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Round Table

Creating Inclusive Workplaces

INTEgreat project

26/03/2024

Introduction

Social Hackers Academy (SHA) organized a round table session on March 26, 2024, marking a significant milestone within the INTEgreat project. This collaborative project brings together partners from diverse European nations, including Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus, and Ireland. It represents a collective endeavour to revolutionize integration strategies tailored for refugees and asylum seekers across Europe. Each partner's contributions, from Greece's educational initiatives to Italy's holistic programs, were conceived to create inclusivity and support for migrants.

At the heart of the INTEgreat project lies the vision to foster pathways to prosperity for individuals navigating the complexities of displacement. By harnessing partner organisations' collective expertise and resources, the project aims to transcend geographical boundaries and cultural differences, offering hope to those seeking refuge and asylum in Europe.

Central to this collaboration is the recognition of the challenges faced by migrants in their search for meaningful integration, particularly within the workplace. Against this backdrop, the focus group session convened by SHA served as a platform for dialogue and introspection, allowing participants to share their lived experiences and articulate their aspirations for a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

The round table discussion's overarching objective was to discuss the inequalities encountered by migrants in their professional lives and to highlight strategies to address these disparities. Through exploring both positive and negative practices, participants were invited to reflect on their individual journeys and contribute to a collective vision of workplace equity and well-being.

As participants engage in dialogue, guided by the facilitation of SHA representatives, the focus group was formed to uncover systemic challenges, amplify marginalized voices, and promote transformative change. By fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and collaboration, the session seeks to pave the way for a future where every individual, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully to society.

Negative practices discussed

At the beginning of the round table, participants were asked to share their negative experiences and encounters not only within Greece but also in all other countries (EU and non-EU) they have lived in. Participants were encouraged to share their stories in anonymity and were reassured that their experiences would be used to inspire positive change and promote the well-being of migrants and refugees in their country of residence.

These are the most significant challenges that many immigrants and refugees face when searching for jobs, and it's essential to delve deeper into each experience to understand the full impact.

- Difficulty pursuing respectable careers as non-EU citizens: Participants expressed their frustration when confronted with bureaucratic difficulties in securing a job in the EU. Participants described the complex process they must go through, including obtaining work permits and visas, as opposed to EU citizens.

- Language knowledge: Participants discussed facing communication barriers that hindered their integration into the workforce of their country of residence. While trying to learn a new language, participants found themselves excluded from jobs due to their level of speaking the local language.

- Lack of proper and regular payment: Participants mentioned having faced irregular payments and a lack of respect for their signed contracts. This led to financial instability and stress while making it difficult for migrants to afford necessities or support their families. Unfortunately, most participants expressed being unable to act on these due to their lack of knowledge and the necessity to keep their jobs.

- Lack of respect for agreements: During the discussion, it was revealed that employers sometimes failed to honour their contractual agreements, such as working hours or job responsibilities. This had an important impact on the individuals' well-being and work-life balance, as well as the erosion of trust in employers and institutions.

- Issues with coworkers and discrimination: Participants mentioned having faced important discrimination by their coworkers. They highlighted the psychological toll of facing discrimination and exclusion in the workplace and the challenges of navigating complex social hierarchies.

- Tribe-related discrimination and exclusion: Some participants mentioned having faced intra-national discrimination based on tribal affiliations. These discriminations are deeply routed into the historical and cultural factors that perpetuate tribal prejudices and exclusionary practices in the workplace. Some individuals were forced to leave their country of origin due to these inequalities.

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- Exclusion due to nationality or race: Many participants mentioned the irony of being excluded or discriminated against in countries where they sought refuge or economic opportunity. Many refugees and migrants have faced xenophobia in the workplace, underscoring the need for inclusive policies and cultural sensitivity training.

Positive practices reported

After concluding the discussion on the negative practices that participants encountered while searching for employement or while being employed in a foreign country, we continued the discussion on the good experiences, the posivitive feedback and stories the participants had to share. The goal was to see the importance of positive practices in the integration of refugees and in creating inclusive work practices.

- Inclusive working environments in international companies: International companies are ale to foster inclusivity more easily due to their international policy. Such companies prioritize diversity and equity in their recruitment, training, and promotion processes. Employees feel valued and respected in their workplaces with a sense of belonging for immigrants and refugees.

- Support for language programs: Language programs facilitate communication and integration for immigrants and refugees. Employees mention positive outcomes for their professional development and job satisfaction. Knowing the local language can be extremely helpful in integrating the social life of the country of residence of refugees and migrants.

- Support for religious practices: Participants mentioned appreciating companies respecting and accommodating religious beliefs and practices. Dedicated spaces and times for prayers and respect for each employee's religion were mentioned as important and highly appreciated practices.

- Inclusion through respectful treatment and familial atmosphere: Participants highlighted tha the company must promote a familial atmosphere and mutual respect among employees. Smaller companies, mainly, cultivate a supportive and inclusive culture that values individuals' unique contributions and differences.

Important ethics to create inclusive working environments

- Tolerance while learning a new local language: Participants emphasized the importance of patience and understanding from employers and coworkers as immigrants and refugees navigate the process of learning a new language. They also discussed the importance of creating a supportive environment where individuals feel encouraged to practice and improve their language skills without fear of judgment or discrimination.

- Provide training and mentors for newcomers—learning and development specialists: For this point, participants highlighted the significance of investing in newcomers' professional development and integration through training programs and mentorship opportunities. The role of learning and development specialists in guiding immigrants and refugees as they acclimate to their roles and navigate unfamiliar work environments was also deemed significant.

- Quality of coworkers and respect towards colleagues and their differences: An essential point is fostering a culture of respect and appreciation for colleagues' diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Mutual respect and understanding is pivotal in creating a positive and productive work environment where employees feel valued and supported.

- Respect, acceptance, and tolerance: Accept cultural, religious, and linguistic differences from employees of different backgrounds. Acknowledge that cultural differences can also offer new perspectives, revolutionize problem-solving, and generate new innovative ideas for a company.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the experiences shared by participants in the focus group shed light on the complex challenges faced by immigrants and refugees in their pursuit of meaningful employment opportunities. From bureaucratic hurdles to language barriers and cultural discrimination, these individuals encounter many obstacles that can put barriers in their integration into the workforce and broader society.

However, amidst these challenges, there are also rays of hope and resilience. Participants highlighted the positive impact of inclusive workplace practices, such as those implemented by international companies and small businesses alike. From support for language programs to accommodations for religious practices and a culture of respect and familial atmosphere, these ethical considerations play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment for immigrants and refugees.

Moreover, the ethical principles identified by participants - tolerance of language learning, provision of training and mentorship, and respect for colleagues' differences - serve as guiding principles for companies striving to create inclusive and equitable workplaces. By upholding these ethics, companies benefit from a diverse and talented workforce and contribute to social cohesion and economic prosperity.

In essence, the experiences and insights shared by participants underscore the importance of collective action in addressing the systemic barriers faced by immigrants and refugees in the job market. By working together to promote inclusivity, diversity, and respect in the workplace, we can create a more equitable and welcoming society for all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances.