

Hiring refugees in the Estonian labour market

A preliminary mapping

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this preliminary mapping is to provide insights into the Estonian labour market in terms of refugee inclusion and, more specifically, the experiences of employers in hiring and supporting asylum seekers or refugees. This segment is quite small in Estonia and no significant attention has been given among employers to refugee inclusion practices. In total, Estonia has granted international protection to 531 people since 1997, when Estonia acceded to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees by adopting the Refugee Act. Out of these 531 people, the Estonian Refugee Council estimates that a little under 400 currently reside in Estonia.

It is important to note that the terms asylum seeker and refugee refer to a temporary legal category that do not define a person or their identity. The people connected by this category have different backgrounds, needs and expectations. Refugees in Estonia mostly originate from Syria, Ukraine, Iraq and Russia. This means they also need different kind of support to enter and stay in the labour market.

This mapping is based on online meetings with organisations offering some type of support to refugees entering the labour market and employers with experience or interest in hiring refugees. The initial research plan envisioned focus groups with employers, but after starting to find contacts and discussing possible focus group participation with them, it became clear that they prefer one-on-one meetings. Employers who agreed to share their thoughts were found via the Estonian Diversity Charter and with the help of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. Altogether, 5 employers with experience in hiring refugees and 1 employer with interest in hiring refugees participated in this mapping.

Profiles of the participants:

representative of Estonian Refugee Council

2 consultants of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund

CEO of outdoor furniture manufacturing company near Tallinn, less than 10 employees

HR manager of an electro-mechanical manufacturing company near Tallinn, over 100 employees

CEO of furniture manufacturing company in Tartu, over 100 employees

manager of a hair salon in Tartu, less than 10 employees

manager of a social food enterprise in Tartu, less than 10 employees

CEO of a football club in Tallinn, over 40 employees and thousands of players

The meetings took place online in May–June and November 2021 and were not recorded. These meetings lasted from 30 min to 90 min and written minutes of all meetings were produced.

EXPERIENCES

Estonian Refugee Council

ERC has supported refugees and helped them find a job among other things. They emphasise the importance of acknowledging that refugees are not a homogenous group and it is important to have open communication when hiring them. ERC notes that discussions around refugees, including on the inclusion and integration of refugees have faded in the Estonian society and the topic is marginalised.

Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund

EUIF offers consultations and helps in job search when the refugee is officially unemployed. The refugee benefits from the services for the general public and also some services exclusively for refugees (can be used up to 5 years after receiving international protection). Since 2017, 38 refugees (or employers who have hired the refugee) have used these services, including 27 who have used pay support, 11 who have used mentoring and 3 who have used language courses. One of the services that has never been used is translation. Consultants say that employers' awareness of the support services is low.

Outdoor furniture manufacturing company

The CEO saw the topic in a TV newscast and thought of offering a job to one refugee. First, they turned to the Ministry of Social Affairs and were then directed to Estonian Refugee Council, through which they found a Syrian man to hire. He had arrived in Estonia 3 weeks prior. He has been working at the company for almost 5 years and his brother, who started after him, 3,5 years. At first, the man did not speak any Estonian nor English, but the company supported him with his Estonian studies and now, both men speak the language on a good level (the brother already spoke Estonian when joining the company).

Electro-mechanical manufacturing company

At first, some years ago, the company hired a refugee from Egypt, who is now a shift manager. Through him, the employer became known in the Arabic community and now they have 5 refugees working at the company and readiness to hire more. Main communication languages are English and Russian, but as the Egyptian man speaks both Estonian and Arabic, he facilitates communication between the company and the Arabic-speaking refugees by translating, if necessary. The company has placed hopes on foreign workers as workforce is scarce.

Furniture manufacturing company

They have employed a number of refugees through the years, with some negative and 1 very positive experience. Negative experiences have been with people who did not show up or suddenly left the country, are constantly late or do not perform required tasks. They have also employed people with whom they do not share a mutual language and this has made communication quite complicated. They value refugees as workers, but say they sometimes lack motivation to integrate and this also reflects in how they perform at work. The jobs they can offer are simpler, more routine jobs like seamstress, assembly line worker, polisher.

Hair salon

This company has only one experience with a barber who had previous experience in the same field in his home country. He came asking for a job personally and they arranged the hire through the Unemployment Insurance Fund (at first as an internship). The barber was very motivated and a good worker, communication with him was also good. He worked for them for 5,5 months and then did not show up anymore, probably moved on to Germany.

Social food enterprise

Their goal is to offer a first job experience in Estonia to immigrants – not only refugees. At first, the person is expected to complete simpler tasks and then progress to work on more demanding jobs. This is also linked with language skills. They offer catering and online recipe workshops and combine a broad range of tasks to give workers as many different experiences as possible. If a person has an interest in a specific field, they try to find tasks for them that would resemble those performed at the desired position. They have cooperated with the Unemployment Insurance Fund, but say the support service system is too rigid and bureaucratic, especially for a small enterprise.

Football club

They do not have experiences with refugees yet, but the club is multinational and they support integration through football. They see that they could offer part-time jobs to refugees as field maintenance workers and include them in the organisation of football games through different tasks, some of which require at least English skills.

KEY INSIGHTS

- **Language** is seen as the most significant obstacle that is keeping refugees from entering the labour market or progressing in their job. This refers mostly to knowledge of Estonian language, which is required for many positions and in many organisations, but also knowledge of other more commonly spoken languages in Estonia such as English, Russian or German. If a mutual language for communication cannot be found, employers mostly rely on the relatives (even children) or friends of the refugee or other refugees with similar origin in the organisation in order to translate more complicated information. Google Translate is also used frequently. Still, employers acknowledge that these practices are not sustainable and explain that the language barrier is preventing them from giving the worker more complicated tasks.
- Employers share that before they had real experiences with refugees, one of the more prevalent **fears** was connected to different cultural, especially religious practices. After actually hiring refugees from predominantly Islamic countries, they admit that these fears were discovered to be unfounded. None of the employers have faced issues connected to the religious background of these workers.
- One employer also expressed that before hiring refugees he feared problems would arise with men who are culturally not used to having **female superiors**, but this fear was unfounded, too.
- Employers in mostly industrial fields that experience **labour shortage** see the refugee segment as a promising hiring pool and also mention they could not function without foreign workers (often from Ukraine).
- Most employers who had experiences with refugees, mentioned that in some cases they had issues with workers **being late, not showing up** for work or **leaving the country** without notice. This makes them somewhat cautious, but they still remain open to hiring refugees.
- In most cases, if a company has already had experience **with one person** and they are in need of workers (e.g manufacturers/industrial companies), they are likely to hire more people from this segment. **Mutual trust** is established in this case: refugees from a certain community gain information about possible work opportunities at this company and the company has first-hand knowledge about hiring refugees.

- Bigger companies who already have a **multinational workforce** usually do not see or treat refugees differently from the other people with different cultural/national background working in the company.
- Employers describe their experiences with refugees as positive when the worker is perceived as **motivated**, is **interested** in learning Estonian language, about local culture and organisational culture. Reciprocity is important.
- One employer shared that since wages, especially entry-level wages for refugees are relatively low, but still high enough to have an impact on the social welfare support, it may result in **no gain in income** for the refugee or their family/household or even have a negative impact. This demotivates people.
- One employer described issues with **finding housing** for refugees – she helped one of the refugees working for her company to search for a separate living space from his family due to the previously mentioned negative impact of his working on the overall income of the household. Finding a rental flat for the Syrian refugee was a complicated task even when the company offered to provide a guarantee letter on behalf of the worker. Finally, a personal acquaintance of the employer agreed to rent a flat to the employee.
- Employers mainly had experience with using **pay support and hiring through internship**, but not so much with other services that should facilitate recruitment of refugees. Some mentioned the bureaucracy and rigidness of the system, for example the risk of having to pay back pay support if the employee leaves or is let go before a certain time period.
- Employers believe that **working is key** in integration and asylum seekers and refugees should enter the labour market as soon as possible after arriving to Estonia.

WHAT WORKS?

- Slow recruitment process, where everything is explained in detail and expectations are explicitly voiced.
- Flexibility in terms of CVs. As some refugees might not have formal work experience or even understanding of the concept of a CV, being open to other means of recruitment will be more inclusive.
- Supporting the refugee in language studies: giving time off during working hours to go to courses, being open to using Estonian at work by speaking in simpler words and slower. One company mentioned that they compiled a small dictionary with the most important terms in the context of the job to support the refugee.
- Pay rise connected to language level: when a new level is achieved, the worker will start receiving higher pay.

- Developing a mutual understanding on the basics is key: some things that might be perceived as normal or expected behaviour are actually culturally determined. Open discussions about what do agreements, deadlines, working hours, lunch breaks, sick leave etc mean, are important. Also, the unwritten rules and traditions of at the workplace might need explaining. The more open and transparent the employer is about expectations and processes, the better the cooperation.
- At first, it is important to make sure that the new hire has a support person/mentor the they can rely on. This makes onboarding easier.



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