



TENT

# How to Integrate Refugee Employees into the Workforce

A Resource for  
HR Teams





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

- ▲ How HR teams can best prepare to welcome refugee employees.
- ▲ How to adjust or expand your onboarding program for refugee employees.
- ▲ Ideas on how to build an inclusive workplace for refugee employees.



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## Integrating refugee employees at work: what HR teams need to know

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 tutorial presentation on this topic.)

This section will cover:

- ▲ The definition of a refugee.
- ▲ Benefits of setting refugees up for success at work.
- ▲ Structuring teams with refugee and non-refugee employees.
- ▲ Making adjustments for cultural differences.





## Who is a refugee?

- ▲ A **refugee** is someone who has been forced to flee their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution or violence, e.g. a civil war or ethnic violence.
- ▲ An **asylum seeker** is someone who has left their country and has formally applied for refugee status in your country but is waiting for an official determination by the government.

### Who would be considered a refugee?

- ▲ Someone fleeing civil war in Syria.
- ▲ Someone fleeing violence and food scarcity in Venezuela.
- ▲ Someone fleeing the Russian invasion in Ukraine.
- ▲ Someone fleeing persecution in Afghanistan.
- ▲ Someone fleeing terrorism and violence in Mali.

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

Attrition is typically highest for refugee employees during their first month at a new job. However, by taking steps to set refugee employees up for success from the get-go, you can increase retention rates during this time period and beyond.

Accordingly, 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. Note that overall, refugee employees tend to have high retention rates relative to their non-refugee counterparts.

As a bonus, supporting refugee employees will likely benefit other employees, too! (For example, training managers to be more responsive to their refugee employees' potential sensitivities will make them better at managing all of their reports.)



## Structuring teams with refugee and non-refugee employees

If your company is hiring refugees for several 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

Consider adapting your work environment to ensure it is inclusive of refugee employees' cultural needs. Keep in mind that many refugee employees will not have previous experience navigating work culture in their new country and they may also be in a different type of workplace than they have previously experienced (e.g. they may be used to an office, but their role with your company is in a factory).

Adapting aspects of the new work environment to fit their needs and communicating these differences effectively 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.



## Making adjustments for cultural differences

- ▲ Broadening managers' knowledge of cultural, religious and **community activities** that might be personally important to employees, like sharing an annual calendar of cultural holidays can help managers anticipate when their refugee reports may prefer to take leave.
- ▲ **Converting an office** into a prayer room and allow employees to take prayer breaks.

If you're unsure how to best accommodate the cultural needs of your new refugee employees, Tent may be able to provide guidance or recommend an organization that can

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## Tailoring onboarding for your refugee employees

Once you have extended a job offer, you can help ensure new refugee employees will succeed at work by making some adjustments to your onboarding processes.

This section will cover:

- ▲ Steps to take before your refugee employee's first day (pre-boarding).
- ▲ Adapting your onboarding program to include refugee employees.
- ▲ Creating a refugee-centric onboarding program.



## Steps to take before your refugee employee's first day (pre-boarding)

Taking steps to ensure that new refugee hires feel welcome and prepared ahead of their first day helps to accelerate their onboarding and establish their sense of belonging at your company:

- ▲ **Send clear offer communication:** In addition to typical administrative paperwork, consider sending a leadership communication to refugee employees welcoming them to the company. If possible, consider delivering these communications in both the primary local language and the employee's native language.
- ▲ **Conduct meet-and-greets:** Offer new hires an on-site introduction to managers and colleagues and a short tour of the workplace to create early opportunities to build new connections and get familiar with the space.
- ▲ **Provide pre-employment support:** Call new refugee employees a few days before the first day to touch base and give them the opportunity to ask questions. Make sure they're clear on the logistics of getting to work, preparing themselves for a work day (e.g. is there a fridge where they can store a packed lunch?), and any documentation they need to bring with them on their first day.

## Adapting your onboarding program to include refugee employees

Do a simple review of your existing onboarding program and identify activities within initial training programs that need to be modified or explained differently for a refugee audience. Making these modifications to your standard process helps to ensure that refugee employees will be able to:

- a) complete all onboarding procedures without a hitch, and
- b) feel an immediate sense of community, legitimacy, and achievement at your company.

Recently-arrived refugees typically aren't tapped into professional or social networks to link them to jobs.

If you partnered with a local organization to hire your new refugee employees, consider reaching out to them for support with onboarding – including translation/interpretation services.

## Suggested adaptations

- ▲ **Offer extra support for key procedures**, like enrolling in benefits or setting up direct deposit, as these may be unfamiliar to refugee employees. If needed, provide translation or an interpreter to assist.
- ▲ **Distribute hard copies of onboarding materials** in case accessing digital materials at home is a challenge. Make sure to include materials with organizational background, values, policies, etc. so that refugee employees can quickly get up to speed on their new workplace culture.
- ▲ **Provide uniforms and badges early** to help refugee employees feel an immediate sense of connection, belonging, and pride within their new workplace.
- ▲ If your onboarding program includes a diversity and inclusion training, consider **adding in resources on refugees**.



## Creating a refugee-centric onboarding program

If your company has hired a large number of refugee employees, it may be worth developing a supplemental onboarding program for them so that they have the opportunity to access specifically relevant information, ask clarifying questions, and meet other refugee employees in a comfortable environment. Such a program could include:

- ▲ **A Q&A session with interpreters** who speak refugee employees' local language(s). This gives employees who have lower proficiency in the local language a chance to comfortably ask any outstanding questions they may have about the company and role.
- ▲ **An information session focused on resources offered by your company**, such as language development training, skills training/recertification programs, or transportation programs.
- ▲ **Workplace culture training**, to assist employees who are new to the local cultural environment with workplace processes and etiquette.

...To go further: Give new refugee employees **local tips** on navigating and experiencing their new community as well as a **welcome box** with items representing the local culture!

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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:

- ▲ Building permanent forums for exchange between refugee and non-refugee employees.
- ▲ Offering ongoing diversity training.
- ▲ Supporting refugee employees in their career advancement.



## 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 *one-on-one* 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 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 showcase your company's diversity instead.

## Supporting refugee employees in their career advancement

From limited local experience to extreme difficulties getting their foreign credentials recognized, refugees are up against several 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, through 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.



A woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a light-colored jacket over a blue shirt, is shaking hands with a man in a blue shirt and dark tie. They are both smiling. The background is a large window overlooking a city skyline. In the foreground, a laptop and a cup of coffee are on a desk.

**Thank you!**