

## Refugees need support to continue their careers – here's how it can be done

Written by Karen Dunwoodie, PhD Candidate, Monash University

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A German Railway AG program helps refugees with career orientation and helps integrate them into the country's employment system. EPA/Martin Schutt

Many refugees expect their new country not only to provide safety and security: they also want the opportunity to start a new life. However, many are unable to use the skills and knowledge they have brought with them and gain work equal to their experience.

Over the past 18 months, we have researched the careers and capabilities of refugees who have arrived in Australia in the last ten years. From the 277 people surveyed, we found around 60% had post-secondary qualifications, more than 50% had good-to-very-good English language proficiency, and only 4% had worked in unskilled or semi-skilled positions before coming to Australia.

But, since coming to Australia, 80% were either unemployed, working in volunteer roles, or in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs.

Together, these findings have important implications for the support agencies tasked with helping refugees obtain employment.

### **What did we find?**

Those who participated in our study highlighted their desire to find meaningful employment that allowed them to use their skills and prior experience.

One young man shared his story about how his tertiary-educated parents, who arrived in Australia around three years ago, were now working in low-skilled jobs that are not commensurate with the types of employment they had in their home country.

He said he would not like to work in a low-skilled occupation like many refugees. Instead, he

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wants to “jump over the broom”, obtain university qualifications, and get a job where he can use his skills. He did not want to be confined to a job where he could not use his education – as his parents had been forced to do when arriving in Australia.

Our research investigated the factors that foster people’s career adaptability: that is, their willingness and ability to adapt to new work environments. Career adaptability is valuable because it influences someone’s job-search behaviours and predicts transitions into employment.

Our research identified four main drivers of refugees’ career adaptability:

- English proficiency;
- cultural intelligence (the ability to relate and work effectively across cultures);
- having a proactive personality; and
- having social relationships with others outside their immediate network of family and friends.

Our research found language barriers and problems with the recognition of overseas qualifications leave many trapped in low-skilled jobs.

We also found that working in a low-skilled occupation can serve as a “survivor” job: that is, a job that provides just enough income to live on but few possibilities for career development. This

may not be problematic for someone in the short term. However, remaining in such a job influences future employment prospects.

### What needs to be done?

In addition to helping refugees improve their English proficiency and knowledge of Australian culture, our findings suggest support agencies should also help refugees build networks in the wider community. These networks are likely to provide refugees with greater information about career choices.

Assistance to refugees can be provided in several ways.

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Support agencies can consider establishing mentoring programs, where refugees are matched with mentors from the business community. This can help refugees think about their career options and search for employment.

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The agencies may also work closely with business organisations to provide opportunities for refugees to gain work experience and broaden their skill sets. In addition, the appointment of suitably qualified employment caseworkers could provide career counselling and guidance.

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Finally, support agencies should consider working with higher education institutions and professional bodies to formulate appropriate strategies for recognition of prior qualifications, and provide pathways to access to both tertiary and vocational training.

Such practices will help refugees obtain meaningful employment and better integrate into Australian society.

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Currently, support agencies tasked by government with finding employment for refugees typically focus on placing them in low-skilled occupations, rather than supporting longer-term career aspirations.

Australian society needs to better assist humanitarian migrants and those still awaiting determination of their refugee applications find commensurate employment. Doing so will ensure they are not marginalised, don't feel discriminated against, and are more able to integrate and contribute fully to Australian society.

*Karen Dunwoodie is affiliated with the Lentara Uniting Care Asylum Seeker Project.*

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