

Hiring Skilled Immigrants: Recommendations for Massachusetts

Report prepared on behalf of the African Bridge
Network

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Donahue Institute
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Hiring Skilled Immigrants: Recommendations for Massachusetts

Prepared by the UMass Donahue Institute's
Economic & Public Policy Research Group

Project Leader

Ember Skye Kane-lee, Research
Manager

Project Staff

Michael McNally, Senior Research
Analyst

Research Assistant

Sofia Molina

Unit Director

Mark Melnik, Director of Economic &
Public Policy Research

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Introduction

The University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) has completed a feasibility study for the African Bridge Network (ABN) to understand the challenges, barriers, and opportunities for skilled immigrants (i.e., foreign-born residents with a foreign bachelor's degree or higher) in both Massachusetts and the United States. The study places a particular focus on those high-skilled immigrants who earned their degrees outside of the U.S.

Studying barriers to and interventions which address hiring skilled immigrants is an important workforce and economic development issue for Massachusetts. There is a high concentration of immigrants in the Commonwealth, especially in Boston and other gateway cities throughout the state. Maximizing the labor potential of skilled immigrants, including the utilization of skillsets from international credentials, will both increase the labor productivity of the state and help with broader issues of inequality and equity in Massachusetts. Addressing barriers to hiring skilled immigrants will only become more important in future years, given Massachusetts' aging labor force and increased need to fill critical job vacancies in the state.

Founded in 2015, the African Bridge Network serves skilled immigrants in the Commonwealth through the development and utilization of programs that create pathways allowing skilled immigrants to re-establish their careers in positions that lead to professional upward mobility. Bridging these gaps, ABN offers their skilled immigrant clients a range of resources and supports such as: orientation to US systems workshops, policy advocacy at the employer and legislative level¹, and specialized programs that provide access to resources, mentorship, professional networking opportunities, and career advancement opportunities through their partnerships with employers.

The Donahue Institute's feasibility study for ABN identified salient risk factors associated with hiring skilled immigrants and solutions for mitigating these risks, which include acceptable assessment tools, necessary training, and specific support systems. ABN is in the beginning stages of developing a program in which they would verify that the skilled immigrants completing the program have a range of key qualifications employers view as desirable for hiring. The Donahue Institute has collected feedback from key informant stakeholders to inform recommendations on the process flow and pre-conditions for the success of a verification program as part of the Immigrant Professional Verification Program.

Through its research, the Donahue Institute has found:

Barriers

- Approximately 17 percent of the Commonwealth's total population is foreign born, with 14 percent of the foreign-born, 16+ workers (Approximately 140,000 people) in positions that provide inadequate hours (underemployed) and/or require education below their current

¹ Policy advocacy could include developing and working with legislators to create laws that help standardize regulations around credentialing. This could also entail creating government programs that help train skilled immigrants in partnership with organizations like ABN. Finally, policy advocacy may entail working with employers to develop robust systems for bringing in skilled immigrants and supporting their transition into American careers.

attainment level (underutilized). Immigrants disproportionately fall into these two categories², accounting for 35 percent of the total underemployed or underutilized population in the state.

- The exact share of this group in the state that is specifically underutilized, experiencing what this report will refer to as “brain waste”, is unclear but one recent analysis estimates the number in the tens of thousands.
- Skilled Immigrants frequently experience multiple barriers to employment in the U.S. including legal status to work, verification and cost of educational credential access, employer awareness of the skilled immigrant population, cultural literacy of American workplace hiring norms, and language barriers.
- Employers appear to be hesitant to hire and work with skilled immigrants, due in large part to a lack of familiarity and knowledge of working with this population.

Interventions

The research for this report made it clear that these barriers are an issue throughout the country and the Northeast. UMDI has identified solutions to the barriers stated above, these include:

- Interventions aimed at addressing barriers to hiring skilled immigrants include accessible training and/or retraining across professional fields, credentialing services, English Language proficiency classes and opportunities for networking and mentoring.
- To ensure the success of the African Bridge Network’s proposed verification program for skilled immigrants, all program features must be described in detail accessible to employers and skilled immigrants alike, and UMDI recommends the program be advertised widely across ABN’s networks.
- For consideration in ABN’s programmatic offerings, UMDI recommends inclusion of workshops and trainings that discuss common cultural workplace norms specific to the United States. Training includes soft skills such as professional communication, conflict resolution and customer service skills for client-facing positions. Additionally, UMDI recommends inclusion of workshops and networking events for employers, which help demystify the process of hiring skilled immigrants.
- Continuing a mentorship component for hired skilled immigrants who have completed ABN’s verification program may help employers retain this population.

The report begins with a description of the seven most common challenges and barriers of hiring skilled immigrants: legal status, credential recognition, employer awareness, cultural literacy, language barriers, cost to access recredentialing services and lack of knowledge around specific considerations for hiring and working with skilled immigrants. The following section provides an overview of five interventions that address those challenges: career counseling and mentorship, accessible training or retraining, legitimizing, and funding credentials, addressing language barriers, and supporting professional networking opportunities. The final section of the report discusses recommendations for

² For this report, the focus will be on underutilization, which will be referred to as “brain waste”, and the definition used will be a worker in a job that has a lower educational requirement than the worker’s educational attainment. Though foreign-born workers also struggle with underemployment, this report focuses on this underutilization of skills and the credential gaps that enable it.

developing ABN's proposed verification program for skilled immigrants. The report concludes with appendices covering the interview and focus group instruments.

Barriers to Hiring Skilled Immigrants

Across the literature review, interviews and focus groups, UMDI identified eight primary barriers. These barriers slow or prevent skilled immigrants from working in the fields they were trained in. This section will go into detail about each of those barriers. To begin, it is important to establish the scale of this issue in Massachusetts.

Demographic Context

As a percentage of the total population, Massachusetts has the 8th largest immigrant population in the nation. Approximately 17 percent of the state's total population is foreign-born. Foreign-born residents make up 28 percent of the age 16+ labor force of the state. This is higher than the national average where only 21 percent of the labor force is foreign born (*State Workforce Data - MA and US, 2022*). A 2023 analysis of BLS data focusing on Massachusetts, found 14 percent of the foreign born, working population is “underemployed or underutilized”. In that report, underemployed persons were defined as those working less hours than they desired and underutilized persons were those working in jobs below their educational and skill requirements.³ The report could not explicitly disentangle the underemployed from the underutilized but estimated that these workers numbered in the tens of thousands. Although they are 28 percent of the overall working population, foreign-born workers account for 35 percent of the total “underemployed or underutilized” population in the state, suggesting that immigrant populations are disproportionately impacted by these issues (Rubin & Warrington, 2023).

This report will focus on the group that 2023 analysis identified as “underutilized”. This underutilization, or “brain waste”, occurs when a worker is working in a position with a lower educational requirement than their current educational attainment. This level of brain waste among the foreign-born population is low among U.S. states. A 2021 analysis by the Migration Policy Institute compared states on their rate of brain waste among the college educated foreign born and found Massachusetts was in the bottom five U.S. states⁴ (Batalova, 2021)⁵. While the level of brain waste is low relative to other parts of the country, having a substantial portion of the foreign-born workforce in jobs that do not fit their skills is a major issue. Brain waste is a serious problem and is the result of high barriers to immigrant workforce reentry. These barriers will be explored in detail, below.

³ Different authors use the term underemployed in different ways. Underemployment in economic contexts often refers to a person working fewer hours than they are fully capable of, or for lower-than-normal pay, because of economic or personal circumstances. This report is focused on immigrant workers who are in a job that has a lower educational requirement than the immigrant's educational attainment. Going forward underemployment is using this skill-based definition, which will also be referred to as Brain Waste”. Though foreign-born workers may face other forms of underemployment, this report focuses on the credential gap.

⁴ Massachusetts is 6th if you include Washington D.C. in the ranking.

⁵ Batalova uses underutilization, underemployment, and brain waste, interchangeably. In all cases the author is referring to highly skilled immigrants, who are working in jobs that do not require their level of skill.

Legal status

An immigrant's legal status impacts their level of brain waste. Nationwide, among college educated immigrants, those with temporary visas, including work visas, have the lowest underemployment (8 percent) of any immigrant population, followed by naturalized U.S. citizens (20 percent) and green-card holders (27 percent) (See **Appendix C**: Forms of Legal Permanent Immigration). These rates are reflective of the ease of access to the American job market that each type of legal status conveys. Visa holders are hired by employer to do a job (see **Appendix B**: Forms of Visa for a list of available visas) and therefore are most likely to be in the job that fits their skills, naturalized citizens and green card holders may have spent more time in the U.S., which improves English speaking abilities and may indicate more knowledge of the job market, though they still are at a disadvantage when competing with workers born in the United States, raising their level of underemployment. Other groups of immigrants usually lack these advantages. College educated unauthorized immigrants and humanitarian immigrants **such as** asylum seekers have the highest rates of underemployment, 34 and 44 percent respectively. Unauthorized immigrants have more challenges due to the range of state-varied work authorizations often required by higher skilled jobs, and because their status makes entering credentialing and education programs more difficult. Meanwhile, humanitarian immigrants often are part of programs like refugee resettlement which emphasize rapid employment rather than employment in the best fitting job for each immigrant, driving up their rate of underemployment (Batalova, 2021).

The legal status mix of underemployed immigrants will vary between industries; one analysis of the healthcare industry found that the majority of underemployed immigrants in healthcare fields were legal immigrants who hold degrees in healthcare fields. The report found that in Massachusetts 87 percent of underemployed immigrants in healthcare were "Legally Present"⁶. A major factor in this rate is that few healthcare jobs are open to immigrants whose legal status is in question. Health care credentials require licensing that filters out immigrants who may be unauthorized or restricted from working (Batalova et al., 2020). This suggests that legal status is less of a barrier for immigrants in the healthcare industry. However, it also suggests that immigrants self-select away from industries like healthcare because of stricter legal status requirements, opting for employment in less regulated settings such as through contact agencies.

Other industries may have their own unique challenges with legal status. Interviews and focus groups suggested that sponsorship for visa holders was rarely a problem at larger employers but that it did present an additional investment by an employer in the worker, which might be more challenging for a small employer to support. Visa sponsorship may cost thousands in filing fees, depending on the type of visa, the size of the employer and other variables.⁷

⁶ Legally present in this context means they are naturalized U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, humanitarian migrants, or possess temporary nonimmigrant visas.

⁷ <https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/how-to-guides/how-to-sponsor-individual-h-1b-visa>

Additionally, there are only 140,000 employment-based immigrant visas⁸ available each year for the entire country⁹. Groups of these visas are specifically earmarked for five classes of immigrant. For example, there is a category of visas for “extraordinary” ability workers in arts, sciences, education, business, or athletics. Recipients of these visas may not resemble the skilled immigrant workers discussed throughout this report. For example, another category of worker visa is for job creating investors who invest \$1.8 million (halved if investing in rural areas) in the United States and create or preserve ten jobs (Morse & Chanda, 2023).

Without a dedicated work visa, a documented immigrant must compete on the open labor market where immigrant skilled workers are often at a disadvantage for reasons that will be explored more deeply in the following sections (Arnita, 2022). The process of renewing a work visa can be stressful for an immigrant worker. One professional interviewed for this project discussed tension in the workplace when the time came to renew a working permit: “I’ve had experiences where certain technicians were on edge because their working permit was expiring, and they hadn’t gotten the renewal and what they were going to do? It’s nerve racking for them, once you get them in, that’s not the end of the story.” However, this tension can also benefit employers. Workers recognize that their employer can support them in the renewal process, which may encourage them to stay with that same employer: “Those that I worked with came through the (medical center) and I guess the (medical center) sort of helps them renew the work permits. You’re able to hold on to them because they know where their work permit is coming from.” The fragility of being a working immigrant in a foreign country can be a burden by itself. An immigrant with a working visa remains in a precarious position due to the legal limitations of the visa system in the United States. Even if the immigrant has done the additional work of getting credentialed in their field, they still need a supportive employer who can guide them and provide resources during the process of visa renewal.

Credential Recognition

Credential recognition is a barrier in multiple directions for an immigrant. Credentials need to be recognized by employers to be hired, by universities in order for immigrants to advance their education, and by regulatory bodies that restrict access to professions while enforcing standards. Immigrants most importantly encounter it when applying for jobs. Employers must decide if an applicant’s resume contains relevant skills for the position, often demonstrated by academic credentials such as degrees, certifications, or by work experience. For an immigrant applicant, the skills on their resume are backed up by education systems, employment, and certification standards that are unfamiliar to most US employers, who typically receive the bulk of their applications from domestic residents. It is not surprising that an employer would be skeptical of resume items that they are unfamiliar with; however, some employers may also react in a discriminatory manner. Employers sometimes assume that any foreign credential is less valuable than an equivalent credential from the United States. A 2015 national

⁸. In addition to these 140,000 immigrant visas, there are also temporary, non-immigrant visas, just under 900,000 of which are for short-term employment such as the H1-B visa. However, workers covered by non-immigrant visas are not the focus of this report.

⁹ <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/employment-based-immigrant-visas.html>

survey of 4,000 college educated immigrants found that 40 percent had issues with employers not recognizing foreign work experience as valid and 35 percent had issues with employers not recognizing foreign credentials (Morse & Chanda, 2023). One employer confirmed this experience during their interview: “They (skilled immigrants) don't even necessarily get the opportunity to interview sometimes or even beyond that, just because the credentialing/experience... you see a resume with everything not here in the United States, and you get put in a pile that doesn't get looked at after.” Foreign resume items can be unfairly interpreted as shorthand for a poorly fitting employee by hiring teams. The 2015 survey also contacted immigrants in the Boston area for interviews. The interviews generally found that skilled immigrant experiences in the city matched their national peers. There was one exception, the college educated immigrants in Boston had a much higher rate of professional licensure (Bergson-Shilcock & Witte, 2015).

Difficulties with having your experience and resume validated by an employer are complicated by legal licensing requirements for certain professions. For example, within the United States international medical graduates, even those with years of experience, need to first pass U.S. Medical Licensing Exams (USMLE). In many states, those who have passed the USMLE must often apply for and complete hard to get medical residency positions, often spending more time in residency before they are licensed than US medical grads. This issue appears within many different medical professions such as nursing, psychology and dentistry. To address this credentialing problem, there are private credential evaluation organizations. These organizations take the resumes and CVs of immigrants and “translate” those credentials to their US equivalents, sometimes while helping the applicant to address non-resume items that they might need such as additional professional licensing. Educational Credential Evaluators, International Education Research Foundation and World Education Services (WES) are a few of the organizations that work in this space. These services charge fees for their work, typically in the realm of several hundred dollars per evaluation, though prices vary widely based on if the evaluation is for academic purposes versus employment, or depending on the industry the evaluation is for. A basic evaluation may result in a certified letter affirming the applicant attended the university they list on their resume, and that the degree earned is the equivalent of say a master's or other degree in the United States.¹⁰ More advanced evaluations might break down individual coursework.¹¹

While credential translation is useful, different employers, professions and even states have different standards for credential evaluation. They may require certain services be used over others. This can complicate the process of immigrating to a place and reentering the workforce. Additionally, these evaluations can take weeks or even longer, with fees for speeding up the process exceeding the initial cost of the report. One interviewed employer pointed out that certain low-level positions may not require credentialing: “...If you have it (certified credentials), you are a good attraction, but not a necessity for us at that point, until you get to a position where it's required that we look into that.”

¹⁰ <https://ierf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/SampleGeneralReport.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.wes.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/sample-CE-US-cxc-2021.png>

However, a skilled immigrant may have access to entry level positions but be unable to advance until they deal with the credentialing issue.

A common issue for immigrants, particularly from countries experiencing conflict or disasters, is a lack of official documentation of their academic and professional achievements. Immigrants who are refugees or asylum seekers, may not have been able to bring their professional material with them in the rush to leave their home countries. Their educational institutions and former employers may no longer be operating, making credential recognition impossible with traditional methods. These immigrants need additional assistance. Programs like the World Education Services (WES) gateway program are specifically designed for immigrants with little credible documentation of their achievements, but even that program still requires some evidence to begin the process of rebuilding an immigrant's records.

Credentialing services are often only part of the licensing process, which can extend on for months or years. One study of barriers to relicensing of nurses and engineers found that on average in the state of New York, it took a nurse 35 weeks or more to have their credentials evaluated. By comparison, engineer license evaluations could take as little as three weeks, but that evaluation was only for their earned licenses; certain engineering licenses require taking a test that could take an immense amount of time to prepare for (Barker, 2018). One person interviewed for this project discussed how delays of more than half a year are possible: "...I could have a dentist (sign on) in January and not start until September because of licensing... It's frustrating for us as employers, but it's so frustrating for people who have done everything they're supposed to get their license, and then are just delayed and they have no answers." In interviews, the burdensome nature of these licensing requirements was highlighted frequently:

The licensing process for all regulated professions is overly burdensome and provides unnecessary barriers for skilled immigrants... even within the state, it's overly complicated and those in positions of power often don't even understand the process themselves when it comes to skilled immigrants.

The literature and qualitative research for this report show that there are excessive regulatory burdens on skilled immigrants seeking to reenter their fields.

Employers

Employers themselves can be a serious barrier to bringing immigrant professionals back into the workforce. Starting from the moment of application, immigrants will find that employers are often unprepared for their arrival. Position descriptions using complex language or jargon, which deviates from the essentials of the position, can be difficult for immigrants to navigate. Even for those with US cultural context, customizing an application for a particular position can be daunting, but for people new to the US, it can be impossible. An overly generic cover letter or a resume that doesn't emphasize the right subset of skills can lead to an application that sticks out for the wrong reasons. The application may be dismissed based solely on these missteps. If the application does pass scrutiny, the interview process can then be severely challenging for an immigrant applicant. Employers may use metaphors that are not understood by the candidate, the interview may move at a pace faster than an English language learner

is prepared for, and the questions may be vaguely worded (ImmigrantsWork Coalition, 2021). For these reasons, some organizations have developed guides for employers of immigrant workers, but none were identified that specifically addressed a New England audience. Canada (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2009) and US states like Minnesota and Illinois have done more work to develop best practices in these areas. Michigan has created an Office of New Americans while Illinois created a welcoming initiative with support for immigrant arrivals (Friedman, 2018). Massachusetts commissioned a 2022 report studying best practices for bringing in more foreign health care workers, but based on the qualitative research for this report, it does not seem like the knowledge from the commission has fully translated into workable employer practices in that industry (Lavery, 2022). For many places the impetus for looking into this issue was the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing a pressing demand for healthcare workers.

A 2015 Urban Institute study performed a literature review and interviewed 13 organizations including employers, immigrant-serving organizations, and unions. The study found that although some employers were better at engaging immigrants than others, they often needed an immigrant focused organization as a partner and assurances that their investment in an immigrant worker, such as sponsoring a visa, would be a long-lasting investment (Enchautegui, 2015).

When developing position descriptions for jobs, employers need to be mindful of overwriting descriptions. One employer interviewed for this project emphasized rewriting job descriptions to represent the actual requirements of the job: "...we are looking at the requirements and saying, is this really a requirement or is this an (example of) 'is it nice to have?' And if it's not a requirement, you can't exclude somebody because they don't have it."

Employers are vulnerable to cultural stereotypes and, as mentioned earlier, may undervalue foreign credentials. This can vary by country of origin of the applicant. A 2016 study in the Netherlands identified that immigrants from OECD countries like the Netherlands, were able to move into professional jobs more quickly than similarly educated immigrants from Middle East and North African (MENA) countries like Turkey and Morocco. The author proposed many reasons for this discrepancy. One explanation for this is a concept the researchers label *signaling*. In general, employers treat schooling as a signal of the value of an applicant. Foreign schooling, if unfamiliar to a host country's employer, is inherently less valuable. Lacking knowledge and familiarity with the quality of foreign schools, an employer may fall back on other parts of their perceived knowledge about the applicant's country of origin, which can lead to negative stereotyping. In this case, an applicant from a foreign country that has perceived commonalities with the host county would have an advantage, while an applicant from a country that is not perceived as having much in common would be at a disadvantage. This kind of discrimination can make it even more difficult for immigrants to reenter the careers they are qualified for, even if their application is otherwise in order (Zorlu, 2016). One interviewed employer discussed active efforts to eliminate bias particularly around schooling. Another interviewee discussed the initial fear and discriminatory bias when evaluating immigrant applicants:

People can say "I don't understand if this person is qualified or not" or "I feel like it's a risk to hire this person." And that might be what they say. But I think there are undertones of not just undertones, but there is discrimination at play in those

statements. There is fear around hiring someone who has an accent and whose credentials they don't understand.

The interviewee explained these habits may lessen completely once the hiring team gains experience hiring successful immigrant applicants and builds confidence in the quality of these workers. Interview participants emphasized that there is a (false) assumption in which US work culture is perceived as superior, causing alternative workplace cultures to be viewed as subpar. Exposure and understanding can go a long way to make the application process easier for immigrant applicants.

Employers may simply be unaware of the talent they could be bringing in from the skilled immigrant population. During one focus group interview, an employer discussed how people in supervisory roles at their company were surprised to learn that as much as 15 percent of their immigrant workforce had an advanced degree not being used in their current role. These skilled workers could be extremely valuable to the company in another role and would not need as much retraining or orientation as an external applicant. Often the process of recognizing the value in an immigrant worker requires looking past aspects of the immigrant working experience that are different from domestic workers, such as periods of underemployment:

One of the several barriers we see is internal. Let's describe them as old school hiring managers who cannot see through a CV- talent coming from another country. They see immediately that you're underemployed when you come to work in the U.S. and immediately ignore past years' experience... That's the struggle that HR must work on, is getting our hiring managers to understand to look beyond that first employment in the United States to see what else is in the background, what's there that fits the position that you're trying to fill. What's the role you want? And let's see if that person has that in their background...We often see skilled immigrants who find work and it is not in the roles that they have been trained to do in other countries. But if you go beyond that under employed role, you'll see where the skill sets are and what you need.

The expansion of skill-based hiring, and training of HR in implementation of such new policies are potential solutions to this issue. While the entirety of one's working experience may not be easy to translate into American cultural contexts, individual skills may be easier to translate, immediately signaling applicant fit to an employer. Skill-based hiring requires not only a HR policy change-this also requires a need for changes to occur to an employer's management process to be implemented effectively. Interviewees discussed skill-based hiring as a solution to this barrier while also pointing out HR departments are often unprepared to understand the skill-based assessments of skilled immigrant applicants.

Cultural Literacy

Immigrants may not be familiar with cultural practices in the work environment in the United States. These practices can vary and may include practices around networking on the job, norms around job safety and habits of interpersonal interaction. Even if an immigrant generally understands American cultural practices, workplace culture has unique practices of its own. One study UMDI reviewed held a

focus group with immigrants in Maine and identified that even small gestures in body language can differ widely across international communities. For example, within some African immigrant communities, making eye contact in interviews was not seen as a culturally appropriate way to interact with someone who might become your boss, causing issues in the hiring process if the candidates are seen as withdrawn because of cultural practices (Barker, 2018). This study also identifies other common international work applicant practices such as including photos and one's marital status in a resume (Barker, 2018). Interviewed employers describe a similar tension, identifying a need for trainings on American workplace culture and interpersonal interactions: "People who have different cultures have different communication styles too...Someone may be accused of being abrupt or something like that. And culturally we would, we would come across the same way I'm sure in other countries. So, I think that cultural training just probably helps in general, for everybody."

In focus groups facilitated by UMDI, employers observe that immigrant workers often experience difficulty describing their work experience to employers due to a tendency to frame past work experience chronologically, without elaboration on what specific skillsets are used in prior work roles. In the US applicants frequently describe their abilities during the application and interview process, connecting them directly to skills that would be useful in the new position.

Focus group participants also identify that skilled immigrants may lack knowledge around hiring negotiations. If details of an official job final offer do not fit the applicants needs exactly, the offer may be declined due to lack of knowledge around points of hiring negotiation, common to the United States. In one focus group, an employer explained that upon receipt of a job offer, "...we expect our candidates to be negotiating their happiness in this position." Another interviewee describes that some skilled immigrant workers may be stuck in a mindset which prevents them from advancing:

Often here employees have more space to be vocal, more space to advocate for themselves. In other countries, that's not an option. And people sometimes don't feel that they can aspire to more, that they cannot ask for a raise, or for additional opportunities because it's not something that you see in other cultures.

In this way, cultural literacy acts as a barrier for immigrant employees even on the job as it may limit their ability to seize new opportunities or develop the next phase of their careers.

Language Barrier

Immigrant populations, even those with higher education, often do not speak English as a primary language, which can cause communication challenges. A 2020 study of underutilized immigrants with healthcare-related degrees identified that Massachusetts immigrants were English proficient¹² at similar rates to national averages. Approximately 64 percent of underutilized immigrants with health degrees were classified as English proficient, placing Massachusetts in the middle of the pack among American states. Across the United States, 46 percent of immigrants are considered to have limited English

¹² "English proficient" in this study referred to persons who spoke only English at home or spoke English "very well" if they also spoke another language at home, based on US Census data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute

proficiency.¹³ It is important to keep in mind that this analysis was done using Census data which is self-reported, and respondents may exaggerate their English ability. Only through formal language testing can English ability be measured with accuracy. These immigrants may still benefit greatly from advanced English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) education. This level of proficiency likely varies by industry, but the study also suggested that this particular group of immigrants spoke a very similar mix of languages to the state overall (Batalova et al., 2020). A 2015 study of college educated immigrant workers mentioned in the section on Credential Recognition, also asked about English proficiency. This study found that while most college educated immigrants self-reported as English proficient, six percent reported very low proficiency and 18 percent reported medium-level proficiency. In a 2023 study revisiting the 2015 survey results, the article emphasized that technical language in a given profession is not usually taught in English language courses, particularly those funded by the state or federal government. An immigrant with the ability to communicate effectively in English in nonprofessional contexts may still find themselves struggling with professional field specific jargon (Morse & Chanda, 2023).

UMDI's interview and focus group participants did not view English proficiency as a dealbreaker in hiring immigrants with higher levels of education, but many noted that lacking proficiency could be a challenge for applicants. One interviewee spoke candidly about an experience of choosing between two immigrant candidates for the same position:

...if you're someone who will be like a liaison between the lab and the pathologist then I tend to worry about language. I have two candidates. Very good candidates for an entry level position. They were both from (the same country). But one of them spoke a little better than the other. So, I leaned towards the one that spoke better.

Both applicants were qualified, with similar resumes and backgrounds, and were from the same country. However, the applicant who did a slightly better job at verbally expressing themselves during the interview, was offered the job. Even slight differences in English proficiency can cause one skilled immigrant to be offered a position over another.

Interviewees frequently discussed how different fields have specific English language needs. For instance, in medical settings, roles that require regular communication with hospital staff or patients may require higher levels of proficiency. The time and monetary investment in English language education can be prohibitive for many skilled immigrants: "Sometimes I have students that cannot advance (in their workplace) because they say "no, I have to choose between taking the English class and reducing workload." Working immigrants with responsibilities on and off the job may be unable to dedicate the time needed to learning English, even if it may lead to more or better working opportunities in the long term.

¹³ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/language/US#>

Cost

The most common expense for a skilled immigrant seeking to reenter their career is the cost of accessing credentialing services. These services may cost several hundred dollars per document translated with additional fees for rush orders, to have them shipped internationally, or to have reports sent to additional employers. Additionally, ESOL courses, certificate programs and licensing exams can be expensive to attend. Massachusetts offers a number of free ESOL courses that are grant funded by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education¹⁴. However, these programs often have long waiting lists, sometimes taking well over a year from initial application to actually being matriculated with some programs implementing a lottery system for new students.¹⁵ A 2020 new article cited data from the Worcester's ESOL network which identified a waitlist of over 2,000 for approximately 1,400 ESOL class slots across 25 programs in the city of Worcester (Tom Matthews, 2020).¹⁶ While waiting to get into a free ESOL course, a skilled immigrant may not be able to advance their career or find a new job if that requires higher levels of English proficiency.

In 2017, an article in the Chicago Tribune investigated possible solutions for the unused international credentials of skilled immigrants. The piece included a compilation of personal immigrant stories who took on survival jobs instead of re-entering the careers they once held in their home countries. Some of these immigrants worked survival jobs because credentialing services were unaffordable for them, preventing them from getting recertified in their preferred field (Bowen & Elejalde-Ruiz, 2017).

There is also the cost of reeducation when credentials are insufficient to allow an immigrant into a regulated profession in the U.S. College educated immigrants seeking supplemental courses to achieve a U.S certification in a field may find themselves ineligible for tuition aid, either due to residency time requirements, or because programs like the FAFSA require that the applicant not yet have a college degree, even if it is achieved abroad (Nguyen et al., 2015). Community colleges could be proactive in ensuring immigrants seeking to get recertified in a particular field are taking only the essentials.

There is also the opportunity cost of pursuing work in a high skill field. Many immigrants have families they need to support and basic needs that must be met. This can make pursuing re-credentialing or dedicating large amounts of time applying to jobs impractical.

Sometimes an immigrant's temporary job has financial advantages over the job they were originally trained in. One employer interviewed for this report highlighted an effort to internally hire an immigrant into a nursing role from an hourly, non-degree requiring role. The immigrant had most of the necessary skills and needed only a small amount of additional training. However, once that was arranged and they were being oriented to their position, the immigrant realized the new position would have meant a reduction in take-home pay because it lacked overtime. The immigrant worked with the employer to

¹⁴ <https://www.doe.mass.edu/ele/>

¹⁵ As an example, Massasoit Community College holds a twice a year lottery for ESOL students in its free ESOL program due to heavy demand <https://massasoit.edu/corporate-community-education/adult-basic-education/massasoit-esol-faq/>

¹⁶ At the time of this report, Worcester's Quinsigamond Community College enrollment page for spring semester day, night and remote ESOL classes noted that all three programs had been completely filled for the semester.

raise the compensation and benefits to make their move to a nursing role a lateral move. A member of the employer focus group described this challenge as: "...a unique constraint that could really stop things cold, you know, no one wants to take a pay cut to reenter their career." One study examining this issue identified a group of skilled immigrants with healthcare backgrounds who did not want to reenter the field because the jobs they already had offered sufficient economic comfort or because they were nearing retirement (Al Achkar et al., 2023).

Cost should be understood to include the time it takes to seek recertification and a job in an immigrant's trained field. Just as immigrants may lack the time to address the language barrier, they also may not always have the time for getting oriented to a new job. During one interview, an employer explained how immigrants are sometimes unable to accept opportunities that would help them gain experience in a position they are interested in, due to financial and time constraints: "...Because many of them already work in like two or three jobs, they cannot just stop working to shadow a program."

Information gap

Information gaps exist within all of the previously discussed barriers. Knowledge of the legal requirements involved in hiring a visa worker may be lacking amongst employers, the value of foreign education might not be recognized by employers (or even recognized by skilled immigrants themselves) and cultural misconceptions are common. Interviews suggest that there is a basic lack of knowledge in the form of employers not recognizing that there are skilled immigrants available to fill employment gaps with little additional effort needed. If employers understood that skilled immigrants were available, they might be encouraged to transform their hiring and internal practices to allow this population to fill employment gaps. Interviews identified a need for more education among different groups involved with the hiring of immigrants: "Those people (career centers, employers, educational resources for skilled immigrants) need to increase their knowledge about how best to serve this population as potentially different from how they serve other students in their system or other job seekers in their system." When applying for jobs, there is a tremendous lack of knowledge among immigrants about the ins and outs of the hiring process for US firms. One employer explains:

They (skilled immigrants) have the qualifications in many ways, but they don't understand the U.S. professional job search process. And that sort of becomes a challenge for them and is one of the reasons why it takes people so long to get back into their profession here.

Immigrants also may not know what services are available to help them. Entities like African Bridge Network or Upwardly Global are available to help smooth parts of the transition to the US workforce. Continuing to build connections among employers and immigrants in Massachusetts that would share information on available resources could help both groups overcome information gap barriers without needing to create new initiatives.

On the job, immigrants may not recognize that there are different limits placed on their scope of practice. In a healthcare setting, for example, technicians and assistants have a specific scope of tasks they can do for patients in the United States. The focus groups with employers identified how these limitations might cause an issue on the job: "...there are the very real concerns that somebody would overstep the role of a PCT (patient care technician) or a medical assistant. Not done with ill intentions,

but just because that's what they know what to do (from their prior international experience).”
Additional training is needed to prevent this and close information gaps skilled immigrants may have.

Interventions Addressing Barriers to Hiring Skilled Immigrants

Skilled immigrants seeking to return to their careers in the United States are facing a number of substantial barriers. However, research for this report identified a consistent set of interventions centered around getting ahead of potential issues, providing resources to immigrants, and ongoing support of these workers.

Career Counseling and Mentorship

The data collected from reviewed literature, interviews and focus groups emphasize a need among skilled immigrants for someone they could turn to for advice throughout the early stages of their career transition to the U.S. One report described a similar role as a “labor market intermediary” (Barker, 2018). This dedicated point of contact could help new arrivals navigate many aspects of American work culture, from credentialing to job applications, to employment negotiations and workplace navigation. Several employers revealed that they often took on this role. They often felt the responsibility to help their immigrant workers with non-work tasks such as teaching them how to network or intervening when there was a cultural misunderstanding.

It is valuable for someone to act as a point of contact during the process of getting hired and employers asserted that having a counselor or mentor that the applicant can turn to would help retain hired immigrant employees. Adina, another interview participant, reiterates how skilled immigrants “would benefit from guidance and support from coaches and advisors and other people who can help them.” Mentorship is wanted by employers, for employees, assuring them that their new hire can smoothly transition into the workplace.

One version of the Labor Market Intermediary was proposed by the Center for State Policy Analysis at Tufts University in a 2023 report on how to bring more skilled immigrants into the Massachusetts labor force, suggesting the state allocate funding to support career counselors for skilled immigrants as part of the existing MassHire system (The Center for State Policy Analysis, 2023). A broader version of counseling may be necessary, as one interview UMDI participant pointed out that while systems like MassHire excel at getting people hired, they may become unavailable once a person obtains employment. Another increasingly common U.S. model for counseling and mentoring, as seen in Portland¹⁷ and St. Louis¹⁸, is the “professional connector”, where U.S. professionals volunteer time to provide guidance and help immigrants build their networks. Ideally a career counselor or mentor would stay connected with a skilled immigrant during the hiring process and for some time after their first US work experience.

One employer describes how they had emphasized the importance of leveraging benefits such as an official employer or university email address to start building a network. Another interview participant

¹⁷ <https://www.portlandregion.com/portlandprofessionalconnections.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.stlmosaicproject.org/pro-connectors.html>

described how skilled immigrants should use non-work experiences related to their chosen careers to help increase their hiring competitiveness: “Internships and work experience in a healthcare setting can be obtained in ways other than direct employment.... Employers appreciate anything that provides a dimension to that candidate. A dimension of commitment, a dimension of familiarity.” Bernadette, an employer of skilled immigrants observes:

You could have somebody that is very talented, hardworking, and smart and might not be able to get to the next level, because they don’t have the right mentor or the right coach to help them and elevate them to that.

Upwardly Global, was mentioned as a resource by several interviewees, and is a national organization that works directly with skilled immigrants. Upwardly Global provides a career coaching program that includes a dedicated career coach, a job readiness course and industry-specific coaching. They will support immigrants for up to 18 months of job searching.

In Canada, where there are both national and state supported skilled immigrant programs, the Canadian Employer Playbook for hiring immigrants recommends using a “buddy system” for mentoring, pairing immigrant hires with a partner in the same working unit as the new hire. This partner could support and guide the new hire throughout their onboarding process. The playbook emphasized that this buddy would act as a role model and make it easier for the skilled immigrant to get the help they need, without consulting their supervisor for every issue (ImmigrantsWork Coalition, 2021). The playbook lays out detailed steps for creating a new internal mentorship program within an organization. A similar guide from the Hire Immigrants Ottawa initiative recommends similar practices during the onboarding process, reinforcing a continual process of support (Hire Immigrants Ottawa, 2023). This post-hire mentoring of skilled immigrants is only part of the solution, with many interviewed employers requesting a need for new hires get acclimated to the workplace faster.

A 2019 report from Canada revealed that skilled immigrants who had completed a job matching program revealed that while this group described feeling welcomed by their employers, they struggled to understand the informal norms of the workplace. The findings from this study recommend mentorship, as the interviewed immigrants discussed positive experiences with workplace mentors, particularly of mentors have similar backgrounds as skilled immigrants (Luciara Nardon et al., 2019).

African Bridge Network should continue to cultivate a network of mentors as it has done with the Immigrant Professionals Mentoring Program. While employers can do much for their employees’, dedicated mentorship is the most effective option. Separate from their Immigrant Professionals Mentoring Program, ABN also offers a Career Advising Program that provides career development support for skilled immigrants building their careers in Massachusetts through the implementation of one-on-one career counseling and job search assistance.

Additionally, having someone who can help an immigrant across a longer time period and even across jobs, might be a way of keeping an immigrant in their preferred field or on track to reenter their profession. Freya, an interview participant, recommends “If ABN can create even a mentorship program

for after you've found that role...someone who's in transition...Having somebody who you feel comfortable with from a network like ABN to go and talk to about navigating that.” ABN should encourage the addition of career path navigators¹⁹ to programs they network with and encourage policy makers to help fund such additions. ABN could also work with employers in its network to develop their own internal mentor networks that could take on some of the work started by the Immigrant Professionals Mentoring Program.

Accessible Training or Retraining

Among skilled immigrants across fields, there remains a need for cost reduced and accessible training. As described in the section on cost barriers, skilled immigrants often have the responsibility of supporting family members and dependents in addition to themselves. They may struggle with living expenses and the cost of maintaining a visa or seeking naturalization, sometimes causing skilled immigrants to take on multiple jobs to manage their cost of living (Bowen & Elejalde-Ruiz, 2017). This leaves few resources and time for those seeking to re-enter their professional careers.

To address these challenges, low-cost or free training that offers flexible scheduling is recommended for this population. A 2023 educational guide created by the Coalition on Adult Basic Education states that community college training programs are necessary in supporting skilled immigrants (Behind Every Employer, 2023). Another study by the Migration Policy Institute argues that the need for cost efficient training programs is high for skilled immigrants (Sumption, 2013). The study also recommends “additional training to fill specific skills gaps; support in acquiring sufficient professional language proficiency; familiarization with the idiosyncrasies of host-country work practices; and mentoring or other support to help immigrants bolster their professional networks and gain local, job-specific knowledge” (Sumption, 2013).

One interviewed employer named Henry describes the importance of offering and funding cost efficient programs for skilled immigrants to understand the U.S. specific markers in each of their fields:

We used to employ doctors as CNAs initially when their English was low, because they wanted to get clinical hours, but they wanted to learn the health care system. In the U.S. and they figured this was the fastest way to get their foot in the door to start understanding insurance and stuff like that. And that really surprised me. One doctor that was from Nicaragua explained it to me, [when I asked] “why are you signing up to be a CNA?” He had pretty good English actually. But he says “I know, this is going to be a practitioner in a healthcare setting. I'm going to be working with patients and I want to learn the insurance side of that. I'm not going to learn that in a lab at a hospital”, which he could also work at. And I thought that was insightful. So maybe just some checklist that says, “Has (this person) worked in the U.S. healthcare system at any level.” Yes. “And if so, what are some things (they learned)?” To me it's just one more thing that shows a more closely oriented applicant (and) a stronger candidate.

¹⁹ <https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/14175EARNNavigatorSpotlight.pdf>

Henry views having customer service-related training, as well as an understanding of insurance for health care field in the United States as a critical skillset. Having cultural competency skills to interact with patients within healthcare can be expanded across many other fields that focus on serving populations face to face. These skills can be learned through cost efficient and accessible training aimed at serving the skilled immigrant population, offered through community college collaborations such as the Skilled Immigrant Program at Howard Community College²⁰, the Internationally Trained Professionals Program at Austin Community College²¹, and Foreign Trained Professionals program at Miami Dade college²². Additionally, community colleges should be encouraged to adapt their career focused trainings in ways that are more accessible to immigrant professionals by offering support for vocational English.

Within the Commonwealth, implementation of Welcome Back Centers and community-based organizations that are part of the Welcome Back Initiative²³ could occur with the partnership of community colleges. Welcome Back Centers are part of a larger, national system called the Welcome Back Initiative, aimed at assisting skilled immigrants in the re-entering of their careers, particularly for those in medical professions. In Boston there is a Welcome Back Center hosted by Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC), assisting internationally educated nurses through a focus on healthcare specific professional English language training²⁴. Additionally, the BHCC Center offers credential evaluation support, assistance obtaining a Massachusetts professional license and preparation for both the English and professional licensure exams. UMDI recommends ABN encourage programs such as BHCC's Welcome Back Center to include a wider range of medical professions and advocate that policy makers fund the setup of additional Welcome Back Centers throughout the Commonwealth. Welcome Back Centers in Rhode Island, Maine, and New York which offer English language training specific to healthcare, to improve communication and medical vocabulary with patients and colleagues.

Across the United States, centers similar in scope to the Welcome Back Initiative network focus on workforce development trainings. For example, while not part of the Welcome Back Initiative, the Welcoming Center in Pennsylvania provides an intensive eight-week training course covering the application and hiring process for immigrants²⁵. Upon completion of the program, immigrants continue to get support from the center for an additional six months as they apply for jobs. The Asian American Civic Association in Boston offer a Career Advancement for Professionals (CAP) program twice annually which is free to qualified applicants²⁶. The 18-week program covers topics like grammar, job readiness,

²⁰ <https://www.howardcc.edu/programs-courses/continuing-education/english-language-center/skilled-immigrant-program>

²¹ <https://www.austincc.edu/academic-and-career-programs/adult-education/career-pathways/internationally-trained-students>

²² <https://www.mdc.edu/foreigntrainedprofessionals>

²³ <https://www.wbcenters.org/>

²⁴ <https://www.bhcc.edu/welcomeback/>

²⁵ <https://welcomingcenter.org/elementor-80/>

²⁶ <https://www.aaca-boston.org/cap>

American work culture and workplace English skills including pronunciation, conversation, vocabulary, and writing. CAP also offers job search support with career specialists.

There are free, and cost reduced retraining programs for fields outside of healthcare in other states. In New York, the Professional Pathways Program provides free and virtual training to professional immigrants seeking help in planning their careers in the U.S.²⁷. The Cooper Unions retraining program in New York City is offered for skilled immigrants looking to be retrained in engineering specific skills and is hosted at multiple New York City colleges²⁸. Within this program, cultural competency, networking, and counseling are all offered for skilled immigrants to help them understand the ins and outs of engineering in New York State.

Broadening cost efficient and accessible training, to focus on fields where there are gaps of skilled immigrants, would provide the necessary tools for this population to succeed in Massachusetts (Gross, 2014). Programs such as Bunker Hill Community College's Welcome Back center are crucial, as it is field specific, and similar programming could be expanded to fields outside of healthcare, emulating existing programs outside of Massachusetts.

During interviews, employers described needing employees that have digital learning which can be expanded, in addition to English and cultural proficiency for customer service jobs. Adina, one of the interview participants, suggests that "digital adaptability...digital skills and being able to pick up new skills. So not just Microsoft, but like a whole bigger suite of digital skills" when talking about what could be a useful skill for immigrants. Another interviewee describes a similar perspective:

If I was an employer, and the manual was saying, "hey this guy's proficient in Outlook." So, if I was an employer, and the ABN was saying "Hey this guy's proficient in outlook." How do they know? Maybe again, another criterion could be like a leveling of Microsoft proficiencies. Not just the suite, but specific applications because most likely, the hospitals are not going to care if a doctor knows Excel. But they will want them to be able to respond to email.

UMDI recommend ABN investigate including digital adaptability to their training resources for skilled immigrants, as well as gaining familiarity with tiers of digital proficiency for differing fields. Instructing skilled immigrants' methods of learning new skills, such as through online tutorials or by directing them to additional adult learner courses can provide this population with additional support as new technology emerges.

Other recommendations for ABN come from discussions on trainings "training institutions, community colleges, places like that to also step in and help with making sure their graduates understand what that (job application) process would be and even like if a community college could offer like a Saturday class or a couple Saturday classes to help immigrants coming in to understand the process." Employer Adina also states, "the employer might like to see that they've (skilled immigrant) gone through some sort of

²⁷ <https://www.professionalpathwaysprogram.org/>

²⁸ <https://cooper.edu/academics/outreach-and-pre-college/retraining-program-immigrant-engineers>

training around U.S. workplace culture and rights.” UMDI recommends that ABN continue to find, gather, partner, and promote low cost and accessible career trainings offered to skilled immigrants. Additionally, UMDI recommends ABN advocate for the continued funding of these free or low-cost programs with policy makers and organizations that offer grants for such programs. Continuing to expand strong partnerships with organizations that offer career training in cultural competency creates employer trust in these programs and incentivizes future funding.

Legitimizing and Funding Credentials

Credential evaluation is the process in which a credential evaluating organization certifies that the higher education a skilled immigrant received in their home country is authenticated and is equivalent to a specific degree level and field and/or set of higher education credits in the United States. For occupations that require a license (e.g., teaching, nursing, engineering), getting a credential evaluation is typically a necessary first step in the licensing process. Many Massachusetts licensure boards and other states only accept evaluations from a narrow set of organizations, especially within health professions. In other cases, such as in teaching, the Massachusetts Department of Education accepts evaluations from any organization that is a member of the National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES)²⁹. Although the cost of credential evaluations varies significantly by provider, they can be up to several hundred dollars, placing one more cost burden on skilled immigrants looking to re-enter licensed professions. For non-licensed professions, the decision to obtain (and pay for) a credential evaluation depends more on the individual employer and job applicant, though cost and quality are still a factor.

The study by the Massachusetts Business Roundtable and The Center for State Policy Analysis mentioned previously also found that funding more grants and loans to help immigrants with costs of credentialing, would help with re-integration into their professional career, strengthening the Massachusetts economy (The Center for State Policy Analysis, 2023). Mainstream media such as the Chicago Tribune have cited studies from Migration Policy Institute and Upwardly Global, suggesting that more funding be allocated to existing programs that help skilled immigrants with re-credentialing costs (Bowen & Elejalde-Ruiz, 2017). Recommended services for credentialing are organizations such as World Education Services (WES) and other NACES-approved agencies. Even when not required for licensing purposes, these services can give employers and academic institutions confidence in the immigrant that applies to such organizations and help them understand the value of a newcomer’s education in a US context. Given the costs of credential evaluations, however, skilled immigrants should at the same time work with advisors to weigh the costs and benefits of this investment.

Cost is not the only barrier to obtaining a credential evaluation. One interviewed employer describes the difficulty accessing credentialing services experienced by skilled immigrants, as organizations often require immigrants have their original documents of their international degrees. To address this difficulty, the employer suggests working with higher education agencies in immigrant’s home countries, to help prepare internationally trained workers for a smoother transition into their professional field

²⁹ <https://www.naces.org/index>

after migration to the U.S. WES also has recently launched the WES Gateway Program³⁰ which assess the educational credentials of individuals who have limited proof of their academic achievements, due to refugee status or other adverse circumstances in their country of education.

Another recommended employer suggestion was to direct skilled immigrants to lower-cost credentialing services. A particular credential service such as WES³¹ may not always be the best fit for every skilled immigrant and there may be alternative services with lower costs or more customized programs for their needs. Having credentialing service organizations that don't charge per translated page or who don't require professional translation, would help skilled immigrants save on costs.

WES has a credentialing partnership program where employers³² and higher education institutions are educated about the credential evaluation process.³³ Expanded use of this program could support employers in recognizing the value of the evaluation itself. Helping employers understand the complexities of credentialing services would help lessen the burden placed on skilled immigrants applying to jobs, demystifying the process for both applicant and employer. Bernadette, an interviewed employer, describes how different services are used for different purposes:

WES is the one that is most recognized and the one that has the most robust website. It has information in different languages. And it has a lot of resources, and we work with them. And then you have the smaller one (credential verification service) which is a Center for Educational documentation (CED). Now in our case, while we work with both (CED and WES), we use them for different reasons. If a degree is an engineering degree, or an architect degree and they want to continue their education, at you know grad school, we use WES. And there are some universities that (out of the two of them), will accept WES, but they will not accept CED (center for education documentation). So that's the reason why when a person comes to our office, we ask them what you will need the validation for. Because depending on what it is, we tell them one company or the other.

This comment highlights the importance of having knowledge of what institutions and which licensing boards take which certification services. Due to comments such as these, UMDI recommends that ABN continue to promote credentialing services such as WES, and others approved by NACES. Along with this, they should distribute informational guides describing which types of credentialing services skilled immigrants should seek based on what their career/educational goals are. The costs of the different services should also be made clear.

Streamlining the process of formal credential verification processes through legislative action may improve the process for skilled immigrants seeking these services. One interviewed employer, Audrey asserts:

³⁰ <https://www.wes.org/partners/global-talent-bridge/wes-gateway-overview>

³¹ <https://www.wes.org>

³² <https://www.wes.org/partners/employers>

³³ <https://www.wes.org/partners/resources-for-institutional-professionals>

It would be great if the credentialing agencies here had processes by which they could take credentials from other countries and they could review them against our standards and make some kind of consistent way...Maybe they look at it and it's like "oh, for this particular credential there's certain things here we do that maybe they don't do in another country" than just making pathways for people to get the piece they're missing and not necessarily have to do entire years and years of a degree all over again.

UMDI recommends ABN advocate for the standardization of the credential recognition process, to make it easier for skilled immigrants understand the process, demystifying barriers accompanying accessing credential evaluation services. In response to COVID, many different states, including Massachusetts embraced policies that made it easier for skilled immigrants in healthcare to work in the state, particularly foreign-trained doctors (Betancourt, 2020). Similar policies would be useful in a wider range of fields if there is a clear employment shortage. ABN could be an active voice surrounding conversation around such legislation.

Addressing Language Barriers

As discussed previously, skilled immigrants can face challenges in communicating their skills and abilities to employers. Addressing language barriers should be an ongoing process supported through both employers and skilled immigrants themselves. This barrier can be overcome through trainings, financial support of trainings, and employers gaining an understanding of cultural and linguistic practices outside of the United States.

The 2015 survey mentioned in the credential recognition barrier section also found that there needs to be an increase of English language skills to support immigrants' professional integration. Investing in English language learner (ELL) training can be the most important step to allow career advancement for skilled immigrants according to their findings. The data findings recommend that policymakers fund existing programs to a higher capacity to serve skilled immigrants seeking to advance their career (Bergson-Shilcock & Witte, 2015).

There are many programs aimed at addressing language barriers in Massachusetts³⁴, often available through community colleges and community-based organizations that directly serve immigrants. These free or low-cost programs are available across the Commonwealth, but most do not teach advanced level language skills or train skilled immigrants to learn field specific English vocabulary reflective of their professions. Most publicly supported ESOL programs in Massachusetts also have long waitlists. In a 2023 study by the National Conference of State Legislatures, researchers argue that while English proficiency is a barrier, there needs to be specification on the type of English proficiency that acts as a career path barrier for skilled immigrants (Morse & Chanda, 2023). While the English proficiency of skilled immigrants has increased since the 2000's, technical vocabulary needed for each specific industry is often not adequately addressed in provided English classes (Morse & Chanda, 2023).

To advocate for career-focused professional English language programs, UMDI suggests employers connect and advocate with higher level advocacy stakeholders, including the Massachusetts Coalition

³⁴ <https://massliteracyhotline.org/>

for Adult Education and the Workforce Solutions Group, for more funding and technical support directed to creating these kinds of programs. Adina, an interviewed employer explains:

...thinking about English language opportunities that are appropriate for skilled immigrants... those might be classes that are advanced enough to meet their needs. There's a lot of beginning, and intermediate level English classes for immigrants. And they need more targeted and specific and contextualized English classes.

This is supported by the literature review. There is a strong need for skilled immigrants to enter classes that are advanced, and specific to a particular career path, rather than courses centered around a generalized focus on basic communication. From an employer's perspective, some schools and other adult education providers offer employers ESOL training opportunities, where a partnership is created directly with employers to educate their workforce. These kinds of trainings are commonly available to incumbent workers, for example, in many large medical centers in Massachusetts, as part of workforce development programs. The English Works Campaign³⁵ coordinated by English for New Bostonians, works with employers to establish contextualized, workplace based ESOL classes and advocates for greater private and public ESOL investment in the immigrant workforce.

UMDI also recommends promoting existing resources of community colleges for ELL/ESOL/ESL classes as well as grant opportunities to help pay for these classes for skilled immigrants. Looking into a way to test certified skilled immigrants' English proficiency would be ideally conducted through TOEFL, and/or leveling different types of English proficiency. UMDI also recommends ABN connect skilled immigrants through partnerships with community colleges.

Professional Networking

It is important for skilled immigrants to have family, colleagues and friends who can help them become accommodated to the culture shock of the U.S. and better understand and navigate educational and career opportunities. If no family or friends are present before migrating, the creation of networks of solidarity can be achieved through support groups accessed through community colleges and partnering organizations. These community support groups can help with socialization which can build individual resilience and help stabilize feelings of isolation from entering an unfamiliar working world. Throughout the literature review and interviewing process, it's become clear that creating a professional network through employers and colleagues can mobilize skilled immigrants in their professional careers. Social support networks allow immigrants to ask questions to other skilled immigrants who have gone through similar barriers and allow them to deepen an understanding on soft skills that those they network with have tackled. One interviewed employer of skilled immigrants observes:

(Skilled immigrants) don't have the networking. So, trying to get their job, their application to float to the top of the pile. And you know, using my influence or their mentors, that they're working with the organization to float to the top of that HR pile to use there. Teach that networking is really very important.

³⁵ <https://www.englishfornewbostonians.org/our-history>

In a 2019 report by the Center for Research on Inclusion at Work, researchers were looking at intervention strategies to help skilled immigrants integrate and be retained in workplaces throughout Canada. The report found that immigrants had trouble socializing at work due to language and understanding “unspoken rules” (Luciara Nardon et al., 2019). Because of the new language and unspoken rules, researchers recommend to employers that they begin to understand and socialize with immigrant networks to gain a deeper understanding of how to tackle new cultural rules, as well as deepen a sense of community. Networks in this respect play a similar role to mentoring, as described earlier. The same guides also ask employers to provide mentorship to newcomers and cultivate cultural exchange in the workplace and outside (through events).

U.S. employers could look to Canada for guidance, though the stronger national and provincial investments in skilled immigrant services create a different starting point. For example, in 2023, a guide made by the Hire Immigrants Ottawa in Canada, details strategies of pre and post on boarding preparation for Canadian employers to hire professional immigrants. Part of their strategic plan for employers are networking and relationship building specific, helping immigrants feel better supported as they re-enter their professional careers (Hire Immigrants Ottawa, 2023). Another employer guide by Canadian Calgary Region Immigrant Employment Council released in 2021, explains that once skilled immigrants are on boarded into their workplace, there should be a buddy system where the workers are paired with a buddy whose responsibilities are to offer advice/guidance. This buddy system allows skilled immigrants to ask questions about work culture, alleviating confusing new cultural practices, as well as creating social connections for them. Although both employer guides are written in and for Canadian employers, their information is easily applicable to U.S. practices already in place, such as organizationally facilitated professional networking programs. These practices of social support networks create a sense of community for skilled immigrants, and helps employers retain this population in their workforce longer.

UMDI’s recommendations for the African Bridge Network to continue and expand their Immigrant Professionals Mentoring Program and expand by adding more applications (letting more people join). Adina, an interview participant notes:

organizations like African Bridge Network are doing this kind of work of creating a network that they then give access to their clients, or maintaining a network or building out a network of volunteer professionals who want to be matched with a skilled immigrant or connecting immigrants to existing professional networks like association of engineers in Massachusetts. So, making the connection point between those skilled immigrants and networks or potential mentors who are going to support them...Skilled immigrants who come here also would benefit from being connected to those networks where they can meet people who can support them and understand and then advocate for them in terms of getting a job.

UMDI recommends ABN partner with more employers and promote mentoring programs to their skilled immigrants.

Table 1: Summary of Interventions

| Intervention | Barriers Addressed | Recommendation |
|---|---|---|
| Career Counselling and Mentorship | Legal Status Cultural Literacy Information Gap Employers | Continue the Immigrant Professionals Mentoring Program, expand the program or establish a new program to cultivate long term mentor/mentee relationships. Work with employers to develop internal mentorship or “buddy” systems. |
| Accessible/cheap training or retraining | Cultural Literacy Information Gap Cost | Expand the number of digital skills trained and include lessons in adaptability. Emphasize training around workplace culture and workplace rights. Partner with existing schools and training programs. |
| Legitimizing and Funding credentials | Employers Credential Recognition Cost | Point Immigrants to available credentialing services while being mindful of costs and fit. Advocate for legislation to make re-credentialing clearer and easier. Educate employers and help familiarize them with existing services. |
| Addressing Language Barriers | Cultural Literacy Employers | Work with schools to develop ESOL courses with a professional language focus for select industries. Direct immigrants to existing programs and services like the Literacy Hotline. Develop a clear measure of English ability in professional contexts which employers can understand. |
| Professional Networking | Cultural Literacy Employers Information Gap | Develop mentor networks, encourage employers to get to know their employees and help teams work together, potentially developing relationships outside the office. Develop networking skills in immigrants working with ABN and support them in building a network of support amongst themselves. |

Recommendations for ABN's Professional Immigrant Verification Program

Understanding both barriers and interventions that address hiring skilled immigrants continues to be an important economic and workforce development issue across the commonwealth. Recognizing a need for a program to be created which addresses skilled immigrant's barriers to hire, ABN is planning to develop a verification program in which ABN would verify that skilled immigrants who complete this program have a range of key qualifications employers view as desirable for hiring. As this program is in its preliminary stages of development, the list of potential program topics shared with interview participants may be viewed as relatively sparse.

The topics shared for feedback with interviewees are as follows: That immigrants who have completed the program 1) are authorized to work in the U.S. legally; 2) have a foreign college degree; 3) have achieved the necessary English proficiency to work in a professional setting; 4) are proficient in Microsoft Office applications, and 5) may obtain other specific requirements that employers may suggest. As the African Bridge Network seeks to develop a verification process for skilled immigrants, understanding employer's perspectives on the pre-conditions necessary for the success of such a program is imperative to its success. Questions describing ABN's verification processes were asked at the very end of the interview, so that individuals would have the opportunity to think about the hiring barriers for skilled immigrants and interventions that may help address these challenges.

Participant Feedback

Participant feedback on the proposal of a program in which ABN would verify that skilled immigrants in this program would have a range of specific qualifications was positive overall, with many individuals viewing the proposal as a unique and 'worthwhile initiative.' When asked if they knew of any programs similar in scope to ABN's proposed program, one employer asserted that they 'don't believe we've come across any programs that are like what ABN is proposing across the U.S.' If the program could apply to and be replicated within other states, one employer viewed the program as having the potential for national interest.

Several employers voiced concern over the list of potential topics ABN would cover, arguing that the topics were too standard- that anyone applying for positions (regardless of whether they are a skilled immigrant) would need to meet all the topics ABN proposed. Henry, an employer who actively hires skilled immigrants voiced his hesitancy towards the topics shared:

I think this list represents the bona fide work requirements, meaning you're not going to get your resume reviewed if you don't have these things. It's not about keeping you from getting hired. You're not even getting reviewed, because you don't have a college degree, or because you need to speak English and things like that. So, these are necessary...These are things ABN has got to be doing already. They wouldn't have any credibility if they weren't looking at this stuff in that level of detail.

To address concerns over many of the topics being too standard, employers suggested ABN consider including program topics that could widely apply to skilled immigrants across work fields, but that do not compete against credential verification services such as WES. Such topics include professionalization workshops, training for specific workplace soft skills such as customer relations, and workshops on cultural workplace norms. Several employers spoke about using WES's verification services for the skilled immigrants they employed and viewed the service of credential verification of foreign degrees to be a saturated market.

From interviews with both employers of skilled immigrants and organizations aimed at assisting skilled immigrants, many suggestions for improvements to ABN's proposed verification program were offered. The following section will first discuss the need to include quantifiable descriptions of all ABN program topics, then will focus on interventions centered around advertising of the program. Finally, this section will describe a range of topics, trainings and workshops recommended for ABN's Immigrant Professional Verification Program.

Including clear, quantifiable descriptions of all program topics

During interviews, employers of skilled immigrants and leaders of organizations that work with the skilled immigrant population discussed a need for ABN to consider several logistical aspects of their proposed verification programming to ensure its success. Several participants expressed interest in having ABN's program include easily accessible information about the program, its features and how these topics are quantified. For many to place their trust in the program, employers need to clearly understand how various criteria is quantified for skilled immigrants in the program.

To include this level of transparency, one employer suggested ABN's programmatic offerings include 'explicit criteria of what falls underneath' each topic being covered within the program. This may be formatted within the webpage of the program's description in the form of a checklist employers can refer to. One employer suggested developing recorded videos describing the program's features in depth, which could then be shared widely throughout hiring networks. Without a clear and quantifiable description of each aspect of ABN's proposed programmatic offerings employers can access themselves, employers described that they would be 'suspicious about the criteria' and its validity.

Though ABN's verification program is in an early stage of development, employers such as Adina express confidence in the program's success so long as the program is clearly defined for employers:

I think it would only gain traction with increased use, especially if employers have a full understanding of it. And it's not just like, I'm arriving with this verification... there's some degree of also, even before the immigrant arrives, making sure the employer understands what the verification means...Make sure any sort of assessment recognizes that (skilled immigrants) have so many of these skills already. We're just trying to quantify and name it for employers.

As mentioned in earlier sections of the report, skilled immigrants often experience difficulty describing and quantifying their transferable workplace skillsets. UMDI recommends that ABN's program include a mechanism, such as a detailed checklist, which describes the transferable skillsets skilled immigrants have.

When employers were asked to review ABN's tentative list of topics included in their Immigrant Professional Verification Program, the last topic describing 'other specific requirements that employers may suggest' received the most input. Many interviewees view the first four topics³⁶ on the list as necessary for all skilled immigrants, for their job applications to be accepted for review. For example, if skilled immigrants are not authorized to work in the United States, their resume would be immediately rejected. Employers suggested including a mechanism to personalize covered topics within ABN's verification program, making them more field specific. ABN will need to work closely with employers to quantitatively define the standards and features of such topics. Additionally, it is important to recognize that while there is a clear value to adding personalized topics for employers and skilled immigrants alike, the implementation of new topics would likely require an expansion of capacity. UMDI recommends ABN expand their programmatic offerings through collaboration with vetted existing programs offered through local and national organizations. To assist in financially supporting this expansion of programmatic offerings, UMDI suggests ABN collaborate with employers directly, and consider charging a fee for employers to cover some of the more specialized, field specific training courses.

Program Branding and Advertising

UMDI defined the operationalization of the phrase 'skilled immigrant' at the beginning of all interviews, as 'as foreign-born residents with a bachelor's degree or higher from outside the United States.' While the majority of employers UMDI spoke with did not raise any questions about the term, two employers viewed the term as too broad, and this could lead to other's misunderstanding of ABN's verification program and population it serves. To avoid confusion around exactly who is included in reference to skilled immigrants, UMDI suggests making ABN's definition of 'skilled immigrant' visible and explicit in their program description. Employers suggest the following two alternate phrases when describing the population ABN's verification program serves: 'internationally trained professionals' and 'foreign educated professionals.'

To ensure the success of ABN's proposed verification program, employers and skilled immigrants alike must be aware of its existence, requiring ABN to continue promoting their programming and nurture collaborations and networking with organizations across the commonwealth. Sophie, an employer of skilled immigrants, suggests that ABN 'figure out how they're going to work directly and kind of have a collaborative spirit with some of the other agencies that are not necessarily doing the same work but doing complementary work.' Collaborative partnerships with similar organizations across the Commonwealth will likely foster growth, usage, and awareness of ABN's proposed program.

Employers spoke positively about their experiences working with ABN as community partners, particularly in quickly sharing information about job opportunities. Freya describes these interactions with ABN in the past, requesting that ABN's future programming continues to build upon their quick distribution of information throughout their networks:

They're fabulous about making sure stuff gets pushed out whenever we send it and sharing with their networks. That's what we need as employers. Especially as a midsize nonprofit I mean, community members who are like 'hey, just send it to me I'll get folks sent right away.'

ABN should expand their network and continue to work with organizations that interact with skilled immigrants seeking employment. Promoting their Immigrant Professional Verification Program across these organizations would assist ABN in both growing employer awareness of their program and growing their pool of employers interested in engagement with the program. Audrey, who works for an organization that employs skilled immigrants, points out that strengthening and growing connections with the heads of HR departments could help connect and recruit more skilled immigrants into ABN's proposed program, 'because they can help guide the process if they understand it.' UMDI recommends that ABN continues to build connections and partnerships with more organizations that work with populations of skilled immigrants throughout the commonwealth.

Recommended workshops and trainings for ABN's verification program

Employee feedback on recommended workshops and trainings for ABN's verification program centered on several key areas, including field specific English proficiency workshops, a need for professionalization skills to be offered in tandem with the program itself, soft skill trainings, cultural workshops on American workplace norms, workshops for effective workplace communication and broadening the range of technical skills offered.

Field specific English proficiency workshops were suggested by many interviewed employers to ensure ABN verification program participants are proficient in English for a range of U.S. workplace fields. Specifically, for their verification program, UMDI recommends there be a measurement of employers' field-specific needs, as well as a measurement of their English level. These recommendations were stated by Adina, an employer who argues: "they don't just need a general English class. They need something that meets their specific needs while teaching them English and digital literacy." She also states how "They don't offer English at ABN, but obviously, there's other tests that can be like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or other things that can verify English language proficiency. So maybe they're just going to use that."

Henry, another participant recommends ABN investigate accrediting skilled immigrants in their new program through levels. He states "If you're having a checklist of English proficiency, you would need to have some sort of method to help a non-expert understand what the different levels of proficiency are. Meaning, you can't just say you are level 5,4,3,2,1... You must maybe give a little paragraph that says at this level, an individual is able to do X, Y, Z. And those taxonomies exist in a very compact way. So, you could build that into a checklist (for employers)."

Professionalization workshops were suggested by the majority of those interviewed, with many people acknowledging that this feature would likely be offered outside of ABN's verification program. Workshops should address what employers viewed to be the most useful skillsets for skilled immigrants, such as interviewing, negotiating hire, formatting resumes to fit an American standard, developing a

³⁶ 1) are authorized to work in the U.S. legally; 2) have a foreign college degree; 3) have achieved the necessary English proficiency to work in a professional setting; 4) are proficient in Microsoft Office applications

LinkedIn profile, and general social interactions with employers and organizations. Adina, who works for an organization that educationally assists skilled immigrants further their career paths, comments:

A common thing that is worked on in some of these programs in adulthood that do work for work well for skilled immigrants is resume prep, interview prep, networking skills, like understanding LinkedIn. Understanding job applications and job descriptions. Being able to read job descriptions as well and understand the requirements that are listed for the job. And then general etiquette around contacting employers, researching companies before you apply, and all those topics I think are important. I just see them as kind of a different set of skills than what the employer wants to see.

If an applicant does not have a sense of American norms around professionalization, it will negatively impact their opportunities for hire (Luciara Nardon et al., 2019). One employer describes writing resumes for an American organization as ‘an art form’ in which nonuniform resumes ‘stand out, just like a neon wart’ to HR teams reviewing applications. UMDI recommends ABN consider offering common professionalization workshops to all skilled immigrants in their verification program, to increase their chances at being hired, and avoid standing out negatively during the application process. Field specific proficiency checks were a commonly requested topic by employers who describe many of their positions (particularly within healthcare and education) as needing specific workshops to help increase the competitiveness of applications by skilled immigrants. An ‘a la carte’ feature of ABN’s verification could include a list of additional workshops and trainings employers may request be included for skilled immigrants looking to work with them. This feature has the potential to help increase the competitiveness of skilled applicants to employers. Adina suggests if ABN could create a checklist of the common general skillsets, they offer workshops and trainings for, “the employer is able to say which ones are most important or priority for them.”

Inclusion of trainings on workplace soft skills commonly required for American work settings such as customer service, effective communication and common American workplace norms were frequently requested as additions to ABN’s proposed list of programming topics.

Customer service was frequently described as particularly important within the context of American workplaces. Henry observes that within hiring, customer service is a commonly viewed as a ‘key skill that is valued highly in the U.S., and not so much sometimes in other cultures.’ As understandings of adequate customer service training may have different meanings, UMDI recommends that ABN develop a clear checklist of the criterion for such a training, that could be further divided into field specific aspects of customer service, such as topics that apply most to healthcare settings.

Effective, professional communication and norms for the American workplace were features commonly requested in interviews. UMDI recommends workshops on the following aspects of communication and cultural workplace norms ABN include professional email correspondence (both internally and with clients), workplace conflict resolution (who to speak with, how to navigate common scenarios involving internal conflict), and general workplace behavior (describing appropriate interactions with colleagues and clients alike).

Continuing to maintain mentoring relationships between newly hired skilled immigrants and ABN mentors is another suggested feature for ABN’s verification program. One employer, Freya, describes

how continuing mentorship of hired skilled immigrants from ABN would be valuable for employers and employees alike:

Having somebody who you feel comfortable with from a network like ABN to go and talk to about navigating (workplace issues) because we hear this all the time- HR is still considered the principal's office...If someone's so afraid to go to the advocates to help them navigate this new work experience, they need to have somewhere to go... somebody to talk to about that is critical.

Mentorship relationships with people outside of the workplace could encourage retention of skilled immigrants by the employer. UMDI recommends ABN considers including a mentorship component to their verification program, which continues even after a skilled immigrant is hired.

Conclusion

The central research topics of the Donahue Institute's feasibility study for the African Bridge Network are to understand the preexisting hiring barriers skilled immigrants' experiences, how these barriers could be addressed through specific interventions, and gather feedback on ABN's proposed Professional Immigrant Verification Program from the perspectives of employers and organizations who work with skilled immigrants. Addressing barriers to hiring skilled immigrants through actionable approaches is important to ongoing economic and workforce development in Massachusetts, allowing this population to fill crucial job vacancies throughout the state. As the Commonwealth's current workforce continues to age, policy makers must prioritize programs that aide in maximizing the labor potential of skilled immigrants, supporting both labor productivity and addressing larger social issues of inequality throughout the state's workforce.

Through an analysis of data collected from prior research studies, supported by data from qualitative interviews with key informants that work with and/or hire skilled immigrants, UMDI has identified seven common hiring barriers skilled immigrants frequently experience (Legal status; Credential recognition; Employer awareness; Cultural literacy; Language barriers; Cost to access recertifying services; Lack of knowledge around specific considerations for hiring and working with skilled immigrants). To address the listed barriers, UMDI recommends the following five interventions: offering career counseling and mentorship; accessible training or retraining; legitimizing and funding credentials; addressing language barriers; supporting professional networking opportunities.

There exists a need for programming aimed at addressing the many hiring barriers skilled immigrants experience. Given the aging workforce and increasing need for job vacancies to be filled in Massachusetts, ABN's development of an Immigrant Professional Verification program that confirms a range of skillsets skilled immigrants who have completed the program have gained is a timely initiative. While this program is in its beginning stages of development, there is strong potential for the program's success and applicability for use by other similar organizations across the United States.

Data indicates ABN's proposed verification program is unique in scope and would be desired by employers of skilled immigrants and organizations working with this population. To set the stage for the success of ABN's proposed program, the Donahue Institute recommends:

1. ABN includes mechanisms such as itemized lists to describe all transferable skillsets gained from training, workshops, and classes. This transparency helps both employers and program participants understand the scope of programming and how it may help translate to the workplace.
2. ABN constructs a title and summary of the program for advertisement that clearly explains the program's objectives, main audiences, and key features.
3. ABN continues to focus efforts towards strengthening connections and building partnerships with organizations working with populations of skilled immigrants throughout Massachusetts.
4. Including training for program participants that address topics on cultural norms, soft skills and customer service.

In conclusion, ABN's proposed verification program for skilled immigrants is a timely intervention to addressing many of the hiring barriers discussed in this report. Addressing the hiring barriers experienced by skilled immigrants through interventions that help empower employers and skilled immigrants alike continues to be an important economic and workforce development issue across the commonwealth. Not only would ABN's proposed verification program be one of the first programs of its kind, but this program also has the potential to impact other similar organizations that support skilled immigrants in the workforce, on a national scale.

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Appendix A: Methodological Approaches

Literature Review

An extensive literature review was done to identify the breadth of available data on skilled immigrant credentialing. In total, 39 pieces of literature were gathered regarding the topic including 17 journal articles and 15 reports. These pieces were published between 2008 and 2023, with half of all items in the literature review published in the last three years. The focus of the literature review was on U.S. based experiences of skilled immigrant credentialing and hiring practices. Themes explored included “Brain Waste” also known as skill underutilization. Research was done into credential evaluation organizations who provide a crucial step in the immigrant hiring process. Research on “English for work” and “Professional Level English” programs was collected to identify how immigrants might overcome language barriers.

While many articles were found, there was considerable cross-referencing between them, reflecting the small body of research on this issue. Some articles were referenced repeatedly. Work by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) was a common point of reference in many pieces. MPI pioneered much of the early quantitative research into the issue of skill underutilization starting in 2008, which laid the foundation for much of the discussion of this issue. The existing body of research is also heavily weighted towards health care workers. There has been considerable interest and policy making around bringing in qualified immigrant workers into health care fields before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Work on this issue seems to be more abundant outside of the New England region and the country. Canada has some national initiatives on the issue with business development organizations in various provinces partnering to address the need for immigrant workers. Canada also has programs specifically for economically integrating immigrants to Canada even before they arrive.³⁷ In the US, economic integration of immigrants depends on the policies of each state. There are also some private initiatives that cross state boundaries, but few truly national initiatives. For more information on the sources used for this report, see the **Bibliography**.

Interviews and Focus Groups

The Donahue Institute collected feedback from key informants to provide narrative context to complement the literature review regarding skilled immigrants. To identify salient risk factors associated with hiring skilled immigrants, solutions for mitigating these risks and recommendations on pre-conditions necessary for a successful certification process for skilled immigrants, the Donahue Institute deployed a mixed-methods approach to data collection. This approach combines data collected from three in-depth one-on-one interviews and two focus groups, for a total of 12 interviewed participants. All focus group and one-on-one interviews were conducted on Zoom, and participants were identified by ABN.

One-on-one interviews provide a unique and illustrative viewpoint of professionals who work within organizations that provide a range of career assistance to skilled immigrants. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Interview questions were designed to understand professional perspectives

³⁷ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/new-immigrants/new-life-canada/pre-arrival-services.html>

on major barriers their organization's skilled immigrant clients experience while pursuing employment, interventions used to address these barriers and gain input on ABN's proposed credentialing program for skilled immigrants.

Two focus group interviews were conducted, totaling nine participants. Participants in both focus groups are employers who either currently employ or are considering employing skilled immigrants. Focus groups lasted 90 minutes. Focus group questions were designed to understand employer perspectives on major barriers to hiring and retaining skilled immigrants. Focus group participants were also asked to give their input on the ABN's proposed credentialing program for skilled immigrants.

Using the interview audio recordings, a verbatim transcript of all focus group and one-on-one interviews was manually generated. This transcript was then coded thematically for data analysis using NVivo coding software. Names of all participants in this report are pseudonyms, to protect participant confidentiality.

Appendix B: Forms of Visa

Table 2: Forms of Visa Classification

| Visa Classification | Definition |
|-----------------------------|--|
| E1, E2 | Treaty trader or treaty investor |
| F-1 | Foreign academic student when certain conditions are met |
| H-1B, H-1C, H-2A, H-2B, H-3 | Temporary worker |
| I | Foreign information media representative |
| J-1 | Exchange visitor, when certain conditions are met |
| K-1 | Fiancé of a U.S. citizen |
| L-1 | Intra-company transferee |
| M-1 | Foreign vocational student |
| O-1, O-2 | Temporary worker in the sciences |
| P-1, P-2, P-3 | Temporary worker in the arts, athletics in an exchange or cultural program |
| Q-1, Q-2 | Cultural exchange visitor |
| R-1 | Temporary religious worker with a nonprofit organization |
| TC | Professional business worker admitted under U.S. Canada Free Trade Act (NAFTA) |
| TN | Professional business worker admitted under NAFTA |

Appendix C: Forms of Legal Permanent Immigration

Table 3: Forms of Legal Permanent Immigration

| Immigration Status Types | Definition |
|--|--|
| Naturalized Citizen | Be at least 18 years old. Be a lawful permanent resident (green card holder) for five years or three years if you received your green card through marriage. Be physically present in the U.S. for at least two and a half years of the past five years or one and a half years of the past three years if you received your green card through marriage. Be a person of good moral character (Have no serious criminal charges or convictions). Be able to pass an English and civics test. |
| Lawful Permanent Resident (LRP) | Has a green card, or immigrant visa, which gives him or her the right to permanently live and work in the United States and travel to and from the United States as long as no laws are violated. |
| Conditional Permanent Resident | If an immigrant receives permanent residence through marriage to a U.S. citizen and the marriage is less than two years old on the day the immigrant spouse enters the United States with an immigrant visa or adjusts status, the immigrant spouse will receive conditional permanent resident (CPR) status. |
| Violence Against Women Act Self-Petitioner | The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) allows battered immigrants to petition for legal status in the United States without relying on abusive U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident spouses, parents, or children to sponsor their Adjustment of Status (Form I-485) applications. |
| Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) Status | Immigrant youth under age 21 who have left their native countries because they suffered abuse, neglect or abandonment by their parents or caretakers. |
| Refugee/Asylee | Refugees are usually outside the United States when they are screened for resettlement, whereas asylum seekers submit their applications while physically present in the United States or at a U.S. port of entry. |

Appendix D: One on One Interview Guide

1. I'd like to begin by asking you to briefly state your name and title.
2. Please describe your connection to the skilled immigrant population.
 - What specific services do you provide for skilled immigrants?
 - Do you work with/provide services for skilled immigrants from specific fields (such as health and medicine)?
3. From your perspective, what do you think are the biggest challenges skilled immigrants experience while trying to get hired or remaining in and advancing in skilled occupations?
 - Why do you think ___ [challenge mentioned] is such a big barrier?
 - What interventions do you think would help lessen this barrier?
 - Have you/your organization executed any of these interventions?
4. What other organizations, programs, and initiatives, both regionally and nationally do you know of that help skilled immigrants address the challenges to being hired we discussed?

I'd like to pivot the topic slightly, to focus on the hiring side of this conversation.

5. From your perspective, what makes the decision to hire (or work towards hiring) skilled immigrants important to an organization?
 - What are the advantages to hiring skilled immigrants?
 - Is this decision more often a personal/ethical decision, a desire to bring in specific skills and/or perspectives, a way to address DEI concerns, or due to other reasons?
 - Are you aware of any specific incentives for workplaces hiring/looking to hire skilled immigrants?
6. What do you think are the largest challenges and barriers employers experience *in hiring* skilled immigrants?
 - What specific factors might prevent more employers from hiring skilled immigrants?
 - Why do you think ___ [challenge mentioned] is such a big barrier?
 - What interventions do you think would help lessen this barrier?
7. What type of integration processes do organizations adopt when planning to hire skilled immigrants?
 - Are these more formal processes (classes/programs) or informal processes (mentoring)?
 - For example- English classes, credentialing processes, costs for education to fill in the gaps?
 - Are there any challenges associated with adopting specific processes?
8. What organizations, resources, programs, and initiatives, both regionally and nationally do you know that work with employers to provide guidance to employers seeking to hire skilled immigrants?
 - What kind of services do they provide?
 - Do you have a sense of which programs may be more popular/useful and why this is?

- Do you know of any regional/national workplaces that actively hire skilled immigrants?
 - specific names
 - are these places viewed as successful in hiring skilled immigrants?

Thank you. Our last topic for today is about the African Bridge Network, which is developing a pipeline program to assist skilled immigrants by creating opportunities for this group to re-establish themselves in positions that have viable career advancement pathways. Employers often remain hesitant towards hiring skilled immigrants (even those with certified degrees outside the US), viewing this group as risky to hire, due in part to factors such as a lack of workplace soft skills, customer service and language barriers.

To address employer hesitation towards hiring skilled immigrants, ABN is proposing to develop a streamlined and comprehensive verification program that would “pre-qualify” skilled immigrants. This program would engage with employers interested in hiring skilled immigrants and would ensure that they check off all requirements expected by prospective employers. In other words, this process is designed to be a third-party (ABN) verification between employers and skilled immigrants.

To ensure skilled immigrant candidates to employers, several topics ABN may include in their program are:

Potential ABN verification program topics:

- 1) Are authorized to work in the U.S. legally**
- 2) Have a foreign college degree**
- 3) Have achieved the necessary English proficiency to work in a professional setting**
- 4) Are proficient in Microsoft Office applications**
- 5) Obtain other specific requirements employers may suggest.**

[copy the proposed Bolded pieces into the zoom chat for the interviewee subject to refer to]

To ensure the effectiveness of this program, ABN seeks to understand (1) hiring requirements that employers would like ABN to verify, and (2) which programmatic features would be the most useful to include in such a verification program. We recognize that this list of topics is not complete and want to hear your thoughts on what we’re missing.

9. The proposed pieces of ABN's verification program I just mentioned have been added to the zoom chat for your reference. Of this list, which proposed topics are things that you think employers would find most useful? Why is this?

10. What additional topics not mentioned in the list shared with you do you think would help improve working with, hiring, and/or retaining skilled immigrants?

- What other topics are important to you when hiring skilled immigrants, (that ABN should include in their program)?
 - Soft skills, cultural workplace navigation, professionalization (resume building, interviewing skills, etc.)

11. From your perspective, do skilled immigrants need to have their foreign degrees in hand (meaning-verified by third parties such as WES) in order to be hired for positions that use their skill sets?

- Do they need to have their foreign degree recognized to be hired?
 - Is this field specific?

12. If such a verification process existed, would you encourage your skilled immigrant clients to use it?

- Why/why not?
- Do you have any hesitations or concerns about such a process?

13. Do you have any additional thoughts or questions about ABN's plans for their verification program?

We're coming to the end of our time today. Before we conclude, I have two last questions for you:

14. Are there any additional aspects of the barriers and rewards of hiring skilled immigrants that we haven't discussed yet?

- Anything else you'd like us to include in our report?

15. Do you have any questions for me about this study?

Thanks so much for your time. If you have any follow up questions or think of anything else you'd like to add to today's conversation, please send me an email and have a great day!

Appendix E: Focus Group Interview Guide

[BEGIN RECORDING to the Cloud]

1. I'll begin by asking everyone to introduce themselves by BRIEFLY stating your name, job title and whether you have hired skilled immigrants or are considering hiring skilled immigrants in the future.

I'd like to get a better sense of what the process and motivations around hiring skilled immigrants looks like and involves from your perspectives.

2) If participant is considering hiring skilled immigrants:

- What specifically has you interested in hiring skilled immigrants??

If participant has hired skilled immigrants previously:

- How did you /your organization begin hiring skilled immigrants? What were the motivations?

3. Could you describe what the hiring process looks like as an employer seeking to hire skilled immigrants?

- How is this different from hiring US natives or US-educated immigrants?
- What steps must always occur in this process?
- Where do you find the information needed to understand how to navigate this process?
- What's the timeframe of this process look like?

4. What have been the largest barriers you've experienced while hiring/aiming to hire skilled immigrants or retaining those who you have hired?

- How have you/your organization addressed these challenges?
- What factors prevent more skilled immigrants from being hired in their fields?
 - Common factors from the lit: English proficiency (real or perceived), lack of U.S. education and work experience, uncertainty about the process.
- Do you think these challenges are industry specific to your field of work?

5. What do you think would be the most useful interventions to have, to make hiring and retaining skilled immigrant employees easier?

- Specific assessment tools, credentialing processes, trainings, and support systems for skilled immigrants?

We've just spoken about the barriers to hiring skilled immigrants, and I'd like to pivot the conversation slightly to discuss the positive aspects of hiring and working with skilled immigrants.

6. What makes the decision to hire (or work towards hiring) skilled immigrants important?

- What are the possible advantages to hiring skilled immigrants?
 - Such as less likely to move, linguistic and cultural competency, international perspective and work experience, increasing workplace diversity...

- Are you aware of any incentives for workplaces hiring/looking to hire skilled immigrants?

Thank you. Our last topic for today is about the African Bridge Network, which is developing a pipeline program to assist skilled immigrants by creating opportunities for this group to re-establish themselves in positions that have viable career advancement pathways. Employers often remain hesitant towards hiring skilled immigrants (even those with certified degrees outside the US), viewing this group as risky to hire, due in part to factors such as a lack of workplace soft skills, customer service and language barriers.

To address employer hesitation towards hiring skilled immigrants, ABN is proposing to develop a streamlined and comprehensive verification program that would “pre-qualify” skilled immigrants. This program would engage with employers interested in hiring skilled immigrants and would ensure that they check off all requirements expected by prospective employers. In other words, this process is designed to be a third-party verification between employers and skilled immigrants.

To ensure skilled immigrant candidates to employers, several topics ABN may include in their program are:

ABN Skilled immigrants from their verification program:

- 1) Are authorized to work in the U.S. legally***
- 2) Have a foreign college degree***
- 3) Have achieved the necessary English proficiency to work in a professional setting***
- 4) Are proficient in Microsoft Office applications***
- 5) Obtain other specific requirements employers may suggest.***

[copy the proposed Bolded pieces into the zoom chat for the interview subjects to refer to]

To ensure the effectiveness of this program, ABN seeks to understand (1) hiring requirements that employers would like ABN to verify, and (2) which programmatic features would be the most useful to include in such a verification program. We recognize that this list of topics is not complete and want to hear your thoughts on what we’re missing.

7. The proposed pieces of ABN's verification program I just mentioned have been added to the zoom chat for your reference. Of this list, which proposed topics are things that you think employers would find most useful? Why is this?

8. What additional topics not mentioned in the list shared with you do you think would help improve working with, hiring, and/or retaining skilled immigrants?

- What other topics are important to you when hiring skilled immigrants, (that ABN should include in their program)?
 - Soft skills, cultural workplace navigation, professionalization (resume building, interviewing skills, etc.)

9. From an employer's perspective, do skilled immigrants need to have their foreign degrees in hand (meaning- verified by third parties such as WES) in order to be hired for positions that use their skill sets?

- Do they need to have their foreign degree recognized to be hired?

- Is this field specific?

10. If ABN's verification process existed, would you encourage your skilled immigrant prospective hires and current employees to use it? Why/why not?

- What features would this program need to have for you to feel confident in recommending it to others?
- Do you have any hesitations or concerns about such a process?
- As a prospective employer, would you be open to covering the cost of the verification services for prospective hires?

11. Do you have any additional thoughts or questions about ABN's plans for their verification program?

We're coming to the end of our time today. Before we conclude, I have two last questions for you:

12. Are there any additional aspects of the challenges facing employers hiring or thinking about hiring skilled immigrants that we haven't discussed yet?

- Anything else you think should be included in this study?

13. Do you have any questions for me, about this study or your participation?

Thank you so much for all of your valuable input and if you think of other suggestions after today, please do not hesitate to contact us. Have a great day.