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Project STAR: Recredentialing and Job-Upgrading for Refugee Professionals

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Early employment is a fact of life for refugees. In return for resettlement in this country, the federal government requires refugees to achieve economic “self-sufficiency” - or welfare avoidance - as soon after resettlement as possible. While early employment in an entry level job responds to the federal government’s mandate to seek “self-sufficiency”, it does not always provide a living wage for the refugee or the opportunity for our society to capitalize on the skills and training that some refugees bring with them. In response to this problem, staff of the International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis, with funding through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, developed a STAR (Special Targeted Assistance for Refugees) program. The goal of STAR is to capitalize on refugees’ qualifications and work experience and thus avoid the wastage of human capital. STAR is a structured approach to climbing the ladder of employment opportunities.

STAR offers qualified refugees a program of assistance with credentialing and job upgrading. Qualifications for participation in the project are refugee status, 12 or more years of education plus professional or technical qualifications, and current employment. Enhanced refugee employment opportunities would, we argued, improve family and community stability besides providing refugees with opportunities to repay their host society in very practical ways: by paying increased taxes on increased income, and through more buying power and thus more investment in their communities.

Clear goals with defined areas of responsibility need to be established for staff and refugees. To achieve these goals, staff need to set aside inter-agency or inter-departmental turf battles and work together, recognizing that no one project component is pre-eminent. The success or failure of the project hinges on team work in which collaboration, professionalism and enthusiasm are key factors. Weekly meetings at which all staff can review the disparate pieces of each case are critical in maintaining a quality program.

The success or failure of the project also hinges on the refugees’ commitment to the project. While they may be anxious for the status recovery that goes with being back in their own profession, they also need to accept that getting back into their field is not going to be a sinecure and will depend for success on their own initiative and openness to change. They must further accept that participation in the project involves staying in contact with Job Placement, going to specialized ESL tutorials to upgrade their English regularly, and doing daily homework after long hours of labor at their entry level jobs. They may have to revise life-time attitudes on authority and work-styles, and they may have to go through professional evaluation. They need to understand that the true goal of the STAR is not to provide them with a better job, but to prepare them for their own independent job search. They must further accept that they will need patience and may experience many rejections before they find the right job match. Most - but not all - refugees will accept these tasks. A formal contract signed by the project manager and the refugee helps to avoid later misunderstandings as to expectations and responsibilities.

Successful staffing must include people who enjoy challenges and breaking new ground. A key staff person needs to be designated to research state and city regulations on professional recertification. Although there are national professional organizations like the American Medical Association, with established exams and procedures for foreign professionals' recertification, some organizations may also have state regulatory agencies who have their own hurdles for refugees to cross. Besides identifying these key gatekeepers, this staff person needs to be familiar with local workplace customs and standards. We found, for instance, that local companies expected their engineers to be able to use AUTOCAD. Most of our Bosnian and Iraqi engineers were not familiar with this program. Fortunately, we had one Bosnian who had gone back to school here in the US to study AUTOCAD. We bought and installed the software program on one of our computers. With our one 'seed' AUTOCAD-trained engineer, we adopted an "each one teach one" approach! We soon had a core group of AUTOCAD teachers and students with scheduled practice sessions on Saturdays and evenings. Successful job placements in engineering fields followed shortly.

Some professional certification organizations are more flexible than others and will try to make their regulatory system permeable for the refugees. Others treat their regulations as if carved in stone. It's important not to let the "stone walls" block progress. Maintaining a network of communication with others in the field will sometimes reveal close alternatives to the area that is blocked.

Two critical steps precede recredentialing: academic document translation and document evaluation. Accurate, speedy and reliable document translation is essential. Where a standard American transcript runs to a few pages, many foreign academic documents can come in bundles of 20+pages. With document translation costing \$20 a page, this single preliminary can be very expensive. We were fortunate in having a document translation service in-house. Even so, 20+ pages of translation could cause a considerable delay in processing. In one or two cases, we were able to speed the process by having the refugee - if he/she had excellent English skills - provide the translator with a rough draft of the translation. The translator still had the job of verifying that the rough draft was an accurate representation of the document, but the process went a little more quickly.

Once translated, the academic documents need to be professionally evaluated. Nine or ten such organizations exist in this country. They can evaluate the translated documents and authenticate the accuracy of the academic claims made by the refugee.

The staff person in charge of recredentialing must be comfortable negotiating for the refugees in academia, state and local recertification offices, and job sites, in addition to becoming familiar with the academic standards and idiosyncrasies of foreign colleges and universities. Storing gathered information in an easily accessible form is important. Storing it with notations about procedures and 'friendly' contact persons is invaluable.

ESL instruction needs to start with a holistic evaluation that takes into account English communication skills together with specific workplace needs and the student's ability to sustain learning through home study. In addition to special purpose language instruction, refugees need instruction in US workplace customs and expectations. This is better done in small group settings. Well educated and experienced professionals take for granted much of their global knowledge. Attitude towards authority, what a resume should look like, how to act at an interview, etc., are all part of the life experiences of professionals. Group discussion can help refugees to re-examine fixed attitudes and rehearse new responses. Videotaping these sessions is a valuable way of underlining and fine-tuning workplace non-verbal communication.

Job Placement Counselors play a critical role in ensuring that a STAR project has measurable outcomes. A key factor here is finding jobs to match the refugees' credentials and skills. Employers need to be carefully educated to the advantages of hiring from STAR's trained worker pool. Flyers and announcements are usually not enough. Employers want proof that hiring a non-native English speaker for a responsible position is going to be cost-effective. Job Placement staff can educate employers best by familiarizing themselves with their clients' professional skills and participating with the ESL instructors in coaching them to interview well, to research the job market using the Internet and public library resources, to write effective resumes, and to familiarize themselves with American workplace culture. Job Placement staff need to avoid the common practice of single-site development and group job placements which tend to diminish the quality of the placement. They need to research new job areas not usually cultivated for refugees. It takes time for confidence in the project's outcomes to spread, but every successful placement has a ripple effect that encourages employer support. Unfortunately it is also true that a single "job-hopping" refugee can ruin the work of your Job Placement staff. It is critically important therefore to make sure that the refugees buy into the project, too.

Finally, all involved in STAR - staff and refugees - need to appreciate that the project will not provide quick-fix solutions to the problems of recredentialing and job-upgrading. Even when the refugee has done all that has been asked of him - documents have been translated, certificates evaluated, English upgraded, interview skills honed, and resume picture-perfect from a laser printer - the job market will still take time to adjust to the skill level and employment needs of STAR participants.

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