

Forum: The Power of Equity and the Future of Adult Education*(Part 3 of 3)*

Empowering Communities Through Diversity: How To Hire Multilingual and Immigrant Staff To Transform Adult Education

Lori Pickett, Alaska Literacy Program

Alaska Literacy Program (ALP), for the last 50 years, has served as a volunteer-based organization committed to English literacy for adult learners. Since our beginnings, these classes have broadened to include digital, family, and financial literacy, programming dedicated to helping people navigate health information, GED services, and citizenship courses. Our organization thrives on a commitment to care and effective communication, values embodied by our diverse, multilingual staff who intimately understand the needs of our immigrant community. Our staff represents 13 different languages, including English, Spanish, Russian, Ukrainian, French, Nuer, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, Emakhuwa, Swahili, Lingala, and Tshilubà. Hiring individuals who not only speak the languages of our students but also bring invaluable lived experiences is the foundation of ALP.

By supporting and valuing immigrant staff, our organization has grown into a trusted cornerstone of our community. We know that tapping into the skills, experiences, and perspectives of immigrant staff can significantly enhance organizational services and build more resilient communities. To effectively hire and retain immigrant staff, we have found success by tailoring our interview process, having clear communication, and having specific thoughtful retention practices.

The job interview is the first step in evaluating how your company can attract more multilingual and immigrant staff. Before the interview, invite applicants to tour the building so that they may meet staff and gain a deeper understanding of the organization's mission. Ensure that all of your applicants have access to the questions they are being asked ahead of time and make a practice of publicly

sharing the wage range for the role. This allows for ample time in translating materials, clarifying any questions that may arise about what the interview is asking and will ensure all applicants have decided that the salary range is what they expect or can accept. Creating a “gotcha” environment that is more typical to our corporate culture in the United States is counterproductive to building a multicultural and multilingual staff. By making the hiring process clear and accessible, you can attract a greater pool of applicants from all experience levels.

Additionally, tailor your hiring process so that lived experience can inform the hiring decision as much as resume listed job experience. Multilingualism is far more prevalent outside the United States. In a setting such as adult education, teaching students from across a global network of countries English, this is valued as having the ability to relate to students of a new language and communicate with a multilingual speaker. Beyond language skills, multilingualism is a testament to the critical thinking, attention to detail, and memory skills that come with learning a new language. By recognizing these skills as highly transferable to any workplace environment, you will be able to find additions to your workforce that reach beyond job experience.

Once you begin to build a staff that is both multilingual and multicultural, do not be afraid to lean on your connections to continue the trend; leverage your connections to sustain this diversity. We have found success in identifying former students who would excel in an open position or asking staff if they have anyone they recommend for the job. This allows us to interview and hire staff who would not have otherwise applied for the

job. By tapping into your network, your organization can connect with a broader pool of talent who are already embedded in the community and understand its unique needs. This approach not only helps in finding qualified staff but also strengthens community ties and fosters a more inclusive work environment. Plus, it allows for more collaboration for staff to join in building your organization.

Equally important to hiring your team is the retention of staff. Communication is, first and foremost, the most important tool to ensure the retention and success of your staff. Using plain language and taking extra time to ensure your messaging is clear and effective will ensure that everyone is welcome in every conversation. Avoid jargon and complex phrases that might lead to misunderstandings. For us, this manifests in reading student policies and job descriptions at staff meetings, where all staff members are able to hear our messaging and flag pieces that require adjustment. By prioritizing effective communication, you can ensure that all staff members, regardless of their English proficiency, are able to fully engage with their roles and responsibilities.

Retaining immigrant staff involves creating a culture of support and recognition across your organization. As an organization, your team needs to treat mistakes as learning opportunities rather than reasons for criticism. Building open lines of communication and opportunities for one-on-one meetings to offer constructive feedback will not only improve the morale of your staff members but will also improve the talents and skills of your staff. As your staff spend more time at your organization, take the time to focus on understanding each employee's strengths. Building their roles around these strengths, rather than rigidly adhering to job descriptions will help employees feel valued and motivated. Holding space for public recognition of staff members who are successful in their work, whether that is in staff meetings or in events with the greater community is equally important.

As your staff grows into their role, create opportunities

for mentorship and professional development across your workforce. Allowing your staff the opportunity to continue learning in their role will enhance your organization's reach and will allow staff educational opportunities that benefit them personally and professionally. When possible, offer more flexible funding for special opportunities, recognizing that traditional funding sources may not cover all professional development needs. If you recognize a staff member that possesses skills that could transfer to a professional development opportunity, encourage them to use their expertise to teach others! Allow for creativity in what this could look like as well.

Lastly, it is important to accommodate the diverse needs of your staff by being flexible with holiday leave, providing food at meetings, and understanding that some staff may need longer trips to visit family. Build services and policies around these needs to create a supportive work environment. Emphasize a top-down approach to inclusivity, starting from the executive level and extending to middle management. Ensure all staff members have the opportunity to provide input and actively involve them in decision-making processes.

For us, the decision to prioritize immigrant staff isn't just aligned with our organizational values; it enhances our services. By harnessing the skills, experiences, and perspectives of immigrants, we not only improve our programming but also contribute to the resilience and strength of our communities. Embracing diversity, particularly through immigrant employment, fosters a stronger, more interconnected community—a testament to the transformative power of inclusivity and shared experience. In embracing immigrant staff, we not only enrich our organization but also champion a more inclusive future—one where diversity isn't just celebrated but actively nurtured for the benefit of all. We invite others to join us in this important work as we harness the greatness in us all to uplift and strengthen adult education as a field.