



## Helping Clients Overcome Employment Barriers

### Practical Approaches to Common Challenges

Refugees come to the U.S. with many skills and strengths, but they also face many challenges when it comes to obtaining initial employment and advancing in their careers. While there are no “one-size-fits-all” formulas for these challenges, refugee employment programs have developed a number of practical strategies that you may want to consider as you serve your clients.

#### A Strengths-based Approach to Barriers

Switchboard defines **employment barriers** as factors that prevent clients from obtaining initial employment in the U.S. or advancing in their careers. As you identify these employment barriers and support clients in addressing them, it is critical to help clients recognize and leverage their **strengths** to overcome barriers.

As you discuss your clients' barriers to employment, be sure to help them think through the skills, knowledge and resources that they *do* have rather than focusing solely on barriers or deficiencies. Build up their confidence by



**This information guide suggests practical approaches to address some of the most common refugee employment barriers, including:**

- Lack of English/literacy skills
- Lack of job skills/credentials
- Logistical barriers
- Cultural/religious barriers
- Emotional barriers

### Key Elements of Strengths-Based Social Services:

- Strengths-based approaches value the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals and communities.
- Focusing on strengths does not mean ignoring challenges, or spinning struggles into strengths.
- Practitioners working in this way have to work in collaboration and help clients to do things for themselves. In this way, clients can become co-producers of support, not passive consumers of support.

*Lisa Patton, Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (2012), [Strengths-based Approaches for Working with Individuals](#).*

encouraging them to take the lead in brainstorming solutions to the challenges that they face.

Now, let's explore some of the most common employment barriers that refugees face and a few strategies that have proven useful in overcoming these challenges.

### Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

The language barrier is one of the most significant challenges that many refugees face. Learning a new language is a daunting task for anyone, and many employers are hesitant to hire candidates with limited English proficiency, citing safety or efficiency concerns.

Here are some strategies for helping your clients improve their English faster, work around the language barrier, and stay engaged with English learning after securing employment:

- Offer English classes at a variety of times and locations.
- Keep an updated list of English classes offered by others in your community.
- Encourage clients to use language learning apps on their mobile phones and to regularly listen to English media.
- Consider becoming a [Coursera for Refugees](#) partner so that your clients can take advantage of a variety of free online courses, including English courses.
- Offer to help employers with interpretation and paperwork completion during job interviews and orientations.

- Pair clients with stronger English with LEP clients so that they can help with interpretation on the job site. Encourage employer partners to pay extra for these additional duties.
- Encourage employer partners to offer English classes onsite during lunch breaks or before or after shifts.



For more resources to help clients overcome the language barrier, visit the [Refugee Center Online](#).

### Lack of Job Skills and/or Credentials

Lack of industry-recognized skills, work experience, or a U.S. resume is another hurdle that refugees face when coming to the U.S.

Some refugees have significant work experience, be it in the trades or in an advanced field such as medicine or engineering, but lack credentials that employers in the U.S. recognize. Additionally, basic math and digital skills are increasingly seen by employers as non-negotiable. Here are a few tips for tackling these hurdles:

Barrier	Strategy
<b>Limited Work Experience</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ List skills and informal work experiences on clients' resumes, in addition to formal work experience. The Refugee Center Online has <a href="#">resume and job search resources</a> to which you can direct clients.</li> <li>▪ Provide volunteer or internship experiences for clients during the job search period.</li> <li>▪ Encourage clients to take advantage of the "gig economy" (e.g., <a href="#">Uber</a>, <a href="#">Lyft</a>, <a href="#">TaskRabbit</a>, <a href="#">Postmates</a>, <a href="#">Wonolo</a>, etc.).</li> <li>▪ Encourage employers to utilize skills interviews and offer job shadowing before and during employment so that clients can demonstrate their skills and learn by doing.</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of Industry-recognized Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identify community colleges and other training providers who provide "<a href="#">Integrated Education and Training</a>" (IET) models, which offer instruction in basic skills such as reading, math or computer literacy along with training in industry-specific skills.</li> <li>▪ Connect clients to federal workforce development pathways such as <a href="#">On-the-job Training</a> and <a href="#">Apprenticeships</a>, as well other vocational training opportunities offered through <a href="#">American Job Centers</a>.</li> <li>▪ Talk to employers in your community to identify industry-recognized certifications that they value. Ask about traditionally recognized certifications (e.g., Servsafe in the restaurant industry, forklift license, Certified Nursing Assistant, etc.), but be sure to also explore employers' attitudes towards alternative ways of gaining and proving skills such as <a href="#">Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)</a> and <a href="#">Digital Badges</a>.</li> </ul>
<b>Unrecognized Foreign Credentials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Connect clients to respected credential evaluation services such as <a href="#">World Education Services</a> and <a href="#">NACES</a>.</li> <li>▪ For highly educated clients with professional backgrounds, be sure to take advantage of resources from organizations and initiatives that specialize in the career pathways of highly skilled refugees and immigrants (e.g., <a href="#">Upwardly Global</a>, <a href="#">Global Talent Bridge</a>, and <a href="#">The Welcome Back Initiative</a>).</li> </ul>

## Logistical Barriers

One of the most frustrating challenges for our clients is when they have the motivation and skills to work, but the logistics of life prevent them from being able to obtain or sustain employment opportunities. Two of the most significant logistical challenges that our clients face are those related to transportation and child care.

### Transportation

Getting to and from work is often a challenge for refugees, especially newly arrived refugees who do not yet have access to a vehicle. Many jobs are not easily accessible by public transportation, and even when they are, transportation may run infrequently or may not be available at the beginning or end of a worker's shift. Here are some ideas for navigating this challenge:

- Cover transportation options in job readiness training.
- Whenever possible, find housing options close to job opportunities and public transportation lines.
- Explore local government or nonprofit initiatives that may provide transportation assistance to low-income city residents.
- Coordinate a bicycle donation program or partner with another local nonprofit that operates this type of program.
- Help clients work towards obtaining driver's licenses and purchasing vehicles.
- Encourage employer partners to provide or subsidize transportation for employees.
- Partner with ethnic community-based organizations or community leaders to coordinate carpool arrangements for community members.

- Explore rideshare options such as Uber and Lyft, particularly for clients whose shifts start or end at times when public transportation is not running. Consider soliciting donations to subsidize this transportation for a limited time.

### Child Care

Child care challenges can make it difficult for some clients to find and maintain employment, in particular female clients. Consider these strategies:

- Research local child care and early education options. Connect to local Departments of Social Services to see if child care vouchers are available. Contact local [Child Care Resource and Referral agencies](#) for help finding child care.
- Mobilize interns and volunteers to lead the time-consuming tasks of research, eligibility verification, and application processes for child care programs.
- Be strategic about scheduling parents on different shifts that will allow them to share child care responsibilities if necessary.
- Search for jobs near child care centers in order to streamline the process of dropping children off and getting to work.
- Encourage your clients to work with you on this challenge, asking them to network within their community to explore solutions.
- For clients who may be interested in starting in-home child care businesses, explore opportunities to help them become certified through [ORR's Refugee Family Child Care Microenterprise Development program](#) or other mainstream programs that may be available in your area.
- Encourage employer partners to help with the challenge of child care through flexible scheduling, child care benefits, and even onsite child care provision, where possible.

### Cultural Norms & Religious Beliefs

Respecting differing cultural norms and religious beliefs, while also encouraging clients to adapt in ways that will support their success and integration, is a constant tension. The role of the employment navigator (AKA Employment Specialist, Job Readiness Instructor, or Job Developer) is to encourage both clients and employers to be open to new ways of doing things.

Clients must be willing to adapt to U.S. workplace norms such as being on time, requesting time off in advance, learning to give and receive feedback, and complying with U.S. workplace laws. Employers, on the other hand, most likely have room to grow in creating a workplace which values diversity to the extent that they are willing to consider reasonable adjustments to company practices and policies in order to promote diversity, equity and inclusion.

### Helping Clients Adapt

Here are some practical suggestions for coaching clients as they balance cultural norms and religious beliefs with the need to adapt to the U.S. workplace:

- Ask clients many questions! Some religious and cultural traditions are non-negotiable, while others are more flexible. This can be different from person to person (even within the same religious or cultural group), so be careful not to make assumptions!
- Use job readiness classes and employment counseling conversations to clearly set expectations with clients regarding non-negotiable U.S. workplace expectations to which they will need to adapt.
- Clarify which cultural or religious issues are reasonable for clients to ask employers to accommodate (e.g., head coverings, religious restrictions against touching certain foods, cultural practices related to grieving, etc.). Provide coaching and opportunities to practice having these kinds of conversations.
- Inform clients of their rights regarding [religious discrimination](#), [national origin discrimination](#), and other rights protected by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Coach clients on what they should do if these rights are violated.
- Some refugees may not be familiar with the concept of withholding part of their income for benefits such as health insurance, life insurance, and retirement and may need coaching to understand their options and make wise decisions.

### Helping Employers Adapt

Encourage employer partners to promote diversity, equity and inclusion (not to mention employee retention) by focusing on clear communication with employees and being willing to make reasonable accommodations. Suggest that employers:

- Be clear about non-negotiable expectations of employees during orientation and provide ample opportunity for new hires to ask questions about policies and procedures.
- Host regular staff roundtables where employees can ask questions and share concerns.
- Make efforts to understand and make reasonable accommodations for cultural and religious traditions (cultural/religious dress, daily prayer times, fasting during Ramadan, Bhutanese week-long grieving process, etc.).
- Hire community liaisons who can help troubleshoot when challenges related to culture or religion arise.
- Provide training to company staff on employee rights, various forms of discrimination, and diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Avoid placing clients in employment situations that may trigger flashbacks of traumatic experiences that they have had (e.g. loud noises, blood, small spaces, etc.)
- Consult with mental health workers at your organization or in your community to develop a plan for what you will do when trauma presents itself as a barrier to employment or to job retention.

## Conclusion

Employment barriers are not unique to refugees; we all have them. We all have inherent strengths as well. But we may overlook our strengths or lack the courage to put them into action until others affirm them, giving us the determination to pursue our goals and overcome our barriers. As employment service providers, we have the privilege of playing this role for our clients: recognizing and affirming their strengths and working collaboratively with them to overcome their barriers.

## Emotional Barriers

Some of the most difficult refugee employment barriers to address are emotional or psychological. These can range from a simple lack of confidence, to unrealistic expectations, to barriers related to the significant trauma that some clients have experienced. While we cannot explore these in depth, here are some quick tips to keep in mind:

- Find ways to build up your clients' self-confidence. Engage them in hands-on learning; provide safe spaces for practicing skills; connect them with volunteers and mentors who can draw out their strengths.
- Set clear expectations with clients about the ways your program can help them. Work with them to set priorities, initially focusing on financial self-sufficiency (if that has not yet been attained), and then moving on to personal work preferences and career goals.
- Affirm self-determination. Present your clients with information and options. Discuss the consequences of various choices but empower them to make final decisions.
- Promote hopeful realism. Encourage your clients to dream, but also keep them grounded in reality. Mapping out the steps necessary to accomplish one's career goal can be a helpful way to support your clients but give them a realistic sense of what to expect.

## Resources

[Switchboard's Job Counseling for Career Pathways Toolkit](#) (2019): This guide focuses on identifying client motivations and needs, collaborating with clients to set goals and action steps, and identifying key resources in the community to support the professional journeys of refugees.

[Switchboard's library of job readiness resources](#): The Switchboard Resource Library hosts a variety of job readiness resources created by past technical assistance providers and refugee resettlement agencies.

[Strengths-Based Customer Service Toolkit](#) (2017): Developed by Social Policy Research Associates in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Labor, this toolkit provides guidance on using a strengths-based approach when providing workforce development services to customers at American Job Centers.

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