

Brain Waste: Understanding the Employment Outcomes of Newly Arrived Immigrants

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Brain waste refers to the underemployment of immigrants in their country of arrival. In the US, it is estimated that nearly half of all immigrants have levels of experience and education that far exceed what is required at their current job or work in entirely different fields.¹ In addition to generating a loss of skilled labor in the US economy, brain waste worsens quality of life, job satisfaction and prospects.

In my initial literature review, I found that the gap between immigrants and non-immigrants persists regardless of time spent in the US, that underemployment occurs most amongst immigrants from developing countries and that international skill transferability are presumed to be the culprit behind this phenomenon.² This led me to questions about what constitutes the transferability of skills and how discrimination and structural barriers can play a role. It is suggested that college-educated immigrants from developing countries struggle due to the lesser quality of their educational credentials and patterns in the type of immigration.³ However, it is difficult to separate real skill quality from the employers' lack of information, discriminatory assumptions and bureaucratic barriers. Furthermore, I considered how smaller gaps in skill and knowledge can be corrected through further education, training and social integration. Yet, these corrections face the major barrier of limited income, time and knowledge, especially amongst newly arrived immigrants.

My reading covered research on overeducation methods and patterns; human capital; job search strategy; immigrant integration policies worldwide; discrimination methods and experiments; job search liquidity constraints; international education quality; state and board regulation for licensing; career mentoring for immigrants; unemployment benefits for impact on immigrants and job search; social cognitive career theory; and vocational stress. This extensive reading provided a solid base knowledge that allowed me to create a framework (Fig.1) to think about my question and create a research plan.

I had initially planned to survey members of Maine's immigrant community and on the recognition of their foreign education credentials, as a contributing factor and policy solution to brain waste. While learning about qualitative data collection, I realized that surveying within such a small community raised concerns about time constraints, participation and anonymity. Especially as my understanding of the brain waste became more nuanced, I pivoted to conducting an online survey. Through a site called Prolific, I could conduct a larger paid survey and screen for a sample of newly arrived immigrants.

The survey is designed to generate a descriptive analysis on immigrants' perception of employment barriers and ways to improve their outcomes. The first part asks questions on economic stress, level of social integration in the US, and past, current and ideal employment situations. Followed by direct questions on employment barriers, job satisfaction, underemployment and any efforts made to improve their employment outcomes. The information experiment provides information on immigrant-specific career services, with a link to a map immigrants-specific guidance around the country, and foreign credential evaluation, with a link to US Immigration Services guidance. By measuring engagement, using the time spent reading and click rate, I hope to get a measure of interest and willingness to pursue these services as a method of improving their employment outcomes. I hope to continue this project by running the survey and analyzing the data and using this to inform a senior thesis.

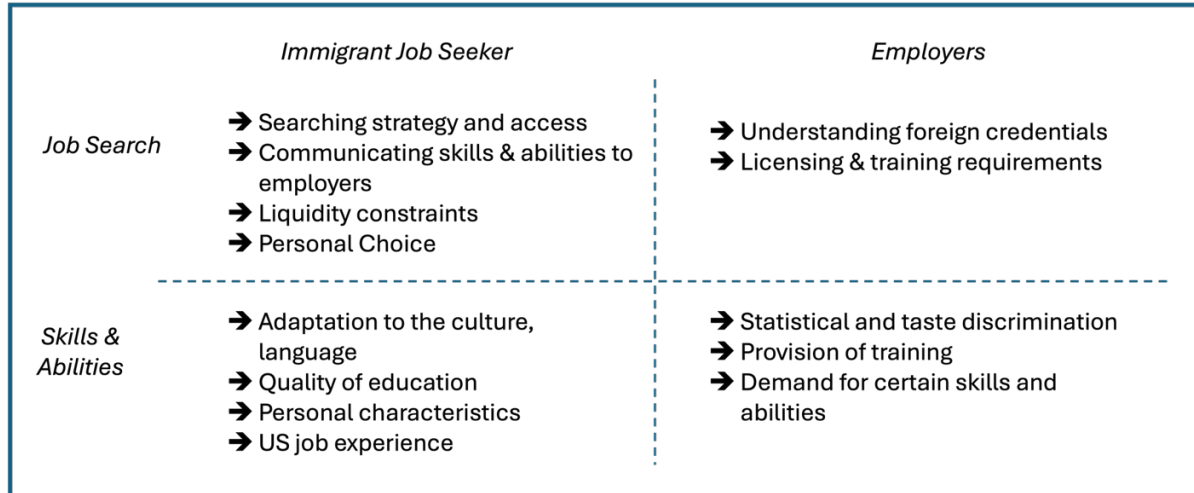
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Figures

Figure 1:

Framework on Immigrants' Employability



References

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