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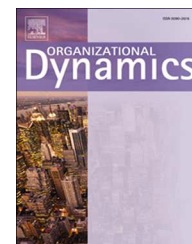
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# Be a hero: Employ refugees like a pragmatist



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## KEYWORDS

Refugees;  
Workplace  
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## Introduction

Barbara, a mid-level manager at a mid-sized German manufacturing firm, wanted to do her part to help refugees. She hired three Syrian refugees who had the language and technical skills necessary for their jobs. Soon thereafter, Barbara became closely involved in their lives—far more than she did with any of her other employees. She tried to enroll their kids in schools, made inquiries and set up appointments about rental apartments, gave them regular German-language lectures in her free time, and even organized leisure and sports activities. All these efforts reflected her sense of compassion and care “to do my best to support our refugee employees’ workplace integration because they need our aid.”

The outcomes were not at all what she expected though. One of the employees, Ahmad, felt compelled to take all of Barbara’s suggestions, even if they did not meet his family’s

needs. He realized the power Barbara held over his career and ultimately resented her involvement in his life, noting, “She wants to control everything in my life. I can’t stand it any longer. If I had known that before, I would have never started the job.”

We’ve changed all names in this article for privacy, but the quotations and situations are real, based on our research. Barbara’s behaviors reflected a common inclination to think about refugees as vulnerable victims who have survived persecution, live in precarious situations, and need various types of support (social, financial, even emotional). On its face, this description might hold, but it also needs to be complemented by the recognition that refugees are talented employees with human agency to decide for themselves how to run their lives. Both perspectives can be true simultaneously, and as we show, using both in combination might be the most useful approach for refugees and managers and the firms that employ them.

Broadly speaking, we refer to a view of refugees as sole victims as the *vulnerability lens* and a recognition of their talent and skills as a *capability lens*. When managers adopt either or both lenses, it likely influences their reasons for hiring refugees, as well as their success functioning as

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refugees' managers. If managers who regard employees through the vulnerability lens behave differently than those who apply the capability lens, what implications does it have for the workplace?

In our research conducted among both refugees and their managers, we find that the different lenses strongly influence managers' behavior, and neither lens in isolation is beneficial for workplace integration. Our findings reveal that managers who are highly driven to promote refugees' workplace integration inadvertently undermine their growth if they adopt only one lens. But with a more balanced, dual lens, which we refer to as integrative, the outcomes improve for both refugees and their employers. In parallel with the extent to which they adopt the three lenses, we identify three reasons why managers hire refugee employees: humanitarian, lecturer, and pragmatic. By clarifying which reason tends to work best, we also derive some best practice recommendations for managers.

## Context: Hiring refugee employees

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, about 1% of all people have been forcibly displaced from their homes by persecution or war. As we finalize this article, over four million Ukrainians have already fled their country, with more refugees still leaving. Refugee support service organizations in most countries help refugees settle in their new homes by fulfilling essential needs for food, shelter, and language training. Yet employment arguably is even more important than language skills for predicting refugees' social integration. In this sense, unemployment among refugees is both individually difficult and societally problematic, because it limits refugees' integration. It is also very common.

A lot of evidence highlights the challenges refugees experience when they seek employment. A Bertelsmann Stiftung Migration Policy Centre report indicates that more than two-thirds of refugees arriving in Sweden and Denmark remained unemployed three years later. Language skills, cross-cultural challenges, and rejection of foreign credentials are three primary barriers, but managers might address such issues, and gain an opportunity to look like heroes, by hiring refugees struggling with these difficulties. Such actions arguably should dramatically improve refugees' lives, benefit society, and improve the firm.

In turn, various organizations, industry associations, and policymakers encourage interest in hiring refugees. The Talent Beyond Boundaries charity aims to facilitate skilled refugee employment; Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP) offers select, skilled refugees a faster route to migration; and the German government funds a network of more than 2500 members to compile and share national expertise about hiring and managing refugees. Some organizations likely adopt these recommendations, as a way to perform humanitarian service; others leverage these opportunities as a way to combat labor shortages.

Yet despite such supportive structures, managers seem hindered by their inexperience with employing refugees. According to an HR manager of a manufacturing company, "We have rich experience with employing foreign

employees in general but employing refugees is an uncharted territory with a lot of questions marks for us." Even when managers are actively willing to hire refugees, they remain uncertain about how to support and integrate these employees. The willingness-ability gap arises because existing support programs tend to focus on encouraging managers to decide to hire refugees; after they have done so, the programs offer little insight into how to manage those new employees well. Some of the managers we interviewed grew so concerned about doing a poor job that they stopped hiring refugees altogether.

No existing evidence-based guidance is available to help managers decide what kind of support they should offer refugee employees. Should they stick to career-related support, such as additional job training, or facilitate adjustments, such as by helping with asylum paperwork or registering children in school? To be effective, managers need to know what kind and how many workplace integration activities to offer to help refugee employees thrive.

## Research method

To learn what kinds of managerial support work best, we talked with refugee employees and their managers in Germany. We actively wanted to get both perspectives on their shared experiences. We conducted this research in Germany because following its migration influx in 2015, German managers likely gained some experience with hiring refugees. Chancellor Angela Merkel frequently rallied German citizens to participate in the migration effort with the phrase, "We can do it," referring to the integration of the refugees. Many managers in Germany responded to this encouragement with a moral sense of responsibility to employ refugees. 24% of German firms employed at least one refugee in 2019. Similar trends might appear in other countries, but German managers likely are ahead of the learning curve and thus provide a good example for others to learn from their experience.

We conducted 127 interviews with refugees, their supervisors and colleagues, chief executives, HR managers, and vocational trainers in 28 German companies, ranging from entrepreneurial craft businesses to large companies. In addition, we worked closely with large German firms in the manufacturing and telecommunication industries. For instance, we spent three years intermittently observing a vocational training program for refugees, run by a large German firm. Finally, we interviewed 8 representatives of nonprofit organizations involved in refugees' workplace integration, such as teachers at vocational schools or refugee support networks and organizations. With this evidence, we designed and conducted workshops and webinars to inform practitioners (executives, vocational trainers, HR managers) about the best workplace integration practices, and hear directly from them about their needs.

The combined evidence indicates that managers' treatment of refugee employees depends on the lens through which managers view refugees, namely, vulnerability or capability or integrative, as we described previously. The quotations in [Table 1](#) illustrate these lenses. Admittedly, the lenses are only one factor among many that determine the

**Table 1** Quotations illustrate the vulnerability and capability lenses.

Vulnerability Lens	Capability Lens
Refugee employees as victims, vulnerable, and potential burdens to society. Managers have a duty to provide aid.	Refugees have the agency to make their own decisions and workplace capabilities. Managers have opportunities to build workforce capacity.
“I did not hire refugees because of labor shortage problems. They need our aid and I tried to help them in any way.” (Executive, craft business)	“I see the positive dimension of his flight. It takes a lot of courage and motivation to leave the home country and to go together with his wife and their infant thousands of kilometers. Many of us would not have the courage to do that. He is highly motivated and that's just what the German applicants for this position were missing. We did not find an appropriate employee. The position was unfilled for more than four years, but we found him now.” (Executive, retail company)
“He exploits our national health and welfare system.” (Executive, food retail company)	“He has a lot of knowledge that is relevant and valuable for our company.” (Executive, media company)
“You will directly notice that life wasn't easy for him.” (Executive, oil company)	“Honestly, I have only positive experiences with him. His professional knowledge and his practical skills are valuable to the company. He was well-prepared for his exams.” (Manager, packaging company)

Notes: Each comment refers to a refugee employee hired by the company.

success of refugee workplace integration efforts. Two recent reviews describe other factors, like company resources, organizational structures, labor needs, and workforce composition. Yet managers' lenses relate strongly to workplace integration too. To understand why, we investigate what happens when managers view refugee employees through capability or vulnerability lenses.

### What happens when managers use a vulnerability lens?

The vulnerability lens includes various views of refugees as victims, a perspective that is understandable. By definition, refugees have not chosen to move away from their homes. When they leave, they experience substantial challenges with regard to learning new languages, grieving losses of connections to family members and finding jobs. Some refugees report being exhausted, such that their work performance suffers, because of the sleep disruption that comes with worrying thoughts, low self-reliance, or mental health problems. Political and media accounts also tend to frame refugees as victims of humanitarian disasters, who need help, or else as a burden on the recipient countries. The large refugee migration from Syria in 2015 often was described as a *crisis*, in stories seeking to illustrate both the refugees' grim situations and the potentially negative consequences of absorbing them into host countries.

A focus on vulnerabilities and obligations is a double-edged sword. Managers may recognize that refugee employees have more or different needs than non-refugee employees, as well as exhibit attentiveness to the problems. Such vulnerability, as part of their lived experience, needs to be recognized in the workplace. But an exclusive focus on vulnerabilities and challenges can harm refugee employees too. Victimized people tends to downplay their agency to make choices, as well as glide over their unique identities as people beyond a single identifier, such as

“refugee.” If managers only see refugees as passive victims of a disaster, they might assume that charitable aid is their highest priority, rather than providing performance feedback, training, or professional development resources. The focus is on refugees' vulnerabilities, not their capabilities.

### What happens when managers use a capability lens?

A research trend, broadly referred to as *positive organizational scholarship*, encourages recognition of positive processes and relationships, in addition to dark-side effects, in organizations. For example, more research deals with antagonistic relationships at work than with interpersonal support and caring. But positive organizational scholarship seeks to redress this imbalance by emphasizing capabilities and possibilities more than problems and threats. The focus is on organizational practices that aid in the development of human strengths. It emerged from a broad field called positive psychology, which focuses on building strengths and behaviors that allow individuals to flourish. For instance, positive educational psychology suggests how individuals can enhance learning by capitalizing on their strengths. This approach is consistent with managers who think about how to help refugee employees develop their professional capabilities.

When managers adopt a capability lens, such that they acknowledge refugees' skills, consider how their unique strengths can contribute to their work, and highlight capabilities, they can better promote capacity building. Through this lens, managers see refugees as employees who can make contributions to benefit the organization. They might value refugees' strong work motivation or distinct skills and knowledge, developed in their home countries. In addition, these managers identify a potential way to address labor shortages for both skilled and unskilled work. Because the refugees are part of the workforce, instead of a

social task or moral obligation, the capability lens supports refugees' agency to cope creatively with inherent integration challenges. Therefore, these managers support refugees in developing their professional capabilities through different tools such as career counseling, (vocational) training programs, or encouraging them to take control of their lives and careers. Despite these benefits though, focusing on refugees' strengths and agency alone ignores those substantial integration challenges. That is, only looking through a capability lens, or rose-colored glasses, ignores the challenges of navigating the asylum-seeking process, mental health struggles associated with past trauma, language barriers, and educational and knowledge gaps. The result would likely be a callous managerial approach, detrimental to both refugees and their employers. For example, unresolved legal, language, financial, or mental health problems likely distract refugees from their work and result in low job performance.

## Integrative lens

A vulnerability lens makes managers aware of refugees' unique challenges but neglects effective plans for enhancing refugees' agency and capacity for professional development. The capability lens features opposite benefits and drawbacks. But with a more balanced view, managers might be able to take migration-related challenges into account while also recognizing refugees' unique skills, knowledge, and agency. Similarly, a former director of the Refugee Studies Centre of the University of Oxford has argued for a paradigm shift to build refugees' capabilities.

Such a view challenges the unsupported notion that vulnerabilities and capabilities are necessarily counterpoints. In some cases, they can even be interrelated. For example, some refugees ultimately build resilience through the process of overcoming significant and potentially traumatic challenges, like uncertainty in the asylum-seeking process, fear of deportation, and sorrows about relatives left behind. If managers, applying the dual lens, recognize and help reduce such barriers, they can simultaneously promote employees' capacity building.

Beyond proposing the lenses and arguing for the value of a combined approach, we sought insights into their actual effects in practice, through interviews, practitioner workshops, and consulting with employers. The resulting insights reveal how the lenses shape managers' reasons to employ refugees and engage in workplace integration activities. These real-world applications also reveal three types of managers—humanitarians, lecturers, and pragmatists—who leverage and combine the lenses in different ways. (Figure 1).

## What drives managers?

The three types of managers cite three distinct reasons for employing refugees, which in turn led them to design different sets of workplace integration activities.

## Focus on the vulnerability side: Humanitarians and lecturers

Managers whose primary intent is to do something good are *humanitarians*. Paradoxically, they intend to do something positive by prioritizing the negative. Humanitarians tend to regard refugees as helpless and sometimes even unskilled, and they express a sense of duty to take care of refugees by delivering as much aid as possible. Take the example of an executive who employed an unskilled refugee based on a religious foundation:

I employed the refugee because of my faith. As a believing Christian, it is important to me to support everyone regardless of where they come from and what nationality they are.... I have to say that he can only operate very simple work. I can only deploy him for unskilled labor. (Executive, tool manufacturing company)

Despite their desire to do good, humanitarian managers rarely give refugee employees space to develop independently, similar to our opening example of Barbara and Ahmad. Rather, they tend to overwhelm them with aid and workplace integration efforts, leading one refugee apprentice to perceive these behaviors as oppressive, as follows:

The organization is everywhere in my life. I feel like I am caught in a box. (Refugee apprentice, metal manufacturing company)

Even as this informant acknowledged the managers' good intentions, he sought to leave to avoid the feeling of being constricted and unhappy. Such expressions of discontent likely would be a bitter disappointment to managers who made great efforts to promote workplace integration.

Similar to humanitarians, lecturers also adopt the vulnerability lens, but they emphasize different elements. Humanitarians tend to victimize refugees; lecturers focus on the risk that refugees will become a societal burden. As a result, *lecturers'* approaches to employing refugees resemble missionary tactics for educating refugees about the traditions and customs of the host country and organization. To promote the national culture, lecturers might police refugees' behaviors, check whether they are learning the local language, and highlight local cultural norms and laws. Lecturers concentrate on adjustment problems, such as the possibility that refugee employees act differently than would be prescribed by local social norms. Yet these behaviors also signal some use of a capability lens, in that lecturers identify benefits of encouraging new societal members to "follow the rules." This ethnocentric approach to workplace integration is well illustrated by the following quote:

I communicate clearly with my team that I would like them to spend their lunch breaks together with Mohammad [refugee]. I also tell them about the reasoning behind this: 'I want you to talk to each other, I wish that his German improves, I also want you to learn something from him'. So, I try to prevent any segregation among my employees. I check in twice or three times a week during the lunch break and almost control if they spend the break together. And if I see that the Germans

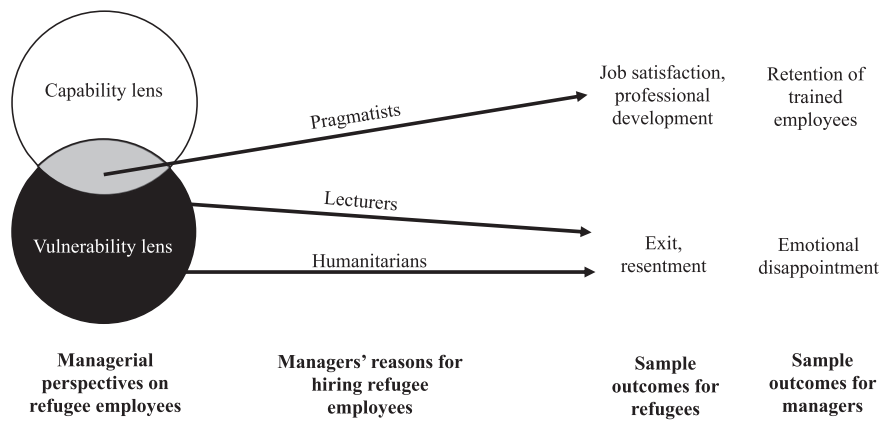


Figure 1. Managerial lenses influence outcomes through managers' reasons for hiring refugees.

stick to themselves and do not include Mohammad, then I go to Mohammad and tell him, 'You want to be part of this, you want to learn the language and be integrated. For that, you cannot stand away from the group. So, I act as a moderator, but sometimes I also force them to spend time together. (Executive, retail company)

Both humanitarians and lecturers tend to become overly involved in their refugee employees' lives, due to a moral desire to help refugees or the fear that refugees might fail. We heard from managers who intervened in their employees' personal lives, including leisure activities and even personal finances; notably, some of them were aware of the potential negative consequences of their behavior:

We have to be very careful that we do not undermine refugees' self-reliance and autonomy. Apprentices should try to solve their problems by themselves and get active in solving them. We can give assistance, but we should not teach them to directly come to us when something doesn't work. (HR Manager, retail company)

Finally, lecturers and humanitarians often become emotionally involved with their refugee employees, whom they regard as "social projects" rather than employees. Such emotional involvement can lead to biased evaluations of the refugees' behavior and performance. Lecturers and humanitarians are susceptible to becoming disappointed and frustrated when the refugee does not act and perform as they would desire.

### Balanced view: Pragmatists

The third type of employer, which we call a *pragmatist*, uses the capability frame far more often. In particular, pragmatists seem to balance the capability and vulnerability lenses almost equally (integrative lens), such that they recognize the challenges refugee employees experience but also identify their strategic workforce value. The manager of a bakery company defined his reason to hire and train refugees as follows:

It is important to us that people can integrate. We also noticed that our local people are not interested to learn the profession anymore. We are very happy that our employed refugees are still interested in learning this

profession, are highly motivated, and are doing it well. (Executive, bakery company)

This statement features the interplay of moral and economic reasons as drivers of the decision to employ refugees. The executive felt a moral obligation to help integrate refugees, but the pragmatic decision also helped the firm address its labor shortage. Thus, refugees represent a valuable resource who can be trained and develop their potential. In turn, the refugee employees we interviewed strongly preferred working with pragmatists, as detailed by a Syrian refugee employee of an apparel company:

I am so grateful. I was worried about my future here in Germany. I lost belief in my abilities. She [supervisor] achieved that my belief in my abilities is back.

Furthermore, the integrative approach is the one most likely to improve employees' job performance, because it prioritizes professional career development. We outline some best practices of pragmatists, highlighting how their behaviors differ from those of humanitarians and lecturers.

### Pragmatic workplace integration measures

We scanned the interview and observation data explicitly to identify how pragmatists' approaches differed from those of lecturers or humanitarians.

### Skill and talent identification

Successful workplace integration starts with careful hiring practices, to ensure the hired refugees have the skills and expertise to succeed in the relevant position or else can be trained to attain those skills. It may sound trivial, but humanitarian and lecturer employers tend to offer refugees vocational training programs or hire refugees without evident aptitude for a position, a mismatch driven by their intentions to do good. They assume it would be enough to provide refugees with any sort of employment in their organizations. Some managers were aware of such mismatches but believed or hoped that, through their effort and aid, the employees would succeed despite lacking the necessary skills or aptitude. Instead, the mismatches were

**Table 2** Workplace integration advice.

**What can hiring managers do?**

1. Be balanced: Managers should avoid seeing refugees only through one lens.
2. Be reflective: Managers should identify the assumptions underlying their motivations to employ refugees.
  3. Be sensitive: Managers should be sensitive to refugees' self-reliance and unique individual needs.
4. Be supportive: Managers should build refugees' capacity as skilled employees.
  5. Be selective: Managers should fill positions with refugees who possess the skills and expertise required for the position or the potential to develop such skills and expertise.
  6. Be compassionate: Along with the focus on pragmatic employment needs, refugee employees may need additional support. Managers should offer only the support they request but do so generously.

**What can refugee employees do?**

1. Be informed about career possibilities: Refugees should request information about realistic career pathways in the organization from their supervisors and HR managers.
2. Be proactive: Refugees should draw managers' attention to their unique capabilities.
3. Be self-reliant: Refugees should be actively working to strengthen their self-reliance.
4. Be forthright: Refugees should communicate with their supervisors if they feel overwhelmed by integration actions provided by the organization.
5. Be self-compassionate: As hard as it may be, refugees should practice compassion for themselves any time they feel overwhelmed. They might actively acknowledge how far they have come and exhibit patience toward themselves if they take longer than wanted to become integrated into the workplace.

harmful to both the refugees and the companies. The unrealistic pressure on refugees to succeed in a position for which they are unqualified is difficult, and managers express frustration and disappointment when they realize that their engagement and aid has been insufficient.

In contrast, pragmatists have a more realistic view. They thoroughly review the refugees' skills and potential for growth and then work to match them to appropriate positions within the organization. In some cases, they offered paid internships for potential candidates, which helped the managers learn about the refugees' skills and enabled the refugees to build a record of domestic work experience. Ultimately, refugees were less likely to drop out of training programs and exhibited more consistent performance gains when their managers adopted an integrative approach.

**Measures to strengthen refugees' self-reliance**

Refugees often struggle with low levels of self-reliance, which refers to a person's ability to provide for their own needs, such as living independently from external support (e.g., humanitarian assistance). For example, years spent in refugee camps or without work permits are defined by low levels of self-reliance—an unpleasant state that pragmatists

acknowledge. In response, they offer workplace integration activities that strengthen self-reliance or build capacity for the future, such as encouraging employees' beliefs in their capabilities, giving them courage, and letting them know that a helping hand is available if needed. By encouraging refugee employees to participate independently in organizational life, this approach increases agency and self-esteem, which are essential to establishing livelihoods on their own in their new countries.

In contrast, humanitarians tend to undermine refugee employees' self-reliance. Driven by their perception of refugees as helpless victims, they believe strong interventions are the key to successful workplace integration. They try their best to shield the refugees from problems, by solving them on the refugees' behalf. The intent is protective, but this level of involvement can inadvertently make refugee employees feel stupid or helpless as if they were incapable of solving the problems on their own. Over time, refugee employees may adopt their managers' perspectives by seeing themselves primarily as helpless victims, which is likely to hinder their performance, prompt disinterest at work, or even lead to higher turnover.

**Career perspectives**

Employees generally have similar career advancement aspirations, but refugee employees might not have access to the same opportunities to advance as non-refugee employees do. In our interviews, refugees commonly claimed that there was no career growth potential in their organizations, and particularly so in organizations in which the vulnerability lens dominated. When refugees could not identify career trajectories in the organizations or had no job advancement possibilities, they became demotivated.

Because humanitarians and lecturers design workplace integration actions to keep refugees from failing, they neglect to identify career pathways for those employees. That is, their primary focus is on preventing refugees from failing in their current positions, not succeeding in future endeavors. In contrast, pragmatists often discuss potential career pathways with refugee employees, including frank assessments of both their vulnerabilities and their capabilities. Merely engaging in such discussions increased refugees' satisfaction with the employer and encouraged them to build long-term working relationships, which represents a win-win outcome for the refugees and the employer.

**Action plans**

These insights provide valuable implications for both practitioners and scholars. Table 2 presents guidelines for what managers and refugees can do for successful workplace integration. However, change is unlikely to occur when it relies on every manager changing lenses independently. Instead, we observed that the managers at a few firms collectively changed from a vulnerability lens to a more integrative lens over time. These firms had in common that they experienced workplace integration failure. This failure triggered managers to critically challenge their assumptions about refugee employees. However, most of the firms in our sample did not

seem aware of the lenses through which they see refugees. To trigger these reflection processes we developed training workshops for practitioners engaged in the workplace integration of refugees. This training helps practitioners reflect on the lenses through which they look at refugees, overcome stereotypes, and finally develop an integrative lens.

Future research following an integrative approach might investigate how firms can effectively balance the lenses we identified. For example, what practices simultaneously enhance refugees' agency to cope with integration challenges and build on their capabilities. Although our insights were based on research in Germany with refugees mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, the lenses and prototypes might also be relevant for other refugees, such as Ukrainians fleeing their country as we finalize this article. Future research might clarify the extent to which cultural, economic or institutional factors lead to a preference for one of the three lenses: vulnerability, capability, and integrative. Closely related is the question of which obstacles impede the development of an integrative lens. We encourage more research that can be used to build stronger workplace systems for refugee employees.

## **Conclusion**

To open this article, we described Barbara's unintended folly and over-involvement in Ahmad's life. Another, more

optimistic account involves another manager who participated in our study. Birgit, a middle manager in an apparel company, came to the realization that by focusing only on vulnerabilities, she was undermining her own integration actions, by delaying the self-reliance achieved by the refugees under her supervision. Therefore, she carefully rethought her actions, working together with colleagues. She said: "We realized over time that our workplace integration approach was neglecting our refugee employees' capabilities with detrimental consequences for our refugees and the firm. After a period of experimentation, we adapted our workplace integration to promote refugees' agency much stronger than before". As our recommendations imply, it is possible for managers to become heroes, by taking an integrative and pragmatic approach to employing refugees.

## **CRedit authorship contribution statement**

**Robin Pesch:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing-Original draft preparation, Writing - Review & Editing; **Ebru Ipek:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing-Original draft preparation, Writing - Review & Editing; **Stacey Fitzsimmons:** Conceptualization, Writing-Original draft preparation, Writing - Review & Editing.



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