



Tapping the talent pool of state's skilled immigrants

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BY PETER GONZALES

RISA AND HER husband were civil engineers who had driven more than an hour to attend the evening event. Sonali had trained as a doctor in India but was now working in a research job, hoping she could someday return to seeing patients. And Jean was a chemist from the Congo. He toiled on the night shift in a medical testing company, but dreamed of a better opportunity.

I met Risa, Sonali, and Jean at Pathways to Success, a special workshop designed to help immigrants who have college degrees from their home countries, but are currently working in low-level jobs. Our organization holds these events at local colleges, giving ambitious immigrants a combination of practical advice and the chance to envision themselves back in their professions.

Attendees get tips about the U.S. job-search process, including what not to put on a resume. (Many are surprised to discover that photos and personal information are frowned upon: In France, for example, it's customary to include a headshot, marital status, and age.)

Pathways to Success attendees also learn about American employers' expectations for the interview process. When it comes to describing prior experience, for example, interviewers in Indonesia might expect modesty, but here in the U.S. we expect people to emphasize their accomplishments.

This cultural norm takes some getting used to. As a Ukrainian job-seeker told us, "On my first interview in America, when the interviewer asked me what I was good at, I said, 'I am not good at anything,' because it is rude to brag about yourself."

She's not alone. Indeed, at each Pathways to Success event, we hear from dozens of participants with stories like hers. Often, they thank us for the opportunity to learn some of the "unwritten rules" of the U.S. labor market. Attendees also appreciate the chance to have their education and expertise recognized, even if just for an evening.

Of course, we want that experience to last for much longer than one night. Indeed, as president and CEO of the nonprofit Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, I have an unusual perspective on this issue: Ensuring that talented immigrants can contribute at their highest potential is the mission of our organization.

To us, a doctor who is reluctantly working as a taxi driver doesn't just represent an individual loss. It's a cost to our entire community, reflected in lost productivity and a

smaller pool of talent. At a time when every dollar counts, our nation cannot afford to squander the investments made by immigrants themselves and the countries that educated them.

The scale of this issue is significant: The nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute estimates that Pennsylvania is home to 29,000 college-educated immigrants who are under-employed. These men and women are working in low-level jobs that fail to draw on their education and experience. Given this enormous scope, simply providing services to individual job-seekers - as important as it is - is not enough.

For that reason, in 2010 the Welcoming Center became a founding member of IMPRINT, a national coalition that advocates for improved policy on skilled immigrant issues. Among the other nonprofit members of IMPRINT is World Education Services, a credential evaluation service and the originator of Pathways to Success events.

Our shared vision is as simple as it is clear: We see a world where the Risas, Sonalis and Jeans get the informed guidance they need to re-establish their professional careers.

In this future world, professional licensing boards are fully equipped to provide advice to internationally educated applicants. Adult educators and workforce development professionals have the resources they need to guide their skilled immigrant students and clients. Employers have ready access to the diverse linguistic, cultural, and technical skills of these ambitious newcomers.

Most of all, we are enjoying a shared prosperity where people like Jean, Sonali, and Risa are free to pursue their callings without confronting unnecessary barriers - and Philadelphia is benefiting from their global experience, education and talent.

Peter Gonzales is president and CEO of the nonprofit Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. Based in Philadelphia, the center serves more than 400 legally work-authorized immigrant job-seekers each year. Learn more about the Welcoming Center's work with skilled immigrants at welcomingcenter.org

Find policy recommendations and more from IMPRINT at imprintproject.org