



TENT

# Setting Up Refugee Employees & Their Teams for Success

A Resource for HR/  
People Teams and  
Managers



## By the end of this presentation, you will learn:

- ▲ The basics about including refugee employees in your workforce.
- ▲ The fundamentals of integration for a company employing refugees.
- ▲ How to prepare managers and teams to work with refugee colleagues.
- ▲ Ideas on how to build an inclusive workplace for refugee employees.



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## Why hire refugees?

In addition to changing the course of a refugee's life, there are also business reasons to hire refugees:

- Refugee employees have lower turnover than other workers.\*
- Refugees are considered to be exceptionally motivated, resilient, and loyal employees.
- Refugees are typically more willing to relocate for decent work.
- Refugees make your workforce more diverse, which drives innovation and financial performance, among other benefits.\*

“Refugees provide us with an amazing talent pool – they’re skilled, dedicated, loyal and engaged.”

— Rohini Anand, Former SVP of Corporate Responsibility & Global Chief Diversity Officer

**Sodexo**

\*A study found that, for example, in the manufacturing sector, refugees turn over at 4 percent per year, compared to 11 percent for others (Fiscal Policy Institute, *Refugees As Employees: Good Retention, Strong Recruitment*, 2017). \*\* Studies have found that diversity unlocks innovation, drives market growth, and increases financial performance (Harvard Business Review, *How Diversity Can Drive Innovation*, 2012; Harvard Business Review, *The Other Diversity Dividend*, 2018).

## Why invest in setting refugees up for success at work?

1. Attrition is typically highest for refugee employees **during their first month at a new job.**
2. Most of the investments covered in this presentation are relatively short-term; **past approximately six months, refugee employees are likely to require far less tailored support.**

As a bonus, **supporting refugee employees will likely benefit other employees, too!**

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## Integrating refugee employees at work: the fundamentals

Companies that are looking to integrate refugee employees into their workforce should consider taking a few key structural steps. (If you're still trying to figure out the hiring process for refugee candidates, reach out to the Tent team for our first tutorial presentation on this topic.)

This section will cover:

- Tracking employees' refugee status – and why it's important.
- Structuring teams with refugee and non-refugee employees.
- Making adjustments for cultural differences.
- Clearly defining roles and responsibilities.



## Tracking employees' refugee status – and why it's important

To maximize the contributions of refugees, companies should have a system to identify, support and retain these workers. Many companies lack clarity on how to collect refugee status information. Tent has developed guidance for Canadian employers on how they can track refugee status in a sensitive, safe and legal manner.

There are two main approaches:

- Attaching refugee status data to confidential employee records or
- Collecting anonymized refugee status data.

By using one of these approaches, employers can make a significant step towards making workplaces more inclusive for refugees –better understanding the demographics of their workforce, monitoring hiring progress, and implementing actions that increase retention and engagement of refugee employees.



## Structuring teams with refugee and non-refugee employees

If your company is hiring refugees for a number of open roles and you have some flexibility when composing teams, try to build teams that have both refugee and non-refugee employees (teams should ideally include at least two refugee employees who can support each other and be a point of reference for each other's growth).

Structuring a balanced employee team encourages cross-cultural interactions, which can drive increased employee engagement.

In the early stages, you may choose to design teams that solely comprise refugee employees to mitigate communication and cultural barriers. When doing so, you should proactively define clear lines of communication and connection points between refugee employees and non-refugees, across teams, to continue creating opportunities for cross-cultural interaction.

## Making adjustments for cultural differences

Adapting aspects of the new work environment to fit the needs of refugee employees will help support their integration. For example, consider:

- **Adjusting your uniform policies** to accommodate cultural norms around appropriate clothing.
- **Reviewing your time off policy** to ensure that refugee employees will be able to take adequate time off to celebrate religious holidays, attend any required immigration proceedings, etc.
- **Broadening managers' knowledge of cultural, religious and community activities** that might be personally important to employees, like sharing an annual calendar of cultural holidays
- **Converting an office** into a prayer room and allowing employees to take prayer breaks.

## Clearly defining roles and responsibilities

- In some instances, the responsibilities and tasks covered in this presentation clearly sit with HR (e.g., setting up an internal system to track employees' refugee status) or with refugee employees' line managers (e.g., giving refugee reports regular performance feedback).
- However, other responsibilities (e.g., creating forums for exchange between refugee and non-refugee colleagues) could sit with either HR or line managers – or even employee volunteers – depending on the capacity of teams and individuals within your company.
- Ultimately, the most important thing is to make sure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined within your company, and to clearly communicate the division of labor to refugee employees and to anyone at your company who works with them in any capacity.

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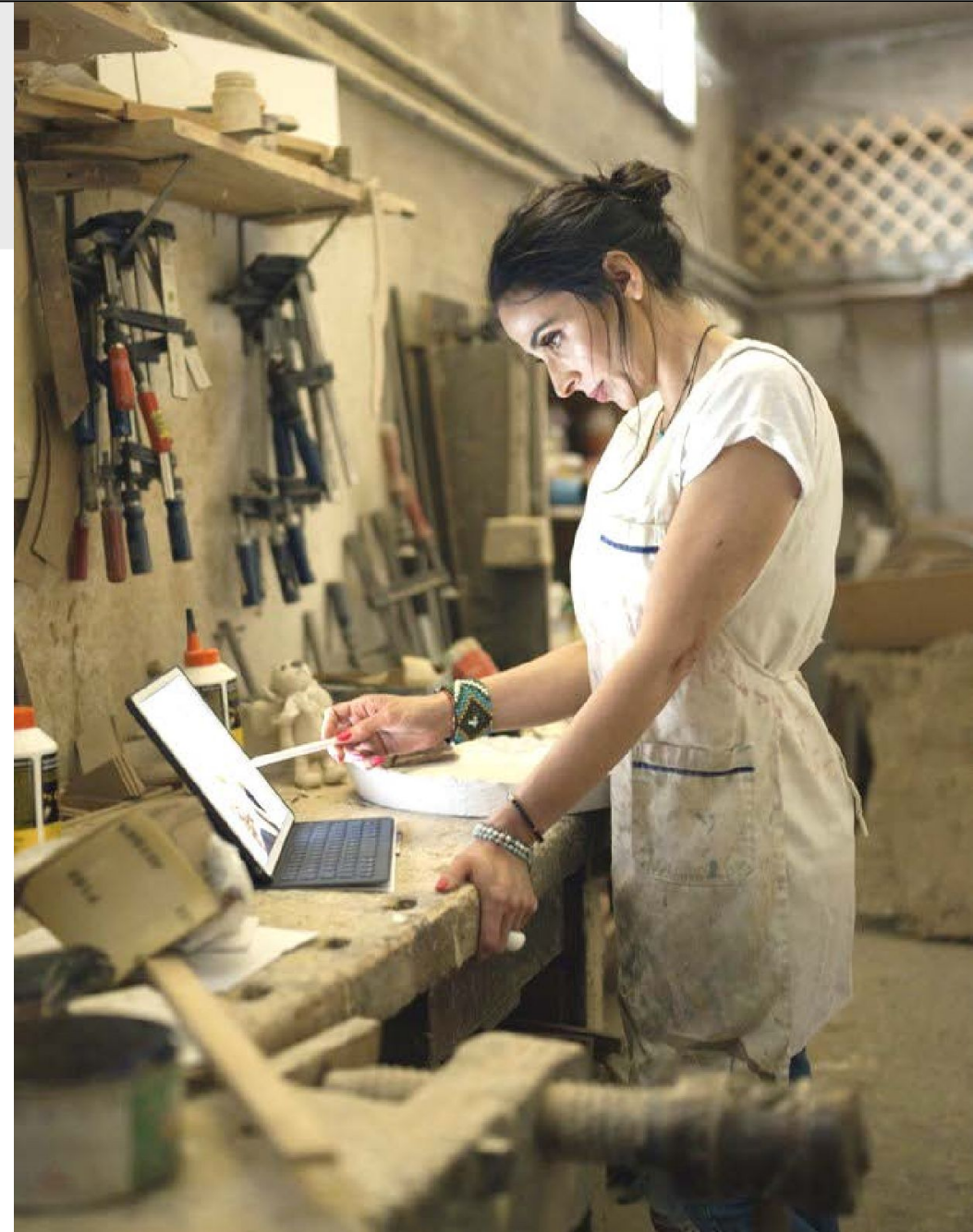


## Preparing teams to work with refugee colleagues

Once the structural considerations discussed in the previous section have been addressed, it's time to turn to the individuals who will be working with new refugee colleagues. Both managers and their teams alike will benefit from some basic preparation if they have never worked directly with a refugee teammate before.

This section will cover:

- General guidance for working with refugee colleagues.
- Guidance for managers on working with refugee reports.
- Preparing team members to work with refugee colleagues.



## General guidance for working with refugee colleagues

- While refugee employees come from diverse backgrounds and may require unique support to get their footing in new countries and work environments, they share many of their non-refugee counterparts' aspirations, such as the desire to succeed, grow, and build better lives for their families. Recognizing this mutuality lays the foundation for strong relationships between refugee and non-refugee colleagues.
- That said, it is also a good idea to share some basic information about refugees with teams to equip them with a baseline understanding before their new colleagues start. If you're working with a local organization to find refugee candidates, consider asking them to provide you with resources or reach out to the Tent team for help.

While some refugee employees seek to maintain their refugee identity; others may choose to shed it over time. Everyone should respect their refugee colleague's wishes in this regard.

## Talking to refugees about their experiences

Non-refugee employees who have never worked with a refugee colleague before may be unsure about how to talk to them about their experiences.

**These general guidelines are intended to make those conversations comfortable for everyone.**

- **Begin with a simple conversation.** Then, if it feels appropriate, you might ask your refugee colleague more about their background and experiences. Be mindful of any language barrier as you go.
- **Respect privacy.** Approach your conversation with sensitivity, and if your refugee colleague appears uncomfortable discussing a certain topic, don't probe.
- **Don't make assumptions** about your refugee colleague's educational experience, professional skills, intelligence, or language abilities. Instead, ask open-ended questions that give them the opportunity to share information about themselves at their own comfort level. (E.g., instead of asking "Why did you leave your home country?" try "Have you been able to settle in here?")

## Preparing managers to work with refugee reports

If you're going to be managing refugee employees, follow these guidelines to build strong relationships with your new reports and help them to get acclimated quickly:

- **Double down on positive reinforcement.** Regular and positive reinforcement can be critical in helping refugee employees build confidence within their first few weeks on the job, especially in new and unfamiliar working environments. Consider tailoring your usual performance feedback process by including more frequent check-ins at the start to reinforce positive growth.
- **Give timely, constructive feedback** to give refugee employees certainty and guidance around how they are doing in the job. Emphasizing a culture of open and positive communication and feedback is highly valuable for refugee employees, who may come from environments in which such behavior is not commonplace. Make it clear that it is acceptable to speak up and ask clarifying questions so that refugee employees feel comfortable doing so.



## Preparing managers to work with refugee reports

- **Make time to connect 1:1.** Arrange to have a welcome lunch or coffee with your new refugee report(s), ideally within their first week, to show that you are eager to take time to get to know them.

“Before beginning my position, I had the chance with my first manager to go out, we had lunch with each other. This is very important and impressive; somebody is coming to a new job, and the manager taking the person to a lunch, that meant a lot for me.”

— Vanig Garabedian, Accident Benefits Claim Claims Analyst

TD Insurance Toronto & Syrian refugee

## Checklist for managers with new refugee employees

**If you have new refugee employees joining your team, use this checklist to make sure you're prepared!**

- Contact the HR department to understand the backgrounds of your refugee employee(s), how to best welcome them, and what resources are available to you.
- Prepare your team to make sure they are ready to welcome refugee employees and are aware of their backgrounds, cultural considerations, and language barriers.
- Help your team in understanding what resources are available to support them in working with refugee employees.
- Design teaming events that are focused on welcoming refugee employees and integrating them within the team and society more broadly – e.g., monthly lunches with a different cuisine.

## Checklist for managers with new refugee employees

- Set up regular touchpoints with your refugee employee(s) to understand how they are doing and what may make their experience more comfortable.
  - Provide refugee employees with the necessary resources that will support them in both navigating the workplace and acclimating to society.
- Provide refugee employees with contacts in the organization who can help them answer different types of questions.

## How to give effective performance feedback to refugee employees

**If you are managing refugee employees, you should aim to give a performance feedback that covers:**

- **Skill level and match with role:** “Do you feel that your skill level matches your role? What skills would you rather use more often or differently?”
- **Unique impediments to success:** “Are there other factors—such as language barriers, technical terminology differences, or cultural practices—that are impeding your ability to use your skills?”
- **Frequency and quality of feedback:** “Do you feel that you are getting adequate feedback on your performance, and at an adequate frequency?”
- **Growth ambition:** “Are there any other areas and/or programs, aside from your normal role, that you would like to explore?”



## How to give effective performance feedback to refugee employees

- **Career paths:** “Do you have a clear idea of how to grow in this role? What is clear and unclear about this process?”
- **Management support:** “Are there adjustments that we as a management team and organization can make to support your everyday comfort and performance? What about your learning and growth?”
- **Social network expansion:** “Is there anyone else at our organization with whom you would like to speak to learn more about their career or role? Could I put you in touch?”
- **Concerns or issues:** “Do you have any concerns or issues with your role or with anyone on the team? If so, how can I help fix these?”

## Preparing team members to work with refugee colleagues

To set them up for success, managers should help their teams to build an understanding of their new colleagues' backgrounds and what is expected from them when working with refugee employees. Be sure to emphasize the value that refugee employees bring to the team and to your company!

With express permission from refugee employees, you can share information about new refugee colleagues' background and culture, skill levels, and unique circumstances with the rest of your team. For example, many refugee employees have experienced unforeseen challenges during their journey, including long spans without a job, which can lower their self-confidence and make it more difficult for them to adjust to a new workplace. Discussing these topics before refugee employees start can build empathy among your team, which in turn contributes to creating a more welcoming environment.

**...To go further:** Companies with robust diversity and inclusion practices may also have (or choose to develop) formal training to equip diverse teams to work well together. This takes the onus off managers and ensures that all teams with refugee employees are being prepared in a uniform fashion.

## Facilitating clear communication between refugee and non-refugee colleagues

You should make sure that your teams are aware of any language barriers with new refugee colleagues and are prepared to tailor their communication style accordingly.

These general guidelines help to facilitate clear communication with refugee employees who do not share your first language.

- **Give simple instructions for individual tasks**, breaking things down step by step.
- **Be conscious of the words you use** and, in particular, avoid using jargon, acronyms, metaphors, or colloquialisms. If you are having trouble communicating, **speak slower**, not louder
- **Check for understanding** by asking open questions, for example, “What time will your shift start tomorrow?” instead of “Do you know what time you start tomorrow?”
- **Be aware that body language and social behaviors like eye contact and shaking hands can be culturally specific** and may not have the same meaning for different people. For example, in some cultures, making direct eye contact is considered disrespectful

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## Building an inclusive workplace for refugees

*Good news!* By taking steps to prepare refugee hires and their teams to work well together and tailoring your onboarding program for refugee employees, your company has already laid the foundation for a truly inclusive workplace. However, there are many strategies and initiatives that can be leveraged well beyond the onboarding stage to build on that foundation.

This section will cover:

- Communicating internally about your company's commitment to its refugee employees.
- Building permanent forums for exchange between refugee and non-refugee employees.
- Offering ongoing diversity training.
- Supporting refugee employees in their career advancement.

## Communicating internally about your company's commitment to its refugee employees

Raising visibility of your company's refugee hiring initiative and sharing the individual stories of refugee employees within your workforce are both important ways of changing the narrative around refugees and building a more inclusive workplace.

- When implementing a new refugee hiring initiative at your company or taking an existing initiative to a new market, encourage leadership to **proactively communicate** the reasons for undertaking the initiative and the benefits for the company.
- Build the personal commitment of senior leaders and other colleagues to the refugee hiring initiative by arranging for them to **personally meet and hear the stories** of successful refugee recruits who are willing to share their experiences.

## Communicating internally about your company's commitment to its refugee employees

- Consider delegating responsibility for visibly championing the refugee hiring initiative to one or more individuals who can be responsible for building internal support and creating forums for refugee employees to share their stories.

No refugee employee should ever be pressured or required to discuss their refugee identity or share their personal story at work. However, creating spaces for refugee employees who do want to share their stories can be a powerful way of helping them to feel supported at work and fostering cross-cultural connections with colleagues.

## Building permanent forums for exchange between refugee and non-refugee employees

To facilitate relationship-building and to bolster internal support for your refugee hiring initiative, create opportunities for exchange between refugee and non-refugee colleagues. These can be in a 1:1 or a community-wide setting.

Companies with the bandwidth to do so may want to consider implementing some of both!



## Ways to build one-on-one connections

- **Encourage lunches or coffee chats** between refugee and non- refugee colleagues. If possible, consider giving pairs gift cards to cover the cost of the meal/coffee or allowing employees to expense it.
- **Assign buddies or mentors** to new refugee employees so they have someone who can help them to acclimate to your workplace culture, practice the local language, and develop a meaningful and reliable connection from day one. If possible, it can be helpful if the buddy/mentor is someone from the refugee employee's same cultural background or who speaks the same native language.\*

## Ways to build *community-wide* connections

- **Hold team- and/or company-wide events and social activities** – like celebrations of local holidays or colleagues' birthdays – that provide an opportunity for refugee and non-refugee employees to come together. Build in moments for employees to share stories about their lives to build cross-cultural understanding at the organizational level.
- **Leverage affinity groups**, which provide employees with a formal space to connect with each other, by encouraging refugee employees to participate. Affinity groups are usually employee-led and are composed of employees who share a characteristic such as gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or a common interest. These communities provide a safe environment in which refugee and non-refugee employees can build meaningful connections.
- **Establish a refugee employee affinity group** to provide a space for refugee employees to connect with and support each other, as well as a forum in which they can provide feedback to leadership on improvements for their community.

## Offering ongoing diversity training

A)

**If your company already has a well-established diversity and inclusion program**, consider modifying it to be inclusive of refugees. In addition, consider incorporating a cultural sensitivity component to help refugee employees get up to speed on local cultural norms, to reduce cross-cultural misunderstanding, and encourage positive cross-cultural working relationships across the whole company.

B)

**If your company is newer to diversity and inclusion**, consider supplementing your existing training offerings with a new diversity or cultural sensitivity training. If establishing a new program is not realistic, publish overviews of both refugee and non-refugee employees' home countries or cultures (via email, your internal website, or in print) to introduce everyone to your company's diversity instead.



## Supporting refugee employees in their career advancement

From a dearth of local experience to extreme difficulties getting their foreign credentials recognized, refugees are up against a number of barriers as they strive to advance professionally. Luckily, there are concrete ways that your company can support its refugee employees in working towards their career aspirations:

- Offer ongoing **language training** and/or **workplace culture training**.
- Offer informal **opportunities for reskilling and/or upskilling professionally**, ideally with a focus on both hard and soft skills. This could take many forms – for example, professional development workshops or mentorship from more senior colleagues.
- Offer refugee employees the chance to **secure professional certifications** in their areas of interest that are relevant to your company. Refugees will need to undergo part-time or full-time training, which can be conducted in-house or through an external partner.\*

## Supporting refugee employees in their career advancement

- Offer refugee employees the chance to **secure professional certifications** in their areas of interest that are relevant to your company. Refugees will need to undergo part-time or full-time training, which can be conducted in-house or through an external partner.\*

\*In some countries, the government may offer certification programs and/or subsidies that employers can take advantage of to keep costs down. You could also consider asking refugee employees to commit to working with your company for a set amount of time after completing their certification course, to ensure that it is a worthwhile investment.