

Making Immigration Work – Getting Things Right in the Workplace

Peter A. Creticos

Amidst the growing list of problems crowding the Congressional agenda, lawmakers continue to work on resolving who should be allowed to immigrate to the U.S. and under what conditions. What seems to be missed is that the concerns of many Americans revolve around how newcomers and longtime residents can live and work together successfully. Unfortunately, our national leaders give too little attention to making immigration work at the grassroots level: at the workplace and in the neighborhood, town or village.

Since much of the immigration to the United States is driven by economic need, it stands to reason that integration should begin in the workplace. There, “success” is characterized by a productive and profitable work environment and good wages, working conditions and career opportunities for both native born and immigrant workers. The path to success is based on strong commitments to fairness, tolerance and understanding for the needs all workers.

For example, publicly funded programs that teach English to people who speak other languages – an absolute necessity if immigrants are to succeed economically and in society – must be balanced with training and other smart employment practices for all workers, including aggressive enforcement of laws governing wages and working conditions. These actions keep the playing field level for everybody, especially the most economically vulnerable. They also prevent “bad apple” employers from exploiting immigrants and from using them as wedges against others.

There is a common aphorism that immigrants do jobs that Americans are no longer willing to perform. This dubious characterization of immigrants - and, by inference, their native born counterparts - is juxtaposed to another often-expressed view that immigrants are opportunistic and take jobs from Americans. The fact is that over the last two decades and in virtually every region of the United States, immigrants provide the necessary labor where there are too few “native born” workers to support the economy, much less grow it. While it is true that immigrants are overrepresented in low-wage, low-skill jobs, it does not necessarily follow that people born here are unwilling to do the same work. In many communities, these jobs are in hotels, restaurants and other industries where employment overall is growing rapidly and where the available labor supply has to expand through immigration in order to meet demand.

We have to go further than simply assuring the fair and transparent distribution of resources. We need new policies that are based on the correct assumption that immigrants comprise a core element of the *permanent* labor force that is *driving* economic growth in the United States. That is why, along with immigration reform, we require national guidance and program support that balances the needs of all who seek good jobs and leads to the successful integration of immigrants into workplaces and communities across the country.

We need to adjust existing job pathways to accommodate the different learning needs and skills of an increasingly diverse workforce. This means that community colleges and other adult education and training institutions will be pressed to increase the pace of innovation leading to greater access to their intellectual offerings. Adult students need to be credited for what they know already so that they can get about the business of learning what they need to know through appropriately tailored courses.

There are scores of successful, separate, initiatives in place today. In order to be effective, however, they need to be incorporated into a national framework that promotes integration, treats native-born and immigrants fairly and equitably, addresses the needs of low-skill, low-wage workers by improving their opportunities for good careers, and supports innovation in education and training. During the last great migration to the United States over one hundred years ago, much of the public energy was devoted to efforts that helped immigrants become part of the American fabric. Although people differed widely as to what that ultimately meant, a common thread was that newcomers to America needed to be embraced and not left simply to their own devices. Today, our focus is on border security and legalization. The great achievements of the last century suggest that we must give equal attention to how America now embraces its new immigrants.

Peter A. Creticos, Ph.D.
President and Executive Director

Institute for Work and the Economy
Northern Illinois University - Naperville
1120 East Diehl Road, Suite 140
Naperville, IL 60563-9347

Office: (815) 753-8101
Fax: (630) 214-0348
Mobile: (312) 282-9475

creticos@workandeconomy.org
creticos@niu.edu

Skype: petercreticos

--

www.workandeconomy.org