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Opinion: Skilled Immigrants Are Uptapped Assets for Regional Economic Development



By Jennifer Brennan

October 17, 2012 | 3:03 p.m.

What do Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Dayton, Ohio, have in common? Each of these cities has endured decades of shrinking population—and each has recently identified skilled immigrants as a vital component of a healthy economy. Their economic-development agendas recognize that attracting and retaining talented newcomers is an important part of regional economic success.

As director of the national nonprofit IMPRINT, a coalition focusing on skilled-immigrant integration, I'm fortunate enough to be engaged with a number of such municipal initiatives. Their budding efforts hold intriguing promise for other cities.

It's important to note that these efforts aren't simply about recruiting raw numbers of newcomers. Policymakers must have a developed strategy for whom they plan to attract and integrate, as well as why and how it should be done.

In identifying the *who*, policymakers must start by developing a keen understanding of the skilled immigrants who already live in their communities. Understanding the assets and barriers faced by existing residents helps point the way to policies and tactics that can spur increased growth.

This is fertile ground: A recent report from the Brookings Institution draws attention to the significant number of educated, legally work-authorized immigrants in the United States who are underemployed. A remarkable 49 percent of college-educated immigrant workers are working in jobs that don't fully draw on their education and training.

As a result, local employers can't benefit from their professional skills, and newer workers can't move into those entry-level positions. However, there are solutions. As the Brookings report notes, IMPRINT and other organizations have developed a variety of targeted interventions that can be implemented to ensure that regions are fully benefitting from the talent in their midst.

Here's another example: Talented international students flock to a region to attend college, and then leave after graduation. Many of them would like to stay, but can't untangle the thicket of federal immigration regulations to figure out how to do it. What if they had help?

That's the idea behind the Global Talent Retention Initiative, a first-of-its-kind program recently launched in Michigan. The initiative's webinars educate students about how to obtain work visas after graduation, while also teaching local employers what they need to know about hiring such students.



Jennifer Brennan is director of IMPRINT.

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The Story That Started It All

In 2010, Ronald Brownstein wrote *The Gray and the Brown: A Generational Mismatch* about America's shift to an older, more ethnically diverse population and how these changes affect us as a nation.

The project was jump-started by Global Detroit, an economic development effort headed by former state legislator Steve Tobocman. Since its inception in 2010, Global Detroit has helped direct \$4 million in philanthropic investments to support a range of activities.

Global Detroit's efforts reflect a practical reality: Because so much of migration happens through word-of-mouth, addressing current community members' needs can also help to spark longer-term growth.

The answer to *why* a city should implement skilled-immigrant recruitment efforts may seem obvious. Of course cities with aging workforces and stagnant population levels need new blood. But IMPRINT has found that building a shared understanding across public officials, higher education and community leaders, and the public is vital to launching a successful initiative.

Such was the case in Dayton, where the Welcome Dayton plan was forged through facilitated, community-wide conversations. Spearheaded by the local Human Relations Council, the plan identified activities ranging from lowering barriers to entrepreneurship to hosting a Global Dayton Soccer event.

Importantly, the Dayton process specifically made room for community members' doubts and even resistance. Acknowledging skepticism is necessary in building trust. Conversely, communities that fail to develop such a consensus can pay a heavy price, as efforts become mired in political mistrust.

Once communities have addressed the *who* and the *why*, the next question is *how*. A few hundred miles from Dayton, the city of Pittsburgh is pioneering an inclusive model that recognizes the city's advantage in productively incorporating the talents of all residents.

"We like to say that people are the next Pittsburgh renaissance," says Melanie Harrington, CEO of Vibrant Pittsburgh. In addition to skilled immigrants, the organization's talent attraction and retention activities serve U.S.-born African-Americans, people with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, among others.

Vibrant Pittsburgh's New Arrivals Bridge program is a five-month undertaking that introduces a cohort of newcomers to the region's history and culture, while fostering relationships among participants and community leaders. Another partnership with fellow nonprofits produced the Refugee Career Mentoring Initiative, which pairs skilled Iraqi refugees with trained mentors to help them navigate the path to employment.

From Detroit to Pittsburgh to Dayton, the evidence is building that skilled immigrant talent can be an important ingredient in regional economic success.

Jennifer Brennan is director of IMPRINT, a national nonprofit coalition that publishes and disseminates information about practical, effective ways to integrate skilled immigrants into the workforce. Learn more at www.imprintproject.org.

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Guillermo

With 23 million people unemployed in the USA I don't understand why we can't train our own unemployed people to have the necessary skills even if it takes a couple of years to do so. It is a long term problem that deserves a long term solution. Using immigrant labor doesn't solve our country's unemployment problem. In fact it makes it worse because the

jobs they take won't be available to US citizens. I think our political leaders (of both parties) have betrayed our country in this matter.

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Charlene Heeter

I think the Imprint problem is a good one. I was surprised to read about my home town of Dayton, Ohio.

3 months ago

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Snuggle_bear64

You want the people in Dayton. Drug test for CFC. welfare or what ever you want to call it. Make them work for the food stamps they get. With all the welfare in the city, if they had to work 20 hours per week Dayton would be a beautiful city again that would draw companies here.

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Snuggle_bear64

This is all a load of crap. Dayton ant losing people it is a WELFARE city. why should people work if they get everything handed to them. You use all this immigration stuff to get people all worked up. Well guess what. I was born here. My Great Grandmother was born here. Full blooded cherokee. But other parts of my family come from Ireland, Germany, Scotland, Dutch. All taught to work hard if you wanted something.

3 months ago 1 Like

Like



Rebecca Tancredi

As a former HR professional, we focused our recruiting team on creative talent pipelines - especially for hard to find skills. I think this is so vital. I now work for Upwardly Global - one of the IMPRINT organizations. It's so terrific to help HR folks realize the rich pool of educated, skilled and work-authorized immigrants already in their backyards!

3 months ago

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PBALABAMA Top 10

No, actually, what these three cities have in commone is that they are run by Liberals/Unions.

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