Employers of migrants and refugees in regional Australia: profit-minded, ethical, ethnicizing, or all of the above?

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Abstract:

Employers play a key role in the current Australian immigration system by shaping the demand for specific skills and the actual immigration of large amounts of overseas migrants. They also influence the internal migration process of humanitarian entrants by facilitating relocation from metropolitan locations to work in regional locations. Beyond paid employment, some employers also provide informal settlement assistance to their recently arrived employees from overseas. This article explores the rationales that underpin these additional roles played by employers of new migrants in some regional locations. Based on recently completed, ARC-funded research on regional settlement in Australia, it highlights the complexity of employers’ motivations, which are characterised by business rationales, moral and ethical considerations with some ethnic bias in the mix. Drawing on the perspectives of migrants and employers, the article shows how these seemingly contrasting considerations comfortably co-exist in a regulatory vacuum.

Keywords: Employers, migrants, refugees, employment, settlement

Introduction

With the shift from a supply to a demand-driven immigration policy regime in Australia, employers have become key actors as sponsors of both permanent and temporary migrants (Hugo 2010). Much research on labour migration and migrant employment has however focused on the experiences of migrants while the actions, roles and influences of their employers have remained relatively underexplored. A better understanding of the role of business alongside other actors is therefore pertinent to understand the ways in which multiple factors at micro, meso and macro level interact to shape labour migration and the settlement of new entrants (Castles 2007).

In this paper I seek to further such an understanding by focusing on the perspectives of employers while also considering those of migrants and refugees in the context of regional migration, by drawing on recent scholarship from migration sociology and beyond, as well as recently completed empirical research. Building on the debate about the tensions between moral and utilitarian arguments in a business context, the paper challenges the simplistic dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ethical and un-ethical employers which often features in discussions of migrant employment.

Some (employers) I could see were exploiting them because they didn’t know any better that is the migrants didn’t know better, but the support groups that
were here, the paid ones and the volunteers ones, they tried to enlighten their migrants as to which were the good employers and which were the not so good employers.  
(Settlement worker in regional Victoria)

Rationales and racializations in the recruitment of migrant labour

Employer demand is increasingly portrayed as the driving force of labour migration. Some scholars have suggested that it is in turn migration that shapes and regulates the labour markets in migrants’ destination countries (Bauder 2006), or that labour demand and supply are mutually conditioning (Ruhs and Anderson 2011). Current Australian skilled immigration policies generally require the presence of skills shortages as a precondition of employer sponsorship of overseas workers (DIAC 2012). Beyond labour and skills shortages, other factors also shape employer demands for migrant labour. As Ruhs and Anderson (2010: 6) have put it succinctly, ‘What employers want can be critically influenced by what employers think they can get from the various pools of available labour, while at the same time, labour supply often adapts to the requirements of demand’.

The missing ‘skills’ in demand are often poorly defined, which leads to an identification of skills gaps where local workers may be reluctant to accept adverse working conditions amongst local workers (Ruhs and Anderson 2010). Employers’ assumptions about the ‘work ethic’ or productivity of different groups of workers critically influence labour demands and recruitment patterns (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Dench et al. 2006; MacKenzie and Forde 2009). As has been discussed in relation to migrant workers in different countries, these ascriptions are often gendered and racialized (McDowell 2009; Ruhs and Anderson 2010). Stereotypical figures such as the caring female Filipina nursing assistant (McDowell 2009), the Latino worker with the right attitude to work (Waldinger and Lichter 2003) or the reliable and integer Sikh (Bauder 2005) contribute to ideas about different nationals’ ‘appropriateness for different types of work’ (McDowell 2009). A related factor is employers’ awareness of the vulnerability of migrants based on lower levels of familiarity with workplace rights or their - de facto or assumed - limited access to protection from exploitation (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; MacKenzie and Forde 2009). This vulnerability usually translates into higher levels of compliance, which makes these workers attractive to employers and leads in turn to a demand for certain nationals (Ruhs and Anderson 2010; Waldinger and Lichter 2003).

A solid body of research on migrant and refugee employment in Australia and overseas has highlighted experiences of discrimination (Piore 1979; Fugazza 2003; Ho and Alcorso 2004; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; 2007; Chiswick and Miller 2008; HREOC 2008). One of the ways in which employers deflect responsibility for discrimination is by transferring responsibility to the market (Tilbury and Colic Peisker 2006). The previously noted employer preference for migrant workers based on their assumed compliance can be interpreted as a paradoxical case of positive discrimination in recruitment that can go hand in hand with discriminatory and exploitative practices in the workplace.
It is useful to look beyond the sociological literature (Castles 2007) to analyses of employer rationales from a human resource management perspective. Forde and McKenzie (2011) have identified three approaches towards ethics and migrant workers, namely ‘business case’, ‘minimal compliance’ and ‘social justice’. A basic principle of the ‘business case’ for diversity is the recognition and valuing of differences, which is said to contribute to organizational renewal and innovation as well as the ability of the business to attract a wider spectrum of customers (Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010: 103). Arguments that are underpinned by a strong ‘business case’ logic may lead however to reinforcing existing class and race divisions and inequalities in the labour market (Forde and McKenzie 2011; Noon 2007). Others have highlighted that ‘business arguments can coexist with social justice arguments to produce a case for diversity that is capable of achieving greater social equality’ (Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010, 102). The fundamental flaw of grounding arguments for diversity and equality in business benefits is its vulnerability to short term economic challenges (Barmes and Ashtiany 2003). With the absence of business benefit the case for diversity and equality disappears (Noon 2007).

Migrant and refugee workers in the regions: the research and methodology

The research under discussion in this paper has emerged from an ARC-funded Linkage Project on the regional and rural settlement of recently arrived visible migrants and refugees. The research has investigated the social, political and economic factors that impact on the settlement experience of these recent entrants.

The methodology included a web survey addressed to respondents who work in the area of settlement; focus groups with 90 stakeholders involved locally in regional settlement; 85 semi-structured interviews with migrants and refugees from African, Middle Eastern, East and South East Asian countries; and 37 expert interviews with government and business representatives.

This paper draws primarily on the analysis of interview data collected from five employers in small to medium-sized enterprises in the agricultural and food processing sector, in addition to data from interviews with migrants and refugees.

Migrants’ and refugees’ experiences of their employers

Many migrants and refugees who participated in this research, portrayed their employer as an important figure in their settlement process and a port of call for any settlement-related matter, exceeding by far the immediate realm of employment and the traditionally expected role of employer. Employers were often described as knowledgeable and helpful in life situations that the migrant or refugee found challenging. These included financial decisions such as the purchase of a new car as well as assistance in such adverse situations as a police arrest after drink driving.

A: And every week, if we have some problem or we need something we go to Bruce
B: Yeah and he knows about everything, he’s like Google.com
C: If anything bad happened we call Bruce, anything could happen, we call him.
D: Car breaks down, he comes and picks it up. (Group interview)
Employers also emerged as critical actors in attracting the interviewed humanitarian entrants as well as skilled migrants to the regional location by offering employment and in some cases also facilitating the move of humanitarian entrants from Melbourne. They also organized accommodation and other settlement-specific services in the absence of statutory or community sector support. It is significant that the supportive and pastoral role described by many interview participants was not limited to humanitarian entrants who tend to be viewed as ‘needy’ in the public. It extended to recently arrived skilled migrants who are often constructed as self-sufficient in comparison (Boese 2009) and are indeed not targeted by any governmental settlement support or related assistance (DIAC 2011). In our interview sample however both humanitarian entrants and skilled migrants found themselves in situations where they required assistance in the settlement process which some employers were able and ready to meet.

In the case of humanitarian entrants whose stay has exceeded the period of federally funded settlement support, the regional employer often emerged as the only port of call. In the case of skilled migrants on temporary visas, the employer is furthermore critical in granting sponsorship for a permanent visa. This creates a dependency symptomatic of a power imbalance that is easily concealed by the described supportiveness of some employers.

**Employers: profit-minded, ethical, ethnicizing, or all of the above?**

Employers interviewed for this research were generally keen to recruit workers, both skilled and unskilled, who were committed to stay in the regional location due to prior recruitment difficulties. The range of assistance mentioned by migrant and refugee workers was also reflected in the employer descriptions of their relationship with the migrant workforce. To achieve a closer understanding of the rationales that underpin such employer behaviours, I will now turn to extracts from two employer interviews. While I do not claim this data is generalizable based on the small sample, I am suggesting that it assists in identifying the complex motivations at issue here.

The first quote is from an interview with an employer whose workforce consists to fifty percent of skilled migrant workers, some on s457 Business (Long Stay) visas (temporary), some on s119/857 Regional Skilled Migration Scheme (permanent) visas.

> When they [ie the migrant workers] first came here I took care of all their accommodation, I found accommodation for them and I put them up and then I found another house but they all wanted to live together but I said it’s too crowded. So I bought a caravan and stuck a caravan at the back that's what they wanted. And I took them to church and did all these sorts of things, took them to where to buy food and then bought vehicles for them and lent them money and do whatever else you have to do to make it work. And at the end of it all I think they have the respect.

Leaving aside the overall tone of this statement, it certainly describes a relationship that exceeds the efforts an average employer would invest in providing for her
employees’ needs. A significant conclusion drawn by this employer is that the additional assistance he provides to his migrant employees gains him their respect. Beyond that, he considers these extra services as a necessity ‘to make it work’. This evaluation of his own efforts and their outcome suggests that this employer’s predominant motivation is a business interest in committed workers who respect him. Being well settled appears as a mere precondition of this ultimate objective.

The same employer however expressed explicit empathy with the workers in their position as strangers without social connections in Australia.

You can imagine being in a country where you know no one and the only people that you rely on is your employer. I think it’s human nature if you don’t look after them it's just not right.

What the employer describes here as ‘human nature’ can be interpreted as an ethical position distinguishable from the earlier ‘business case’-argument. That a lacking concern for newcomers who have no access to other assistance, is ‘just not right’ is a moral value statement unrelated to his interest in a ‘functional’ workforce.

The second quote is from an interview with an employer whose workforce consists exclusively of overseas workers on skilled visas. This employer explained that part of his recruitment research aims to ensure that the prospective worker does not abandon his family in his country of origin through migration. What might firstly appear as an ethical concern with the wellbeing of the worker’s family overseas, can also be interpreted as a business-centred concern with securing a sustainable workforce, undisturbed by the experience of family fragmentation or the prospect of returning home to be reunited as a family.

At the end of the day it's in our own interest because if you haven’t got, like, because if you haven’t got, like a settled workforce and a settled people then it’s not good, you know ..

The same employer was also keen to prevent his migrant workers from working overtime. In explaining his rationale to the workers he appealed both, to their sense of wellbeing and their consideration for his business interest.

I said well, I don’t want over time and it's not about money. I said I want, I don’t want to put an emphasis on over time for the simple reason is that you guys came here to have a different lifestyle, you didn’t, you were working 12 hours a day where you were and I said did you like that? And they said no. And I said well let's not start heading that way, you know. And I said I don’t believe we get the best out of people once we get over certain many hours a week.

Both interview extracts show an inextricable connection between the employer’s astute awareness of the migrants’ personal background and wellbeing on the one hand, and a clear interest in protecting business interests in the equation on the other hand. This co-existence of business and ethical concerns was apparent throughout the interview. While the data discussed in more detail here pertains to businesses which employ only skilled migrants, the identified constellation of interests also emerged
from interviews with employers who employ both skilled and humanitarian visa holders. These employers’ perception of their employees’ needs for assistance puts indeed into question the earlier mentioned popular juxtaposition of self-sufficient skilled and needy humanitarian migrants.

The employers in these examples as well as other employers who participated in this research not only held positive views on their employees of migrant or refugee backgrounds but they tended to compare them favourably with Australian workers. The common measure for this comparison was the ‘work ethic’ and attitude towards their job, which these employers ascribed to specific ethnic backgrounds. Ethical and business concerns for their migrant workforce went hence along with ethnic stereotypes.

**Conclusion**

This article aims to further our understanding of the rationales underpinning employers’ recruitment and employment practices in relation to their migrant workforce. Rather than conceiving these employers as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, a closer analysis suggests that their influence on migrants’ and refugees’ settlement experience is complex and manifold. The regionally based employers that have been discussed in this article have chosen to assist their migrant workers in their settlement beyond their responsibilities as employers. The underlying rationales and motivations have their basis in interpretations of the migrants’ characteristics and needs and the latter’s impact on their business, combined with ethical imperatives.

Viewed through an economistic lens, the different reasons for assisting migrant workers can all be related to economic interests. In the current political context economically framed arguments for ethical employer behaviour tend to have more clout than those that are morally or ethically framed. However, for analytical purposes we still need to address the challenge of dissecting the economic, moral and ethical rationales when trying to understand the relations between employers and migrant workers. As long as businesses act as default settlement assistants for many new entrants in a regulatory vacuum, such an endeavour is relevant in understanding the present and future of migrant and refugee settlement in a multicultural Australia.

**Footnotes**

1. By ‘recently arrived’ we mean within the last five to seven years. Visibility is understood as a relative category, which only ever carries meaning in relation to a particular place and time.

2. The research was led by Prof Brian Galligan and Dr Millsom Henry-Waring at the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne and carried out in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) and the Office for Multicultural Affairs (OMA).
References


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