



Roadblocks to Workforce Inclusion for Young Adult Immigrants:

Charting the Path Forward

Introduction

Over 20 years ago, Upwardly Global's founder noticed the distinctive obstacles those with immigrant backgrounds face in obtaining skill-aligned employment. To date, Upwardly Global has worked with thousands of immigrants and refugees under 30 (as part of our career skills and training program, which has touched well over 20,000 to date of different ages), helping them find family-supporting jobs while filling persistent gaps in the professional U.S. workforce and building a country where everyone — including those with immigrant backgrounds — can fully contribute and thrive.

But the work is far from over — more than two million immigrants and refugees are [unemployed or under-employed](#) in jobs that don't match their skill levels — with the odds of underemployment 54% higher for Black immigrants and 40% for Latinx immigrants. Many U.S. industries, especially those with high demand for professional skills, have put up cultural barriers between “us” and “them” without thinking of the immense untapped potential of newcomers to contribute, innovate, and fill workforce gaps.

“To be honest, [the hard part] is not documents, it's not interviews. It's to keep pushing. To keep trying. To never give up. When you move out of your country and you don't have your support system and everything is all new, it's really hard.”



Approximately 47% of recently arrived immigrants come to the U.S. equipped with a [college education](#). Our economy loses out on hundreds of millions of dollars per year by not incorporating this population into skill-aligned jobs. For young immigrants, finding professional jobs that support their families is one of the most critical ways of building true inclusion and uplifting individuals as well as their communities. With the increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees anticipated from Afghanistan, Ukraine, Venezuela, Haiti, and elsewhere, more than ever, it is essential to provide pathways to thriving-wage careers.

Today, we're sharing fresh insight and data on the unique inequities young immigrants face on the path to gainful employment — from building networks from scratch to dealing with the nuances of professional English to evaluating which U.S. career paths are worth pursuing.

With support from Port Jobs, The Door, and South Bay Community Services and funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Upwardly Global surveyed over 200 young adults under 30 years old with immigrant backgrounds to address the barriers they face. We heard from healthcare workers, legal professionals, project managers, physical therapists, journalists, software engineers, human resources professionals, and more about their common thread — navigating the U.S. job market as an outsider.

Deepening our understanding of employment barriers has immense potential to inform and strengthen workforce equity in the years to come, and addressing these barriers promises to open opportunities for millions of young immigrants and refugees restarting their lives and careers in the U.S.

Upwardly Global invites employers, policymakers, funders, job seekers, and all others interested in workforce development and immigrant inclusion to reflect, build, and act upon these findings. For more insight on an equitable path forward for young immigrants, find our recommendations in the latter portion of the report.

Executive Summary

Young adults under 30 with immigrant backgrounds, arguably those with the most potential for further career development, share a particular burden. They're eager to learn and acquire new skills, but find the path to purposeful work to be long, convoluted, and often costly, with cultural and systemic barriers at every turn. To shed light on the unique challenges and lived experiences of immigrant young adults seeking to attain economic mobility in the U.S., we asked hundreds of immigrants to share their own insights, with a goal of identifying and implementing solutions to ensure their long-term success and inclusion.

This research outlines job search roadblocks and the path forward, bringing human-centered insights and new data to the unique challenges young adults under 30 with immigrant backgrounds* (young immigrants) face on their employment journeys. Collected via 10 hours of focus groups with a total of 66 participants and 207 survey responses, the data shows that young immigrants face five major roadblocks when navigating the U.S. labor market and pathway to self-sufficiency:

- **Identifying their place in the U.S. market.** 71% had difficulty evaluating which career paths, professional courses, or credential evaluations were worth pursuing.
- **Accessing and valuing professional networks.** 85% of all jobs are filled through networking, but only 50% of study respondents used networking as a job search method.
- **Communicating about their job skills and history in professional-level English.** While 22% mention English proficiency as a barrier, 43% asked for targeted support on cultural differences, industry lingo, and professional communication.
- **Possessing little U.S. work experience.** Only 17% of participants had any U.S. work experience in their field of specialization, facing many U.S. employers that don't recognize overseas education and experience.
- **Finding the time for a job search.** 65% report having less than five hours per week to look for a job.

To address these distinct challenges, early career immigrants asked for efficient tools and templates for professional communication and industry-specific coaching and support as they navigate the U.S. job market.

Due to these barriers to meaningful employment,
60%
of participants believe their professional skills are not fully valued at work, with that number climbing to over
70%
for immigrants of color.

"I'm grateful for this job I have, but it's a survival job — I didn't study for this. I studied for six years to become a doctor ... and now, I really want a job that lets me help people the way I know how."



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** For the purposes of this research, an individual with an immigrant background is someone who has experienced immigration to the U.S. or has at least one parent who has experienced immigration. Most participants in the project directly experienced immigration to the U.S.*

Job Search Roadblocks

Young immigrants cited challenges translating their skills and experience into U.S. career paths. They also encountered other barriers to meaningful employment, including: lack of professional networks, minimal professional communication skills, lack of time to search for a job, and limited U.S. work experience. As a result, a majority find their skills and experiences undervalued at work.

“It’s difficult to balance work and life for everyone— for immigrants, it’s even harder. You have your survival work that you need to do, then you come back from work [and] start looking for a job that you really want.”

1. Career Navigation

“When I came to the U.S., I didn’t even know what the correct title for my background was, or if it even existed. It was hard to start my job search and decide what career to pursue.”

71%
of young immigrants had difficulty evaluating which career paths, professional courses, or credential evaluations were worth pursuing.

Young immigrants find their job search stalled from the very start, uncertain where their career paths fit in the U.S. job market. Participants may have spent years getting their degrees or credentials in their home countries, but in the U.S., it feels as if there’s nowhere to use them because many U.S. employers simply do not recognize overseas credentials and experience. Many face a major decision: attempt to validate and translate their previous career path to the U.S. market or start entirely from scratch — getting new degrees or credentials well-recognized by U.S. employers. But starting a new career or obtaining a new academic credential takes more years and puts financial strain on their families who depend on them now.

From the start, young immigrants — especially those seeking jobs in highly specialized fields that require specific, geography-based credentials — have little information about how to proceed. In fact, there are **nearly one million** unique secondary and post-secondary credentials to choose from in the U.S. alone, and those translating careers in healthcare, engineering, and law have a particularly complex journey ahead.

“The job market is completely different [than in my home country]. The job titles, the requirements. It was quite difficult to choose my career and where I wanted to go. The position titles, the different levels — manager, supervisor, associate — those were very difficult for me. I could have had the experience to be a manager back home, but how it’s evaluated here is different.”

“I have a law background and degree. People were telling me, ‘You should take a paralegal course,’ but the paralegal certificate takes two years! Others would tell me, ‘You don’t have to because you have your degree.’ The thing that I really needed was some counseling — someone who’d talk to me and say, ‘These are the options.’”

2. Networks Matter

“When a position becomes open, it’s spread around by word of mouth. It’s sad, but they do that — they talk to their families and friends first. Sometimes, jobs that are posted have already been filled, [and] they just post them for posting’s sake, which is sad — especially for an immigrant.”

85%
of all jobs are filled
through networking

70%
of jobs are never
posted publicly

ONLY 50%
of young immigrants
use networking as
part of their job
search.

While research demonstrates that networking is key to accessing jobs in the U.S., young immigrants report not using the method extensively, leaving them in the running for only 15% of all U.S. jobs. Without the opportunity to lean on built-in networks and communities that many native-born Americans grow up with, young immigrants are often isolated and find the doors to many professional U.S. jobs shut for them. Even if they do possess small networks, interrelating challenges with professional communication and time constraints still make networking a difficult “in.”

Without networks in their professional fields, early career immigrants often look to their own communities. Latinx job seekers especially cited tapping into jobs this way, often prompting them to take on survival work rather than skill-aligned employment opportunities.

33%
of young immigrants
don’t think
networking is
important during
a job search

“When I first got here, I applied to five different companies. Only one called me back for an interview and it’s the one where my wife knows somebody. That is when I figured connections [are] really important when looking for jobs. It is really hard to do that as an immigrant not knowing anybody.”



3. Professional Communication

“I have the experience; I know how to do the job, [but] sometimes I feel like I’m not saying what they want to hear. Sometimes they say, ‘We want someone with more technical experience,’ but I have it. It’s in my resume. I talked about it – what more do you want?”

If young adults have figured out where to start, accessed a small network, and made it to the interview stage for a position, many still need further support. Younger participants put it practically— their English needs help, but not in the way you’d think. While only 20% describe English proficiency as a barrier, nearly 50% ask for targeted assistance with professional communication. Holding professional conversations in your field is key to landing skill-aligned work, especially when marketing your skills to employers.

43%

of young immigrants asked for targeted support in understanding cultural differences, practicing industry lingo, and accessing tools and templates for professional communication.

22%

of young immigrants mention basic English proficiency as a barrier

55%

for Latinx immigrants



“I find it difficult when I have to explain my skills. The English level is the first barrier for me — I know how to communicate with people, but I don’t know how to communicate with the necessary technical words to explain the proficiency that I have.”

4. U.S. Work Experience

“Some of us come from places where we grew up functioning in survival mode, and we translate it into [these] areas of our lives. We feel like we have to hop on the first opportunities that come out of fear that nothing else will come after.”

Only one in five young immigrants had any experience working in the U.S. in their field of specialization, instead relegated to jobs that don't utilize their skills, speaking directly to their lack of access to skill-aligned opportunities. Without work experience that U.S. employers recognize and respect, few better opportunities come, and young immigrants trudge on, working in survival positions that gain them no further experience in their fields. They may live and work in the U.S. for years but still have almost no professional work experience on their resumes. Often, it's a catch-22.

Only 17%

of young immigrants had any experience working in the U.S. in their field of specialization, immigrant women were also

50%

less likely to have U.S. work experience in their fields.

“I have a PhD in structural engineering — when I apply to lower level positions, the company tells me that I'm overqualified for the job, and when I apply to higher level positions, they tell me that I don't have the experience here [in the U.S.] for it. It's really a challenge for me.”

64%

of participants found a lack of U.S. work experience in their fields a main barrier to entry.



5. Finding the Time

Looking for a job is a job in itself, whether writing resumes or tailoring cover letters, networking, and preparing for interviews. And young adult immigrants do even more: They juggle rapid-attachment work, families, and time-consuming immigration processes first. With less than five

hours per week, a majority of young immigrant job seekers face prolonged stress and financial difficulties that make an already arduous process more difficult. For some, a lengthy job search means they're out of a specialized job in their field for three to five years, and the more time not spent in their field, the less legitimacy they have.

Young adult women also had childcare and household burdens, having even less time to dedicate to a job search, with Latinx women being the most time constrained overall. With so few hours in a week, many women don't have the time to obtain certifications or customize each job application, tasks that are key to accessing opportunities.

"I'm a full time student, and I have a full-time [survival] job. I'm getting used to sleeping three to four hours a day because I have to."

65%

of young immigrants report being able to spend less than 5 hours per week looking for a job:

81%
of Latinx women

69%
of women

79%
of the Latinx community

6. Feeling Valued at Work

With so many young immigrants underemployed due to a distinct lack of access to professional, skill-aligned jobs, it's tough to find a young immigrant whose workplace fully recognizes their capabilities, let alone aligns with their career goals. In fact, a majority of immigrants feel undervalued at work, with many noting intersecting experiences of racial discrimination and xenophobia due to misunderstandings of their immigrant backgrounds within the workplace.

"One time, [my manager] said to me, 'I'm very concerned about your understanding.' I heard that and felt like I was stupid — I know how to do these things, but it's hard for me sometimes because English is my second language. And then he started to talk down to me in Spanish, as if he was a teacher speaking to a child. My first language is Portuguese; I'm from Brazil. I don't think he would have done that with a white American. He's doing this to me because I'm a brown, female immigrant."

60%

feel like their skills are not fully valued; over

70%

for Black, Latinx, and Middle Eastern immigrants



The Path Forward

For over 20 years, Upwardly Global has empowered young immigrants and refugees with the skills, coaching, and social capital needed to build new lives and careers in the U.S. We engage in this work in two ways — through direct job seeker support, and by sharing innovations, research, and thought leadership that aim to transform the systems at play. We believe it's our duty to clear the path to employment for the individuals we serve and to reflect on what we have learned after working with nearly 6,000 young immigrants to find thriving-wage employment opportunities.

This study helped us to identify and deepen our understanding of specific job search barriers for young immigrants and refugees. Based on these findings and Upwardly Global's knowledge of workforce inclusion, we recommend the following actions:



1. Industry-Specific Resources and Coaching

Young immigrants in the study found a lack of career path options and industry-specific professional courses and credentials to be primary barriers to finding a skill-aligned job. Targeted and differentiated career-navigation support for newcomers, especially young immigrants and refugees, is necessary to foster workforce inclusion. These programs can help by:

- Bolstering a support system through industry-specific job coaching and mentoring.
- Providing a clear starting point and pathway for each major industry.
- Outlining templates for job search documents like resumes and cover letters for efficient professional communication.
- Offering soft-skills practice geared to the U.S. market.

All of the above could improve young immigrants' ability to build U.S.-specific job skills as well as address another key barrier: a lack of time. With 65% unable to dedicate more than five hours per week to their job search, support from workforce development organizations that provide job-readiness resources and coaching enables immigrants to navigate the job search effectively and efficiently, greatly improving their chances of accessing jobs that align with their career goals.

76%
of Upwardly Global job
seekers report finding it
easier to prepare job search
documents after
gaining access to our
communication tools
and templates.

2. Employer Investment in Alternative Hiring Models

Time and again, young immigrants told us that they wanted a chance to prove the quality of their work and skills but weren't even making it to the starting gate. Employers that care about diverse hiring and immigrant inclusion can shift hiring practices to offer on-ramps for non-traditional talent by implementing alternative hiring models like work-based learning and skilling-to-hiring. Companies who take these steps are supporting young immigrant workforce inclusion by:

- Providing first exposure to the American labor market and professional workplace norms.
- Helping them access critical on-the-job training..
- Arranging opportunities for immigrants to receive mentorship from professionals in their industry of interest.
- Helping them gain a foothold in their desired career pathway.



Such opportunities are particularly promising for refugees with gaps in work experience due to “deskilling,” a common consequence of prolonged displacement and migration, as well as immigrants with foreign degrees who are excluded from professional jobs due to a lack of recognition of their education. Paired with career-readiness coaching and training from workforce development organizations, concrete employer commitments to upskill, mentor, and hire young immigrant candidates helps newcomers gain familiarity with the U.S. labor market and establish the social capital needed to thrive in the professional workforce long-term.

3. Connections, Connections, Connections

If U.S. industries rely on networking to fill 85% of all jobs, it's time to allow early career immigrants into the conversation. Our focus groups showed that networking was deeply undervalued and underutilized during the job search, as young immigrants have few natural connections in the U.S. and therefore no robust interpersonal and professional networks to lean on during the search for skill-aligned work. Connecting young immigrants to industry professionals in their fields is key to bridging the networking gap between young immigrants and their respective industries. This helps them:

- Establish key mentor-mentee relationships to guide them through the U.S. job market.
- Gain confidence for professional communication in English.
- Initiate U.S. networks and build social capital within their industry.
- Access job opportunities in their respective fields.

Matching young immigrants to mentors must be done with care in order to build equitable and immigrant-serving relationships. In conjunction with organizations that bring credibility and frameworks for mentorship, these links can open up a world of opportunity for new immigrants, truly building bridges and community.



Conclusion

Immigrant young adults comprise nearly 10% (or 5 million) of the overall foreign-born population. Amid U.S. workforce shortages in high demand industries, there is a strong case for public and private philanthropic investment to build immigrant workforce equity, including clear investments that increase economic mobility for young immigrants and refugees.

Likewise, the prioritization of public policies that ease young immigrants' entry into the U.S. workforce — more security for those receiving work permits to stay and build their careers, improved recognition of international credentials and experience, and the reduction of licensing barriers for those in highly regulated fields such as healthcare, for example — should serve as a key area for focus for funders, policymakers, and implementers alike.

A successful model for immigrant inclusion would include:

- Developing labor market-aligned career pathways.
- Shifting employer practices and implementing alternative hiring and work-based learning models.
- Creating opportunities for network-building and development of social capital.
- Promoting systems change through targeted advocacy and storytelling that elevates the lived experiences of this community.

Without the tools, services, and support to help alleviate transitional challenges for young immigrants seeking skill- and career interest-aligned work in the U.S., they may instead find themselves stuck in survival mode and unable to contribute to their potential. **In fact, the U.S. economy may lose out on hundreds of millions of dollars per year in underutilized immigrant talent. And for those under 30 whose careers still have decades to advance and expand, their potential is, quite literally, boundless.**

Now is the time for those invested in a strong, diverse workforce and immigrant opportunity — employers; local, state, and federal governments; workforce boards; and philanthropic partners — to take action, ensuring that young immigrants have access to uplifting job opportunities and contribute to their fullest potential within the U.S. economy.

Thank you to Lorenzo Vanelli for conducting this research for Upwardly Global. Lorenzo has a background in education, research, and tech. After moving to the U.S. from Italy, he experienced firsthand the difficulties of being a young adult immigrant looking for meaningful opportunities to contribute his skills in the U.S. job market. He currently serves as the Product Manager for [Jobversity](#), Upwardly Global's online learning platform.



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