



# Implementing a Buddy Program for Refugee Employees

Buddy programs are an effective way for companies to integrate refugee employees into their workforce and address some of the challenges they face during their first months on the job, when attrition among refugee employees is typically at its highest. These programs pair new refugee hires with an experienced colleague who can provide more customized support than most onboarding programs offer, thus helping refugee employees to better understand company processes and dynamics. Once past this onboarding phase, refugees have very high retention rates.

Tent recommends that companies integrate a buddy program into their onboarding process so that refugee employees get one-on-one support from their first day/week on the job. This resource offers guidance to companies on how to launch a buddy program in support of their refugee employees.



## Steps for setting up a refugee buddy program:

01

### IDENTIFY A HIRING MANAGER OR COORDINATOR WHO WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR OVERSEEING THE PROGRAM

02

### OFFER RESOURCES TO HELP EMPLOYEES NAVIGATE THE AREA

- Share a simple registration form for the program on internal communication channels and newsletters. Highlight how volunteer employees can benefit from participating in the program – for example, by enhancing their cross-cultural skills and making a meaningful impact on a refugee’s career.
- Encourage multilingual employees who speak refugees’ native languages to sign up. (This will vary depending on country of origin).
- If you need additional support recruiting volunteers, ask leaders to offer public endorsements and/or encourage employees to spread the news through word-of-mouth.

03

### MATCH NEW REFUGEE HIRES WITH EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERS

- Prioritize matching new refugee employees with volunteers who are enthusiastic and willing to commit time to the program.
- Consider matching refugee hires who have limited local language proficiency or professional backgrounds to more experienced employees at the company, if this option is available.
- Companies with the capacity to do so can go further by matching new refugee hires to volunteers who work in the same department(s) or live in the same region. Also consider matching employees based on shared interests or backgrounds. This information can be obtained by, for example, asking program participants to complete a short questionnaire or organizing a “mixer” style matching event during the refugees’ first week(s).

## 04

### SHARE EXPECTATIONS WITH PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

- Offer guidelines to volunteers about how long the program will last and how often pairs should meet. (See below for a suggested program structure).

## 05

### COLLECT REGULAR FEEDBACK

- Collect feedback from refugee employees about their experience as part of the program through informal conversations, interviews, or by distributing a survey. Use this feedback to strengthen the program for future participants.



### Recommended structure for a buddy program:

Tent recommends that a buddy program lasts for six months, with two meetings during the refugee employee's first two weeks, an additional touch point during their first month, and monthly touch points after that. After six months of personalized guidance, refugee employees should feel more acclimated to their position and require less tailored support. Tent recommends that volunteer employees stick to the following structure:

#### ▲ WITHIN THE FIRST TWO WEEKS

- Introduce yourself to the new hire, share contact information, set expectations for how the buddy program will work, and schedule regular touchpoints for future conversations.
- Give a tour of the office and/or facility, and share relevant information about the local community, including commuting options (e.g., carpooling, public transportation, etc.) and local resources (e.g., supermarkets, doctors, community centers, etc.).
- Share information about your company's culture that can set the new hire up for success, including what type of communication employees typically use (email, Slack, etc.), reminders to show up on time to meetings, etc.
- Share any company norms your buddy could benefit from understanding: explain dress codes and company traditions, translate company jargon, and/or highlight any relevant company holidays.

#### ▲ WITHIN THE FIRST MONTH

- Ask if there are questions about company culture or norms.
- Facilitate introductions to other relevant staff (e.g., employee resource group leads).
- Explain which employee benefits exist at your company and encourage your buddy to take advantage of them, where applicable. Share any relevant HR materials and information about who to contact if they would like to find out more.

### ▲ AFTER THE FIRST MONTH

- Check-in once a month about the new hire's experience at the company, and encourage them to raise any questions and share any challenges they are facing on the job.
- Discuss your buddy's long-term career goals at the company and ask how to support them.
- Encourage new hires to take advantage of any professional development and training courses your company offers.



After six months on the job, refugee employees will likely need less onboarding support. It is then appropriate to gradually reduce the amount of meetings, or conclude the buddy program entirely, as the employee becomes more comfortable.



### Tips to share with volunteers:

#### ▲ BE RESPECTFUL AND OPEN-MINDED

- Be sensitive to the fact that refugees may have different expectations around interactions with colleagues in a professional setting, especially as it relates to eye contact and/or physical touch.
- Be mindful of religious and cultural norms, such as dietary needs (e.g., Halal food for Muslim employees) or observance of national/religious holidays.
- Do not make assumptions about your refugee colleague's background, professional experiences, or language abilities.
- Some refugees will hold their refugee identity with pride, while others may choose to shed it. Be mindful and respectful however a refugee colleague decides to present themselves, and respect their privacy.

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#### ▲ ENCOURAGE OPEN COMMUNICATION

- Create a safe forum for your refugee colleague to communicate about their work experience, and share their professional interests and aspirations.
- Refugees may or may not wish to share their personal journey, such as why they fled their home country. Do **not** ask your refugee colleague about it unless they choose to raise it themselves.
- Help your colleague to avoid feeling overwhelmed by encouraging them to ask questions.

## ▲ SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

- Define clear expectations around the role(s) of volunteer employees, which may involve guiding buddies through their onboarding process, introducing them to colleagues, and being a primary point of contact for work-related questions. Reiterate that the role of employee volunteers is to support new refugee hires, not to supervise them.



Volunteer employees should not ask refugee colleagues probing questions about life in their country of origin, or about how and why they fled. Refugee colleagues may voluntarily share this kind of personal information. If this happens and both parties feel comfortable, pairs are welcome to engage in the conversation.



## Next Steps:

The Tent Partnership for Refugees can work with companies to develop and launch a buddy program to support the integration of refugee employees. To learn more about Tent and its services, reach out at [info@tent.org](mailto:info@tent.org).

## About the Tent Partnership for Refugees

With more and more refugees displaced for longer periods of time, businesses have a critical role to play in helping refugees to integrate economically in their new communities. Tent was launched in 2016 by Hamdi Ulukaya, the CEO and founder of Chobani – a multibillion dollar food company in the U.S. – to mobilize global businesses to fill this gap by helping connect refugees to work. Today, Tent is a [network of over 300 major companies](#) committed to hiring, training, and mentoring refugees. Find out more at [www.tent.org](http://www.tent.org).

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