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FEATURE**Helping Immigrants Thrive in the Workplace**

May 15, 2025 | Nancy Mann Jackson



In today's tightening labor market, one workforce segment is quietly holding up the American economy: immigrant workers. But while companies rely on them to stay afloat, most still aren't doing enough to help them thrive.

"Foreign-born workers are critical to our labor force," said Emily M. Dickens, J.D., chief of staff and head of government affairs at SHRM. "As U.S. demographics shift, these workers are necessary to complement and supplement U.S. workers and fill vital talent gaps across the country."

Consider this: Without the [17.7% increase in foreign-born workers - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/research/foreign-born-workers-full-report \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/research/foreign-born-workers-full-report) between 2021 and 2024, the U.S. labor pool would have [nearly 900,000 fewer employees - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/research/foreign-born-workers-full-report \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/research/foreign-born-workers-full-report). [Almost one in five U.S. workers - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/research/foreign-born-workers-full-report \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/research/foreign-born-workers-full-report) is now an immigrant — yet too often, these essential contributors are hired without the support needed to succeed. To retain talent and unlock the full value of their immigrants, companies must create support systems that help them integrate, contribute, and advance in the workforce.

"They are typically hard workers who are loyal, reliable, grateful, and resilient," said Emily Foster, vice president and chief of public affairs at the National Immigration Forum. "Many have gone through challenges to get to the United States, and they really want to contribute, to support the American economy and their families."

Understanding these obstacles is the first step toward building a workplace where all employees can reach their full potential.

Demand for Immigrant Workers Will Continue

The American labor market is undergoing a profound shift. As [Baby Boomers retire - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/hr-quarterly/us-labor-shortage-looms-who-will-do-work \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/hr-quarterly/us-labor-shortage-looms-who-will-do-work) and [birth rates decline, - \(https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/hr-quarterly/from-the-ceo--broadening-the-talent-pool \)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/hr-quarterly/from-the-ceo--broadening-the-talent-pool), workforce growth among native-born populations is slowing — creating long-term labor shortages that immigration is uniquely positioned to fill.

While many countries are experiencing birth rate declines, that trend is more pronounced in high-income countries. Currently, the global labor supply is split between lower-income countries (49% of workers) and higher-income countries (51%), according to [World Economic Forum research - \(https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf \)](https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf). But by 2050, 59% of the global working-age population is expected to be located in lower-income countries. Companies in high-income countries such as the U.S. will become more dependent on immigrant labor for the foreseeable future.

U.S. companies are already feeling the pinch of a tight labor market. In 2024, more than three-quarters of organizations (77%) reported experiencing difficulty recruiting for full-time positions, and over half had difficulty retaining full-time workers in the previous 12 months, according to SHRM's [2024 Talent Trends survey - \(https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/research/2024-talent-trends-research-overall-findings.pdf \)](https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/research/2024-talent-trends-research-overall-findings.pdf). By positioning themselves as welcoming to immigrants, U.S. companies can be better prepared to attract the majority of future workers.

The Strengths Immigrants Bring and Their Necessity in the Future

Savvy employers are dedicated to helping immigrant workers overcome workplace challenges because they understand the vital role that foreign-born workers play in their organizations. Foreign-born workers can foster a sense of cultural exchanges, which is crucial for workplaces as they bring diverse perspectives and improve problem-solving skills and adaptability.

A study published in [Papers in Regional Science - \(https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S105681902302105X \)](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S105681902302105X) shows that people who decide to migrate typically have higher levels of personality traits valued by employers: extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability.

“Many customers of U.S. businesses are outside the United States, and immigrants can contribute to cultural competencies and understanding that can help companies engineer products that will meet the needs of global customers and meet global regulations,” Foster said. “Companies typically perform better when their workforce reflects their customer base, and hiring immigrants is key to achieving a mix of perspectives that allow them to compete globally.”

In confirmation, a 2023 study published in [Research Studies in English Language Teaching and Learning - \(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378703397_Use_of_Bilingualism_in_Business_and_Commerce_A_Study_of_Multilingual_Communi \)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378703397_Use_of_Bilingualism_in_Business_and_Commerce_A_Study_of_Multilingual_Communi) shows that the use of bilingualism in business can provide significant advantages, including increased customer satisfaction and enhanced international collaboration. The study also showed that organizations that successfully implemented multilingual communications strategies demonstrated improved performance and a competitive advantage in the global market.

[Immigrants also tend to start their own businesses at a higher rate - \(https://news.mit.edu/2022/study-immigrants-more-likely-start-firms-create-jobs-0509 \)](https://news.mit.edu/2022/study-immigrants-more-likely-start-firms-create-jobs-0509) than domestic-born workers, reflecting an entrepreneurial, innovative bent.

Workplace Challenges for Immigrant Employees

Foreign-born workers face unique obstacles to thriving and advancing in the workplace.

Many immigrants report high levels of workplace discrimination, difficulties making ends meet, and confusion and fears related to U.S. immigration and foreign policy. About half of all working immigrants say they have experienced discrimination in the workplace, such as being paid less or given fewer opportunities for advancement than people born in the U.S., or being threatened or harassed, according to the [2023 KFF/LA Times Survey of Immigrants - \(https://www.kff.org/report-section/understanding-the-u-s-immigrant-experience-the-2023-kff-la-times-survey-of-immigrants-findings/ \)](https://www.kff.org/report-section/understanding-the-u-s-immigrant-experience-the-2023-kff-la-times-survey-of-immigrants-findings/). About a quarter of all immigrants, including 30% of those with college degrees, say they are overqualified for their jobs, the survey found, which may indicate they had to take a step back in their careers when migrating or lacked advancement opportunities in the U.S.

Many immigrants confront language barriers and a lack of digital literacy, and their international education or credentials are not always recognized in the U.S., Foster said. The KFF/LA Times survey found about a third (34%) of immigrants say they have been criticized or insulted for speaking a language other than English since moving to the country. Meanwhile, 20% of U.S. employees who speak English with an accent say they feel judged for that difference, even though 40% of all U.S. workers speak with accents that are different from their co-workers, according to a 2025 [Babbelfor Business poll - \(https://www.babbelforbusiness.com/us/news-events/accent-anxiety-workplace-cost-productivity-language-barriers/ \)](https://www.babbelforbusiness.com/us/news-events/accent-anxiety-workplace-cost-productivity-language-barriers/).

Workplace discrimination of any type has been proven to disrupt productivity at work, according to studies such as a recent one published in [Nature Human Behaviour - \(https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-023-01703-9.epdf?sharing_token=Oo67Z2BJP9EnLhqdeWITgtRgN0jAjWel9jnR3Zotv0Puf9dl0Ymj_XpEUdss9XWiiPvhc1RlJmKRontJ9tA5kwzRA7xhv_KTfmJCm7lu2yaEEGxiQLBVi8Jo7Ls36hsAeyyzqQ-8N19Sv8WC7MEzMU%3D \)](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-023-01703-9.epdf?sharing_token=Oo67Z2BJP9EnLhqdeWITgtRgN0jAjWel9jnR3Zotv0Puf9dl0Ymj_XpEUdss9XWiiPvhc1RlJmKRontJ9tA5kwzRA7xhv_KTfmJCm7lu2yaEEGxiQLBVi8Jo7Ls36hsAeyyzqQ-8N19Sv8WC7MEzMU%3D). But even when discrimination is not present, immigrants face other challenges, such as immigration status and the need to periodically renew work authorization. [SHRM research - \(https://devshrmadvocac.wpengine.com/wp-](https://devshrmadvocac.wpengine.com/wp-)

[content/uploads/2024/12/Workplace-Immigration-Comprehensive-Survey.pdf](#)) shows employers are frustrated by the length of time immigration processing can take. Over half (54%) of employers agree that the U.S. is losing out on top talent to other countries because of its immigration system.

“Our workplace immigration laws haven’t been meaningfully updated since 1990 and no longer reflect the realities of today’s economy,” Dickens said. “The U.S. immigration system must support — not hinder — employers’ ability to plan for the future and access the talent they need. Arbitrary barriers undermine workforce planning and weaken our global competitiveness.”

Other challenges might include [cultural disconnects](#) - (<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/inclusion-diversity/cultural-awareness-needed-u-s-well-overseas>) with colleagues or managers, a lack of [formal mentorship](#) - (<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/news/hr-magazine/mentorship-models-for-a-diverse-workforce>) or sponsorship pathways, and barriers to leadership opportunities.

“Businesses need not only to hire qualified workers but also retain them,” said Foster, whose organization partners with companies to meet the needs of immigrant employees. “By providing a workplace culture that meets the unique needs of foreign-born workers, companies can help these employees thrive and build a strong foundation for the future.”

Thoughtful HR practices can address many of these common obstacles for immigrant workers. For example, companies committed to fostering truly inclusive environments must ensure that all employees — including immigrant workers — can fully participate and thrive. This means proactively identifying and removing potential barriers, and, depending on organizational capacity, offering support such as English language courses or the recognition of foreign credentials.

The Business Case for Inclusion

Making an effort to help immigrant workers thrive is crucial for filling the labor pipeline by improving retention and engagement, but that’s not the only positive business impact. Companies that prioritize a human-centric, holistic approach to supporting their workforce benefit from a team that is diverse in thought, perspective, skills, and talents — ultimately gaining a competitive edge in the global marketplace.

Companies that prioritize inclusion and diversity perform better in several ways, according to [McKinsey & Company](#) - (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-matters-even-more-the-case-for-holistic-impact%22%20/%20%22/auth-download//~/media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/diversity%20and%20inclusion/diversity%20matters%20even%20more%20the%20case%20matters-even-more.pdf?shouldIndex=false>) data.

- 36% to 48% higher profitability: Companies in the top quartile for gender and ethnic diversity significantly outperform their less-inclusive peers.
- 53% higher customer satisfaction: Inclusive teams, especially in the consumer-facing industries, build stronger customer connections.
- Up to 40% improvement in engagement scores: Companies that prioritize inclusion foster stronger employee loyalty.
- 25% lower turnover and 21% higher productivity: Inclusive workplaces engage employees who feel seen and valued.

“Immigrant employees matter deeply to business because innovation depends on diversity of thought, empathy builds better leadership, and ... the future of work is global, human, and deeply interconnected,” said Louis Carter, founder and CEO of Best Practice Institute and Most Loved Workplace. “In my experience coaching CHROs and leadership teams, the most loved and effective organizations are the ones that go beyond surface-level inclusion. They create systemic ways for immigrant employees to integrate, grow, and lead.”

As U.S. demographics shift and labor shortages persist, the future of successful companies may depend on creating environments where all employees, including immigrants, are positioned to thrive and lead.

Strategies for Creating a More Inclusive Workplace

Organizations that aim to welcome immigrant employees and foster their growth can institute several important programs to make that happen, such as:

- **Culturally aware onboarding.** These are onboarding programs that help employees “navigate not just their job, but the nuances of American workplace culture through mentorship, language support, and manager training,” Carter said. Foreign-born workers do not need a separate onboarding program. Instead, all employees should have access to robust onboarding programs that address these issues.

The National Immigration Forum, for example, partners with companies to offer English at Work, its English language training program that teaches the vocabulary necessary for workers to succeed in their jobs.

- **Visa and legal navigation resources.** A number of organizations partner with companies to provide resources that can help immigrant workers establish a more permanent status in the U.S., reducing immigration worries so they can focus on work. Carter recommends offering these resources “not just as a benefit, but as a message to say, ‘We’re here for you.’ ”

- **Affinity groups and sponsorship.** Use employee resource groups (ERGs) as internal communities, led by those with shared experiences and backed by executive leaders who can drive change. “ERGs can be great opportunities for networking, collaboration, and mentorship,” Foster said. “It doesn’t require a lot of administrative work, but allows companies to show they care and support the immigrant workforce.” While any such ERGs should be open to all employees, they can be particularly beneficial to foreign-born workers.
- **Pathways to advancement.** Look for ways to build leadership development programs that intentionally remove bias and open up opportunity across cultures and identities. For example, the National Immigration Forum works with a group of grocery stores through the Western Association of Food Chains (WAFC). “They found that many high-performing employees did not have strong English language skills, which held them back from promotions,” Foster said. “We help participating employees strengthen their English proficiency, and then they’re able to complete the Retail Management Certificate program through WAFC, which prepares them for management roles.” Note that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in various employment decisions based on protected characteristics, which include national origin. As companies build their internal talent pipelines, they should ensure that they emphasize equal opportunity for all.

Carter said he worked with a company that had an immigrant employee who came to the U.S. as a refugee. “He started in an hourly role, but the company’s learning and mentorship program helped him rise into a senior IT position,” Carter said. “He’s now mentoring others and creating change that echoes far beyond his role. That’s the kind of impact we should be designing for.”

Company Spotlight: Driscoll’s

In 2018, after receiving several inquiries from employees about reputable legal services for naturalization and immigration processes, Driscoll’s partnered with Immigration Forum to begin offering citizenship assistance services. The program, known as the New American Workforce, works with businesses to assist eligible immigrant employees with the citizenship process through the worksite. It offers citizenship information sessions and provides employees with access to a secure online portal to complete citizenship applications, as well as remote legal review and assistance.

The citizenship work platform makes it easy to connect employees and their immediate family members with support that fits their unique situations, said Jenét DeCosta, senior director of public affairs at Driscoll’s.

“Driscoll’s is a diverse company with production in over 20 countries,” DeCosta said. “The ability to provide employees with opportunities to move within the company as well as facilitate knowledge transfer is extremely important.”

Over the past seven years, employee use of the citizenship services ebbs and flows, she said. Employees say the program is helpful and they appreciate that it extends to family members.

“We strive to foster an environment where employees are able to and want to work,” DeCosta said. “Our key values of passion, humility, and trustworthiness guide our decisions.”

Company Spotlight: ISS/Guckenheimer

ISS/Guckenheimer, a leading integrated facilities management company, worked with the National Immigration Forum to develop an [English language training program with curriculum specifically for the facilities management industry - \(https://metroairportnews.com/iss-debuts-industry-specific-english-language-training-program/ \)](https://metroairportnews.com/iss-debuts-industry-specific-english-language-training-program/). The program focuses on cross-training vocabulary so that participating employees can be prepared to contribute wherever they are needed at work.

“One of the unique things about the ISS program is that the company paid its employees on the clock to take the training rather than allowing them to do it on their own time,” Foster said.

As a result of the program and its success, the National Immigration Forum presented ISS/Guckenheimer its [2024 Keepers of the American Dream Award - \(https://immigrationforum.org/event/keepers-of-the-american-dream-2024/ \)](https://immigrationforum.org/event/keepers-of-the-american-dream-2024/), which honors organizations that are making the U.S. a better place for immigrants.

Preparing for a Long-Term Impact

As companies continue to navigate a talent shortage, fostering truly inclusive workplaces, boosting performance for all workers, and identifying barriers that inhibit workers from fully participating in the workplace is smart business and good HR. “The labor challenges we’re seeing are not short-term problems,” Foster said. “Even if the economy changes, we’re always going to need levels of immigration that provide adequate pipeline for the future. As companies seek to fill roles across all levels, they can benefit from hiring and retaining immigrant workers.”

To determine whether your workplace is set up to retain foreign-born workers and maximize their talents, companies must remain vigilant and regularly audit their systems to ensure that current employment practices are not based on outdated or arbitrary perceptions. Additionally, upskilling and reskilling programs can help identify and develop the skills needed to fill critical talent gaps.” Organizations should be asking themselves, “Are we helping all of our employees — including immigrant employees — thrive or just get by?”

“Companies with inclusive cultures are more innovative, more productive, and more likely to retain top talent,” Carter said. “Employees who feel seen and supported are more engaged and more likely to stay and grow with you. In today’s competitive talent landscape, welcoming immigrant employees isn’t just the right thing to do; it’s a strategic advantage.”

Today's inclusive workplaces build stronger, more resilient companies tomorrow.

Learn about [immigration policy](https://devshrmadvocac.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Workplace-Immigration-One-Pager.pdf) - (<https://devshrmadvocac.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Workplace-Immigration-One-Pager.pdf>) and **SHRM's legislative priorities - (<https://www.shrm.org/content/dam/en/shrm/advocacy/shrm-119th-congress-legislative-agenda.pdf>) for the **119th Congress**.**

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