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Cultural Transition, Identity Crisis and Challenges of a Foreign Professional

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Abstract

Most of the time, we talk about immigrants like those who have come to this country without documents, illegally; individuals who, regarding all inconveniences, make a life in United States.

However, what about the people who immigrated legally, and made a professional career in their countries, and living here do not find the opportunity to develop their talent. Is the adaptation process or the cultural transition simpler for these people? The answer to this matter is complicated, and yet even more difficult than most of us think. The people who have been through an immigration process and concluded it successfully have their own problematic thoughts, suffering of cultural psychosis and environmental change, provoking a decrease in their intellectual capacity. The professional level of education is distorted when the American schools question the preparation of the foreign student, since the requirements to continue education or expedite a similar professional degree seem complicated. How can they make the transition to the professional job market and be competitive? What are the guidelines? What is the role of the bilingualism in the professional success? The human being is born inside a society and culture that transmits beliefs, traditions and values that facilitate his interpersonal relationships, but the immigrant has to face a different culture and the fact that this culture regulates his life from now on. Therefore, if the individual wants to succeed in his profession he must accept the new culture and adjust to it. An obstacle of such professional development would be the language barrier, or if the person has some linguistic knowledge, being bilingual will help him to be successful.

Furthermore, having a foreign qualified background and speaking two languages does not always mean you will have a granted opportunity, because foreign individuals have not proven their skills in the U.S. job market. Second, it is precisely because this market is totally opposed to the Latin-American. And third, the accent plays an important role that could have a positive or negative connotation depending on the type of position individuals are applying for.

Consequently, the challenges that the foreign professional has to combat day by day might weaken his/her hope of a better future, perhaps will make him/her question their own skills, expectations and goals. The global market has proved, more than once, the efficiency of investing in highly qualified individuals from other countries. Companies all over the world see in them the opportunity to grown business through the cultural approach.

Keywords: professional growth, immigrant education, foreign professional

Introduction

Most of the time, we talk about immigrants who have come to this country without documents illegally. These individuals, regarding all inconveniences, make a life in the United States. However, what about the people who immigrated legally, and made a professional career in their countries? Is the adaptation process or the cultural transition simpler for these people? The answer to this matter is complicated, and yet even more difficult than most of us think.

The immigrant experiences a complete change in his environment... the role of the human environment, however, is much less well understood... the racial background affects an immigrant in two main ways... fundamentally what he is; it profoundly influences the way he feels'. (Pratt, 1927, p.1-6).

The people who have successfully concluded an immigration process have their own problematic thoughts.

Pratt (1927) sustains that, "The immigrant must go through a dual transformation. He must be denationalized and re-nationalized at the same time. The strain and stress of this experience is probably incomprehensible to one who has not gone through it," (p.13). Meanwhile, the expatriate might suffer cultural psychosis due to the environmental change and lifestyle context provoking a decrease in their intellectual capacity, as Thomas C. Wheeler (1971) says, "An immigrant state of mind," (p. 2). It is precisely this "state of mind", not just for foreign professionals, but for every foreigner.

They have to learn, adopt, and adapt to the new... and might have to sublimate, suspend, discard some old aspects of their self-identity... to operate effectively as balanced social persons and as effective professionals in their new host societies. (Kolapo, et al. 2009, p. xi).

With better communication technology, expa-

triatees can relieve some of this physiological desolation by accessing video conferences and social networks. This allows them to remain accessible to people, such as family members, living on the other side of the globe. But this just fulfills the partial need of a physical approach, not just with loved ones, but also with their communities. A. Aneesh (2004) says, "Taking roots in new cultural soil is never easy," (p. 61). The most devastating realization is one of political and social exclusion... the realization of being the "other"... gives rise to general despair and disappointment. (p. 56). For Ann O'Hear (2009), a culture can be defined as, "A collection of values and assumptions that go together to shape the way a group of people perceive and relates to the world" (p. 55). She also mentions three different models of assimilation.

The melting pot, which completely discard the cultural heritage they brought with them; cultural mosaic, which pretend to transform American society into a multicultural mosaic; culture-shock, cultural adjustment which faces different levels of assimilation (curiosity – distress – isolation – acceptance and integration). The mosaic will be preferred for immigrants mostly because it allows them to keep their self-identity and co-exist with the American society. (p. 58-59).

Unfortunately, even when this might be joyful it sometimes comes with the price tag of discrimination, one of the reasons why the culture-shock model is more common. Wheeler (1971) mentions that, "The irony of American opportunity is that it has required rootlessness," (p.11).

Immigrant professionals have to battle against emotional despair and against the expectations of an effective practice. They must adapt their expertise to the workforce requirements that they are entering into. Kolapo (2009) exposes this as problematic when he confirms that immigrants, "even when highly qualified at home, may find that they have to start their career from a lower level," (p. 13). It might become necessary to take some courses or seminars that would help immigrants have a better under-

standing of the job market in the United States.

The professional level of education is distorted when American schools question academic preparation of foreigners since the education requirements of similar professions in the United States are different. If a foreign professional is accepted into a university to further their education suffers of challenges and has to face situations and realities. Kolapo states, "Certainly advanced degrees from American universities do not ensure equality of opportunity in the labor market," (Parlin, 1976, p. 37). Also, there is a lot to be said for, "Stress, tension, challenges, and opportunities that immigrant... can experience during their acculturation process in the host academic environment," (Kolapo, 2009, p. xii).

The Professional Job Market in the New Society and its Competitiveness

How can a skilled foreigner can make the transition into the professional job market and be competitive? The hardest part of the venture is simply getting hired in the preferred position, over non-foreign candidates. "Some might argue that citizens should reasonably have prior rights over noncitizens in the employment spheres, especially in conditions of tight labor markets," (Aneesh, 2004, p.69). Also, the language capability can play an important role in the hiring process. "Immigrants often have to bear comments or accusations, that they speak with "funny, thick, bad... accents," (Kolapo, 2009, p.22). Having an accent can play an important role in the hiring process and can have a positive or negative effect depending on the type of position the individual is applying for. Furthermore, having a foreign-qualified background and speaking two languages does not always mean that a foreign applicant will have a better chance of being hired. This is because foreign professionals have not proven their skills in the United States job market and because it is precisely the market that is opposed to other world markets that immigrants came from.

Other external factors might work in favor of foreigners, such as the global job market and the need for bilingual skills. International companies

are becoming one of the best sources of employment for foreign professionals because, "The workforce is becoming more global, diverse, flexible, multi-source, and complex in nature," (Vance & Paik, 2011, p. 6). It is also said that, "Admitting more skilled immigrants in particular is seen by some observers as a way to achieve such competitiveness," (Sorensen, Bean, Ku, Zimmerman 1992, p. 13). In other words, not everything is lost for foreigners in their professional field.

The global market has proven more than once that there is a need for investing in qualified individuals from other countries. These companies own several facilities all over the world and their employees respond to different cultural identities and professional backgrounds. These responses show that management groups capable of merging these personalities into a common goal have better productivity. International Companies see the opportunity to grow their businesses by hiring immigrant professionals. In other words, this cultural approach shows:

Without proper knowledge of the different cultures involved, an international joint venture company will not be able to achieve its targeted goal by streamlining existing operations. Instead, it will experience wasteful confusion and debilitating, destructive conflict. (Vance & Paik, 2011, p. 42).

The mobilization of the workforce is a reality that no one can deny. Currently, the United States' international businesses are moving into a different direction compared to 30 or 40 years ago when, "Migrant workers were seen as people who cause problems instead of people who contribute economically and culturally to receiving societies," (Eide, Krause, Rosas, 1995 p.339). This negative idea of migrant workers is now fading in order to achieve the idea of multiculturalism and principles of equity.

Bilingualism and Multilingualism

What is the role of knowing two languages in the current workforce? There are both advantages and disadvantages to speaking multiple languages

in the current workforce. It is important to note that bilingualism is a very important tool that immigrants can use in their favor. "The professional success, to an extent, depends on the correct use of the linguistic resource". Potowski (2010) sustains:

Despite the spread of global languages, multi-lingualism remains a reality for most of the world; around two thirds of the world's population is bilingual. . .bilingualism and multilingualism is present in practically every nation in the world, whether official recognized or not. (p. 26).

It is important to be competitive in the United States job market, but competition alone is not enough. Foreign-born professionals must analyze their skills and shape them into the equivalent requirements of a potential employer. Immigrants must hunt for opportunities and inspect the terrain with its possibilities. They must transition confidently into the professional market in the United States. Clark says:

Not only do the new foreign-born immigrants with high levels of education easily move into professional occupations, they often become the founder of companies. . . that in turn provide the jobs for the new immigrants. (Clark, 2003, p. 110).

The importance of bilingualism has been growing in the United States and has been increasing, emphasizing the need of new language policies in the United States. "Many educational policies. . . focus on the promotion of English. . . thus the country lacks a comprehensive policy for the promotion of languages other than English. (Potowski, 2010, p. 255).

American society is becoming aware of the demand of bilingualism in the global workforce in order to be more competitive and productive in the job market. Citizens can lose job opportunities because they only speak English. Most business

meetings, conferences and conversations are spoken in English as well. However, related to business operations or personnel management for international companies, bilingual foreign-born professionals can take advantage of privileged linguistic positions. Mejia (2005) explains that:

We can see a rapid increase in the number of people who need to be bilingual or multilingual in one or more languages because of job mobility, further education opportunities, socio-economic progress, or because they have to keep up to date with advances in the sphere of business, science and technology. (p. 3).

Foreigners transitioning into the U.S. workforce should practice their skills and recognize the importance of their respective professions. This will promote positive feelings about the new host society. Foreign-born professionals will recover trust in their skills gradually and cross the acculturation process faster and more effectively.

Conclusion

People are born into different cultures that transmit different beliefs, traditions and values that facilitate interpersonal relationships. Immigrants have to face a different culture in the United States. The insertion of foreign-born professionals into social and political professions is not simple. "There can be no doubt that immigrant professionals are a minority in American society. . . they appear to face many of the same barriers to economic independence as other minorities," (Parlin, 1976, p. 64). Therefore, if foreign-born professionals want to succeed in previously studied professions, they must accept the new culture in the United States and adjust to it. An obstacle of such professional development could be language-barriers, such as an accent, but also in English proficiency. .

Consequently, the daily challenges that foreign-born professional have to combat might hinder the hope of a better future, perhaps will make him question his own skills, expectations and goals. Despite

all despair and cultural challenges the immigrant professionals came to this country to find something that is not in his homeland. Perhaps, “an essential step in really appreciating immigrant backgrounds is to comprehend the difficulty of this process,” (Pratt, 1927, p.12). It is important to give voice to this group of people, and listen carefully, so we can reproduce their stories. Immigrants must replant their roots into this land to survive the transition and succeed in the U.S. workforce.

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