Research corner: breaking through the UK job market



Many thanks to Hani Michael, an Eritrean refugee who lives in Ethiopia, for drawing this sketch to accompany the blog. It shows a person breaking through a wall towards a bright lantern.

In our latest blog, Akosiwa explains how her experience of applying for a peer researcher role helped overcome some of the barriers to employment that new migrants can face.

When a barrier became an opportunity: my experience of breaking through the UK job market

by Akosiwa Agbokou

It is quite hard for people with a refugee status to penetrate the labour market in the UK regardless of their educational background, language and other skills, or their readiness to work. And, unsurprisingly, this puts them in a precarious situation.

Working as a peer researcher on the Refugee Integration in Yorkshire and Humber (RIYH) project has impacted me in many ways. In this post, however, I will only focus on the recruitment process and our involvement in the project.

It all began with a job advert shown to me by Connecting Opportunities – an organisation working to connect migrants with job opportunities. The peer research job advert came at a time where I was ‘shutting down’ and losing hope regarding a professional life in the UK - this was due to the numerous

refusals/rejections I'd faced any time my immigration status was disclosed to employers. Reading the job advert for which one of the essential criteria was to have personal experience of holding refugee status, gave me hope. I had a sigh of relief and became overly excited to the extent that the person who shared the information with me had to calm me down and asked me not to have high expectations. It's obvious she could not understand where the excitement was coming from. I didn't apply nor get the job yet, but I could not contain my excitement.

The job application process in the UK is different to what I was used to. Unlike simply submitting a CV, letter of interest and being called for an interview – the process I am used to - the UK recruitment process has many other steps and requirements a new migrant may not be able to meet. It can be lengthy, sometimes stressful, and differs from one employer to another. The following are some examples. In my experience, some employers require applicants to:

- have lived in the country for at least five years – some employers run a pre-employment check which is done over five years - this process automatically disqualifies new migrants
- possess either indefinite leave to remain or British citizenship, which take time. Some migrants begin with up to five years' limited leave to remain after which indefinite leave may be granted – 12 months after that an individual might be permitted to apply for citizenship.

In addition to that, for new migrants, especially people with refugee status, whether they are resettled or came through the asylum system, there are other factors that makes it harder for them to get employed. Some of the obvious ones are:

- employment history – people are not normally allowed to work while waiting for a decision to be made on their asylum claim, causing them to have an employment gap on their CV
- lack of work experience in the UK – most of the time, people's overseas work experience and qualifications are not enough, and employers require work experience in the UK
- lack of knowledge of the UK job application processes – people have difficulty knowing how to fill in the application form and what to include in it
- lack of referee – in the UK, it is a customary to provide two references alongside your job application and the lack of access to referees could jeopardise one's chances of getting a job.

Involving people with migration experience in research projects is without doubt a good initiative and for someone experiencing all of the above, it is a lifeline. Hence, co-production or peer and community led research should be designed as a proper job even if it's for a short period of time. It can be the beginning of a career for some but for others, it can prepare them for the job market on different levels or help shape their vision and aspiration for the future.

Thinking about it now, when I applied for the peer researcher role at Migration Yorkshire, I did not know well how to fill an application form to fit the UK job market. Therefore, I felt fortunate that Migration Yorkshire chose to take the simplest route, making it possible for people without much experience of the UK job market to have a start. The process was easy. Applicants were asked to submit their CV or contact the recruitment team to discuss the position. That was exactly what I needed at that time!

After expressing my interest in the role, I was invited for an interview which was held in a ‘semi-formal’ way. It felt more like a conversation aiming to find out our level of passion for the role, how it will benefit us immediately or in the future rather than how competent we were as researchers. I found it encouraging and empowering as I thought we were given a chance and a voice.

My experience of being a peer researcher has changed my perspectives and has put me in a better position professionally. I have a clear vision of what direction I want to take, and I am hopeful for the future. One opportunity can turn things around for migrants, so let’s approach peer research well.

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