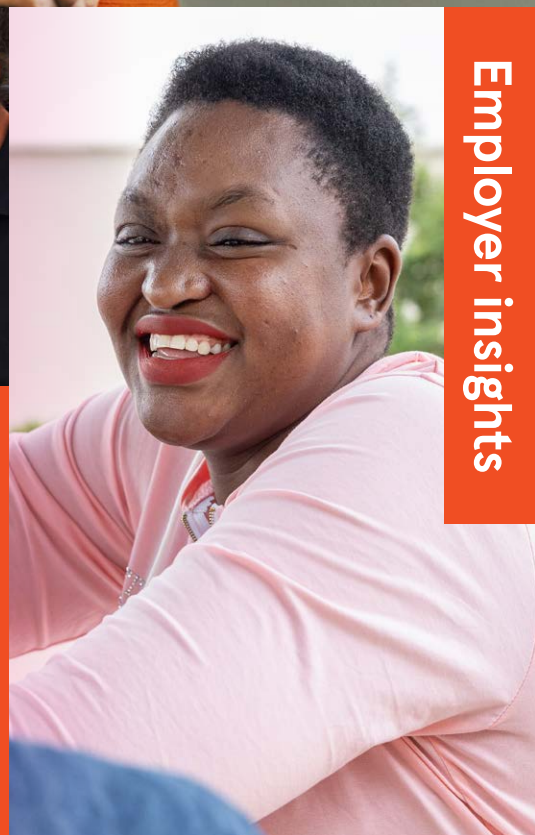


Employing people from
a refugee background

HOW TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN INTENTION AND ACTION



Employer insights



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Thank you to Carmen Garcia and her team at Community Corporate for their collaboration on this study, Brad Knight from the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment for his invaluable guidance, and Sophia Johnson for her ongoing support.

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We acknowledge the tradition of custodianship and law of the Country on which the University of Sydney campuses stand. We pay our respects to those who have cared and continue to care for Country.

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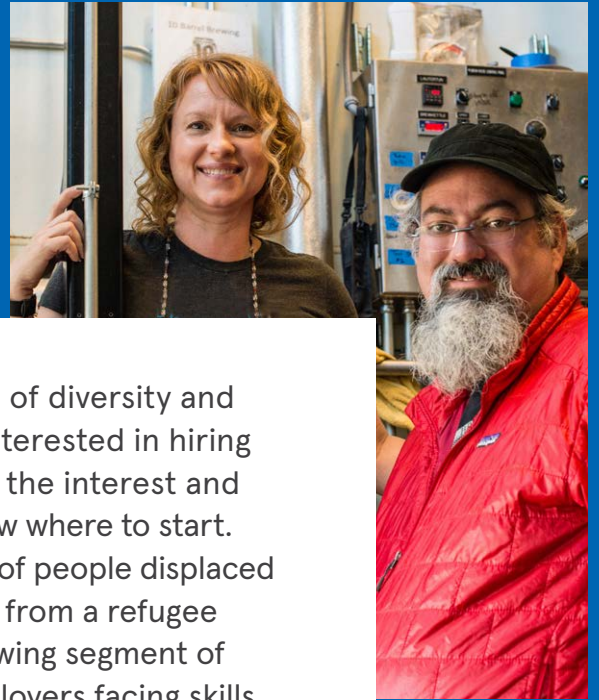


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Thank you to everyone who took the time to participate in this study. This report would not have been possible without your contribution.

BACKGROUND



Australian employers recognise the benefits of diversity and inclusion within their workplaces, and are interested in hiring people from a refugee background. Despite the interest and motivation, many employers often do not know where to start. As the world grapples with a growing number of people displaced by war, conflict and natural disasters, people from a refugee background are increasingly becoming a growing segment of the Australian talent pool. Especially for employers facing skills shortages, refugee jobseekers can be strategically important for accessing the skilled workforce businesses need.

People from a refugee background are an underutilised talent pool. What should employers consider to successfully action their interest and motivation to hire refugees?

The following report is an overview of experiences and lessons learnt from 35 employers new to employing refugees, who participated in a study led by Dr Betina Szkudlarek (University of Sydney Business School) and Dr Eun Su Lee (University of Newcastle).

This report aims to share the lessons and provide recommendations to employers who are new to hiring refugees. The advice found within applies to those employers who, despite the motivation, believe they do not have the time, resources and/or information for refugee hiring initiatives.



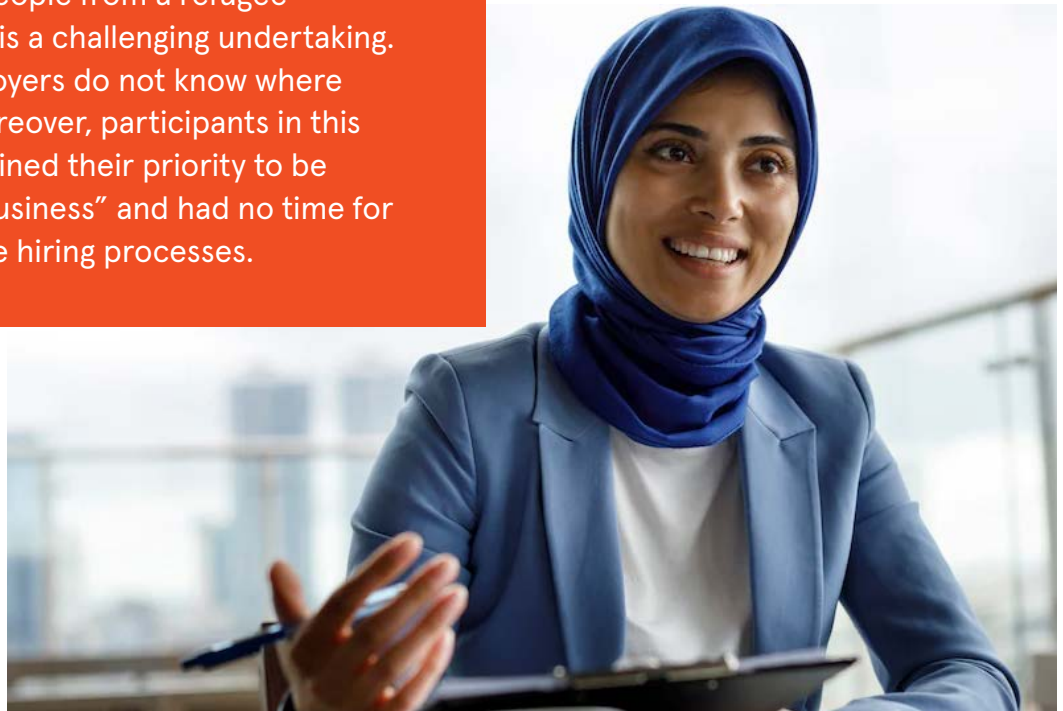
There does genuinely seem to be this incredibly underutilised underemployed group of people [...]. Why would we not want to consider them?

– Study participant



THE 5 W'S OF HIRING REFUGEES

There is a perception among employers that hiring people from a refugee background is a challenging undertaking. Often, employers do not know where to begin. Moreover, participants in this study underlined their priority to be “running a business” and had no time for cumbersome hiring processes.



Answering the who-what-where-when-why (5 W's) for hiring people from a refugee background can be the first step towards recruitment from this particular talent pool. The 5 W's represent an effective way for time-strapped employers to simplify and streamline the thought processes around deciding whether they want to hire refugees and, if so, how to go about it.

The overarching finding of the report is that service providers specialising in refugee employment are invaluable in helping employers validate their 5W's of hiring refugees. They can also help plan and implement refugee hiring initiatives and simplify the overall experience.

WHY

WHY am I considering hiring refugees?

Articulate your objectives, the reasons why your organisation would want to hire refugees, for what roles you would consider refugees, and how your organisation would benefit from hiring from this group. Also, consider what may have prevented your organisation from engaging thus far.

WHERE

WHERE do I find refugees?

Consult a service provider specialising in refugee employment to guide you through the recruitment process, and help you find suitable refugee job candidates based on your organisation's unique needs. Service providers can also support the integration of new employees into your workplace.

WHO

WHO will be instrumental in making hiring a success?

Appoint individuals within your team that will take ownership of the planning and implementation of refugee recruitment, and secure support from the organisation's leadership.

WHAT

WHAT do I have to do to prepare my organisation?

Evaluate if your team is ready to welcome culturally and linguistically diverse colleagues, address latent biases, identify helpful external and internal resources, and be flexible with your recruitment and onboarding processes.

WHEN

WHEN is the best time to start?

Many employers with good intentions are stuck in inaction. The best time to start is now, learn on the go and incorporate lessons learnt into your hiring practices.

COMMON REASONS FOR CONSIDERING REFUGEE TALENT

People from a refugee background bring a wide diversity of skills and expertise to the local labour market. Still, refugee talent is much under-explored. Below are some of the reasons employers who participated in the study considered hiring refugees.

Employers' motivations for considering refugee talent:



Access breadth of experience and fresh perspectives

49%



Do the right thing / personal values

46%



Alleviate skills shortages

23%



Have staff who are representative of the community

20%



Fulfil corporate social responsibility goals

20%



Meet externally imposed conditions for doing business

3%

Access breadth of experience and fresh perspectives

About half of the employers interviewed were interested in the breadth of experience and diversity of thought refugees could bring to the table. One of the employers interested in hiring refugees, said, “It [hiring refugees] really adds a new element of creativity into the team, in terms of how things are actually completed, because it gives the diversity of thought.”

Do the right thing

Personal values and experiences tended to influence interviewees’ interest in refugee talent, with some undertaking the task as a “personal endeavour.” For instance, many interviewees attributed personal values and/or experiences as a core motivation. Factors influencing personal interest included the self-reward of having a positive impact, experience with barriers faced by disadvantaged groups, and experience with exclusion or being a minority. One interviewee that had experience with barriers faced by disadvantaged groups said: “You don’t really think about it [hiring refugees] unless you’ve been put in that position, or you know someone that’s in that position.”

“ *It’s something that I’m personally really passionate about, being a migrant myself. [...] I’m passionate about it because I’ve experienced [the challenges faced by refugees] very closely with friends whose parents came from war torn countries.*

– Study participant

Alleviate skills shortage

Employers experiencing challenges filling vacancies through their traditional recruitment channels considered refugees a potential talent pool to alleviate skills shortages. One employer’s reason for considering refugees was that their industry is in “an absolute talent crisis” because “Australians are also typically reluctant to some career pathways.” Another employer was considering refugees because “not all of the skills that we want exist in our local market.”

Have staff that is representative of the community

Several employers wanted the makeup of their staff to be a “representation which is reflective of a community.” One employer doing business with companies with a diverse workforce said, “Your client feels more comfortable with you because you represent them.” Another interviewee said: “Australia is so diverse that when you have a team that is not representing that, you are obviously missing something.”

Fulfil corporate social responsibility

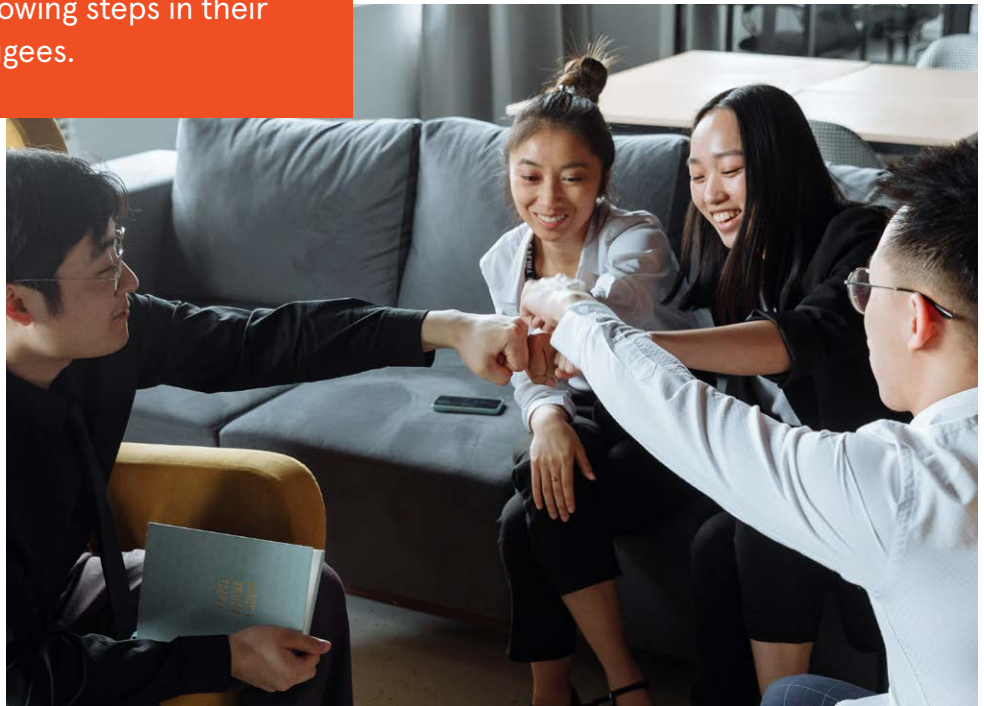
For several employers corporate social responsibility (CSR) drove their interest in hiring refugees. One employer noted: “It aligns with our organisational values.” Value-driven recruitment made leaders within the organisation more sensitive to the unique circumstances faced by people from a refugee background and open to adjusting the recruitment processes accordingly.

Meet conditions for doing business

Previous research showed diversity targets imposed by government tenders or due to contractual commitments with clients tended to encourage the hiring of underrepresented groups in certain sectors in Australia (Szkudlarek, 2019). Beyond governmental requirements, employers recognised increasing pressure from clients for the inclusion of disadvantaged groups into organisations creating a “big driver” for adopting hiring practices that encourage a diverse workforce.

STEPS FOR SUCCESSFUL HIRING

Employers who participated in this study took the following steps in their efforts to hire refugees.



WHY am I considering hiring refugees?

Employers tended to be clear about their motivation for considering hiring refugees. Some reasons to consider refugees stemmed from business cases that could benefit employers, such as innovation through new perspectives, or addressing concerns associated with skills shortages. Other reasons were guided by CSR or personal values, where employers felt there was a role they could play in society by helping refugees secure employment. Others realised they inadvertently excluded a valuable talent pool that could be instrumental to their corporate strategies. Examples include employers improving their ability to serve clients with a particular ethnic background or employers tendering for government work with social procurement targets.

“ I think expanding the talent pool, that’s certainly a benefit.
A previously untapped talent pool.

– Study participant

WHERE do I find refugees?

Many employers did not know how to access the refugee talent pool. They also considered it challenging to validate internationally obtained credentials and assess how experience gained abroad could be seen as transferable to the Australian market. Service providers specialising in refugee employment can help employers connect to refugee talent. An employer who connected with a service provider after the first interview spoke about the insights they gained for understanding transferable skills. “[Service providers] can tell us what skills they [refugees] have, and potentially we could look at how we could retrofit that.”

WHO will be instrumental in making hiring a success?

Many interviewees had an interest in hiring refugees because of personal values. Though personal interest tended to be a driver, leadership support was crucial for allocating time and resources to implement initiatives for hiring diverse candidates. Without personal ownership and leadership support, one interviewee described how there would likely be no action. “There’s just nobody that was passionate enough to take charge and take the lead.” Turning intentions into action is especially more difficult, if employers decide to pursue the recruitment process without the aid of a service provider. Personal ownership, leadership buy-in and support from a service provider are key contributors to success.

WHAT do I have to do to prepare my organisation?

Employers in this study found it helpful to engage service providers in identifying how they need to prepare internally, but also to navigate external resources, such as subsidies and grants. Some employers discussed the importance of preparing their staff to work in a culturally diverse environment to be able to “provide an environment where they [refugees] feel safe and welcome.” One employer with an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategy designed for another disadvantaged group, considered using their existing strategy as a foundation to create a strategy for people from a refugee background based on the similarities between the groups. Internships or casual employment seemed to be one of the avenues for risk-averse employers.

WHEN is the best time to start?

Most employers tended to miss the opportunity to take the first step and engage in the recruitment of disadvantaged jobseekers such as people from a refugee background. Despite facing skills shortages or seeing the necessity to diversify their workforce, employers continued with conventional hiring strategies, based on assumptions that their current approach was sufficiently inclusive or that new initiatives would be overly cumbersome or costly. Service providers can assist employers with articulating the “why, where, who, what” of hiring refugees, simplifying the recruitment process. Employers working with service providers tended to start small, learn on the go and incorporate lessons learnt into their hiring practices with the intention to scale up as they gained success. Alternatively, some employers engaged in other ways such as volunteering as a mentor to a refugee, or joining business networks or roundtables, where employers share knowledge about refugee recruitment.

“ *The connection [with a service provider] that you gave me was the most useful. Because it lets me take action without actually having to do much more [...] The service provider was able to tap into this network that I don’t have access to. So, by handing it to them, they can run with it.*

– Study participant

PITFALLS TO AVOID



When employers who are motivated to hire refugees decide to turn interest into action, there are some risks or pitfalls they may meet along the way. Employers in this study have elaborated on some of the pitfalls they have experienced.

Getting stuck in inaction

Understanding the internal resources needed to train or onboard refugee hires, or helping refugees feel safe and welcome in the workplace were concerns among many employers. Overthinking the process or overestimating resources needed can hinder hiring initiatives. In some instances, employers' perception of preparation efforts they needed to welcome refugees also tended to be a barrier to turning intentions into action. Engaging service providers in identifying and implementing a company-specific hiring strategy helps overcome internal inertia.

Sticking to traditional recruitment methods

Many employers in this study did not have a strategy to purposely hire disadvantaged groups. Some employers tended to take a passive stance on diversity, pursuing mainstream recruitment processes. The assumption that existing recruitment channels or screening processes were enough to hire refugees tended to be a barrier to attracting refugee applicants. EDI strategies have helped a number of employers prioritise certain groups as part of their hiring plans. It could also be beneficial for employers to consider creative ways to adjust hiring practices. For example, to bypass the candidate's challenges resulting from limited English proficiency, one employer let refugee job candidates demonstrate their skills rather than rely on a CV or interview.

“ We'll look at doing a practical assessment rather than behavioral-based questions [...] We might try and skip that and get them in for work trial or something like that instead.

– Study participant

Losing momentum when someone leaves

Initiatives to hire refugees stalled among a few employers because the staff member leading the initiative left the company or was no longer in the same role. Including refugee hiring initiatives in the overall strategy and incorporating them in a succession plan could help assure continuity of hiring initiatives.

“ *It's just so hard, I guess, to maintain that momentum when a key enthusiastic person leaves.*
– Study participant

Limiting recruitment to overseas candidates

A misconception seems to exist that refugees need to be recruited from overseas. A few employers participating in this study have either attempted to recruit refugees from overseas or were considering it, assuming this was the only path available. Australia admits thousands of refugees annually, many of whom often struggle to secure employment.

“ *I didn't know that there was a model where I could source refugees who were already based in Australia. It was really beneficial to understand that.*
– Study participant

Starting too big

A few employers facing major skills shortages have attempted or planned to recruit refugees at a scale to address their open vacancies immediately. By engaging service providers in their efforts, these employers have instead modified their approach by starting smaller and readjusting their hiring strategies based on lessons learnt.

Going at it alone

Previous research found that successful hiring processes are often based on a collaborative approach, where employers engage a service provider specialised in refugee employment (Szkudlarek, 2019). A service provider can take over a big part of the recruitment process. Many employers who participated in this study struggled to allocate time and resources to inclusive hiring. Involving a service provider could help employers create and manage their hiring initiatives.

“ *That's the beauty of leaning on an organisation [a service provider] like that, because they will help us [...] To me, that's why we engage with [service providers], they've probably seen it all before and they'll play a role in making it more successful than it ordinarily might have been.*
– Study participant

Focussing only on refugee training

According to previous research, employers that successfully hire people from a refugee background give equal importance to training refugee employees as they give to the training of existing staff (Szkudlarek, 2019). Failing to recognise the importance of preparing the staff to work in a culturally-diverse environment and to welcome refugees makes integration and retention more challenging. Initiatives such as unconscious bias training helped employers to create more inclusive and welcoming workplaces.



Barriers to hiring refugees:



No strategy to hire disadvantaged groups

54%



Challenges validating international credentials

23%



Staff member leaving

11%



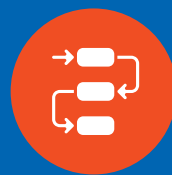
Concerns about making refugees feel welcome

37%



Unsure of how to access refugee talent pool

17%



Perception of required preparation

6%

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Service providers and digital databases

For a comprehensive list of service providers across Australia and digital databases to connect to refugee jobseekers, please visit the page [Refugee employment services directory](#) on the website [Humans Like Us](#).

Peer support networks

[The Australian Employer Network for Refugee Inclusion](#) is a community of practice that connects those who successfully hire refugees and those who are considering doing it.

Funding support

A list of governmental incentives and refugee-specific programs can be found on the web page [Government programs and subsidies](#), on the website Humans Like Us.

Refugee training and upskilling

Details on job-specific training options for refugee hires are available on the [TAFE NSW](#) website, or the national register, [training.gov.au](#), which maintains a complete list of RTOs.

Publications

A few comprehensive publications on best practices for hiring refugees include [Employers Guide to Refugee Employment – A Collaborative Approach](#), [Australian Employers' Guide to Hiring Refugees](#), [A Guide for Employers](#) and [Engaging Business in Refugee Employment](#).

Additional support

For any information about refugee employment and guidance on recruitment strategies, contact the authors of the report at refugee-employment.project@sydney.edu.au.



METHODOLOGY

The study consisted of two sets of interviews conducted with employers. Thirty-five (35) employers participated in the first round of interviews, where they were asked about their stance on hiring people from a refugee background and their perspectives on the refugee talent pool. Following the first interview, participants were provided with information and support materials, links to resources and an offer to get connected with service providers specialising in refugee employment.

The second interview with employers was conducted within three to six months after the first, where employers were asked about any steps undertaken with regard to hiring people from a refugee background. The intention was to allow employers to reflect upon the utility of the shared materials and identify barriers to engagement. Of the 35 employers that participated in the first interview, 23 agreed to a second interview.

Note about quotes in this report: study participants' quotes have been edited for clarity and brevity.

REFERENCES

Szkudlarek, B. (2019). *Engaging business in refugee employment: The employer's perspective*. Sydney: The University of Sydney Business School.

APPENDIX

Overview of employers who participated in the interviews

Industry	Business size*	Industry	Business size*
Hospitality	Large	Banking	Medium
Technology	Large	Services	Medium
Retail	Small	Construction	Small
Manufacturing	Medium	Professional Services	Large
Utilities	Large	Sports	Medium
Food	Medium	Professional Services	Small
Government	Large	Mining	Large
Professional Services	Large	Professional Services	Small
Professional Services	Small	Healthcare	Small
Manufacturing	Large	Technology	Small
Services	Medium	Services	Small
Healthcare	Large	Manufacturing	Large
Technology	Small	Services	Large
Government	Large	Technology	Small
Professional Services	Small	Professional Services	Medium
Professional Services	Large	Professional Services	Small
Banking	Small	Technology	Large
Healthcare	Large		

*(1-99 employees) Small businesses
(100-499 employees) Medium-sized businesses
(500+ employees) Large businesses.

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Please note this guide provides general information and is not intended to and does not constitute legal advice regarding the employment of those from a refugee or asylum-seeking background.

The law, particularly in relation to employment and the legal status of refugees in Australia and overseas, is complex and subject to change based on government policy and legislation. The particular circumstances must be considered in every case, and for that reason legal advice should be sought.

The authors disclaim any and all liability arising from reliance on the contents of this report however caused.

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