Abstract:
In this paper we examine the experiences of three refugee groups in using the Job Network: former Yugoslavs, people from Middle Eastern backgrounds and black Africans who arrived in Australia during the 1990s and 2000s as permanent residents. We contrast these refugees’ perceptions of the Job Network with those expressed by employment service providers. Whereas the latter tend to see themselves as ‘expert’ mediators in the Australian job market culture, our study shows that the former found the Job Network assistance to be generally inadequate. Notwithstanding, the majority of our participants regarded the job seeker training sessions as useful in developing social networks, even when these services did not directly lead them to employment.

Introduction
Finding employment is one of the challenges that refugees—and other migrants—face when they arrive in Australia. Unlike other migrants, humanitarian entrants are entitled to unemployment and family support benefits upon arrival (Taylor 2004). For the first twenty six weeks, humanitarian entrants are exempted from seeking employment while they adjust to their new situation and attend English language classes. During this period, accessing the employment services is optional. Afterwards, job seeking is mandatory
Private, government and community agencies are contracted by the government to provide employment assistance to job seekers, including refugees (Webster and Harding 2001; Puls 2001; APC 2002). But how do refugees perceive these agencies, collectively known as the ‘Job Network’ (JN)? In this paper we examine, firstly, the experiences of three refugee groups in using the Job Network: former Yugoslavs, people from Middle Eastern backgrounds and black Africans who arrived in Australia in the 1990s and 2000s as permanent residents. Secondly, we contrast these refugees’ perceptions of the JN with those expressed by employment service providers. Whereas the latter see themselves as ‘expert’ mediators in the Australian job market culture, the former regard the JN assistance as inadequate.

The information presented in this paper is part of a larger project that focuses on the effects of ‘visible difference’ on employment outcomes for the three aforementioned refugee groups (see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003; 2006; Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006). The data were collected by undertaking 150 structured questionnaire-based face-to-face interviews with refugees, with the choice of open-ended comments for some questions. Bilingual assistants recruited participants by snowballing. Each refugee group included 50 participants who were of working age and either employed or looking for work, and with a completed high school education, trade or professional education. This well educated sample was selected to eliminate a lack of human capital (poor English and/or lack of skills) as an explanation for poor employment outcomes (see Puls 2001; DIMIA 2002; APC 2002; Wooden 1991). All participants self-assessed their English language skills as being either ‘good’, ‘very good’ or ‘fluent’. We also conducted a total of 40 semi-structured interviews with employers, recruiters and employment service providers, out of which we are using only the sections pertaining to employment service providers.

Seeking jobs: How do refugees look for jobs?

We asked respondents about the methods used to look for a job (Table 1) and, if they were ever employed in Australia, how they had found work (Table 2). The questions aimed to identify the relationship between methods used, and relative success.
answers varied among the three groups, reflecting cultural differences and approaches to resettlement, as will be shown later.

**Table 1 – What methods have you used to look for a job?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>MidEast</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal methods</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door knocking</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community networks</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other networks</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Multiple answers possible. Two responses missing from each of the African and Middle Eastern samples.

On average 86.7% used formal methods to seek employment. Community networks also were highly important for the former Yugoslavs and the Middle Easterners, but less so for Africans. Former Yugoslavs and Middle Eastern migrants were able to take advantage of the long established communities from previous migration waves (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2005:7). These results are similar to Lee’s (2002:25) findings on job search strategies among migrants and refugees. She found a higher preference for the use of newspapers.

**Table 2 – If employed in Australia, what methods did you used to find that job?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>MidEast</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal methods</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door knocking</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community networks</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>46.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other networks</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Multiple answers possible. Eight responses missing from each of the African and Middle Eastern samples.
Again, formal methods appear most successful in finding employment (56.7%). When considering the groups separately, the Middle Eastern group showed the highest successful use of formal methods (64%), followed by black Africans (60%). The ex-Yugoslavs, on the other hand, showed greater use of community networks (66%). Tables 1 and 2 show the importance of formal methods for refugee job seekers; yet, whether their success in finding employment has resulted from the use of the Job Network services is another matter.

**Job Network service providers and NESB migrant job seekers: tasks and challenges**

In order to make the welfare system more ‘efficient’ in 1998 the Liberal Coalition Government introduced the Job Network. This network of tendered private and community service providers replaced the former Commonwealth Employment Services (CES) (Puls 2001; APC 2002; Colic-Peisker and Waxman 2005). Two important changes were introduced. One was the focus of services on ‘mainstream’ clients (see Jupp 2002; Colic-Peisker and Waxman 2005). ‘Mainstreaming’ implied understanding the job-seekers’ needs as universal; thus, special needs’ groups such as NESB migrants were not made a priority. The other change was ‘outcome-based’ payment to service providers; that is, the number of people successfully allocated into permanent jobs determined payment (see Kyle et al. 2004; Oslington 2005). A JN recruiter explained, ‘the way the organization like ours works is that we need vacancies, that’s number one. […] If we don’t have vacancies, we can’t fill those positions; we don’t make money’. Even though the new model allowed for specialized tendering of the services, for instance focusing on NESB clients; there were no financial incentives for doing so. On the contrary, outcome-based payments for the service providers meant a greater focus on clients who were easier to place in permanent employment (Kyle et al. 2004). In fact, there are currently no JN members who cater specifically for NEBS clients in Western Australia.

JN services are organised into three main stages. ‘Job Matching’ is the initial stage whereby job seekers already referred by Centrelink need to register with a JN provider. If after three months the job seekers have not found full-time employment, they are called to attend a series of seminars on ‘Job Search Training’, the second stage. If they have still
not found employment within the next three months, they enter into the ‘Intensive Assistance’ stage, which involves several substages until the job seeker finds employment (see APC 2002; Lee 2002). In accomplishing their tasks, employment service providers see their role as that of ‘expert’ mediators between the unemployed and potential employers. A JN staff member explained:

It’s a coaching role, absolutely. You’ve got to remember, too, that some of our clients [employers] may be managers in certain fields but they don’t have any skills in actually recruiting and understanding core functions or … competencies of particular jobs, so really, we’re experts; we know […] what’s transferable, what’s not, what you can do with certain skills. Then, it’s actually convincing the client to at least look at people on their own merit and saying: ‘this can work for you and there are so many other benefits to it’, as well. (Stress is ours).

Clearly the perceived ‘client’ is the employer, and staff see themselves as working on their behalf, to find the appropriate skills match. Job seekers need to accommodate to the expectations negotiated between the employer and the service provider. Furthermore, service providers’ views of themselves as the capable translators, mediating between potential employers and employees, tend to downplay their own need for cross-cultural awareness.

Refugees’ perceptions of the Job Network services

In such a context, how do Job Network service providers fare in the eyes of their refugee clients? Of our sample, only a third were referred to JN services by Centrelink, although others may have accessed the services voluntarily before they were bound to do so. We asked those who had used the services to evaluate their usefulness (Table 3).

Table 3 – How would you describe these services?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>MidEast</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of responses per group: 26/50; 20/50 and 33/50 respectively.
There is a substantial difference evident in the appraisal of Middle Easterners compared to the other two groups. A large number of former Yugoslavs and Africans were critical of these services, considering them ‘poor’ (52%) or ‘acceptable’ (22%). A Bosnian woman who holds a TAFE Diploma commented:

My case manager was very nice/polite and provided moral support. However they never found a job for me. I did it on my own. I believe these services are useless and government should consider changing the way they function. They should have individually tailored services as not everyone has the same needs.

Among comments made by the African sample, criticisms were similar. A university-educated Ethiopian expressed his experience in stronger terms. He wrote, ‘Job Network providers are the real “dole bludgers” who earn by pretending to find jobs while they leave their clients to their own devices’.

These comments were in stark contrast to those from Middle Eastern respondents. Their highly positive evaluation is partly the result of general cultural politeness imperatives (see Tilbury 2006). But they also may derive from fear, mistrust in authority, and the perceived consequent loss of Centrelink payments, as an Iraqi resettlement officer explained:

Iraqis do not want to criticise anyone. […] I’m trying to convince them [Iraqi clients] that I’m working for the community organisation, but they think I’m a government agent. This is an issue we raise with the community from time to time. We tried to organise a peaceful demonstration against the war in Iraq, but people were afraid to come over […]. They say “the government may cut our Centrelink payments”.

Notwithstanding the fear, those who did provide further details on their responses articulated clear critical views of the JN services. An Iraqi man with a university degree commented: ‘they told me look for job and when find job, tell us’. Another Iraqi man who holds a TAFE Diploma further commented that ‘most people who work there are not qualified and have no idea how to fix problems or deal with migrants’.

**Job search training**
The majority of our respondents who had used the JN services had attended training sessions (former Yugoslavs 68%, Africans 44% and Middle Easterners 82%). We asked participants to assess how useful they found the training in order to find employment (Table 4).

**Table 4 – How useful did you find the training in order to find employment?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>MidEast</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty useful</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all useful</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of responses per group: 33/50, 21/50 and 42/50 respectively.

Almost half did not respond to this question, but overall participants found the training more useful than they found the services generally. Once again, respondents from Middle Eastern backgrounds provided the most positive responses; Africans were the most critical. Some stressed a sense of threat as a motivation for attending rather than any perceived usefulness of training. For instance, a Nigerian man with a post-graduate qualification wrote:

> As far as I am concerned the training is a waste of time, money and energy for both the government and people like me. The training is so basic that it is even boring. I did the training because I had to do it under the social security act.

To explore alternative explanations we asked respondents if they found the services useful in ways other than job seeking training (Table 5).

**Table 5 – Have you found the services useful in other ways?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>MidEast</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To meet people</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To meet other migrants</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overcoming isolation  22.0%  10.0%  50.0%  27.3%
Useful in learning about Australia  30.0%  18.0%  46.0%  31.3%
Teachers and staff were helpful  40.0%  20.0%  24.0%  28.0%
Useful in establishing employer contacts  30.0%  14.0%  20.0%  21.3%
Useful in establishing contacts with Australians  34.0%  16.0%  14.0%  21.3%

*Multiple answers possible. Number of responses per group: 29/50, 13/50 and 43/50 respectively.

‘To meet people’ was the highest or second highest choice selected by all participants. Overcoming isolation was particularly important for the Middle Eastern sample. For the former Yugoslavs establishing contact with employers and Australians was perceived as of relatively higher importance than for the other groups. For all groups the need to meet people predominated. This indicates that even though employment service providers seemed inadequately prepared to act as cultural ‘mediators’ in the employment market, they did provide a necessary space to fulfill some of refugees’ needs: meeting other people, and developing networks, which are usually more restricted for recent migrants, especially those from a NESB.

**Conclusion**

According to evaluations of the Job Network services, both nationally and locally, they have not reduced unemployment rates significantly either for mainstream or NESB clients. Job Network service providers do not appear adequately equipped to deal with the special requirements of refugees in the job seeking process; which helps explain their slow integration into the labour market. Oslington (2005:32) suggests that ‘[u]ltimately the effectiveness of programs like the Job Network depends as much on the causes of unemployment as the quality of the programs’. The comparatively high unemployment rates among refugees appear related to cultural unawareness towards job seeker clients. Instead, service providers and employers stress the need for the refugees to conform to the demands of the Australian job market, demands which include language and other technical skills, but also revolve around ‘cultural skills’. A common concern with the
adequacy of the Job Network services is that they do not provide their refugee clients with the necessary information about the workings of the employment services. Our research supports these conclusions.

Unemployment among refugees in Australia is regarded by some scholars as a problem of skills. For instance, Wooden argues, that their unemployment is not related to ethnic discrimination, but to the problems of English language skills and job skills that are relevant to the local labour market. Wooden’s argument does not account for many of the refugee cases considered in our study: highly qualified refugees, some with high levels of English literacy. In contrast, our study shows that ‘visible’ difference – in terms of accent, language, qualifications and racial differences, but also cultural knowledge differences – may prevent these migrants from having the same opportunity as ‘mainstream’ Australians, for whom the JN employment services have been designed. Clearly there is a mismatch between perceptions of refugee clients and JN providers of the adequacy of the services, and perhaps expectations of their respective roles.

Assisting refugees in their job seeking process in the Australian job market requires a focus broader than looking at employment indexes and finding and filling job vacancies. As Oslington suggests, more attention should be paid to user-led rather than ‘service-led’ assistance. Our findings suggest the shortcomings of outcome-based service provision, which was found by participants to be generally inadequate. Notwithstanding, they found the services useful in developing social networks, even when these services did not directly lead them to employment. Service providers fared better in the view of these refugees in their usefulness beyond employment training than they did in relation to their specific purpose: assisting people to find jobs. We can, thus, conclude that service providers and refugee job seekers do not meet in their respective goals. The former see themselves as ‘experts’ in the job market. However, their expertise lies in their ability in finding appropriately skilled employees for employers, rather than providing training and specific job seeking assistance for job seekers. In other words, in their specific relation to job seekers, service providers appear to expect the needed skills to be found among rather than given to job seekers. The latter, instead, seek to gain skills, networks and jobs.
Footnotes

1 These three groups of refugees came to Australia from war-torn countries. The majority of former Yugoslavs in the sample are Bosnians who lived in Australia for 5 years or more. The Middle Eastern sample is comprised largely of Iraqis. Most of them have been settled in Australia for about 5 years. The African sample is mostly comprised of Sudanese, Eritrean and Ethiopians.

2 People were asked to mark all the appropriate options and this is why percentages do not add to 100%.

3 By ‘formal methods’ we mean newspaper advertisements, internet, shop window, Job Network and/or Centrelink.

4 By ‘community networks’ we mean close-tied networks such as family and friends and ethnic group. Hence, ‘other networks’ refers to looser ties with the wider community.

5 Lee’s report includes ‘improve English’ and ‘further studies’ as job searching strategies. Both represent the highest percentages among humanitarian entrants, 61.6% in each case. ‘Newspapers’ represent 58.3% and ‘through friends’ 50%.

6 Prior to this change, Miller and Neo (1997), in an evaluation of immigrant unemployment in Australia between 1980 and 1996, noted the relative disadvantage of NESB migrants and the need for specialised services.

References


Colic-Peisker, V. and F. Tilbury (2006a) 'Integration into the Australian Labour Market: the Experience of Three "Visibly Different" Groups of Recently Arrived Refugees.' Forthcoming in International Migration 44.


