Female Migrant Workforce: Future Directions

by Lesleyanne Hawthorne
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ISBN 0-947119-05-1
ISSN 0155-4409
FEMALE MIGRANT WORKFORCE: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Presented at the International Business Communications Conference.
"Managing Diversity in the Australian Workforce in the 1990’s" (Sydney, May 1 & 2, 1990)

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Introduction

In the seventies, if you had been asked to describe the 'typical' migrant woman, chances are you would have said that she had a peasant background, spoke poor English, had little education, fewer skills, and worked in manufacturing.

This stereotype was only ever partially true and will be less true in the future. My purpose in this paper is pragmatic, and future-oriented. I want to introduce you to the kind of migrant women who will seek to enter employment with you in increasing numbers throughout the nineties, as a direct result of changes in immigration policy. Perhaps you employ many of them already - people like Sim, Malgorzata and Reina. They are different from the migrant women of the past, and different from mainstream Australia. They offer you great potential, while presenting you with real challenges. Handled poorly, you and they will get less than you should in terms of outcomes. Handled creatively, with innovative management thinking, you will find you have recruited excellent human resources.

Sim is one of 24,000 Malaysian women who migrated to Australia before 1986. She is an accountant with thirteen years uninterrupted professional experience - despite the birth of three daughters. Women from Malaysia in fact have high workforce participation rates, with those migrating here being twice as likely to be professionals as the rest of the Australian female population (10% cf 5%) (1). Asian women have the potential to form a new workforce elite. They possess degrees at almost three times the rate of local women (despite the figures being distorted by Vietnamese and mainland Chinese women, who have much lower education rates). According to research conducted by Dr Poo Kong Kee at the University of Melbourne, Chinese migrants from Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong are far better educated than the norm, more likely to be in professional or managerial positions, have high incomes, and few English problems (2). Their qualifications are recognized because they trained in commonwealth countries. Women like Sim have strong workforce potential.

Reina is an executive secretary from El Salvador, a Central...
American country from which Australia is taking increasing numbers. She worked for the Attorney General there — before he was decapitated in the bomb blast that blew the roof off his car. Reina migrated soon after with her husband and family, and phrase-book English. She is committing herself to studying the language, knowing it is the first essential step to re-accessing her career. She has a good educational background like other El Salvadorean women here. 65% of Australian women have left school before the age of 16. This compares with only 39% of female El Salvadoreans.

Malgorzata's first career was as an historian in Poland. She completed a master's degree in her field before she joined Solidarity, fell foul of the Polish government, was arrested and beaten up, and escaped to Austria with her husband. She cooled her heels there for a year, waiting anxiously for a visa to Australia. Assessing the situation quickly after arrival, she saw she would have minimal chance in the foreseeable future of securing work as an academic.

She was prepared to adapt, and fixed on a three year plan that might transform her chances. The first year she studied English — five days and four nights a week, taking and meticulously attending any course on offer. She studied newspapers to learn labour market trends. The second year she enrolled in a post graduate conversion course in computer science. The course was taxing, but she studied tenaciously and made a career transition in one year. She sought and found employment as a programmer in the public sector. In the next three years she had two babies, but promptly returned to work. It was not just a matter of money, she assured me. It was natural that she should want to develop her career.

The New Migrant Workforce

The Southern European women who migrated in the fifties came from restricted circumstances, to restricted Australian choices. The government provided few language classes, allowances, or other educational supports. The situation now is totally different.

Migration is a tool for social engineering. As the places in manufacturing that sustained a generation of postwar migrants permanently disappear, the government has re-committed itself to renewed high level immigration (about 140,000 people each year). Once our aim was to import brawn, not brains. Now, with research showing a clear nexus between long term unemployment and low skills (4), policy is designed to recruit professional, para-professional and business migrants — people seen as capable of making a swift contribution to Australia's performance in the post-technological age. The bias towards skills exists even in the refugee/special humanitarian and family reunion categories — which once delivered vast numbers of unskilled people to Australia.

It is hard to get a sure estimate of the number of skilled
women arriving. According to statistics published by the Bureau of Immigration Research, by the end of the 1980s 30% of the total migrant intake was skilled, 13% semi-skilled, and 4% unskilled. This was almost certainly an under-estimate, for many women with strong occupational skills do not appear in the statistics. There is systematic distortion in the information gathering process at overseas posts. When families apply, the skills of 'principle applicants' (ie male) are counted in the tally. The remaining 53% of the intake are summarized, somewhat dismissively, as 'dependants (mostly spouses and children)', whose skills are simply not counted.

While it is true that many migrant women have lower qualifications than their husbands, it is wrong to assume that this is generally the case. As in Australia, men frequently marry women of similar educational and socio-economic status. Last year, in my work at RMIT, I was in a position to screen all applicants for courses, and compare statistical data on occupation with the reality offered by a vital array of women. The disparity between the accuracy on males and females was blatant. Large numbers of engineers, economists, secretaries, administrators (etc) were described as 'not in the workforce' or 'home duties' - apparently simply because they happened to be wives and mothers, married to men regarded as 'principle' applicants.

There is little doubt that these women intend to seek employment in large numbers, and in positions commensurate with their skills. Many come from migrant source countries that support female training and workforce participation in a full range of career options. Few are plagued by the personal doubt about combining careers with child-rearing still suffered by many Australian women. Women from socialist countries, like Poland or China, justify their training by full-time career-oriented employment. Childcare may be poor quality, but it is widely provided and frequently used. In the newly industrializing countries of South East Asia, as in Central and South America, middle class women have been freed of domestic and childrearing responsibilities to a degree undreamt of by Australian professional women. Cheap servants in these countries provide secure home-based childcare and household support for women. Gaps in employment due to childbearing are in consequence often minimal. Sim took three months off work each time she had a daughter. Reina was briefly away when she had her son. Neither felt career-orientation precluded them from being loving and attentive mothers.

Personal Backgrounds

The women you can expect to target employment in your organization will have four main backgrounds.

They include new migrants like Sim or Reina, who gained all their professional training and a high degree of skill overseas. Most often they spend six months to a year on English. Then they will enter the workforce.

The second group comprise people like Malgorzata, who complete their qualifications in Australia—either because
their overseas qualifications aren't recognized, or because market forces don't favour employment in their original field. These women typically spend longer learning English, since they will face the rigorous demands of tertiary courses. They seek employment after the one to four years it takes for study completion. By then they will have earned their place in your workforce twice over.

The third major group targeting employment are newly graduated overseas students (mostly Chinese,) who left their homelands at the age of eighteen to enrol in tertiary studies in Australia. Many have qualified in valued areas like accounting, computer science, or engineering. Though 'Asian migration' may mean Indochinese to the typical Australian, only one in six Asian-Australians has arrived as a refugee. Ex-students are a very substantial group - welcomed when they apply for permanent residence, because of their high level of skills, and experience of life in this country.

The fourth group you will see in your workforce are not strictly speaking migrants - though many will later change their status. According to a 1989 Monash University conference on trends in immigration, a characteristic of the workforce in the next two decades will be the increasing internationalization of professional workers - people changing countries according to international demand for skilled labour. Bureau of Immigration Research statistics suggest this trend is already a reality. Between 1982 and 1988, for instance, 3,340 female engineers/scientists entered Australia. Only a third of these were permanent migrants - the remainder categorized as 'long term arrivals'. The proportions are similar in other professional fields. In the same period 11,590 women arrived skilled in business and commerce, of whom 4,340 were migrants. Many will initially arrive accompanying their husbands. Most will seek visas and work. They will offer international perspectives to your company.

Barriers to Employment

There are substantial barriers to be faced however, before any of these skilled women can successfully target employment.

The first is level of English. Most professional women from non-English speaking backgrounds will spend one or more years taking English courses, to give them the sophisticated language they will need for work in their proper employment. Government policy has changed from the past. More courses are available; migrants are encouraged to attend sequenced learning options. Attending such courses however is often less complex for men than for women. The childcare supports they relied on in their country of origin have vanished. Though free childcare is provided for daytime classes, children get sick in the first year of migration - and sick children cannot attend childcare centres, so mothers stay home. Night classes tend to be packed with men rather than women - because few childcare options are conveniently arranged at night. Most women achieve their goals however. Many are better language learners than men. They will
5.

persist in learning English because they are determined to revert to their careers.

A second barrier to employment is lack of recognition of overseas qualifications. Attempts are being made at the moment to reform Australia's seriously discriminatory system, by which 90% of qualifications from English-speaking countries are recognized, compared with just over half that number from non-English speaking countries - regardless of quality of courses (8).

Most refugees get their qualifications savagely downgraded. People from the Middle East or non-Commonwealth Asian countries often get their bachelor's degrees cut back by one or two years. Though there is sometimes justice in the decisions made, in many cases there is gross injustice, and even absurdity. Françoise, a native French teacher trained at the Sorbonne University in Paris, was informed in Victoria that her qualifications were regarded as inadequate to teach local French. (The course was different from the Australian Dip.Ed., and therefore unacceptable.) Juanita, a Philippino psychologist with two bachelor's degrees from Manila, and a master's degree from the United States, was told she was recognized as having completed just one year of an undergraduate degree. Her Manila qualifications had been compressed to one year. (Since people start school in the Philippines two years later than in Australia, she was presumed not to have finished high school.) Her US master's degree was not even counted - because according to Australian thinking, she had never been 'eligible' to enter post-graduate education.

Women placed in this situation have two choices. If they are determined enough, and can live poor for years, they will tenaciously work their way through completing an Australian professional qualification. If they are unable to make this life choice, they seek employment at a downgraded level (accounts clerks instead of accountants, secretaries instead of administrators). Almost certainly, if you employ them, you will be underutilizing their skills.

A third barrier to employment is knowledge of the local job-seeking culture. Malgorzata comes from Poland. She had never competed for a job in her life before coming to Australia, and felt supremely awkward doing it. In socialist countries, people are appointed to positions by government: they do not apply, and are rarely consulted. The idea of marketing themselves through applications and interviews may be totally alien.

Women from Asian cultures may also have differing job seeking cultures. Some are trained to a degree of modesty
during interviews that may preclude reasonable self-promotion. A woman from Vietnam or Indonesia may avoid all eye contact, as a way of showing respect - especially if an older male is asking questions. When asked about past work performance, she may modestly infer her skills are minor. The courteous deference she shows in interviews may be construed as excessive passivity (or obsequiousness!) by Australians.

The fourth barrier to work, especially in high positions, is lack of local experience. If you are a refugee, like Malgorzata, the year spent waiting for a visa, coupled with two years of English and professional training, may mean you were out of the workforce for three critical years before re-entering it. You have no local work experience to offer, and no known referees. Whatever your experience and ability, unless market forces favour you, you may spend dispiriting months getting a toehold on employment.

Workbased Challenges

Despite these problems, almost all skilled migrant women find work within a twelve month period of seeking it. Many access it first through public sector employers, with equal employment opportunity policies in place. Most women accept their first job with tremendous relief, which is strengthened in proportion to the time they have spent looking. At this point the next set of challenges begin, however - for them as employees, and for you as managers.

I do not want to exaggerate when looking at these. Many migrant women will experience no significant problems at work. Sim is vibrant and outgoing; she laughs when she makes mistakes in English, and asks for help. She targeted private sector employment, and found her workload a breeze. (Australia has a less competitive business environment than many parts of Asia.) Malgorzata mastered English quickly, improving even faster once surrounded by Australians in her profession at work. She has been promoted twice within a two year period, and is working now as a team manager. It is important to acknowledge though that for significant numbers of women there are real transitional problems.

For five years I taught night classes at RMIT, to migrant professionals engaged in full-time day employment. The women worked in areas ranging from engineering to computer science, architecture, secretarial and administrative tasks. Many of them were struggling, particularly when market forces had favoured their premature employment.

The workplace problems they encountered were almost identical to those I learnt last year, when conducting a needs analysis for migrant professionals employed by three major public sector employers. Just under half these skilled
sixty-six migrants were women - predominantly from south-east Asia, but also from countries as diverse as Turkey, Poland and Egypt. All of them shared four major concerns. Often these concerns were greater for south-east Asians.

The base problem is typically inadequate communication. Many have simply not learned enough English to function fully in their professions. They can work capably with rows of figures, or computer screens, but when further demands are made on them (instruction of users, writing of reports, giving explanations to management) many feel themselves placed suddenly at enormous disadvantage. Though the problems are often transitional, for the women involved they may be humiliating, painful, and create a sense of personal failure. If they have not learnt English for long, they can probably be easily helped by teaching. If they have learnt English poorly years before, and bad grammatical patterns have 'set', they may have accents and speech styles that are very hard to eradicate.

An extension of this problem is the difficulties women report about informal socializing in the workplace. This knowledge is critical when it comes to acceptance or rejection of them as people - a factor which can have long-term implications for the prospect of promotion. Malgorzata found at first that she was regarded as stiff and excessively formal. She did not know how to small-talk comfortably. She came from a country with a lot of surface formality, where it was bizarre to address a boss by his/her first name, or be addressed that way by an office girl. At times it was felt that she deferred too much to people in authority, or patronized the secretaries. This was not her intention, or her fault. Like most migrant women, she had had minimal chance of contact with Australians before getting her first job. She was determined to adapt, and unlearn some old mannerisms. In the meantime, she saw uncomfortably, she put people off.

A third major problem relates to performance in meetings. In some workplaces, meetings are rare occurrences; in others they are ordeals embedded in each week. Speaking at meetings means you contribute and understand; it is also a way of showcasing for promotion. For migrant women however, speaking out may have negative cultural implications. All her life an Indonesian or Vietnamese professional may have expressed interest and respect by quiet concentration. It may feel unseemly to her to criticize, or make suggestions - particularly if she is new to an organization, or younger than others attending. She is not to know, unless taught, that if she says nothing she may be regarded as a foreign mute, who has nothing to say!

The fourth concern of migrant women is the critical one of
accessing promotion. For all the reasons outlined above, they may feel (and be) at a real disadvantage. This sense is compounded when they apply unsuccessfully, perhaps on successive occasions - each time being passed over for native speakers who may have lesser qualifications or skills. The problem here is twofold. The women need to know how to prepare appropriate resumes, and maximize their interview performance to improve their chances of a positive outcome. They also need lead-in time, to prepare their knowledge of English for greater workplace challenges.

The Role of Management

A decade ago most migrant women were alone in their situation. Few could expect to find compassionate understanding of their problems at work. Difficulties were hidden, for fear of discrimination or (in extreme cases) loss of employment. Managers, if they noticed problems, tended to dismiss them all as due to ‘bad English’, and feel that they were owned by the individual migrant - not the organization.

By the end of the eighties, some managers were clearly shifting to a more enlightened and sensitive position.

The organizations I dealt with last year had equal opportunity officers in place: typically females appointed to address discriminatory practices affecting women. None had originally seen migrants as a special needs group. Experience on the job however had led them to realize that there were major social justice issues to be addressed in Australia, when managing an increasingly diverse and talented workforce. They had little knowledge of how to help migrants, but they saw how transitional problems could sharply circumscribe individual potential. Some realized culture had a part to play in difficulties, as well as English. Perhaps the most radical shift was a new perception that an organization (as well as an individual migrant) might own the problem - and share responsibility for seeking better outcomes. They were prepared to consider that work-based solutions might be found, through creative managerial support.

They had a major advantage in seeking such solutions. Their goal in the workplace was identical to that of their skilled migrant workers: most of whom wanted passionately to fit in, contribute their skills, and develop their fullest potential.

Improving English

It can be argued that most of the problems the women face are connected with language difficulties. It is vital that they get appropriate help as soon as possible, because it
becomes harder to change language as time passes - like smashing a vase and remaking it, since language patterns 'set'.

If you employ women with language difficulties, be active with them in exploring available services. If they seem less than appropriate, network with other managers, and lobby for them to be improved.

The Adult Migrant Education Program funds free courses for adult migrants, including the ones your employees will have attended in their first years of settlement. What few employers realize is that the AMEP, through its English in the Workplace Program, can arrange to teach tailored specialist courses on site. This program began in 1947, entering full-time operation in 1973. Three thousand students are currently taught, at more than 300 centres. Typical courses might focus on report-writing skills, meeting procedure, literacy in English (for those with special needs), communication skills (etc). When you seek inclusion in the program, you meet with a representative from EWP to discuss the content, timing and duration of the course. A committee is formed, including employees, union and management. After the needs analysis is conducted, a course of 100 hours or more is designed to be taught on site.

Successful courses can boost a company's image. According to the AMEP, the program offers major advantages to both management and workers: better communication between staff, improved understanding of workplace culture, increased motivation, and greater participation.

If you lack sufficient employees to mount such a course, it is worth contacting similar organizations to yourself, to see if you can put a joint case for a specific program to be mounted. Most TAFE colleges offer vocational English courses. They can be approached to respond to your needs. At the same time, it is worth gathering a full range of leaflets related to courses offered in non-working hours by such providers. Many are available in evenings, by correspondence, or even weekends. You might consider giving your employees time-off incentives to study English. As their language improves, they will become increasingly valuable human resources.

**Link into Employment Programs**

The Adult Migrant Education Program, along with some TAFE colleges, offers a range of courses designed to prepare skilled migrants to fit into appropriate professional work. These courses seek employer input, particularly when it comes to arranging local work experience. If you often recruit newcomers (eg migrant computer programmers), consider contacting course providers to tell them what you think employers need. Take people 'on trial' for a month through the free Work Experience program. If you are satisfied with their potential, offer employment. If there are problems, let the course organizers know.

The government has said, after all, that its prime aim in
skilled migration is recruiting people who are of immediate value to the workforce. It announced in 1989 that an additional $4.68 million would be spent in a single year on advanced English for migrants, coupled with innovative training programs. See if some of these courses could be workforce based. Use employer groups to lobby the government departments responsible for migrant education (DILGEA and DEET) if you have ideas that could contribute to more practical outcomes.

Funding Training

On-going training of workers in Australia is becoming vital, with flexibility in performance becoming a hallmark of the post-technological age. According to a survey conducted by the Australia Bureau of Statistics however (April 1990) (9), Australian managers have been niggardly to date when it comes to investing money in training. Only 22% of organizations spend any money at all - with large firms spending 2.8% of gross wages and small businesses spending less than 1%.

Experience suggests that money spent on training migrants with skills may be money well invested. Induction programs can pre-empt the development of many later problems. Mainstream ones can be broadened to cover work-culture aspects like participation at meetings, communication style, hierarchy in the Australian workplace (etc). If employees from non-English speaking backgrounds will be writing memos or reports, consider offering them a range of photocopied models to illustrate in-house style, and referring them to a mentor for advice, if later they experience trouble. These specialist inductions need not be patronizing, or compulsory. An Australian-educated Malay-Chinese, for instance, may simply not need them.

If your organization is committed to social justice, you will want to develop on-going training strategies that will enhance migrant employees’ chances of successfully targeting promotion. Perhaps in conjunction with like employers, you might consider offering short preparatory courses to develop relevant skills (preparing action resumes, ‘selling’ yourself in interviews, predicting and handling awkward questions etc). When migrants apply unsuccessfully for promotion, consider making time to see them individually, to discuss their major problems - converting a discouraging rebuff to strategies for a better outcome. Once English and cultural barriers are minimized, it becomes easier for all employees to be promoted or rejected on the basis of their skills.

If you employ people whose qualifications have been downgraded, you might consider encouraging them to enrol in part-time studies, that will return them to their original occupations. An Egyptian accountant, for instance, can be promoted from accounts clerk status once she has completed a
limited number of extra units. Her loyalty to your organization is likely to be enhanced. So will her chance of making a valuable contribution.

Cross-Cultural Training

It is vital for managers to recognize that communication is a two-way thing: native speakers, as well as migrants, share responsibility for negotiating understanding in the workplace. The Australian male who complains "I don't understand Ha" may in fact be saying "I don't want to understand Ha! She is an Asian female - why should I take instructions from her on how to use a computer?"

The need for cross-cultural training will receive increasing attention in Australia, with the growing diversity of the white collar workforce. As migrants get appointed to a range of hierarchical levels, Australians will have to confront their own biases, and personally adapt. Many people are still learning to see even women as valid bosses. They need to be encouraged to extend this learning - to see that a Polish woman or a Chinese woman is entitled to be appointed to a position of authority, on the basis of personal skills. Cross-cultural sensitization courses can be offered to all staff, to let them examine their personal biases. Most Australians have never seriously studied another language, or operated in another culture. It can be helpful, for a day or two, to step outside their normal shoes.

Consider Risk Taking

Perhaps the most important choice you as managers can make is to consider a little more risk-taking.

Too many organizations in Australia have denied promotion to women, on the assumption that they have inappropriate skills. Imagine then how often migrant women, despite their potential, have been organizationally bypassed.

Migrants lose a world they cannot retrieve when they change countries. They have to validate what they have lost by what they can personally achieve in the future. If you harness this force, you will see you have recruited skilled workers of will and potential. If you don’t, there is wastage all round.

Galina, an unemployed Russian engineer, once put it this way. "There are three losers in this situation. Australia loses, for bringing in people on account of their skills, and then not using them. People like me lose, for leaving established careers and lifestyle, and then being de-skilled. The countries we come from lose, because they say goodbye to some fine professionals."

Many of the choices will be yours in the nineties, as human resources managers. The decisions you make will help decide whether the new immigration policy is a success or a failure.
Notes

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