understanding Between Refugee and Non-Refugee Staff

Native-born employees or other immigrants may fear refugees taking their jobs or do not know how to communicate with their new co-workers.

Potential Solutions:

* Offer diversity training to highlight the importance of diversity in the workplace.
* Assign refugee employees with a mentor who can help them acclimate to American office culture, practice their English, and develop a meaningful and reliable connection.
* Use team-building exercises.
* Give existing employees the opportunity to learn about refugees and how to communicate with individuals who have limited English skills.
* Incorporate the sharing of cultures at company’s events.

“Prior to the refugees coming on board, we sat down with our construction teams to give general information about refugee’s life experiences, and to express the company expectation of being welcoming to new hires that may have had little direct experience in the community and in the workplace. Once the hires were made, face to face communication continued to increase the empathy that people had towards their new co-workers.”

Transportation:

Recently arrived refugees are likely to rely on public transportation, as they may not have private vehicles to get to and from work, may not know how to drive, or may lack a U.S. driver’s license. If your company is outside of public transportation lines, there are creative way to ensure refugees can still get to work.

Potential Solutions:

* Arrange for carpooling with other employees and ensure that shifts align with carpooling routes.
* Use an employer-sponsored van for employees.
* Connect with local non-profits that offer discounted cars to low-income populations.
* Check with state or local Department of Social Services to see if any transportation assistance is available.
* Where available, employees can utilize rideshare services such as Lyft/Uber and, if possible, consider providing subsidies for this transport.

Childcare

A common barrier to employment is a lack of childcare, especially for refugees who might have limited family or social networks to rely on for this.

Potential Solutions:

* Connect to local Departments of Social Services where childcare vouchers may be available.
* Encourage informal childcare arrangements within networks.
* Allow parents and caregivers to work separate shifts.
* Inform employees about childcare centers/Head Start programs close to the work location.
* Offer childcare at the worksite.