

**ENGEN**



# **Situation Analysis: Immigration and the Future of the Workforce**

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# FOREWORD

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*Author: Jane Oates, former U.S. Assistant Secretary for the Employment and Training Administration & President, WorkingNation*

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Two years after the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world, American employers are seeking workers in numbers **previously unseen**. The so-called Great Resignation and a surging U.S. economy means that the demand for employees quickly outpaced the labor supply and led to historically high numbers of unfilled jobs. According to the **Bureau of Labor Statistics**, as of February 2022, there are nearly 11 million open jobs but only about 6.5 million unemployed people looking for work.

Our nation is just beginning to feel the effect of this talent shortage. To solve this unprecedented employment crisis, companies can't return to the same old ways of looking for employees. We must build new and innovative pipelines to produce workers with the skills that organizations need today as well as tomorrow.

Throughout my career — as a public school teacher, as a senior leader with the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education and the U.S. Department of Labor and now with WorkingNation — I've devoted myself to expanding opportunities for all kinds of workers and learners to help improve individual opportunity and our nation's economy.

As companies search widely for talent, this must include the ranks of newcomers to this country. There's plenty of ability there, but for too many immigrants, the English-language remains an enormous obstacle to finding good jobs and taking part fully in American life.

My dad was a union organizer, and growing up I was always going to the union hall to get a ride home from school. I remember one union member I saw often — he worked in a factory and always quizzed me about my biology and chemistry classes. As my dad told me later, this man knew so much about science because he had been a doctor in his home country but couldn't get a medical license here.

That immigrant's story stayed with me. He would have made an excellent teacher, perhaps a remarkable doctor, if only his English was better. Since then, when I meet workers limited by language, I see their limitless potential as new Americans if only we can build better pathways.

Today, **one sixth** of the American workforce is made up of people from other nations. Future immigrants and their children born here in the United States will account **for nearly 90 percent** of the nation's population growth over the next four decades. But America now can help **only about 4% of adults** who need to learn English. That's too much wasted potential.

According to a **recent report** from national nonprofit Jobs for the Future, immigrant and refugee workers contribute nearly \$2 trillion annually to the nation's gross domestic product. By the middle of the next decade, projections show that immigrants and their children will add about 18 million

new people to the nation's workforce and help offset the impending retirements of the Baby Boomer generation. Moreover, research has shown that companies that offer English-language adult learning programs see a return on investment for their businesses of more than double.

This paper highlights the importance of immigrants and refugees to the nation's economy and prosperity. It makes good business sense to invest in these essential and capable workers by ensuring they become proficient in English. To take full advantage of this abundance of new talent and expand opportunities for all, we must make certain that everyone has the tools — and language skills — they need to thrive.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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- **Matthew Daniel**, principal consultant, Guild Education
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- **Dianna Lippincott**, assistant director of strategic innovation, Arizona State University's Global Launch
- **Jennifer O'Leary**, director, MaineHealth Center for Workforce Development
- **Laura Roberts**, director of corporate leadership, Jobs for the Future

# SITUATION ANALYSIS:

## IMMIGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORKFORCE

The ongoing resettlement of some **37,000 refugees** from Afghanistan across the country—and President Joe Biden’s recent **commitment** to raising the refugee admissions target to 125,000 for fiscal year 2022—are shining a light on both American immigration policy and the vital contributions immigrants and refugees make to society.

These contributions have garnered well-deserved attention in recent months, thanks to the unprecedented global crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past year, immigrants played **integral** roles in keeping the U.S. economy afloat. The pandemic spotlighted the often-overlooked frontline workers—staffing America’s hospitals, grocery stores and restaurants, farms and food-processing plants—whose “essential and critical” roles (as classified by the Department of Homeland Security) sustain the economy and daily life as we know it, and arguably carried the nation through the pandemic’s darkest hours. According to UCLA’s Latino Policy and Politics Initiative, **over 78 percent of immigrants without legal status** work in these fields.

This increased recognition of the contributions of immigrant workers comes at a time of widespread transformation in the labor market. The economic upheaval caused by the pandemic exacerbated a war for frontline talent that is compelling companies to invest in their workforces in sweeping new ways. Last April, Chipotle announced the expansion of the **debt-free degree** program it launched in 2019 to 10 colleges

and 100 different programs—including those in agriculture, culinary arts, and hospitality—in partnership with leading social impact company Guild Education, which connects employees to its career platform and learning marketplace full of real-world education and training programs to help them achieve their personal and professional goals without coming out of pocket for tuition.” That month, Chipotle Chief Financial Officer Jack Hartung **told CNBC** that 85% of the employees who take advantage of its free degrees work in its restaurants; they’re also 3.5 times more likely to stay with the company, and 7 times more likely to move up into management.

Across the U.S. economy, the trend of investing in training and upskilling has only accelerated. In May, **Waste Management** said it will not only pay for college degrees and professional

**85%** of the Chipotle employees who take advantage of its free degrees work in its restaurants



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**7X** more likely to move up into management



certificates for employees, but also for their spouses and children starting in January. And in September, Amazon, the largest job creator in the U.S., announced it will **fund full college tuition**—as well as high school diplomas, GEDs, and English as a Second Language (ESL) proficiency certifications—for its 750,000 front-line employees, including those who have been at the company for as little as three months. And employees themselves tend to agree: as the ever-evolving U.S. job market makes training an **operational imperative**, three in four American workers agree that improving (75%) and diversifying (74%) professional skills is **more important than ever** as a result of the pandemic.

Given that **87% of companies worldwide** believe they already have a skills gap, or will have one in a few years, employers' emerging focus on upskilling is only the beginning. And in the U.S.—where **97% of net workforce growth** will be immigrants and their children by the year 2030, and immigrants and refugees are projected to

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add about **18 million working-age people** to the workforce over the next 15 years—the subject of upskilling immigrants and refugees in America has taken on new urgency.

Laura Roberts, director of corporate leadership at **Jobs for the Future (JFF)**—a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems—believes COVID-19 cast the limits of government support into sharp relief, especially in regard to communities that have not received equitable investments from the government or private sector like immigrants and refugees. “The challenges presented by the pandemic have really underscored that there are issues that the government doesn’t fully solve,” says Roberts. “It’s become clear that it will be up to the private sector in terms of how they deal with them. In general, I think there’s been an increasing focus on how employers should be investing to make sure people can do their jobs.”

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— Laura Roberts, director of corporate leadership at Jobs for the Future

# THE BENEFITS OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Against this backdrop, what's arguably the most critical skill immigrants and refugees—who **boosted U.S. economic growth** by 15% between 1990 and 2014, **added \$2 trillion** to the U.S. GDP in 2016, and now comprise **a sixth** of the American workforce—need in order to succeed in America?

The ability to speak English.

The benefits of English proficiency in the U.S. are obvious: it's associated with **increased wages, promotions, and performance**, as well as **employee retention**. English-language skills also play a key role in acceptance and assimilation of immigrants in America: while a recent **Gallup poll** found that 77% of Americans think immigration is “a good thing”—and for the first





time since 1965, a majority of Americans say they want to see immigration increase—a **majority of Americans** also believe that a person must speak English to be considered American.

As a result, according to Matthew Daniel, a principal consultant at **Guild Education**, companies are increasingly recognizing the value of including English-language learning (ELL) initiatives in their employee benefit packages.

“Large employers—the Fortune 1000 organizations and folks of that caliber—are talking about incorporating ELL programs into their DE&I initiatives far more now than they were three or five years ago,” Daniel says.

Daniel points to employers’ expanding efforts to find and retain quality talent, especially in high-turnover industries like **retail** and hospitality. He recalls a recent conversation with a retail client that was struggling to fill public-facing positions, and whose majority of back-of-house employees are non-English speaking.

“Obviously, these industries can’t shift employees to frontline positions where they’ll interact directly with customers until those English-language gaps are closed,” Daniel explains. “These employers are in a war for talent, and they need their workforces to be as fungible as possible, so they can fill as many holes as possible. Employers are definitely looking for new and better ways to upskill that talent.”

Dianna Lippincott, assistant director of strategic innovation at Arizona State University’s **Global**

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– Dianna Lippincott, assistant director of strategic innovation at Arizona State University’s Global Launch

**Launch**, which has provided high-quality, accessible English-language training for learners worldwide for more than 40 years, agrees that educational benefits for employees—and ELL opportunities specifically—are becoming a business imperative.

“The idea of education as a benefit for people in the workplace is definitely a growing trend,” she says. “I think there have always been efforts here and there by companies to teach employees English, but now we’re seeing employers doing it more at scale because of the growing number of English-language learners in the workplace.”

# ENGLISH-LANGUAGE LEARNING & THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The growing need to provide frontline workers with easily accessible ELL opportunities is juxtaposed against a backdrop of very few cohesive support systems for new immigrants and refugees arriving in the U.S.

“In my opinion, our whole immigration system is a disaster,” says Jaime Fall, director of [UpSkill America](#), which works with employers to improve their employee education, training, and development strategies in order to expand economic opportunities for frontline workers in the U.S. “The way Congress has handled it is a complete dereliction of duty, absolutely.”

A June 2021 article in [The Atlantic](#) outlines the minimal support offered to immigrants and refugees upon arrival in America as compared to other countries. Canada’s well-regulated immigration system, for instance—where in recent years roughly 70% of the federal immigration agency’s budget has gone toward settlement programs—makes it [a prime destination for immigrants and refugees](#), who comprise some 20% of the country’s population.

“In Canada, there’s a state-sponsored acknowledgement that language barriers are really important for people to overcome if they’re going to navigate living in a new place—whether that’s on the work front or simply finding somewhere to live and enrolling in programs they may need,” Roberts, of JFF, says. “Companies in the U.S. are operating in an entirely different context in terms of the support that employees who don’t speak English receive from government and nonprofits. They’re starting from a different place.”

In the U.S., where [60-70% of frontline workers](#) have not accessed the literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving training that can aid with job growth, companies are increasingly stepping in to invest in immigrants in ways the government does not. And for good reason: as Roberts explains in a [recent JFF report](#), basic skill development opportunities offered as part of a company’s benefits package—such as English-language instruction—can have an exponential impact on both immigrant workers’ prospects for economic mobility and a business’ bottom line.

Roberts points to Tyson Foods, one of the world’s largest food processors, as a prime example of a company that’s [leading the charge](#) in upskilling its frontline workforce, 60% of which are immigrants and refugees representing [more than 60 countries](#). In 2016, the company launched [Upward Academy](#), which offers employees in 59 locations (and counting) the opportunity to build English-language fluency, foundational skills, and earn a high school equivalency.

A [comparison group study](#) of the program found a return on investment (ROI) of 123 percent for Tyson—meaning that for every dollar Tyson spent on Upward Academy, it gained \$1.23 from increased retention of participants.

In February 2021, the company debuted [Upward Pathways](#) as a complement to Upward Academy. Piloted at 10 of Tyson’s plants nationwide, the program is a partnership between Tyson, adult education providers, and community colleges to establish a standardized promotional pathway for frontline team members.

Roberts also highlights **Walmart Academies**—America’s largest private employer’s main training program for frontline retail workers—in her report. With a curriculum that includes advanced retail skills like merchandising, the program is free to all frontline employees who aspire to management roles; many associates pair this with educational offerings provided through Walmart’s **Live Better U**, which offers English-language classes and high school completion programs at no cost. As of March 2019, Walmart had trained more than 800,000 employees in Walmart Academies, promoting 215,000 people to higher-wage jobs through the program. Last July, the company announced it would invest **nearly \$1 billion** over the next five years in career-driven training and development.

Companies are increasingly listening to their employees when it comes to ELL. Uber, for example, approached ASU after polling drivers to learn which subjects they’d want to study as part of an educational benefit program through **Uber Pro**. When English ranked at the top of the list, Global Launch—which also works with universities, businesses, and government agencies, and has conducted more than 50 training programs worldwide in ELL, teaching, and other faculty development since 2015—developed a program of online and classroom courses for the ride-hailing giant.

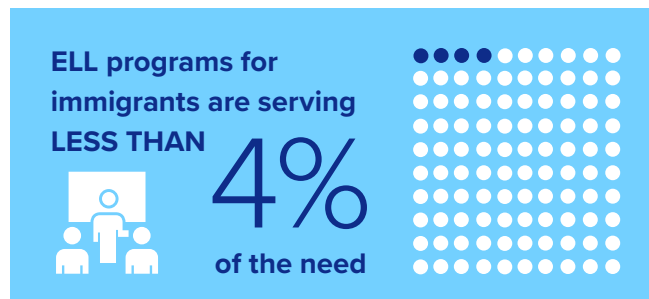
“Once Uber discovered English-language classes were what drivers and delivery people on its platform wanted, they took it seriously,” Lippincott says.



# A FAMILIAR DILEMMA

Despite these burgeoning and notable efforts, the urgent need to upskill frontline workers with English-language skills continues to grow in the face of changing demographics—the U.S. Hispanic population alone is expected **to top 111 million by 2060**—while efforts to teach English to immigrants and refugees in America still fall woefully short.

ELL programs for immigrants—largely run through local nonprofits, community colleges, and school districts—are serving less than 4% of the need, according to a 2018 report from the **Migration Policy Institute**. Immigrants often face myriad logistical and practical challenges in accessing traditional language-learning models, which contribute to their relatively limited success.



Mary Jo Ferrare, regional director for the Mohawk Valley at the **Workforce Development Institute (WDI)**—a statewide non-profit in Utica, New York, that facilitates projects to build workforce skills and strengthen employers’ ability to hire, promote, and retain workers—has experienced this dilemma firsthand.

“We have 43 different languages spoken in Utica, and we struggled for years to find an effective way to teach people English,” she says. “We did classes on work sites, after work, on weekends. We practically did backflips, trying to teach people. It was incredibly frustrating.”

Ferrare recalls her experience with a local medical device manufacturer that had a large refugee workforce.

“We set up a six-month training with a terrific local community college and provided transportation,” she says. “It was so rewarding for us because by the end, they were speaking and writing simple sentences, and reading a bit. Then the class ended, and they all went home to their families and spoke what was comfortable for them.”

Ferrare notes that the need to work and take care of their children—as well as transportation issues, and the idea of spending unpaid time on English classes—makes learning English exceptionally challenging for this population.

“These traditional ELL methods often don’t work for immigrants,” she says.



# INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Discouraged but determined, Ferrare first heard about **EnGen**—a results-driven, virtual ELL platform for organizations and employers working with limited English proficient (LEP) employees—from Lois Johnson, WDI’s director of workforce strategies.

EnGen’s patented pedagogy—which has benefitted over four million people since 2012—piqued their interest: rather than using generic workplace content supplemented with industry-related word lists, EnGen empowers incumbent workers with English skills relevant to their particular workplaces—a crucial differentiator versus traditional ELL platforms. Its mobile-first design also meant learners could access EnGen on their phones outside of work.

“We agreed that maybe it could work, because these folks could learn on their own time and go at their own pace,” Ferrare recalls.

WDI had initially worked with Chobani, which has a plant nearby in New Berlin, on a traditional ELL program for its employees, with very limited success. Ferrare approached Chobani again about trying the EnGen platform, and the company agreed to a pilot program of 14 employees.

“Our initial goal was just to increase their level of English-language comprehension so they could advance from a cleaning or janitorial position into production,” she says.

EnGen developed course content specifically for Chobani; the company put computers in the lunchroom and offered incentives to employees to use the platform. Of the 14 employees who participated, all received pay increases, and two earned promotions. Last summer, WDI collaborated again with EnGen and Chobani to develop specific manufacturing curriculum and



offer the platform’s proficiency assessment to 300 foreign-born employees to gauge their levels of English comprehension. More EnGen training at the plant launched in November 2021.

“Compared to everything else that we’ve done in the Mohawk Valley, EnGen is really promising,” she says. “The whole idea of the program is that it teaches people English via a skill set they need in a particular line of work. We have a lot of manufacturing here, and it can be dangerous. Just from a safety perspective, improving communication between coworkers has been key.”

Indeed, the need to find groundbreaking, scalable ways to arm America’s growing immigrant population with English-language skills is giving rise to a new generation of methods.

“We hear a lot from employers that have tried more traditional English-language training and haven’t seen much success, because it wasn’t contextualized,” says JFF’s Roberts. “You can spend six weeks learning the alphabet or how to order off a menu, but an on-the-job environment requires pretty specific vocabulary—which is why we’re seeing the emergence of on-demand, mobile-based training platforms that are more nimble and customizable. That’s not to say traditional classroom instruction doesn’t work for those who are invested in it, but it’s not fully sufficient—at least not for everybody.”

Global Launch’s Lippincott, who also oversees creation and implementation of digital products and customized group programs in her role, agrees that customizable, scalable solutions

will increasingly address the shortcomings of traditional approaches to ELL.

“To really make gains in English, you need to study every single day,” she says. “It’s difficult for many people to attend traditional English classes because of family, work, and transportation issues. Given the general lack of funding across the board for these types of programs, you want something that’s scalable and can reach a lot of people—which is where online platforms and apps can play an important part. Different people learn in different ways—you need to meet people in the way that they learn.”

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## ENGEN AT WORK

MaineHealth, the largest health care system in Maine, also offers English-Language Learning (ELL) classes to its frontline workforce via the EnGen platform, with promising early results. The health care system began working with the [Immigrant Welcome Center of Greater Portland](#) in late 2018 to provide ELL instruction to existing environmental, linen, and food services employees at Portland's Maine Medical Center, the largest hospital within the MaineHealth system.

"MaineHealth has a real commitment to employee engagement, a key facet of which is professional development," says Helene Kennedy, vice president of talent at MaineHealth. "For a lot of our entry-level workers, part of their ability to advance along a career path is to acquire English-language skills. That's very consistent with our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and the professional development of our workforce, which all ties into our mission of improving the health of our patients and communities by providing high-quality affordable care, educating tomorrow's caregivers, and researching better ways to provide care."

Care team members participate in classes in the hospital's two computer labs outside of work hours (as well as on their own mobile devices), and receive a \$350 stipend upon successful completion of the program. EnGen's flexibility and ease of use especially lend themselves to an environment where learners hail from around the globe.

"In any given cohort, we'll have seven or eight different languages represented," says Jennifer O'Leary, director of the MaineHealth Center for Workforce Development. "EnGen allows us to take MaineHealth content and translate it into

the students' first language. That element alone is more efficient and effective than a traditional ELL approach."

While the impact of COVID-19 has caused some interruptions along the way, 80 learners have already participated in the program since its launch, with 19 more currently enrolled. In addition to leveraging EnGen's dashboard—which assesses learners' written and verbal skills, measures their engagement and progress, and features live components including group chats—MaineHealth is in the process of developing its own internal data dashboard to measure return on investment.

"There's high demand for this program—our care team members are actively seeking it out, and it's generated so much positivity within our workforce," says O'Leary. "From an employer standpoint—especially given that workforce retention is such an enduring topic for businesses—creating these opportunities to upskill and support our care team members is one of our ultimate goals. EnGen has demonstrated that MaineHealth is an organization that invests and supports our care team members' educational journeys throughout their careers."



# PROVEN RESULTS

As these examples illustrate, innovative ELL initiatives help to empower workers, immigrants, and refugees with economic mobility—and ultimately, a better quality of life.

“With targeted instruction, these employees are learning what they need to know on the job, which in turn gives them the confidence to go out and use their English in their community—with their children’s teachers, to make friends, in various types of situations,” says Lippincott.

EnGen—which offers hundreds of integrated career-aligned pathways using real-world content—regularly surveys participants in every program to understand their successes, and aligns its analysis with an industry-standard framework (the [Impact Management Project’s Five Dimensions of Impact](#)).

The **results** of its latest survey, conducted in December 2021, speak for themselves. Of the more than 550 EnGen learners who responded, a whopping 80% said EnGen enabled them to achieve their real-world career goals; 59% of learners improved their communication with colleagues, another 16% received a new job offer, 10% received a promotion, and 11% received a pay raise.

The findings also underscore EnGen’s value proposition for employers in terms of employee productivity and satisfaction. Eighty percent of learners said improving their English helped them save time at work, while 65% ranked their job-skill improvement a 4 or 5 on a 0-5 Likert scale. Twenty-six percent received a job offer or a promotion. Those who were highly engaged with the platform demonstrated more workplace-related benefits: of 557 respondents, higher engagers were 30% more likely to rate their job skill improvement a 4 or 5 on a 0-5 scale

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**16%** received a new job offer

**10%** received a promotion

**11%** received a pay raise

than lower engagers. Furthermore, 24% more of higher-engaged learners rated their confidence improvement a 4 or 5 on a 0-5 scale as a result of their improved English.

For her part, Mary Jo Ferrare is committed to spreading the word about the transformative impact of ELL platforms for immigrants, refugees, and employers alike.

“Here in the Mohawk Valley, employers are scrambling for employees, and they know these people are tremendous workers with huge potential for a career ladder if their English improves. They shouldn’t stay marginalized doing entry-level work when they’re so capable,” she says. “Investing in ELL platforms like EnGen may not be at the top of these companies’ to-do lists now, but the more we emphasize their benefits and impact, the sooner that will change.”