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Networking towards a more sustainable working life for immigrants

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The contribution of migration to sustainable development has already been recognized which is a cross-cutting issue in the UN 2030 Agenda, relevant to all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Global Migration Data Portal 2021). Networking supports especially goal 8, which concentrates on decent work and economic growth for all.

Employment is a key component of the integrating process (Kärkkäinen 2017). It is very hard for immigrants to attain information regarding the job market, especially when many jobs are in hidden job markets (Doyle 2020). Successful networking can help immigrants to get information about different job opportunities and careers. Expanding the social and professional network creates more options. Despite the presence of an effective nationwide system of public employment agencies, the social network still plays an important role in linking job seekers to the world of work (Ahmed 2005).

Focusing on the situation of immigrant integration, the MESH (a synonym of net) transnational project aims to empower immigrants via mentoring and networking. The MESH partners developed three different networking models during the project years 2019–2021. These are

- [Networking Steps Model](#) by Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Finland
- Model for [organizing networking initiatives](#) by the Economic House of Ostend, Belgium
- “All-in-one 4 HER” [digital networking](#) model by Beyond the Horizon ISSG, Belgium.

The models are introduced thoroughly in the [Horizon Insights Journal](#). In the article, we discussed the experiences concerning the piloting of the models in general and the challenges and opportunities of networking during the pandemic (Hillgren et al. 2021).

Challenges of networking

Turku University of Applied Sciences has organized several mentoring programmes for highly educated migrants. Based on interviews made for seven mentees and four mentors, networking is essential in working life as well as personal development. By building connections, there are increased opportunities for getting a more suitable job.

According to the interviews, networking seems to be quite difficult in Finland, both in the professional and social sense. Many reasons have been mentioned, e.g., Finnish people are not very interactive, it is difficult to find people to network with or places for professional networking. To mentees, professional contacts felt more special, whereas the mentors with a foreign background stated that professional networking in Finland is much easier than social networking. The mentors thought that in Finland, professional networking is quite straightforward due to the lack of hierarchy.

Cultural and language barriers in networking are obvious. Most of interviewees mentioned that one must be extremely sociable to be able to network with people in Finland. In contrast, one of the mentees mentioned that it is not difficult, as people will be happy to communicate with anyone about their job. The mentees highlighted that integration is a two-way street but building up any relationships and trust with the locals might take a longer time compared to their home culture.

The mentors encourage migrants to be active and put themselves out there by joining e.g., associations, unions and foundations. Additionally, a mentor pointed out that the job market “works through half official and half un-official channels. In every group one knows someone, who knows someone, who knows someone... That’s how it goes.”

Networking step by step

Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) has developed a [Networking Steps Model](#) in the international MESH project.

TAMK has organized virtual workshops for piloting the steps model during the years 2020 and 2021. The main aims and objectives of the workshops were to assist immigrants to develop their networks through using the networking steps model. The participants were highly educated, and they came to Finland from different parts of the world. They were very much active and interested in developing their networks to get acquainted with the Finnish society and job market.

Most of the participants (75%) stated in the feedback forms that the networking step model is very fruitful in building a network in a competitive job market. However, cultural and language barriers are highlighted as the main barriers to build networking in a new society. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic was also one of the barriers to developing a network because of the limited scope of participating face to face events, seminars and classes.

Digital networking, an opportunity during the pandemic?

[Beyond the Horizon ISSG](#) has developed and tested a [digital networking platform](#) aiming to accelerate highly educated migrants’ integration into the labour market in Flanders, Belgium. Based on a networking model, this digital platform brings different users together and connects registered migrant newcomers to supporting organisations, mentors and employers thorough defined functions, namely posting, meeting, matching and messaging. The testing put forth different challenges and opportunities.

The COVID-19 situation has increased the attention of users to the digital platform due to the limitations of the physical contact and more necessity in use of digital tools and meetings, which also shows the increasing need for digital networking. The posting function on the platform enabling all supporting users to share their activities, events and tools with others and regular updates via newsletters were found very useful and interesting. This has been valued for facilitating reaching out to the target group for supporting organisations and finding diverse talents to vacancies for employers and recruiters. The mentor matching ability and the support of the platform for the mentoring process has been found useful by the mentor users and mentoring organisations. They were able to plan their meetings, structure their mentoring process and use the tools on the platform during their digital mentoring sessions.

Digital networking also experienced several challenges. Due to the sensitivity of migrant users’ data, GDPR limited the networking functions of the digital platform. Some of the migrant users were sensitive about their personal information and hesitated to register on the platform or wanted to be sure that their data is protected. On the other hand, competition in the digital market and tendency to use widely known communication and social media platforms hindered the usage of a new platform for networking and communication. However, for many of the users, a local digital platform was a useful, complementary and supporting tool for their professional networking and for the digitalisation of integration processes.

Organizing inclusive networking events

Organizing physical or virtual networking events is a good way of facilitating migrants' networking. Economic House Ostend has adapted '[the quadruple Helix model](#)' and developed a [practical guide](#) in Flanders, Belgium. These help organizations plan their events in an organized way by including all relevant stakeholders, and considering equality, communication, etc. based on a criteria checklist. The Economic House tested this model with mostly low-skilled immigrants. The model is easy to use and can be used for different target groups in different countries.

The main challenge in implementing this model was to bring multiple stakeholders together in an event at the same time, but this could be overcome by good planning starting early enough with good time management, good communication and by creating added value for all stakeholders. Another challenge was to prepare immigrants for networking which could be overcome through information sessions and guided job applications.

Since the pandemic has limited physical events, virtual networking opportunities have been used. Virtual networking brought more formality which proved to be a big challenge for low-skilled immigrants. Effective networking for them happened mostly through informal situations. To reduce the challenges, the Economic House supported their activities through digital services, such as competence enhancing learning modules with online interactive exercises, making video CVs to connect them with employers which can overcome language barriers.

Learning new ways to face challenges

Some common challenges for immigrants have been identified from the experiences of the networking piloting programmes in Finland and Belgium such as language barriers and cultural barriers. The language barrier acts as a threshold in attaining the necessary information. In this situation, personal guidance or mentoring is a very effective method of getting support to start networking and it may help to identify visions and actions towards networking and finding employment. Arranging inclusive well organised onsite networking events might create more informal situations to overcome the cultural barriers and assists the immigrants in getting information, particularly about the hidden jobs in a competitive job market.

The COVID-19 adds up to these challenges bringing more physical distance among people. In this respect digital networking can be used as a complementary tool for networking of migrants by supporting organizations. It should be noted that GDPR must be taken into account for organising such events.

Organizing inclusive and well-planned physical or virtual networking events can help immigrants to connect with local people and find new opportunities. This can be realized by early planning, including different kind of stakeholders and creating added value for all participants.

Networking is an instrument that helps immigrants to contribute to the employment sector in a new society. This is important for social sustainability. Networking will be a more thoughtful, innovative and realistic approach to migration governance that will generate surprising gains in support of sustainable integration and achieving the sustainable development goals.

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