

EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

A report on engaging employers to improve refugee employment in the UK.

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**REFUGEE
EMPLOYMENT
NETWORK**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was commissioned by the Refugee Employment Network. The research explored how organisations in the refugee support sector¹ are working with employers and how the sector could engage more effectively with employers to open up more opportunities for refugees in the UK. It involved a mixture of a survey and in-depth interviews with 11 organisations in the sector and in-depth interviews with 7 employers.

Overall, the research revealed the need for more strategic, sustainable, cross-sector collaboration to improve refugee employment in the UK. Employers are taking initiative to respond to the challenges caused by global displacement, but the employment support available to refugees is not currently creating a work-ready pipeline for employers. Organisations supporting refugees have an opportunity to change this through more effective employer engagement both individually and collectively.

¹ A note on terminology: 'organisations in the refugee support sector' and 'sector organisations' are used interchangeably throughout this report.

Key findings

Employment activities

- Organisations in the refugee support sector are offering a range of employment activities, but only certain activities tend to be delivered in partnership with employers: work placements, jobs and pre-employment training.
- The sector organisations are collectively working with more than 50 employers, 52 of which have been identified. The sectors most represented include financial, legal and retail.
- This differs from the most common refugee skillsets cited by the sector organisations, which include hospitality, food and drink and retail.

Employer experiences

- The primary motivation for employers to engage with refugee employment is the social need – a response to the “refugee crisis”. Secondary motivations include

reputational benefits, responding to skills shortages, and increasing diversity within the workforce.

- The biggest challenge for employers is accessing a pipeline of refugees, with employers finding the pipeline to be smaller than expected. Some employers have also struggled to find refugees with the right skills.
- Some employers highlighted the disparate nature of the support sector, and the impact this has on recruiting refugees.
- The key business benefits mentioned by employers include recruitment and retention, a new talent pipeline, and employee engagement.

Employer engagement

- Sector organisations are very focused on making a 'business case' to engage employers whereas

employers are motivated by the social case, and do not see this to be mutually exclusive with the business case.

- Employers indicated that the sector does not show enough commercial awareness
- The sector has high expectations of the level of awareness an employer ought to have, and could be missing opportunities to increase awareness through partnership.
- The fragmented nature of the sector makes it difficult for employers to engage and is driving a competitive culture which is damaging employer engagement
- Refugee employment programmes can incur a significant cost to employers that may not be sustainable and could pose a risk to the long-term sustainability of programmes
- Securing buy-in at a senior level and from the HR team is key for embedding refugee employment

Recommendations for organisations supporting refugees

Full recommendations on pages 16 and 31-32

1. Create a more effective pathway for refugees

- i. Involve employers throughout the employment journey, from early stage work-readiness through to offering and sustaining employment.
- ii. Audit the skills and experience of refugees.

2. Strengthen your approach to employers

- i. Include the social case.
- ii. Take time to understand the commercial pressures on a business.
- iii. Train staff on employer engagement engagement

3. Educate and inform through partnership

- i. Make the most of every opportunity to partner, even if an employer has low levels of understanding.
- ii. Offer advice and training to employers covering the global displacement of people, and the situation for refugees in the UK.

4. Maximise your efforts through collaboration

- i. Be more transparent about employer engagement.
- ii. Refer refugees between programmes where beneficial.

5. Ensure long-term investment

- i. Pilot activity to understand the resource required from an employer before agreeing to scale.
- ii. Find ways to bring the costs down for partner employers.
- iii. Ensure refugee employment is embedded within the business by securing senior level buy-in and engaging the HR team.

Actions for the Refugee Employment Network

1. **Use your collective voice** to raise levels of awareness and understanding amongst employers.
2. **Provide training** on employer engagement for staff with an employer-facing remit.
3. **Develop a co-ordinated national approach to growing investment into the sector**, which includes employers as one of the significant stakeholders in this.
4. **Create a national referral mechanism** to enable referrals between programmes.
5. **Work with employers to create a positive narrative** which supports refugee employment.

2. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that there are 117,234 refugees living in the UK – or 0.18 per cent of the total population.² The employment rate for refugees is worryingly low, considering the contribution they could make to UK employers. Only 56% of working age people who came to the UK to claim asylum are in employment, compared with 76% of UK nationals.³ The employment rate of refugees does increase over time, but it can take two decades for refugees to reach the same employment level as UK nationals.⁴

Against this backdrop it is important to understand that refugees have access to the same employment support as any other UK job seeker – including out of work benefits and support from Jobcentre Plus. However, refugees face a set of unique barriers to employment as the figures suggest.

Spontaneous arrivals to the UK can face long periods of unemployment before they receive their refugee status and right to work. Even with the right to work many continue to

find themselves unemployed or underemployed, relying on the support of voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations to find work.

Organisations in the Refugee Employment Network are supporting refugees to gain employment, engaging employers in this process. This report, commissioned by the network, uncovers how effective this engagement is currently and where there are opportunities for improvement.

Through a mixed methodological approach, the report synthesises insights gained through in-depth interviews with employers (both within BITC's membership and non-members), a short survey on employment activities and secondary research. This reveals how employers are working in partnership with organisations in the sector, employer experiences of refugee employment and insights into effective employer engagement.

² British Red Cross, Refugee Facts and Figures, 2017

³ Differences in Labour Market Outcomes between Natives, Refugees and Other Migrants in the UK, University of Oxford, 2017

⁴ Ibid.

Finally, combining this research and our 17 years' experience working with employment organisations and employers to secure employment for excluded groups, we have identified practical recommendations for the network going forward.

3. METHODOLOGY

We applied a mixed method approach to capture both an overview of employer activity on supporting refugees and an in-depth understanding of how employers are working with third sector network organisations. We conducted primary research through a snapshot survey and in-depth interviews with organisations providing employment support to refugees and in-depth interviews with employers. We conducted extensive secondary research to understand the wider context, the extent of employer activity on this issue across the UK, and the challenges or barriers they are experiencing.

Survey

To gather insights into how the refugee support sector is currently engaging employers, Business in the Community circulated a short survey (see Appendix 1) to the Refugee Employment Network's mailing list. A total of ten organisations on the network's circulation list of 25 completed the survey – eight online and two through interviews. Less than half the group responded, which could indicate how many network members are actively engaging with employers. Further research into engagement would be required to understand this.

Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven sector organisations to understand what is proving to be most effective in engaging employers, and with seven employers to understand how they are supporting refugees and how partnerships with the refugee support sector could be more effective. This enabled us to identify any reality gaps and gain in-depth insight into employers' own perceptions of refugee employment and partnerships.

Thank you to all the organisations and individuals that took part in the research:

Refugee support sector organisations

Ashley Community Housing
Breaking Barriers
Bridges Programmes
Integr8 UK
NEMI
RefuAid
Refugee Council
TERN

Transitions

UN Migration Agency (IOM)

World Jewish Relief

Employers

Barhale

Ben & Jerry's

Grant Thornton

IKEA

Oliver Wyman

Starbucks

Waitrose



4. EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT: activities and employers

Mapping employer activity on supporting refugees into employment is challenging since most employers are only starting to take action on this issue, and are not ready to make it public. Employers that have publicly shared what they are doing have not necessarily made an impact yet, or may only be supporting small numbers of refugees. Employers that are not publicising their activities yet feel it is too soon; they perceive it as a reputational risk to actively promote their work before making a substantial impact and developing robust evidence of what works in practice.

With that said, this research reveals some important examples of employer activity taking place across the UK and suggests there could be many more to uncover in the future. Those employers that we did speak to were very keen to provide as much information as possible.

4.1 Employment activities

To identify opportunities for further engagement, the survey circulated amongst sector organisations asked which

employment activities currently offered by the refugee support sector are being supported by employers:

- Pre-employment training, work placements and employment (offering jobs) are widely offered in the sector and supported by employers.
- Language skills and help with finding a job are also widely offered, but only two organisations are engaging employers in these activities.
- Activities that seek to build confidence are offered by all eight respondents, but only half of respondents said these activities are supported by employers.

Other activities offered by respondents include: Support adapting to a new culture, careers development, skills translation and requalification, volunteering opportunities, and in-work support. Of these, only skills translation was said to be supported by employers. This highlights the potential to engage employers beyond work placements, training and jobs.

Activities	No. of organisations offering activity	No. working with employers to deliver activity
Pre-employment training	6	6
Work placements	5	6
Employment	7	5
Confidence building	8	4
Job coaching/mentoring	6	4
Networking	6	4
Language skills	7	2
Help with finding a job	6	2
Support with self-employment	4	1
Other (please specify)	6	1

Sector example: Engaging employers throughout the journey

Through their wider work supporting refugees, Bridges found that low levels of English were a barrier to employment. Working with a local college and in partnership with employers in select sectors, Bridges developed a sector-based English language course. To ensure the refugees Bridges support have the language skills needed to enter a specific sector - for example, the care sector - an ESOL teacher will visit and observe an employer in this sector to design a course for participants. This employer then also contributes to the course through providing mock interviews and taking part in a Q&A.

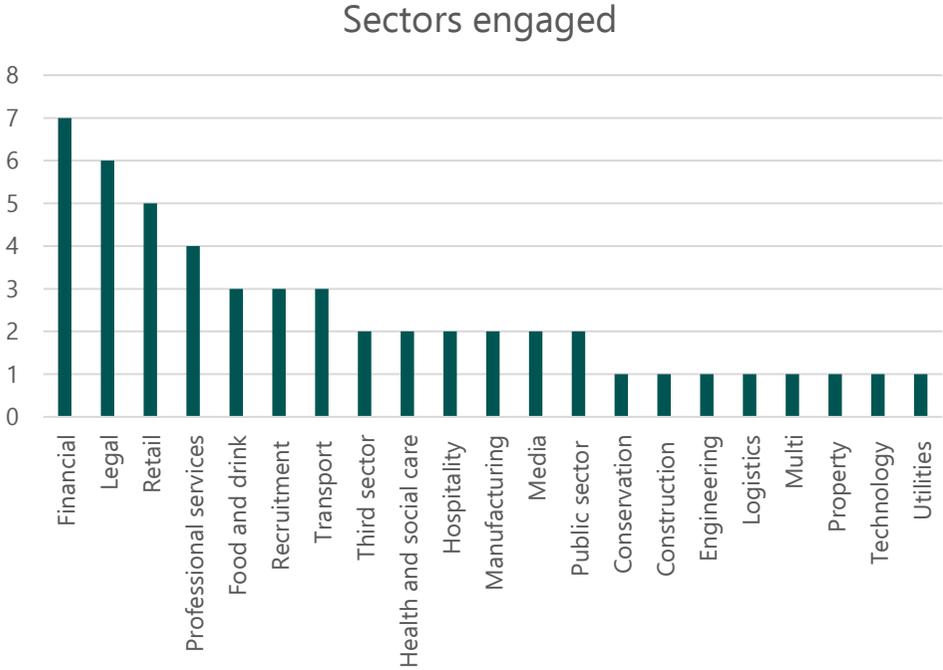
4.2 Employers engaged

Through the survey and interviews, a total of 51 employers were listed as providing employment support to refugees:

Arcadis	Fox Rodney Search	Proactive rail
Arup	Gem Construction	Refugee Action
Ashurst	Goldman Sachs	Rise
Bank of America Meryll Lynch	Grant Thornton	River Manufacturing
Bates Wells Braithwaite	Hays Recruitment	Starbucks
Ben and Jerry's	IKEA	Temple Chambers
Big Yellow Self Storage	Lloyds Bank London	Tesco TFL
Bloomberg	LOLA	The Goring
Blue Arrow	Community Credit Union	Thomson Reuters
Blue Ventures	Mayer Brown	Timpson
Bristol Hotel	Mayor's Office	Unilever
Capgemini	Mischon de Reya	Uniqlo
Chi & Partners	MyDentist	Virgin
Co-op	National Grid	Waitrose
Crossrail	NHS	Weil LLP
Deutsche bank	Oliver Wyman	Wells Fargo
DWP		WeWork
		Wincanton Logistics

This provides a good picture of the breadth of companies engaged, but is naturally not comprehensive. One organisation was unable to share the list of employers it is engaging with, and there are also other employers in the UK supporting refugees into employment. It is also worth noting that these employers are engaged in different ways and at different scales.

Sector breakdown



The top three sectors in this list are financial, legal and retail.

Locations

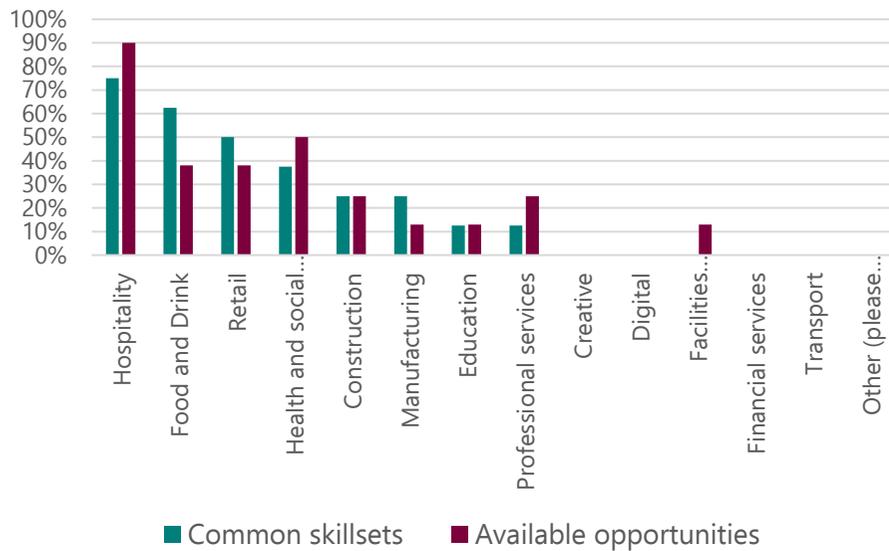
Many of the employers engaged are based in London, with engagement in other regions relative to the location of the survey respondents. One respondent indicated it had been difficult to engage employers in activity outside London, and the business interviews confirmed that activity for national employers tends to be piloted in London. However a number of employers indicated that their programmes would be expanding to other cities in the UK.

Skills and sectors

Refugees are not a homogenous group, with huge variations to be expected in English language abilities, skill levels, and educational backgrounds. In general, organisations in the sector prefer to take an individualised approach to supporting clients, with the aim of finding employment opportunities which correspond to the individual’s skills and experience.

However, to understand how employer engagement can be most effective, the survey sought to identify any trends in refugee skillsets, and how these correspond to available employment opportunities. Responses to the survey show that the skills and experience most commonly encountered align with the most accessible opportunities – namely hospitality, food and drink, retail and health and social care.

Skillsets and opportunities



There could be a number of explanations for this.

- A number of network members interviewed suggested that they have sought partnerships with employers that mirror the skillsets seen amongst the people they support, which is likely to have created accessible opportunities.

- As an organization establishes partnerships with specific employers and sectors, this will influence the demographic of refugees accessing network member services.
- One organisation suggested that refugees were more likely to have had UK work experience in hospitality, food and retail, even if these were not skillsets they had before coming to the UK. This is both an indication that jobs in these sectors are more accessible, and that underemployment could be one explanation for the trend in skillsets.

A note on skill level

The trend could also challenge the generalization made by some sector organisations and employers that refugees can be characterised as a highly skilled group. Several organisations noted huge variations depending on nationality, gender and educational background, and one organisation specifically challenged the assumption that most refugees are highly skilled and/or highly educated. Data from the UK Labour Force Survey shows that 31% refugees are highly educated.⁵ This is a higher rate than UK nationals but still cannot be described as a majority. Research from the Nuffield foundation with refugees *does* show that the majority were

⁵ Differences in Labour Market Outcomes between Natives, Refugees and Other Migrants in the UK, University of Oxford, 2017

in employment, self-employment or study before coming to the UK, suggesting a focus on experience rather than skill level may be more appropriate.

Establishing beneficial partnerships

The sectors best represented in the list of employers above do not correspond with the skillsets most commonly seen amongst refugees. One explanation for this could be that in any company there are a range of roles available – for example, a cleaning role at a financial services company, although a lot of these roles are often outsourced. It may also be that sector organisations have established partnerships with some of the less accessible sectors deliberately to open up jobs.

But when looking at this as a reflection of successful employer engagement, it is also likely that the employers most willing and/or able to engage with refugee employment are not necessarily those with the most accessible jobs.

Two of the organisations interviewed referenced this. One interviewee explained that their organisation identifies sectors with accessible jobs, looking at skills shortages and growing industries to understand where there are likely to be vacancies. Another

interviewee explained, “the earlier we can work with employers the more easily we can work back from the available vacancies and provide the right training.”

4.3 Employment support: Recommendations

1. Create a more effective pathway for refugees

- i. Involve employers throughout the employment journey.**
Employers can get involved with a range of employment support activities, for example confidence building, mentoring, or CV writing, either by hosting or providing volunteers. This would improve the support available to refugees, provide employers with a greater understanding of the barriers refugees face, and unlock new employer partnerships.
- ii. Audit the skills and experience of refugees.** In order to establish employer partnerships that are most likely to lead to job opportunities, the sector would benefit from a better understanding of the skills and experience of refugees. This could be done by individual organisations, but also collectively as a sector through the Refugee Employment Network.



5. EMPLOYER EXPERIENCES: motivation, challenges and benefits

A key focus of the employer interviews was to identify any differences in the perceptions and reality of supporting refugees into employment, with a focus on challenges and business benefits. The employers interviewed covered a range of sectors – retail, construction, food and drink, financial services, and professional services. Five interviewees were head office or national contacts, while two interviewees were local contacts.

Some key themes emerged, with other trends relating to whether activity was initiated at a local or national/international level, differences between sectors, and the type of roles available.

5.1 Employer activity in-depth

All of the employers interviewed for this research are working in partnership with organisations in the sector to provide employment support as follows:

Barhale

Medium-sized civil UK-based engineering, infrastructure and construction company employing 600 people nationwide

Barhale's Scotland office approached Bridges in 2016 when an employee suggested it could be a good thing for the business to do. Now the company supports around three refugees a year in Scotland through six week work placements, and to date has employed three refugees in roles including administration and engineering.

Ben and Jerry's

Global ice-cream company and Unilever brand with less than 50 UK employees

Responding to the refugee crisis is part of Ben and Jerry's focus on social inclusion. As well as looking to change the political narrative in Europe through campaigning work, Ben and Jerry's has begun to provide part-time ice-cream vendor roles to refugees, who can work for the company for four months, allowing them the time and resources to develop their idea for self-employment with TERN.

Grant Thornton

Global accountancy company, employing 4,500 people in the UK firm

Grant Thornton's work supporting refugees began when the company's CEO prioritised this as an action area. After exploring the best way to help, Grant Thornton is working with the Institute of Chartered Accountants to address the challenge of skills translation,

and has recently partnered with breaking Barriers to provide work placements in its London offices.

IKEA

Global retailer employing 11,700 people in the UK

IKEA's commitment to supporting refugees is a global initiative sparked by the company's CEO. As a company that takes pride in providing fulfilling work opportunities, IKEA decided to partner with Breaking Barriers to support refugees into employment in the UK. To date the company has helped 110 refugees with employment support, and 51 through a bespoke course to gain customer service English language skills. 20 refugees have now gained employment in IKEA stores.

Oliver Wyman

Global management consultants employing 600 people in the UK

Following a global commitment from its CEO, Oliver Wyman has partnered with sector organisations including Transitions and TERN to provide employment opportunities to refugees in the UK. So far 3 people have found roles with the business in the UK, making up 10 people globally.

Starbucks

Global coffee company with 5,500 direct employees in the UK

In 2017 Starbucks' CEO announced that the company would be supporting 10,000 refugees into jobs with the company globally. In

the UK, Starbucks is now working in partnership with Refugee Council and Ashley Community Housing to deliver an employability programme, preparing refugees for jobs in Starbucks stores.

Waitrose

Supermarket chain, part of the John Lewis Group which employs 85,500 people in the UK.

Waitrose is a national partner of Business in the Community's Ready for Work programme, providing two week work placements to people who face barriers to employment. Working with World Jewish Relief, Business in the Community approached Waitrose about providing placements to refugees on the Syrian Resettlement programme. A local Waitrose store in Coventry took part in the research – so far the store has supported five refugees through the programme and two participants have found jobs at the store.

5.2 Motivation

A response to the refugee crisis

The majority of employers interviewed made reference to the global refugee crisis as the motivation for taking action, with this usually coming from CEO or directorate level:

"Our CEO made a global commitment to support 10,000 refugees into employment"

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“Our CEO threw down the gauntlet and so we ran focus groups to explore options for responding, to understand the issue better.”

The two exceptions to this were where a local contact was interviewed. In the first instance action had come out of a decision nationally, and in the second the local contact had engaged with a charity partner through word of mouth as a “CSR activity”.

Employer example: Changing the dialogue on refugees

Ben and Jerry’s has a strong focus on social inclusion, seeing this as an important part of its corporate purpose. The company has used its brand to campaign on several issues and counts the refugee crisis and the integration challenges it poses as one of these. Ben and Jerry’s is working to change the narrative around refugees in the UK, and knows that positive stories of integration need to be at the heart of any campaign. This was a key motivator for the company to partner with TERN by providing short term employment opportunities to refugees enabling them to develop their own businesses.

Reputational benefits

There was a general sense amongst the employers interviewed of wanting to ‘do something for the greater good’, and to be seen to be acting in response to the refugee crisis. For some this was related to core business values, and with others it was viewed as an opportunity for positive PR.

The sector organisations suggested that PR concerns have been a barrier for some employers. Most of the employers are yet to publicise their activity, but only expressed reservations about being able to show enough impact rather than what the response might be. Of greater concern to some of the employers was how to communicate their support amongst their employees.

A skilled talent pipeline

Several employers interviewed said that they expected refugees to be a skilled, talent pipeline to fill vacancies and meet a skills gap within the business – and a number said they expected refugees to be ‘hard-working’ and ‘highly skilled’.

Diversity – a driver for some

Diversity was only mentioned by the professional services firms interviewed and was seen to be positive for helping attract a more diverse talent pipeline generally:

“Supporting refugees helps to grow a diverse workforce which is then more attractive for new and diverse talent, through having diversity of thought within the business.”

5.3 Challenges

The pipeline

Several employers indicated that it has been harder than expected to access a pipeline of refugees, or find candidates with the right specialised skillsets:

“The landscapes are very different. We’ve found refugees hard to find and engage because the UK doesn’t actually take that many. Despite the rhetoric in the press, [the UK] doesn’t actually take that many.”

Employer example: Struggling to fill highly-skilled roles

In 2015, Oliver Wyman set out to provide employment opportunities to highly skilled refugees in some of the firm’s consultancy and project management roles. However the firm found it more challenging than expected to find candidates with the right skills and language abilities to be able to compete for these roles. The firm recognises the potential for barriers within its own recruitment process and the need for more flexibility in sifting candidates, and is now working with Transitions to access a larger pool of talent. Oliver Wyman has also found that roles within its services department – such as production and design - tend to be more accessible as they don’t require such a high level of English, and so the company has focused on providing placements in these areas.

“It has been much harder to find the pipeline of refugees than expected.”

The mechanism for working with refugees has also proved challenging for some employers, who commented on the need for a national mechanism of support:

“The sector is very fragmented. Working in multiple locations means having six monthly partnership programmes. There’s no one organisation in the UK providing support, and the most prominent ones are not very involved in employment support.”

Employer example: Multiple partnerships

Recruitment and retention are key business challenges for Starbucks, which has caused the company to take an open approach to recruitment including partnering with Job Centre Plus across the UK to access job-seekers. When Starbucks first looked to employ refugees in the UK, it looked to Job Centre Plus. However, the Department for Work and Pensions has no way to identify jobseekers who are refugees. Therefore Starbucks has had to establish partnerships at a local level, starting with Refugee Council in London and expanding to six local partnerships across the UK.

Recruitment methods

A number of participants said that the normal recruitment methods used within their business would be inaccessible for refugees.

"We're rejecting candidates from Oxford and Cambridge, and colleagues sifting CVs do not know to make allowances"

"Our application process is very complex, and without a tailored programme I expect we wouldn't be able to employ many refugees."

Employer example: Skills and qualifications translation

Sectors which require specific professional qualifications can be particularly inaccessible for refugees, who may not have the paperwork to prove their skills and experience or whose qualifications may not be recognised within the UK.

Grant Thornton has recognised this as a problem and is working with regulated industry bodies to find solutions. Starting within its own sector, the firm is working with the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales to explore what steps can be taken to make roles more accessible for refugees with accountancy qualifications.

Legal concerns

Interviews with some of the sector organisations suggested that legal concerns are a significant barrier for employers looking to engage in supporting refugees and this particularly seemed to be the case when engaging local contacts and hiring managers. One of the

sector organisations however suggested that legal barriers can sometimes be used as a scapegoat for other challenges when engaging with employers.

Amongst the employers interviewed, legal concerns were certainly not mentioned as a challenge or barrier to engagement. They were however flagged as an internal challenge within the business when engaging HR colleagues. This could be because the employers interviewed are those already working with refugees, but it is also possible that sector organisations are either overstating or overestimating this as a barrier,

Employer example: Educating colleagues

In order to employ the refugees being supported through its programme with Breaking Barriers, IKEA's lead on People and Communities had to support HR colleagues to understand principles, checks and documentation relating to right to work. IKEA was convinced of the importance of supporting refugees, and therefore the legal considerations did not present a barrier to partnership, but an internal hurdle for the company to overcome.

English language

English language was generally perceived to be a barrier by the employers prior to engagement. However the degree to which

language has proven to be a barrier varies depending on the kind of roles employers are looking to fill.

Integrated language support

IKEA is unlocking employment opportunities for refugees in its UK stores as a Corporate Partner with Breaking Barriers. As a result of the bespoke support provided by Breaking Barriers, IKEA has found that English language skills are not a big barrier to employment, with some of the candidates speaking better English than many of their existing employees.

For roles which involve engaging clients, a very high level of English is required, and this has proved a challenge for one business.

“Language is a big barrier, and we have no capacity to provide English language training.”

One of the smaller employers interviewed suggested that language can be a challenge but employees are understanding and patient.

“Language can be a challenge but we press through!”

The companies that have struggled least with English language are those that had realistic expectations and have put other support in place.

“We were told to expect English language to be a challenge...we were amazed to see how much the candidates’ English improved day by day.”

Other challenges

One of the perceived barriers for engagement was a concern about how resilient refugees would be – for example, whether they would have the confidence to deal with customers, or whether trauma might resurface in the workplace.

“We want to be careful that we are prepared to support people properly. We know that the things people have been through can cause trauma, and that often refugees do not have strong support networks in the UK.”

Another challenge mentioned was cultural differences. One employer had an issue with a male member of staff not respecting the authority of a female manager, although when the business explained its expectations relating to equality and diversity the issue was resolved.

5.4 Business benefits

Recruitment and retention

For retailers particularly, recruitment and retention were identified as important benefits, with one interviewee mentioning concerns about the impact of Brexit on the business' talent pipeline:

"For nine years we struggled to recruit and always had high vacancies and high turnover, but supporting refugees has allowed us to fill vacancies and set a new standard."

"We have a high churn in our business, but we have good retention rates amongst refugees. We have Brexit to consider too, and if the worst comes, refugees are a good talent pool."

Talent

Employers also expressed an expectation that refugees would be hard-working, and the candidates they have been able to find have proven this to be true.

"The two refugees that have filled roles have set a new standard for new starters."

"They are very hard-working and flexible recruits."

"The refugees we have employed have become some of our greatest brand ambassadors."

Three employers said that they were not expecting to be able to employ any of the refugees they set out to support, but soon realised their potential.

"In the first pilot we only expected to run the course and do mock interviews, we weren't expecting to be able to provide jobs"

"We didn't expect there to be much other than doing something for the greater good."

Setting a new standard

Waitrose in Coventry has been working with Business in the Community to provide refugees with work placements, and at the outset did not expect to find a solution to its challenges with high staff turnover. Learning from other experiences of supporting people into employment the store made sure both participants had a 'buddy' – a Waitrose partner to show them the ropes.

Two refugees completed their placements, and the store manager was very impressed:

"One of them even had a background in managing a warehouse, so he really hit the ground running. We didn't expect to employ them, but when they finished their placement we had a lot of vacancies available and so we gave them the pick of the lot. Now they're setting a high standard for our new starters."

"We didn't know what to expect. Never thought we would employ them, but we soon realised it would be great."

Employee engagement

Supporting refugees into employment has broadly had a positive impact on existing employees, who have engaged in programme activity or worked alongside refugees.

"The impact on colleagues has been positive, seeing someone who really appreciates the opportunity they've been given"

"I've been amazed at the engagement from store managers who have been really passionate about this".

5.1 Employer experiences: Considerations for employers

- 1 It was evident from both sets of interviews that open and clear communication is key in any partnership.** When expectations are not clearly set at the start, partnerships can be strained by frustrations relating to timescales, level of support and scale of impact. Several sector organisations expressed frustrations that employers they have worked with have either not known how they are best placed to support refugees or not communicated their intentions with partners.

- 2 The sector organisations were clearly concerned that a lot of business activity can be reactive without a long-term plan.** Activity that is reliant on a specific CSR focus or budget is vulnerable to change. Early groundwork can feel slow, but embedding activity within the business and identifying long-term funding will enable sustainable impact.
- 3 Several employers interviewed were interested in opportunities to engage with likeminded peers.** This could help both to embed and grow existing activity, and to support other employers to establish programmes. This is an approach that has worked successfully at Business in the Community amongst employers working with ex-offenders by establishing a Reducing Reoffending through Employment Network. This network enables employers to work more efficiently by replicating employment activity, and was the starting point for the Ban the Box campaign which has since received Government backing.

A number of opportunities already exist for employers to learn, share and shape activity, but it would be particularly beneficial to have a network of employers that could feed into and learn from the Refugee Employment Network.



6. EFFECTIVE EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT: Barriers, enablers and opportunities

Comparing themes from the two sets of interviews revealed important insights to enable more effective employer engagement on refugee employment.

6.1 Making the case

The social case is still an important motivator for business

When asked what they felt has been helpful in establishing partnerships with employers, the sector organisations focused heavily on the importance of making the “business case”. Only two organisations recognised the increased media focus on the refugee and migrant crisis as being a helpful factor in engaging employers, and in fact a number of organisations made negative comments about employers that were responding out of sympathy for refugees and the “social case”:

“Business shouldn’t be doing this out of sympathy but because of the business case.”

“We’ve not sold anything on the basis of philanthropy”

“It’s not about getting businesses to support a vulnerable group but about their bottom line... we tend to shy away from companies with

big CSR strategies as there’s often not a lot of substance behind these.”

In contrast, when the employers were asked about their motivation for taking action all were motivated by the social need, and “doing the right thing”. For the global companies this began with leadership at an international level, whereas for others it was a local response:

“Our work began with direction from our CEO and in response to the refugee crisis, which he sees as being biggest crisis facing our world.”

“We wanted to respond to the refugee crisis in Europe”

“It’s the social case. If it was purely commercial we wouldn’t be touching this area. I could be using my time and talent to focus on making us more profitable.”

This is not to say that the business case is unimportant. In fact, a number of employers have discovered commercial benefits they were not expecting, which has helped them to articulate the business benefits of their initiatives. However, with the nature of corporate social responsibility changing, employers are increasingly viewing the creation of social value as a key business purpose. Business in the Community has highlighted this change particularly in the

marketplace with a focus on purpose-driven brands, drawing on research that shows purposeful values-driven companies outperformed their counterparts in stock price by a factor of 12.⁶

Therefore, for employers, the social need is important both because responding is seen as the right thing to do, but also because responding is a key part of being a purposeful – and therefore profitable – business.

When engaging employers to provide employment opportunities to refugees, organisations in the sector should not be afraid to highlight the challenges refugees can face and how providing employment can make a difference.

The sector does not show enough commercial awareness

In addition, while organisations in the sector are clearly trying to engage with employers on their terms, feedback from participants suggested this can sometimes miss the mark. As one participant put it:

“There are a lot of organisations out there and they don’t have a full grasp of what a commercial environment looks like. There’s a need for more awareness of our needs...there’s a requirement for organisations across the board to get a better understanding of

some of the issues that we would face as an organisation employing people.”

One sector organisation highlighted that its most effective employer engagement has not resulted from making a compelling business case but from demonstrating an understanding a business’ needs:

“An ability to listen to the concerns of the business and develop a programme that is manageable seems to have been a key factor in establishing successful partnerships.”

Similarly, the employer working with this partner also highlighted this as a key factor in the success of the partnership:

“It’s a very open and honest partnership – [the organisation] is very accommodating and understanding of the business needs.”

Therefore, whether it’s at the stage of establishing or maintaining a partnership with an employer, an ability to speak the business language seems to be key. Commercial and not-for-profit environments can be very different, and Business in the Community’s experience with its members has found that partnerships are most effective when they are mutually beneficial.

⁶ Corporate Culture And Performance, John Kotter and James Heskett, 2011

One interviewee mentioned the importance of having staff-members with sales backgrounds. Considering the previous experience of employees is important, but training could also be provided to help staff understand the commercial environment and how to engage with employers. The Refugee Employment Network provides a good opportunity to invest in this kind of training, and benefit from peer learning.

6.2 Raising awareness through partnership

The sector has high expectations of employers

The sector organisations interviewed expressed concern about a lack of awareness amongst some of the employers they have engaged with, referring particularly to false assumptions and perceptions amongst employees:

“There’s a perception challenge amongst employers about refugees - staff involved need better training to provide opportunities for refugees.”

“You do see some misconceptions about refugees and staff sometimes need training up on how to work with the client group!”
“There’s always a standard learning curve to overcome misconceptions.”

“There’s a lot of surface level in the issue but not a lot of understanding.”

Some explicitly spoke of only wanting to partner with employers that were doing it for the “right reasons”.

The level of understanding amongst employers will vary, but is likely to be relatively low in comparison to the wealth of expertise within the sector. Before an employer has started to work with refugees they are unlikely to know the full picture: they may have a mix of reasons for wanting to get involved, and their employees will have assumptions informed by the media. Nonetheless, they are interested in taking action.

If sector organisations are only willing to partner with employers that seem to “get it”, this could limit the opportunities available for refugees, and risks missing an opportunity to increase awareness through partnership.

The sector has great expertise to share with business

Indeed, the employers interviewed clearly view the sector organisations as the ‘experts’ and highlighted how much they have benefited from this expertise:

“They understand the challenges well and can have a personal relationship with the clients.”

“They have provided our staff with awareness training and resources for employees. They are the experts in the field, out there on the ground sourcing the right candidates.”

Even if a business may not seem initially interested in formal training, through meeting refugees and delivering employment support they are likely to gain a fuller understanding and may even go on to champion refugee employment.

Business in the Community’s experience on employment has proven the effectiveness of this approach particularly in the area of ex-offenders. It is not unusual for members to be very hostile to the idea of employing people with criminal convictions because of stereotypes and a lack of understanding around the issue. However, through working with these employers – whether through a prison visit or an employment programme – we have seen some of these members create more inclusive recruitment pathways for people with criminal convictions, and become leaders in this field.

6.3 The state of the sector

⁷ Refugee Employment Support in the UK, Milestone Tweed for the Refugee Employment Network, 2018

A fragmented sector makes it difficult for employers to engage

Several employers interviewed said that they had found it challenging to engage on refugee employment describing the sector as ‘fragmented’, ‘slow’ and ‘in flux’:

“Support for refugees seems to be very fragmented because of a lack of funding”

“The sector is in flux... some consolidation is required.”

“There’s no one-size-fits all approach to supporting refugees. It seems very disparate.”

Another research report produced for the Refugee Employment Network received responses from 57 different organisations supporting refugees into employment.⁷ The impact of this on employers cannot be underestimated. As the Starbucks example in the previous section demonstrates, it creates logistical challenges for employers looking to operate at scale who have to engage with a range of partners. It also means that proactive employers face an

unclear landscape that can be very time-consuming to understand or at worst could prevent a business from engaging at all.

A competitive culture within the sector is damaging employer engagement

The fragmented nature of the sector seems to be driving a competitive culture. A number of the employers highlighted competition within the sector, which is making it harder for them to engage:

“There are quite a few [organisations] out there. We did our own research and spoke to charities themselves, but there doesn’t seem to be any cohesiveness. They’re acting in silos and a bit competitive”

“Some of the charities seem very risk averse and protective of their activity because of funding concerns”

Related to this, a lack of clarity from individual organisations can make it difficult to select the right partner to work with:

It was difficult to think, ‘what is it that you, charity A, are doing, what is it you’re trying to achieve and how can we help to support that?’. It was a tricky process to go through because you have to wade through what the objectives of each one are, and which is it that we feel most aligned to.”

One sector organisation raised this concern, stating that the sector can often “do more harm than good”. Indeed, if there is competition in the sector this will likely be contributing to a lack of clarity.

As organisations in the sector aim to engage employers, many will be tempted to try and meet any and every need regardless of whether this is something they already offer. This can lead to duplication of effort, and make it increasingly difficult for other employers to engage as there is no clearly defined offer. Collectively the sector could achieve more if individual organisations clarify their offer to and ask to business, which would make it easier for employers to engage.

There is a need for more openness and sharing within the sector, and more collaboration where appropriate, in order to also present a more united front to employers. In addition, with such a wide range of employers that remain to be engaged, this would also enable the sector to broaden its horizons and go beyond targeting the ‘usual suspects’ in order to engage a much wider range of employers.

6.4 Achieving long-term impact

There is a significant cost to business that could pose a risk to the long-term sustainability of programmes

All of the employers interviewed said they would either look to sustain or increase their current activity on refugee employment over the next three years. However several employers referred to the challenge of high costs associated with partnering to deliver refugee employment:

"We have had to invest financially and in kind.. we have had to make a significant financial investment to get these programmes off the ground. Unfortunately it's not like the rest of Europe where a lot of programmes are funded by the Government which means that businesses have to invest."

"At the moment it's quite costly for our business to get involved. We are looking at how some of these costs can be shared."

Scaling up activity while questioning its affordability is precarious and poses a significant risk to the long-term sustainability of employment programmes. Most of the employers and sector organisations interviewed referenced the benefits of piloting activity and "starting small", which presents a good opportunity to also test the affordability of the programme and consider ways to mitigate any longer-term risks before scaling up.

Securing buy-in at a senior level and from the HR team is key for embedding refugee employment in a business

Both the employers and sector organisations highlighted the value of having senior-level buy-in.

"It has helped when we have engaged with senior staff members or had a lead sponsor. It works best when the initiative comes from employers and senior staff not D&I practitioners."

"Internally, we need to engage a senior partner to enable work placements."

As has already been seen, the majority of employers referenced the role senior-level leadership has played in initiating their response to refugee employment. However, much of this has been reactive and therefore sustaining engagement at a senior level is key with these employers otherwise there is a risk that refugee employment may fall off the radar. Similarly, where engagement only happens at a local level there is a risk that a programme's value is not seen at a national level. Engaging senior contacts directly, or supporting main contacts to embed refugee employment is a senior-level priority, is an important enabler for achieving long-term impact.

The other key enabler is embedding refugee employment across the business by ensuring colleagues within HR are engaged in addition to any existing corporate responsibility contacts. If refugee employment is embedded within a business' core recruitment this

will have a far greater impact than sporadic or reactive CSR programmes.

It has already been noted that employers can face challenges gaining buy-in because of confusion about refugee terminology and legal status. Therefore while this engagement needs to happen within the business internally, organisations in the sector can play a role by ensuring HR engagement is made a priority and equipping main contacts with the right resources to have effective conversations.

Employer engagement: Recommendations

2. Strengthen your approach to employers

- i. **Include the social case.** When speaking to employers, a business case is valuable but it is important to refer to the situation of refugees both globally and locally as this is in many cases a primary motivation for engagement.
- ii. **Take time to understand the commercial pressures on a business.** In your meetings or conversations with business, demonstrate awareness of a commercial environment by considering:
 - The financial year and pressure points
 - The nature of the workload eg. Consistent, fluctuating, seasonal

- Any changes in leadership or business structure eg. Acquisitions or mergers
- Any press coverage, whether positive or negative
- Pressures or trends in the sector

- iii. **Train staff on employer engagement.** Ensure colleagues with an employer engagement remit receive relevant training. *This could be delivered through the Refugee Employment Network.*

3. Educate and inform through partnership

- i. **Make the most of every opportunity to partner, even if an employer has low levels of understanding.** An employer is unlikely to have a full understanding of the barriers facing refugees or the situation of refugees worldwide. Many employers are looking to sector organisations to provide the expertise they lack. There may well be ignorance or false assumptions, but these are likely to be challenged best through partnering with experts and meeting people with lived experience.
- ii. **Offer advice and training to employers.** To raise awareness and ensure good practice, provide training for employees on refugees covering the global displacement of people, and the situation in the UK.

4. Maximise your efforts through collaboration

- i. **Be more transparent about employer engagement.** There are many more employers that could be employing refugees. By sharing activity through the Refugee Employment Network the sector could avoid duplicating effort, enabling more opportunities for refugees.
- ii. **Refer refugees between programmes where beneficial.** This would maximise the range of employment options available to refugees. *A national system to enable this should be explored through the Refugee Employment Network, supported by the Home Office.*

5. Ensure long-term impact

- i. **Pilot activity to understand the resource required from an employer before agreeing to scale.** Starting small and piloting activity is essential for understanding the costs to any employers you are partnering with, including any in-kind

support. Accurate calculations at this early stage enable an employer to plan ahead and allocate budget for future years of delivery.

- ii. **Find ways to bring the costs down for partner employers.** Whilst important partners, employers should not be viewed as the answer to funding challenges in other areas of delivery. Instead, to secure long-term investment from employers explore match-funding programmes or lowering fees in exchange for medium or long-term commitment.
- iii. **Ensure refugee employment is embedded within the business by:**
 - **Securing senior level buy-in.** If you cannot secure this directly, make this a priority for your local or national employer contacts and provide regular impact reports to demonstrate a programme's value.
 - **Engaging the HR team.** Work with your contacts to ensure activity is embedded as a core part of recruitment.

APPENDIX

Refugee employment: network member survey

Thank you for completing this short snapshot survey. The aim of this survey is to identify opportunities to engage employers with the issue of refugee employment, by mapping the current landscape of employer engagement.

1. Your details*

Name

Organisation

Location(s)

2. Which of the following employment activities do you currently offer?

- Confidence building
- Language skills
- Pre-employment training
- Work placements
- Job coaching/mentoring
- Help with finding a job
- Employment
- Networking
- Support with self-employment
- Other (please specify)

3. Which of these activities are supported by employers you are working with (not including funding or sponsorship)?

- Confidence building
- Language skills

Appendix

- Pre-employment training
- Work placements
- Job coaching/mentoring
- Help with finding a job
- Employment
- Networking
- Support with self-employment
- Other (please specify)

4. Please list any employers you are working with

5. Thinking about the people you support, what skills and/or work experience do you encounter most often? Please select the top three.

- Construction
- Creative
- Digital
- Education
- Facilities management
- Financial services
- Health and social care
- Hospitality
- Manufacturing
- Professional services
- Retail

Appendix

- Transport
- Food and Drink
- Other (please specify)