

U.S. Companies Step Up to Hire Afghan and Ukrainian Refugees

Some of the largest companies in the U.S. have pledged to hire a total of more than 22,000 refugees over the next three years.

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The 6-year-old girl didn't understand why she had to rise in the middle of the night to travel to the Kabul airport and stand outside the gates for hours in a jostling, desperate crowd, only to be forced to return home again. She didn't understand why her family was turned away from the airport two more times, including once having to flee tear gas thrown by the guards.

"She was traumatized," explains the girl's father, who was enduring the worst stress of his life and fearing that his family would be forced to live under Taliban rule. His daughter kept asking why they had to travel at night and who were the Taliban she kept hearing about. After the third time the family failed to enter the airport, the man said to his three daughters, "I am sorry I couldn't save you."

But eventually, he succeeded. His former American employer arranged transportation to the airport for its workers to get on a plane.

"We will stay alive. We are safe," the father recalls telling his daughters. (Like the other Afghan refugees interviewed for this article, he didn't want his name, his location or the name of his former employer disclosed, to protect family remaining in Afghanistan from retribution from the Taliban.)

Companies Pledge Aid

That was August 2021. Now the 32-year-old is living on the Eastern Seaboard and working as a business analyst at Accenture, which is among the companies that have increased efforts to hire and aid refugees. The intense news coverage of people trying to escape the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, followed by Ukrainians fleeing the war in their country, has pushed more U.S. companies to either start or expand their refugee hiring efforts.

In September, some of the country's largest companies, including Pfizer, Amazon and Marriott International, pledged to hire a total of more than 22,000 refugees over the next three years. The initiative is the brainchild of the Tent Partnership for Refugees, a nonprofit that mobilizes the business community to assist refugees. And in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, a who's who of business and political leaders launched Welcome.US, a coalition to help refugees settle in their new country.

It's not just the tragic stories and images that are driving such initiatives. Military veterans often encourage their employers to hire Afghan refugees. Many of these veterans served in Afghanistan and want to aid those who risked their lives so the U.S. military could carry out its mission. And with the ongoing worker shortage and low unemployment rate, many companies are desperate for dependable workers and are more open to the idea of hiring refugees to help address the talent gap.

Above: Afghan refugees, evacuated from Kabul, board an American Airlines plane from the Naval Air Station Sigonella in Italy in September. Sigonella served as a holding and evacuation hub, moving qualified refugees to more permanent locations.

REFUGEES AND RETENTION

Nineteen of 26 employers surveyed (73 percent) reported a lower turnover rate for refugees than for other employees. This was true across industry sectors and geographic locations.

Lower Turnover 73%

12% Higher Turnover

15% Same Turnover

Source: Tent Partnership for Refugees/Fiscal Policy Institute.



The Loyalty of Refugees

People who are grateful to be safe are typically more loyal to their employers. In fact, refugees tend to stay at their companies longer than the average worker, according to a 2018 study of 26 businesses in various industries conducted by the Fiscal Policy Institute and funded by Tent. Nearly 75 percent of those companies reported higher retention rates for refugees than for other groups of employees.

In certain industries, the statistics are particularly striking. For example, the annual turnover rate for refugees in meatpacking companies was 25 percent, compared with 40 percent in all other industries. And in both the hotel and manufacturing sectors, the turnover rate for refugees was [seven percentage points lower - \(https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TENT_FPI-Refugees-as-Employees-Report.pdf \)](https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TENT_FPI-Refugees-as-Employees-Report.pdf) than for other employees.

Companies with a long history of hiring refugees caution that while it is worth the effort, the process can be difficult. Many Afghan refugees speak English and are familiar with American customs because they worked with U.S. organizations. But that's not the case for all Afghan refugees—or many of the refugees from other countries. Some are unskilled and can't read or write in their native languages. They may not understand U.S. culture and may need help with basic tasks, such as getting to work, filling out insurance forms, enrolling their children in school and communicating effectively with co-workers.

Expect Challenges

"This isn't easy," says Mindi Cox, chief marketing and people officer for O.C. Tanner Co., a Salt Lake City-based software company. "If you're serious about enriching your teams and your culture with people with such a diversity of experience, there are going to be some exceptional lengths you have to go through to make sure that it works."

That can include arranging transportation for workers, creating buddy systems and establishing prayer rooms, among other things. These days, it also means paying more attention to refugees' mental health. Cox says refugees who fled violence in their countries have been distressed by coverage of the war in Ukraine.

“There was all kinds of trauma coming out [in employees] from the images of the war,” Cox says. O.C. Tanner brought in a mental health professional to discuss post-traumatic stress disorder with refugees and how to address it.

Refugee trauma extends beyond images on TV. A few years ago, an earthquake in Utah unnerved some of the Bosnian refugee employees at O.C. Tanner because it reminded them of what they endured during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s.

“People were calling and saying, ‘I can’t come in,’ ” Cox recalls. The company helped them access the appropriate mental health benefits to address their feelings.

Who Are Refugees?



Refugees are individuals who have crossed international borders and are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin due to being persecuted, or having a reasonable fear of persecution, because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. It can take years to gain refugee status in the United States.

People outside the U.S. seeking refugee status must register with the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, whose agency investigates the claim.

The U.S. chooses the refugees it accepts and sets limits on the number of refugees it allows into the country each year. Before being accepted, refugees are screened by various government authorities, including the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Defense.

Individuals already in the U.S. who meet the definition of a refugee can claim asylum and must file an application with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the DHS. However, if the person is going through the deportation process, the individual must file an application with an immigration judge at the Executive Office for Immigration Review, part of the Department of Justice. These asylum seekers also go through government screenings.

People fleeing Afghanistan over the past year were largely let into the country on Special Immigrant Visas. This visa category was established in 2006 to help Iraqis and Afghans who worked with U.S. troops, diplomats and aid workers, because their association with these Americans put their lives at risk.

Refugees who are accepted into the U.S. are referred to one of nine resettlement agencies, which help them find housing and employment. Those partner agencies work with hundreds of other nonprofits to help refugees acclimate to their new lives.

U.S. employers that are interested in hiring refugees can contact any of the nine resettlement agencies, as well as the Tent Partnership for Refugees, Upwardly Global and Welcome.US. —T.A.

Resettlement Agencies

[Church World Service - \(https://cwsglobal.org/ \)](https://cwsglobal.org/)

[Ethiopian Community Development Council - \(https://www.ecdcus.org/ \)](https://www.ecdcus.org/)

[Episcopal Migration Ministries - \(https://episcopalmigrationministries.org/ \)](https://episcopalmigrationministries.org/)

[Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society - \(https://hias.org/ \)](https://hias.org/)

[International Rescue Committee - \(https://www.rescue.org/ \)](https://www.rescue.org/)

[U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants - \(https://refugees.org/ \)](https://refugees.org/)

[World Relief - \(https://worldrelief.org/ \)](https://worldrelief.org/)

[U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops - \(https://www.usccb.org/ \)](https://www.usccb.org/)

[Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services - \(https://www.lirs.org/ \)](https://www.lirs.org/)

For Additional Information

[U.S. Resettlement Partners - \(https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/us-resettlement-partners.html \)](https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/us-resettlement-partners.html)

Veterans Lead the Charge

Some military veterans who watched the U.S. departure from Afghanistan in 2021 were moved to ask their employers to embrace hiring refugees. Greg Anderson, a senior managing director and chief operating officer for HR at Accenture, says he received calls during the withdrawal from veterans saying, “What can we do?”

Accenture’s initiative to hire veterans has informed its newer program to employ Afghan refugees, according to Anderson. People from both groups often don’t have job responsibilities and resumes that easily fit into the parameters laid out in employment ads by most U.S. companies. So, when Accenture began hiring veterans, he notes, it started to look at underlying skills and how they could be applied to different roles.

“We had to develop that bridge,” he says. “And what we found is that the bridge is very helpful in this [refugee] situation.”

Time Commitment

Even if a company is willing to hire refugees, matching the person with the correct job takes time and effort.

“It can be challenging to find the right fit,” says Diane Woolley, senior vice president and CHRO at White Plains Hospital in New York. She says one of the hospital’s HR directors will typically sit with refugee candidates for hours, going through their experience and discussing what kinds of jobs might interest them.

The hospital receives candidates from Hearts & Homes for Refugees, one of the hundreds of nonprofits that work with refugees across the country.

When Hearts & Homes referred 41-year-old refugee Haroon to the hospital, he was initially confused. “I thought only doctors worked at hospitals,” says the father of four.

In October 2020, he began working as a patient technician, organizing and cleaning operating rooms. Last year, he was promoted to anesthesiology technician; in that role, he prepares and cleans the machines. Now he is considering becoming a nurse.

“I am so happy here,” Haroon says. “There is just so much freedom.”

Prior to coming to the U.S., Haroon never considered a career in health care, having worked in administrative roles for the United Nations and for a U.S. military contractor. He started receiving death threats from the Taliban in 2014, and it took six years for him to receive a Special Immigrant Visa to come to the U.S.

Most of the Afghans who arrived over the past year also have such visas, which are given to those whose lives are in danger from working with U.S. organizations.

Communication Hurdles

Frank Fumich opted to hire Afghan refugees for a simple reason: “I needed workers,” he says. Most of the positions at his airline catering company entail physical labor and don’t require any special skills. An acquaintance suggested he hire a refugee, and he has ended up hiring eight Afghan men so far.

“Communication is the biggest challenge,” says Fumich, CEO of Express Catering Inc. in Arlington, Va. All the Afghan employees either speak or understand a bit of English, but they largely communicate through translation apps. If there is difficulty conveying instructions, Fumich calls one of the employees’ uncles to translate. (It’s not uncommon for family members of refugees to help out in this manner.)

Initially, Fumich says, some of the men didn’t understand that they were required to work certain hours, and sometimes they would try to leave midshift. He also didn’t realize how much assistance they would need.



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JINA KRAUSE-VILMAR

Fumich gave an employee a car but had to get it back when the worker decided to leave. The man had been a good worker, Fumich recalls, and then just started missing shifts or leaving early. He suspects the employee might have been struggling with some personal issues, but the language gap made it difficult to determine what was going on.

Fumich made a car loan to one employee and co-signed a lease for another so the man could move closer to the airport. He also started a GoFundMe campaign to help an employee pay his rent in advance and purchase furniture for his apartment.

“I hope they appreciate it and that they’ll be good employees,” Fumich says. “They are good workers. I’m pleased.”

Underemployment and Untapped Talent

Refugees are typically very grateful to have found a job and to be out of the dire circumstances they escaped. But they also often miss the stature they held in their former jobs and communities.

Wahid and his wife work for a different catering company. He says they are happy to have jobs they can perform without speaking English. Yet, at times, they grow depressed. Wahid holds a bachelor’s degree and worked for the education department in Afghanistan before accepting a post with a contractor for the U.S. military. His wife was a high school teacher. They are both trying to learn English and move into professional jobs.

“This is not me,” he says through an interpreter, adding that some of the other employees at the catering company are engineers and former military officials. “I am disappointed. But this is where I work right now.”

Underemployment is a problem in the refugee community, says Jina Krause-Vilmar, president and CEO of Upwardly Global, a New York City-based nonprofit that helps refugees and immigrants with college degrees and professional experience find jobs that match their qualifications.

Krause-Vilmar says 45 percent of recently arrived immigrants have at least a bachelor’s degree, yet U.S. employers often assume that refugees come from “poor countries” with subpar education systems that don’t prepare them for work.

That’s one reason why companies may not consider hiring refugees. Another is that they don’t understand how the immigration system works and don’t realize that anyone with refugee status is allowed to legally work and live in the U.S. without any additional visa requirements.

A Refugee Family Affair



Life has come full circle for Paw Lar.

Nine years ago, she arrived in the U.S. after living in a refugee camp in Thailand since birth. She couldn't speak English and didn't understand American culture. Now, the 25-year-old is a community liaison at Tyson Foods Inc., where she assists other refugees at the company who speak Karen, a language used in Thailand and Myanmar, and helps them navigate life in the U.S. Lar's job entails everything from translating at employees' doctor appointments to enrolling their children in schools.

"It feels good to give back to the community," says Lar, whose family moved to the U.S. when she was 14 years old. "I felt like I didn't belong here for a long time. It takes a long time to learn things."

Lar became a U.S. citizen in September and now says, "I feel like I belong here."

Tyson has played a significant role in the American story for the entire Lar family. Lar's parents have worked at the company for eight years, and her brother has been employed there for 11. Lar attended the University of the Ozarks on a scholarship provided by Tyson and has been working at Tyson since last year.

"I wanted to work at Tyson. My friends and family work there," says Lar, who, along with her family, works in a poultry plant in Clarksville, Ark.

Refugees have been a source of labor for Tyson for decades, and the company is adding new benefits to help them acclimate.

"Refugees and immigrants have come into the meatpacking industry because it's a great entry-level manufacturing job," says Garrett Dolan, senior manager of community investment at Tyson. "Where can someone come and get a job when they may not speak the language or have a technical degree?"

More than 50 languages are spoken at Tyson plants. At one plant alone, employees speak at least 25 different languages. Hundreds of interpreters float around Tyson plants to facilitate communication. The company also offers English classes to employees, as well as courses in financial literacy and computer skills.

Earlier this year, Tyson expanded its service to help workers renew their employment authorizations and apply for citizenship from seven to 40 facilities. In 2021, it launched a pilot program in three locations to provide day care for the children of all employees, not just those who are refugees.

“The immigrant populations are very excited to take advantage of it because when they come here, they don’t have the family network,” Dolan says. “You can’t drop kiddo off at grandma’s if there’s a problem.” —T.A.

Inviting Conversations

Krause-Vilmar says many employers fail to delve into refugees’ backgrounds to determine how their talents can best be used to benefit the organization. Upwardly Global runs a series of programs for both refugees and employers to help close that gap. Of course, a refugee who was a doctor or lawyer can’t start practicing their profession in the U.S. without meeting certain requirements, and that can take years. However, there is no reason why a medical doctor should be working on an assembly line when so many medical institutions need skilled workers.

“We tell employers to invest in them because they are going to be here for the long haul,” Krause-Vilmar says. She adds that hiring refugees helps employers meet their workforce diversity goals while bringing in quality talent.

Cox of O.C. Tanner says employers should ensure that each refugee employee has a career path, just as they would for any other worker. Managers should have conversations with employees about their goals and look out for those who show any special potential or aptitude.

Refugees who are just grateful to be employed may be more reticent to discuss their ambitions and may need more encouragement to speak up, Cox says. They may also be more reluctant to report any problems, so it’s vital to ensure they understand workplace rules and to keep lines of communication open.

“You want to invite conversations,” Cox says. “You don’t want to inexplicably say to someone who is grateful that ‘your job is to keep your head down.’ ”



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MINDI COX

Hiring refugees can also create an overall sense of purpose at a workplace that goes beyond fulfilling basic business goals. Employees increasingly say that is very important to them.

“There is a feeling that happens when the work isn’t just about getting the work done,” Cox says, “but the work is about elevating people, that your organization has decided that this is an endeavor that is worth some extra effort.”

Theresa Agovino is the workplace editor for SHRM.

Photographs by MC2 Andrea Rumple/U.S. Navy/Alamy Live News (Afghan refugees), Portra/iStock (infographic), Honglouwawa/iStock (Arrivals sign).