“Why are only we expected to adapt?”

The well-being of foreign employees in Finland – existing challenges and new solutions

AGENDA

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Ingrid Biese & Jeanette Björkqvist

Agenda

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Foreword

The importance of being welcoming

Photo: Sofia Jern

At the end of the 1990s I had the great privilege of spending a gap year before my national service and college studies working in a British school in Togo, a French-speaking country in West Africa.

Students and staff came from some thirty countries in our different continents. The melting pot was a factor, and no-one needed to be integrated, since we were all essentially immigrants. Even so I was all too aware of being white, and all the advantages which that entailed. Skin colour and origins do play a part; to suggest anything else would be lying to yourself.

Now, more than twenty years later, we in Finland are in another new decade faced with a huge shortage of labour, which can only be resolved by using foreign work force. At the end of 2021 a monthly average of 8,000 job vacancies for carers and 4,600 places for nurses were unfilled in the labour market.

We often pride ourselves on living in the happiest, cleanest and most efficient country in the world. Alas, that is the case only if you have the same colour of skin as the majority of the (national) population. Being born in Finland is like winning the lottery, we used to say.

For this study, the journalist **Jeanette Björkqvist** and researcher **Ingrid Biese** sat down and listened to a group of people who came to Finland from different countries and backgrounds to find work and establish a life for themselves over here. They talked of racism in their daily lives, at work, of exclusion from the working environment, lack of communications and misleading job descriptions.

This study looks at how we treat one another. It is not enough for us just to take on someone, breeze in and hand over a list of technical terms to a new arrival. We need to look at this individual, respect the individual and even adjust ourselves to the needs and wishes of the newcomer. And that goes for everyone in the company, not just HR and the MD/CEO. It is really all about the little things: acknowledging a new colleague in the corridor, wishing the in-house carer a good weekend, quite simply respecting everyone in the organisation, not just those working alongside you or above you. A smile costs you nothing, and yet it can mean everything to someone who is feeling insecure.

The fact that this study came about at all is due in no small measure to **Emina Arnautovic** at Folkhälsan. She has also written a comment regarding the result of this research. In it she illustrates her own journey: from the war-torn Balkans in the early 1990s to becoming a part of the establishment in her (adopted) hometown of Närpes in the 2000s.

Helsinki, September 2022

Ted Urho
Director, Think Tank Agenda

Comment

Of course, I want to work!

Photo: Johan Hagström

All human beings have a book of life that says who we were, who we are and what we want to be. My book says that I am the daughter of Adil and Samka. It says that my grandmother Djuma learned to read and write at almost 50 years old – at the same school desk as her 7-year-old son. It also says that my grandmother Kadira was illiterate, but she sold the family's cow so that her daughters could be educated, in a different place as well. It was a bit of a scandal back in the 1960s in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These two women are my greatest feminist role models. In my book it says that I wanted to become a journalist and save the world by exposing all the injustices that I saw around me. But the contents of the book were rewritten: I graduated in computer engineering instead.

When you come to a new country or a new environment, you are a clean slate. Suddenly, no one recognises you and there is a great risk that after some time you won't recognise yourself either.

In March 1994, I received a call from the (Finnish) Employment Office instructing me to call the health centre. They wanted to offer me a job. I was so happy because we are talking about the 1990s when unemployment in Finland was high. Until then, I had had various temp jobs and was looking forward to

starting work for real. I eagerly rang the given number, introduced myself and gave the reason for my call.

"What kind of job do you want to offer me?" I enquired.

"You're going to clean," said a voice from the other end.

"Clean?!" I blurted out.

"Don't you want to work?!" the woman retorted.

Of course, I took the job. There are few jobs I'm as proud of as this. My first real job in Finland. In my book, however, it did not say anything about me working as a cleaner. So, I allowed myself to be a little surprised; after all, I had received this job offer. Only for a second. But in the answer on the phone I understood there was an expectation on me to prove to them that I really wanted to work in this new country. An expectation not only for me, but all my compatriots too. There was no time to think about what lay behind my question.

Was I lazy, haughty, scared, insecure, or just curious?

During my time as a cleaner, I learned a lot while working with my colleagues. It certainly wasn't easy for my co-workers or for me.

When I got that job in the summer of 1994, however, one of my Finnish colleagues lost his coveted summer job. Neither he nor I understood that I was a cheaper alternative for the employer, due to labour market support. He became a substitute and had to teach me how everything worked. I can still remember the moment when, after a few minutes of introduction, I was left alone with a large machine I couldn't handle. Choking back the tears, I tried to run this – in my eyes, grotesque – thing, and felt worthless.

I stayed behind after work every day and practised alone until I mastered it. To this day, I can still remove floor wax from any surface, and with any machine. But both my colleague and I felt bad. I can't help but reflect on what a difference just a little more communication from my employer would have meant to both of us – me as an employee and an immigrant. For the entire working environment, in fact.

A report from the Nordic Council of Ministers (2018), states that integration requires a holistic approach and that well-being promotes integration. Social contexts, in turn, promote well-being and support meaningful leisure time, which will lead to better integration. Since we spend much of our lives in a work community, well-being at work is a prerequisite for a person's well-being in general.

According to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, integration is an on-going process that operates in two directions where both the immigrant and the receiving society engage and acquire the knowledge and skills required in today's society and working life in Finland.

Those who receive foreign workers also need support to be able to function in the best way possible in a new, multicultural environment. This can be challenging for both immigrants and the receiving society to begin with. But research also shows that if we can create a psychologically secure environment, the results will exceed the expectations. This strengthens both well-being and prosperity in society.

If we look at the great labour shortage in our country and the competition for workers, an investment in well-being at work is essential. This report has been compiled because Finland needs foreign workers, and we need to take measures to ensure that those who come to Finland to work feel good and want to stay in this country. In the report, lack of information and communication has been assigned its own chapter where the authors pinpoint the very factors that create uncertainty, misunderstanding and ill-feeling. But not everything can be explained by a lack of information. We cannot and must not overlook the fact, as highlighted in the report, that discrimination based on ethnic background is the most common type of discrimination in Finland. If we want to create sustainable well-being from a multicultural perspective, we really need to take on board the conclusions drawn in the report. In the long run, it will be worth it in every way.

On 17 December 2022, it will be exactly 30 years since I first came to Finland. On the very day of writing this text, I was with my mother at the health centre in Närpes. When I walked through the door there, I felt at home. Even though everything had changed, it still felt familiar and safe. In my book of life, there is one whole chapter dedicated to my first place of work which my colleagues and I learned to master through sweat, toil and tears – individually and collectively. Today, I feel that there is a greater awareness of both the challenges and opportunities of a multicultural society. We have more experience and more tools which we can all use better. So let's just do it!

Närpes, September 2022

Emina Arnautovic
Integration Expert
Folkhälsan

Introduction

In December 2021 the European migration network held a conference in Helsinki. The theme was how Finland – in accordance with the current government's objectives – would succeed in doubling its immigrant workforce by 2030. In layman's terms: How can we, in just a few years' time, attract the minimum requirement of 50,000 people from other countries to patch up the holes which many industries can no longer fill by the indigenous working population?

Among the many speakers at the conference was **Jean-Christophe Dumont**, Director for the OECD's department of international migration. He reminded Finland, among others, that global competition for experts and immigrant labour was already fierce and thus it was no longer enough to focus simply on efficient and transparent migration processes. Important though these are, it also requires a holistic understanding where trade & industry and society can actually work together to overcome the challenges.

Above all else, says Dumont, society needs to completely re-evaluate its approach:

> **"It is extremely important to establish a friendly and receptive working ambiance for overseas employees. It's not enough just to open the door; there needs to be warmth within the cottage as well. Finland must create an atmosphere which welcomes immigrants into all parts of its culture."**
>
> JEAN-CHRISTOPHE DUMONT, OECD

This welcoming environment seems, in part anyway, to shine by its absence, even though there has been, for a decade at least, a realisation that we need to attract overseas labour to a far greater extent. Amid the plethora of studies and surveys conducted over the years – and still being conducted – around this theme, you can read about various types of deep-seated problems which address not only dubious attitudes within society and working life but also slow, laborious bureaucratic procedures for acquiring permits which challenge both the employer who is eager to hire and the prospective employee from overseas. Together these structural problems create not only real obstacles for labour migration, but also make it difficult in the long run for immigrants to feel happy at work – and in Finland.

In public debate also the matter of our ever-increasing need for labour migration often appears from Finland's point of view. We define our needs on the apparent assumption that there are people elsewhere who are ready to choose Finland when we announce which gaps in the labour market should be filled.

But, of course, it's not that simple. As OECD's Jean-Christophe Dumont mentioned above, global competition for experts and alternative immigrant labour is already fierce. So, if Finland is to make further inroads into these competitive markets, it needs to make fundamental changes to its systems and attitudes.

Among the many problems highlighted time and again are, as mentioned above, cumbersome permit procedures which can scare off not only potential employees but also employers with a readiness to recruit.

Another problem is how immigrants experience their existence in Finland overall. In 2019 the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment published an overview with scientific articles where this theme is also looked at. Under the heading *Syrjintäkokemukset ja niiden yhteys hyvinvointiin ja kotoutumiseen ulkomaalaistaustaisessa väestössä* **Shadia Rask** and **Anu E. Castaneda** point out, for instance, that 40 per cent of people with a foreign background have experienced some form of discrimination – an alarmingly high number. The negative experiences are most common among those from the Middle East, North Africa and other parts of Africa.

The humanitarian immigration has long since been in focus when discussed in public debate. It should not be confused with labour migration, but we do not believe that you can separate these two matters when it comes to creating a tolerant attitude towards those who come to our country. It is hard to take a

grudging approach towards asylum seekers (a minority of those who come) while simultaneously believing that, at times, the very serious overtures in the refugee debate do not influence how attractive Finland as a country seems in the eyes of potential foreign employees.

The attitudes of society, smooth permit procedures, an effective integration process and culturally sensitive places of work are all factors which are essential in making Finland an attractive destination.

Many traps in diversity work

So, how does it feel to work as an immigrant in Finland? Can we attract employees, and do they want to stay?

To get a better impression, we will look at places of work among the immigrant workforce in this report on well-being. We will map out existing challenges, and present solutions and practical advice for how we can ease the situation for, and the integration of, foreign workers so that their well-being at their workplaces can be promoted better than is currently the case.

The focus is on well-being at work among the immigrant workforce in our country, and on how employers with experience of multicultural workplaces have treated their newly arrived employees.

We have taken some of the research and studies conducted both in Finland and abroad; we also gathered opinions of employees and employers alike in Finland during the spring of 2022.

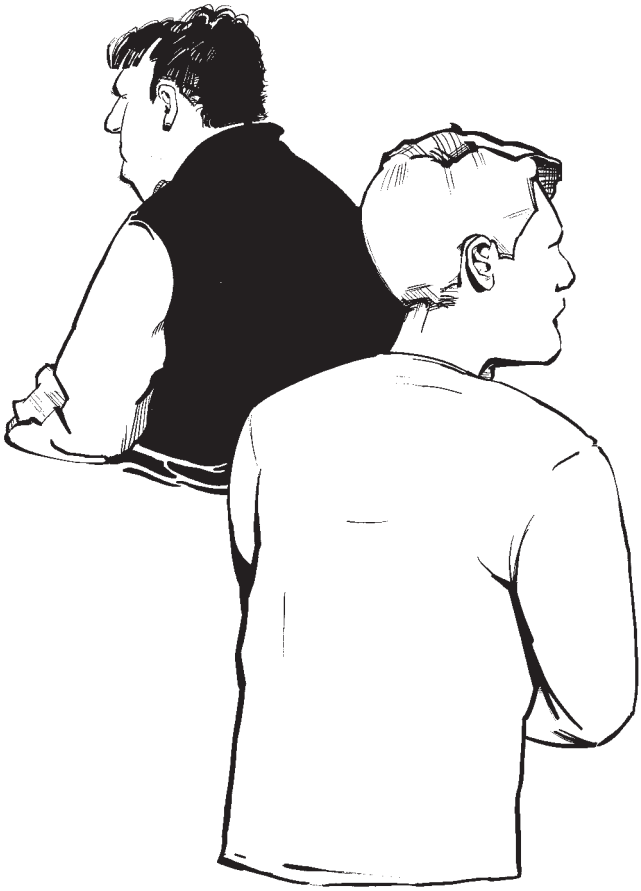
This was done by holding two workshops in which participants could talk frankly about their experiences, challenges, requirements and discuss effective solutions.

The idea is to use the findings in the report to help all parties involved at multicultural places of work understand where and how conflicts and misunderstandings of various types can arise, and the thought process when looking for solutions.

The report begins with a look at the general situation in Finland. Who can come here, how can they come here, where are they placed, and what structural problems do they face? The overview addresses, for instance, residence permits and related procedures which, although not the focus of the report, should still be seen as relevant background if we look at the opportunities for coming to and staying in Finland at all.

Working with diversity issues is not straightforward and there are traps which are easy to fall into. That is why we offer tips and solutions for what can be done and how it pays to consider these matters. The end of the report contains a checklist which you can have at your place of work.

This report focuses on cultural diversity – not on other forms of diversity such as sex, age, sexual inclination and capacity to work, which should of course be addressed in daily working life. Although the focus is on cultural diversity work, the practical part of the report may also be helpful for other types of diversity.



Labour shortage chokes growth

It has been widely documented that many industries are experiencing such an alarming labour shortage that it is slowing down their growth and that the situation will deteriorate further in the next few years.

The various studies conducted include research carried out by the Entrepreneurs of Finland in the autumn of 2021, which revealed that 65 percent of employment companies have been experiencing recruitment difficulties. Up to 79 per cent of companies with ten or more employees have been struggling to find workers. More than 40 percent of such companies believe that a lack of competent staff is choking growth.

The most recent survey about labour shortages was carried out in the spring of 2022 by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. It shows, for instance, that the health care sector is constantly affected by a serious lack of staff in various areas. As a result, it has often been difficult to maintain operations at full capacity. At the end of 2021, a monthly average of 8,000 health care posts and 4,600 vacancies for nurses were unfilled in the employment service. Finland has tried to be proactive here; it was decided some years ago, for instance, to recruit nurses from the Philippines – an enterprise we will return to on page 18.

In recent years, the restaurant and hospitality industry has gone from surplus to deficit in terms of its own manpower. There is currently a shortage of professional staff throughout Finland. In some regions, the situation is critical.

The same problem is evident in the construction industry, with a noticeable shortage of knowledgeable supervisors. Here, the situation varies from region to region. In the spring of 2021, about half of Finland's Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY centres) concluded that supervisors in the construction industry were in very short supply – the worst hit regions being Kanta-Häme and Northern Savonia.

These are just a few examples of industry which are experiencing labour shortages. But there are many more. Those industries which lack qualified personnel seem to agree on one thing: a far greater degree of labour migration is required to solve the current problem.

Not all the gaps can be filled by simply recruiting foreign workers; they require other types of policy measure. Yet in many industrial sectors, e.g. cleaning, service and construction, with carefully considered intervention, these gaps could be filled by a foreign workforce to a greater extent than currently is the case. The same applies to health care.

Industries experiencing labour shortages

Increasing needs – top 15 recruitment areas

- Carers – 5 321
- Nurses, among others – 3 221
- Specialists in social work – 2 635
- Senior and specialist doctors – 2 212
- General practitioners – 2 211
- Kindergarten teachers – 2 342
- Audiologists and speech therapists – 2 266
- Dentists – 2 261
- Home help staff (home help services) – 5 322
- Psychologists – 2 634
- Restaurant and catering staff – 5 120
- Office and hotel cleaners, among others – 9 112
- Special needs teachers – 2 352
- Senior and departmental nurses – 2 221
- Construction work supervisors – 3 123

- Critical shortage of applicants
- Shortage of applicants
- Equilibrium
- Many applicants
- Too many applicants

Source: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment

Labour force matching problems in Finland

Ahead of the 2021 local elections, the Agenda think tank asked 1,300 Finns – both Finnish and Swedish speakers – their opinions on various matters relating to economic values. According to the poll, 75% of Swedish speaking respondents and 65% of Finnish speaking respondents would be prepared to accept a job which did not reflect their qualifications, if they were to lose their current job. However, only 21% of Swedish speakers and 17% of Finnish speakers would agree to a considerable cut in their salary.

"We are experiencing increasing unemployment while at the same time advertising job vacancies: there are, for instance, plenty of applications for marketing and HR employment but very few individuals applying to be professional carers and accountants. Regardless of their mother tongue, respondents say that if they were made redundant, they would be prepared to further their qualifications and even accept a job which did not reflect their current education. However, they would not accept a considerable cut in their wage level. I ask myself: how can the responsible employer with open wage politics relating to competence and experience possibly address high wage demands from a further educated unemployed individual who lacks the relevant work experience?

As a mother of three, I can well understand the unwillingness to accept a cut in wages and therefore lower one's standard of living. As long as the system allows the individual to live on unemployment benefit which is linked to the loss of a high wage level, it is of course possible, but the question is whether the system actually benefits us Finns in the long term. Having experienced a period as an unemployed job seeker, I have absolutely nothing against a financial protection net which offers security for the foreseeable future, but I do feel that the period of time is too long and that current employment policies neither help nor encourage the unemployed individual to make a real effort to find a new job as quickly as possible."

Erika Ehrnrooth, CEO Eilakaisla (2019–2022) in Agenda's report Ekonomi: Finländska värderingar för 2020-talet (2021)

Over 15,000 applied to work in Finland last year

The corona pandemic caused a temporary slump in the number of applications for residence permits, but 2021 showed a new upturn. At that time, more than 36,000 applications were submitted for a first residence permit[1] – over 15,000 more than in the previous year.

Although much of the media reporting in recent years has focused on humanitarian immigration, the fact remains that work, family and studies are the most common reasons for people wanting to stay in Finland. More than 15,000 applications from 2021 related to jobs – most of them permits for those wishing to work, for instance as cooks, nurses, cleaners and restaurant workers.

The group of "specialists", e.g. IT specialists, submitted just over 1,600 applications for first residence permits, which was double the figure from the year before.

Although the permit process for labour immigration has been criticised for being slow and inefficient, almost 11,500 positive decisions were made for people applying for a first residence permit relating to employment – just over half of them concerned employees.

Among the specialists, only 1,300 were approved, the majority of whom came from Russia, India and China.

The number of seasonal workers also increased: just under 16,000 received a positive decision, most of them came from Ukraine (before the war) and they had agreed to work on Finnish farms. Even so, the war has had a clear impact on the number of applications in 2022.

Alas, the most recent figures show that the number plummeted to less than a third at the beginning of the year; this is because most of the seasonal workers are usually from Ukraine. They generally work in the horticultural sector – and, as a rule, for no more than 90 days with a special permit. But before the sum-

[1]A first residence permit refers to a permit which you usually apply for abroad before moving to Finland. It includes the Employment and Economic Development Office's (TE Office) examination of the availability of labour before the Migration Agency makes its decision.

mer, the Finnish Immigration Service had granted just under 4,500 permits for short-term seasonal work to Ukrainian citizens, compared with just under 13,300 during the same period in 2021.

Of those already in the country, more than 30,000 people applied for an extended permit to stay in Finland last year. The most common reason was still that you had a job. EU citizens have also registered their stay in Finland to a greater extent than before[2]. Last year, almost 12,500 EU citizens submitted their applications, almost half of them being on the basis of employment. Most of these were Estonian, German and Latvian.

"Finland needs a workforce – that way Finns will learn about foreign cultures. You cannot expect us to be exactly the same as we are now. You have to accept that we are different."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

[2]EU citizens do not need a residence permit in Finland, but they still have to register their stay in Finland if it exceeds three months.

Decision on first residence permit based on work in 2021

	Positive	Negative	Total
Nutrition	110	279	389
Work requiring partial decision[3]	5 929	1 439	7 368
Scientific research	964	6	970
Trainee	91	7	98
Sporting and coaching activities	296	64	360
Specialist	1 293	21	1 314
Other work	334	22	356
Specialist, Blue Card	191	0	191
Seasonal work	1 619	47	1 666
Seasonal work requiring partial decision	403	10	413
Internal relocation	15	0	15
Start-up entrepreneurs	155	7	162
Voluntary work	28	1	29
Total	**11 428**	**1 903**	**13 331**

Source: Finnish Immigration Service

[3]The application for a residence permit for an employed person is decided in two phases both requiring a partial decision by the TE Office. The partial decision is based on an overall assessment in which the authority assesses the availability of labour, the terms of employment, and the conditions of employer and employee. Once the TE Office has made a partial decision, the final decision on a residence permit is transferred to the Finnish Immigration Service, which assesses whether the general conditions have been met for granting a residence permit. Source: European Migration Network (Finland)

Complex system tests patience

Although the point of this report is to examine how working life succeeds in receiving and integrating workers with a foreign background, people must be able to get to Finland in the first place. Over the years, entrepreneurs and employees alike have strongly criticised the complex, lengthy and rather costly Finnish system. Today, there is a motley patchwork of legislation and bureaucratic processes relating to migration issues which makes it difficult to get a true and realistic overall impression of those areas specifically concerned with labour migration.

The basic framework for an immigrant's status and residence in Finland can be found in the Aliens Act. Written in 2004, it comprises over 200 paragraphs and has been amended more than a hundred times. These amendments have occurred either because of changes at an EU level or because they have been deemed necessary by the Finnish state.

Certain aspects of the Aliens Act are being reformed yet again. In addition, some other relevant laws which are reflected when relating to the Aliens Act also apply to labour immigration. The most important include those concerning how people from so called third countries can come to and stay in Finland, their ability to move internally within companies and their right to do research, studies, training or voluntary activities in Finland (see Fact Box 1). All these laws have come into being quite recently because of the need to try to make labour migration easier from other countries. But opinions differ about whether the whole process has become more straightforward or even more complicated.

FACT BOX 1

Several laws relevant for those who want to come

Aliens Act (2004, amended several times)

Act on the Conditions of Entry and Residence of Third Country Nationals in terms of Seasonal Employment (2017)

Act on the Conditions of Entry and Residence of Third Country Nationals in terms of an intra-corporate transfer (2017)

Act on the Conditions of Entry and Residence of "Third World" Nationals in terms of research, studies, traineeships and volunteering (2018)

Also, laws stipulating, for instance, integration, mobile labour and citizenship may at some point be updated for the immigrant worker.

FACT BOX 2

Fragmented areas of responsibility in management

Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment

- has been responsible, since 1 January 2020, for the immigration policy for workers, entrepreneurs, trainees, students, researchers, and also legislation, as well as the steering and supervision of the Finnish Immigration Service in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior regarding these issues;

- is also responsible for the international employment services of ELY Centres and TE Offices and the EURES Employment Service Network;
- is also responsible, together with the Ministry of Education and Culture, for preparing and coordinating the national action plan Talent Boost.
- The Ministry of the Interior used to be responsible for policy and teamwork relating to labour migration. But in 2020, that responsibility was transferred to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in accordance with Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government Programme; they wanted to streamline the treatment of these issues.

Ministry of the Interior

- is still responsible for the general provisions in terms of all residence permits mainly provided for in Chapter 4 in the Aliens Act. These include various forms of residence permits, residence permit cards, requirements for travel documents, general conditions for granting a residence permit, the definition of family members, income requirements, the length of residence permits, revoking of residence permits and termination of residence permits.

The Ministry of the Interior will still cover, for instance, matters concerning the immigration of a worker's family members and the provisions on the right of asylum seekers to work.

In 2021, another think tank, Libera, decided to look closely at labour migration from a legislative and government point of view.

In a report entitled "Tervetuloa Suomeen, tervetuloa töihin" (Welcome to Finland, welcome to employment), the authors note that the Finnish system resembles a motley patchwork comprising so many legal traces and so many authorities with different responsibilities that the whole thing becomes unmanageable, time-consuming and cumbersome. This, in turn, has an impact at least indirectly (and probably directly) on the extent to which Finland manages to attract labour from other countries.

Although not the subject of analysis at the moment, this very issue may be worth bearing in mind when discussing the well-being of the immigrant workforce in Finland. So often, complex and costly processes lie behind the fact that people have even managed to come to Finland; and when they are here, bureaucracy continues to hamper them in various ways in everyday life, not just legally but also in terms of being able to participate at all levels of society.

FACT BOX 3

Many different residence permits

Before you can get a residence permit, you need to find a job in Finland. In order to be able to work, either an employed person's residence permit or some other (type of) residence permit for gainful employment is usually required. The type of work will affect the type of permit.

Residence permit for an employed person
required for certain tasks if you cannot work with the support of another residence permit or without a residence permit; applies, for instance, to work as a cook, cleaner, carer or nanny; requires a partial decision by the TE Office before the Migration Agency's decision.

Other residence permits for gainful employment
required for certain tasks not covered by the employee's residence permit; applies, for instance, to: assignments in business management or as an expert, also assignments in research, science, culture or art, and trainee work; does not require a partial decision by the TE Office, but the decision is made by the Finnish Immigration Service's.

Residence permit for seasonal work
The work may not exceed nine months and applies, for instance, to plant cultivation, forestry work or festival work. Citizens from countries with visa requirements must apply for a seasonal work

visa from the nearest Finnish embassy or consulate for seasonal work, which lasts up to three months. *If the work lasts longer, seasonal work permits must be applied for from the Finnish Immigration Service.*

Work with another residence permit
People with a residence permit on other grounds, e.g. family ties, do not usually require a separate residence permit to work.

Completed degree or completed research
can be applied for when you get a job. If you have left Finland, a signed agreement is required to obtain a residence permit based on a degree or research.

A person looking for a job or wanting to become an entrepreneur
only granted as a continuation of the residence permit for students or researchers and must be applied for before the expiry date of the previous residence permit; granted for a maximum of twelve months, and once only.

Specialists
do not require a residence permit, but will probably need a visa or the right to stay in Finland for three months without a visa; require a workplace that meets relevant requirements. For work exceeding three months, a residence permit is required.

Work without a residence permit
This is valid in some cases. For citizens of countries with visa requirements, a valid visa still applies. It applies, for instance, to permanent employees of companies operating in another EU/EEA country who have to come to Finland to carry out temporary delivery or sub-contracting work for up to three months.

FACT BOX 4

Responsibilities of local and regional authorities

The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment is responsible for the integration of immigrants. The Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centres) and municipalities are responsible at local and regional levels.

ELY Centres

- enforce the Integration Act and monitor its regional application
- align regional integration measures with national guidelines
- guide municipalities in making integration programmes and implementing integration
- cooperate with, for instance, municipalities, TE offices and organisations.

Municipality

- central to the integration of immigrants, its responsibilities include making sure that services are adapted for immigrants;
- has a general responsibility and coordination responsibility for developing integration as well as for planning and monitoring it locally.

> **"Why is it just we who are expected to learn? Why shouldn't Finns learn to understand better about where we all come from?"**
>
> WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

Much is being done, much is still to be done

The Marin Government was aware of the importance of Finland gaining more foreign workers. It therefore chose to emphasise a wide range of necessary measures in the Government Programme written in the spring of 2019. Many of these measures have already been implemented or started. Last year in particular, the issue of labour migration was firmly on the political agenda. This work is ongoing, and the situation is changing (see fact boxes).

FACT BOX 5:

More legislative changes to come

At the end of August, the government proposed to amend some parts of the Aliens Act to simplify the permit process for foreign workers. These apply to changes in Chapter 5 and certain other provisions and laws. The aim of the reforms is to speed up the processing period so that it does not exceed 30 days.

Some measures: digitalise and automate decisions; allow the licensing authority to use information from various government registers to avoid the need to be requested by the applicant or employer; direct the applications online.

Reliable employers must be certified. In their case, the processes can be further accelerated.

Other changes: Residence permits for entrepreneurs and growth entrepreneurs will be specified; those who have completed a degree or research work in Finland will receive their own permit. Specialist experts will receive a separate permit.

In future, oral interviews with embassies or consulates can be carried out by virtual means. That the applicant's travel document is valid when the first residence permit is granted, is sufficient.

In parallel with this, supervision will also be improved when foreign workers are taken on to avoid any exploitation at work.

Source: Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, press release 25.8.2022

Looking at what has already been done, it can be noted that the administration for labour migration is now subject to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. The purpose of the transfer is to integrate labour migration more effectively into employment, education, industrial and innovation policies.

At the moment, responsibility for the permit process is divided into three administrative areas:

The **missions of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs** in the employee's home country receive the application and the applicant's personal data and interview the applicant.

The **Employment and Economic Development Offices** under the **Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment** make a partial decision that includes an assessment of the existing availability of labour, the terms of the employment relationship, and assesses the employer's and employee's conditions to complete the employment.

Under the **Ministry of the Interior**, the **Finnish Immigration Service** makes the actual decisions regarding all permit matters.

"Everyone at the workplace should be aware of what goes on when we come."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

The policy has strongly emphasised the need for flexibility in the permit system if Finland wants to be a serious contender in the competition for labour. The goal is, and has always been, that the average processing time should not exceed about a month – a goal that the Finnish Immigration Service has not yet achieved in all respects, despite investing in the development of e-services and automatic processing of applications.

Similarly, there has been criticism of the requirement that the applicant must visit the Finnish embassy and that waiting times can be so lengthy. In some cases, one should be highly motivated to choose Finland over Estonia, for example, whose system has been praised for being considerably faster and smoother than ours, especially concerning experts who are due to arrive in Finland.

A lot of improvements have been made, although it may be some time before the results are visible. For instance, specialists and growth entrepreneurs have recently been given an express file; this means that it should not take more than two weeks before they and their family members have their residence permit applications processed.

Although in many cases time dragged considerably, there were also improvements in 2021 according to the Finnish Immigration Service:

16 days

AVERAGE TIME FOR A SPECIALIST TO OBTAIN HIS/HER FIRST RESIDENCE PERMIT (22 DAYS IN 2020)

24 days

FOR GROWTH ENTREPRENEURS (70 DAYS IN THE PREVIOUS YEAR)

72 days

FOR EMPLOYEES (143 DAYS IN THE PREVIOUS YEAR)

Conflicting information about where immigrants work

There are no summarised official statistics on how applications for work permits are directed in relation to different industries, but by examining employment figures, indirect conclusions may be drawn about where most of the immigrant labour force is placed. An analysis by the National Audit Office in 2021 revealed that most of them were employed as cleaners of properties, as workers in the restaurant or construction industries, and as employees through both foreign and Finnish staffing companies. The most recent years have seen an increase in the number of foreigners in the health care and cleaning sectors. Workers from the Philippines and Bangladesh, in particular, have been a rapidly growing group for a long time.

Where you are employed seems to depend partly on where you come from. Ukrainians, for instance, were a significant resource in the Finnish sectors of agriculture, service and construction – until the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Their efforts have usually been seasonal: they come for a certain length of time, work and then go home at the end of the season. Then they return the year after and follow the same pattern.

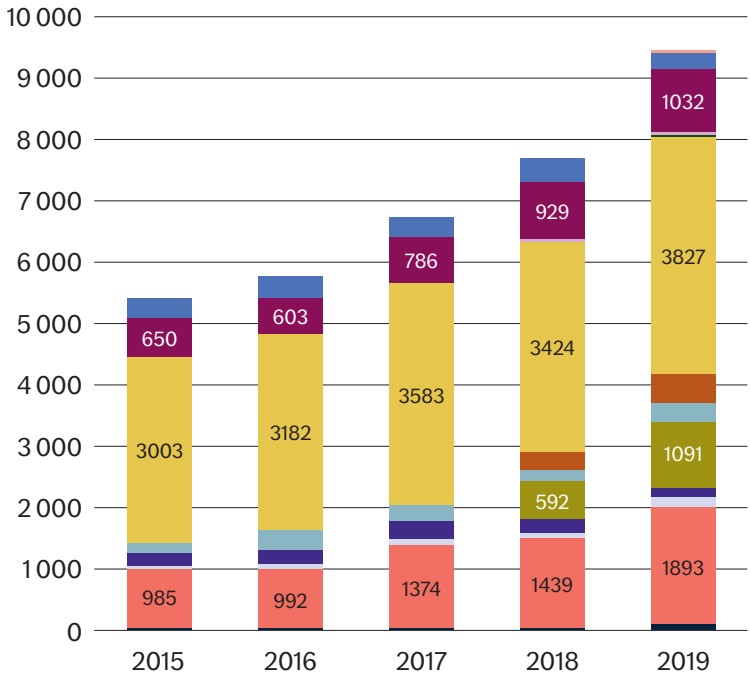
Estonian labour has also been important in Finland for a long time, followed by Polish and Romanian citizens, among others. Because the types of short-term work they usually carry out is not visible in statistical records, it is hard to know how many people actually do these jobs, but the National Audit Office estimates that it is a matter of at least 50,000 people on an annual basis. The majority of them presumably work in the construction and metal industry, where foreign labour is very noticeable.

People who work in Finland come from Estonia, Russia, Iraq ...

Main countries of origin 2021	Population 31.12.2021	Main countries of origin 2021	Population 31.12.2021
Estonia	51 805	UK	4 985
Russia	30 049	Romania	4 955
Iraq	15 075	Poland	4 834
China	11 405	Germany	4 770
India	8 245	Iran	4 036
Thailand	7 925	USA	3 831
Sweden	7 921	Nepal	3 803
Afghanistan	7 686	Latvia	3 494
Vietnam	7 237	Italy	3 281
Syria	7 203	Spain	3 164
Ukraine	7 202	Nigeria	3 073
Somalia	6 581	Pakistan	3 059
Turkey	6 079	France	2 837
Former Serbia & Montenegro	5 432	Bangladesh	2 819
		Bulgaria	2 699
Philippines	5 351	**Total**	**240 836**

Source: Migri

Work-related residence permits by applicant group 2015–2019



Source: Migri, National Audit Office, 2021

During the 2000s the number of foreigners employed in Finland quadrupled. This is a development that both decision-makers and ordinary Finns applaud. But it is still not enough. As mentioned above, Finland needs to ease the bureaucratic process to attract more people, though one single measure will hardly be enough.

According to various international attitude surveys, Finland as a country rarely tops the rankings when measuring the attractiveness of countries. It is all very well being able to offer a safe and environmentally clean country, but equally relevant is the question of how those who come to Finland experience their reception here, in working life and, naturally, how their leisure time and social integration develop.

"There are only a few foreigners working in the factory and they have short-term contracts. I don't know if it's racism or if it's because they need to have Finns there. I've been working on short-term contracts for three years."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

The experiment with Philippine nurses

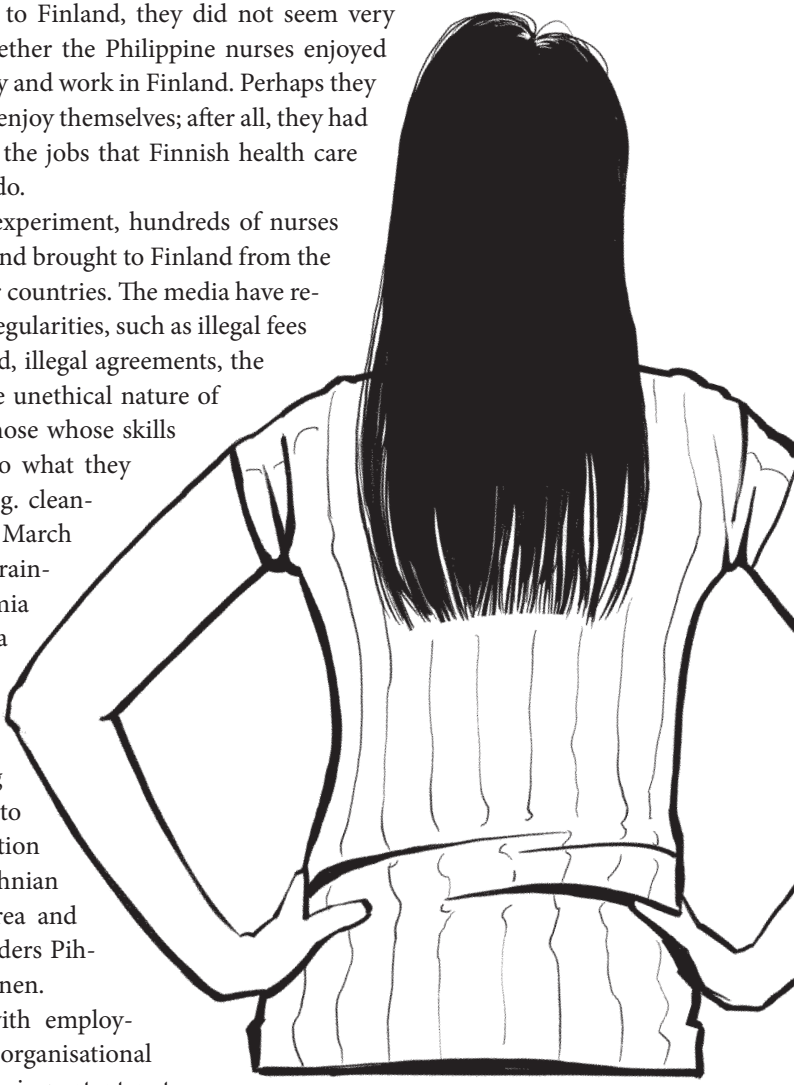
To ease the labour shortage in the health care industry, the staffing and recruitment company Opteam, the care company Esperi and the adult education organisation Amiedu came together in the early 2000s and tried to import nurses from the Philippines. Between 2008 and 2010, a total of 75 nurses were recruited to work as carers in surgical wards and in assisted living facilities for the elderly. The arguments for the recruitment of overseas health care workers included the ageing of Finland's population, the difficulty of staffing all services and, quite simply, the changing labour market. Young people increasingly opted out of the health care sector to find better paid jobs which they did not find as taxing and unsatisfactory as health care work. As a result, imported workers would fill the holes that existed and do those jobs that no one else wanted to do.

The forces behind the attempt collaborated with a recruitment firm in the Philippines, where the nurses were trained to meet the competence requirements and learn some Finnish before moving to Finland. The organisations recruiting the nurses took care of the practical details and made sure, for instance, that these newcomers had a home on arrival in Finland. In 2008 interviews were conducted with the first group. There was optimism in the coming workforce who were looking forward to working in Finland. For some, the move meant a better chance to support their families financially. Some even hoped that family members would be able to move to Finland later on.

But once in Finland, the experience was not as positive. An academic study later followed up the situation; it revealed that one major problem was Philippine nurses having to do the very jobs that no one else wanted to do. Although they could obtain a high level of education and solid experience in the Philippines, they had no chance of advancing in their jobs, but worked below their level of competence in Finland. In the later interviews nurses said that they were paid less than their Finnish colleagues, even though they had to work harder. Also, they were not fully aware of their rights, due mainly to a lack of language skills. They were afraid to complain about the situation because they were worried that it would cause friction amongst their colleagues. They

thought that complaining would only have made matters worse. In addition, they felt discriminated against, sometimes even bullied, by Finnish staff. Quite simply, they felt that they were being exploited.

In the survey, it emerged that there had been a type of throwaway mentality around the Philippine nurses. Although the recruiting companies, with the support of the state, established expensive systems for recruiting, training and bringing people to Finland, they did not seem very concerned about whether the Philippine nurses enjoyed life and wanted to stay and work in Finland. Perhaps they were not expected to enjoy themselves; after all, they had been taken on to do the jobs that Finnish health care staff did not want to do.



Since that initial experiment, hundreds of nurses have been recruited and brought to Finland from the Philippines and other countries. The media have reported on various irregularities, such as illegal fees for coming to Finland, illegal agreements, the lack of rights and the unethical nature of delegating tasks to those whose skills do not correspond to what they were recruited for, e.g. cleaning. As recently as March 2022, the vocational training organisation Vamia announced during a press conference that a new pilot scheme would be carried out to bring 25 Philippine nurses to Finland in cooperation with the Ostrobothnian well-being service area and the health care providers Pihlajalinna and Mehiläinen.

Those working with employment issues in the organisational world know that it is important not

only to be able to attract employees, but also to be able to retain them. Training new workers is expensive. The same is true for workers who feel unwell or do not feel comfortable: they do not work as efficiently; they make more mistakes and sick leave increases.

The example of Philippine nurses is not representative of all workplaces with a multicultural staff, but that does not mean that there aren't other challenges. Many organisations work with diversity issues with the intention of being able to integrate incoming staff as effectively as possible, though it is not always so straightforward. Of the diversity work which is done, there are many things which do not change very much; they simply reinforce existing stereotypes, attitudes and structures.

"The employer needs to be more active in improving well-being. They should also appreciate more readily that those who come have a lot of valuable experience that can be very useful."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

"You can't just bring us here and then lose interest and not take responsibility. It's not just the employer's responsibility, it's everyone's, it's the whole of society."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

Ethnic discrimination common in working life

When researching the experiences of ethnic minorities in their places of work, the research shows that discrimination and the threat of being discriminated against are factors which affect them the most.

They feel that employers and colleagues have a negative stereotypical idea of them. They feel that they are neither trusted nor seen for who they really are, and that their legitimacy is questioned.

They often get to represent diversity as proof that an organisation employs people of different ethnic backgrounds and that the organisation works with diversity issues, even though that may not be the case at all. Once they are received into an organisation, they are still expected to hide their differences to embrace existing and ”accepted” ways of operating and working.

> **”En uskonut, että Suomessa on tällaista.”**
>
> WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

This is also the case in Finnish organisations. Discrimination based on ethnic background is the most common form of discrimination in Finland. Racism against ethnic minorities occurs at all levels both in organisations and society in general. Sometimes racism is part of the structures and processes that influence an individual's choices and opportunities. Structural racism often occurs without awareness or intention of acting in a racist way. As **Robin DiAngelo** remarks in his book 'White Fragility': *Most of us don't want to be racist, and yet racism occurs everywhere because it's integral to all the structures that surround us*.

If you have grown up with racist principles, you will do and say racist things without realising it. It is not that we would be bad as people, but rather that we have yet to learn to recognise and question the structures. To address structural racism, we first need to learn about it.

Sometimes discrimination can be open and pronounced in a way that structural racism is not. But it can also be so subtle that a victim of racism is not always sure that this has been the case. Then it is difficult to take in and resolve. One problem is that racist attitudes are often legitimised and explained as something else, such as circumspection. Managers who do not regard themselves as prejudiced still reproduce the racism and discrimination which occurs in society by minimising the seriousness or by asserting that it is because of something different. They may use racist terms and sayings; or perhaps discrimination exists in the employment situation and staffing routines. One could possibly avoid sending some ethnic workers to certain customers if one suspects racist attitudes there. But then one's actually participating in discrimination, even though that may be exactly what one wants to avoid.

Racism within Finland's organisations

A study has shown that many Finnish managers feel that they cannot do very much if it is revealed that instances of racism have occurred in the organisation. Even when it comes to blatant racism against an employee, e.g. from a customer or a colleague, they may conclude that this is something you just have to live with. Very often, discrimination is not regarded as that serious. Managers tend to minimise, silence and normalise the problem when it occurs within their organisations.

"The most animosity I get comes from my colleagues. We immigrants have to work harder than the local residents … Colleagues don't like it because they see it as a threat."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

"You're there and they forget you're a foreigner and so they talk about foreigners."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

Breaking Down the Whiteness Norm: Three Active Measures

1. Self-education

Because of the privileged position they enjoy in society, most white people have no knowledge of racism. When you do not experience it yourself, you do not see how it can influence your daily life. It is difficult to understand that racism creates unequal opportunities in life when you benefit from the structural arrangements which create barriers for others. When you live in a society where whiteness is synonymous with humanity, it is hard to accept that even white people are "racialised" – as whites. But it is also because of these privileges that it is important that white people take responsibility for educating themselves about racism. "Racialised" people already have to work much harder to achieve many things that white people feel they are entitled to. Furthermore, it is not the responsibility of "racialised" people to educate white people about the repression they experience or explain why they deserve the same dignity and opportunities in life as whites.

Black lives matter demonstration at Senate Square in Helsinki, June 2020.
Photo: Jasmine Kelekay

2. Active measures in everyday life

It is important not only to become familiar with racism in theory, but also to put into practice what you have learned. One mistake that many people make when they think of racism is to categorise people as "racist" or "non-racist". This categorisation builds up racism as a personal feature instead of a mindset or action and portrays it as an individual thing. But if we are to understand racism as structural, we must also understand anti-racism as a process. We may not be able to transform the structures of society immediately, but we can, at least, all take steps to try and ensure that we do not uphold racism within our social conditions – in the workplace, in public areas and so on. It is a matter of actively challenging and speaking out when we see racism around us as well as exploring different ways to actively make our workplaces, schools and institutions more inclusive and equal.

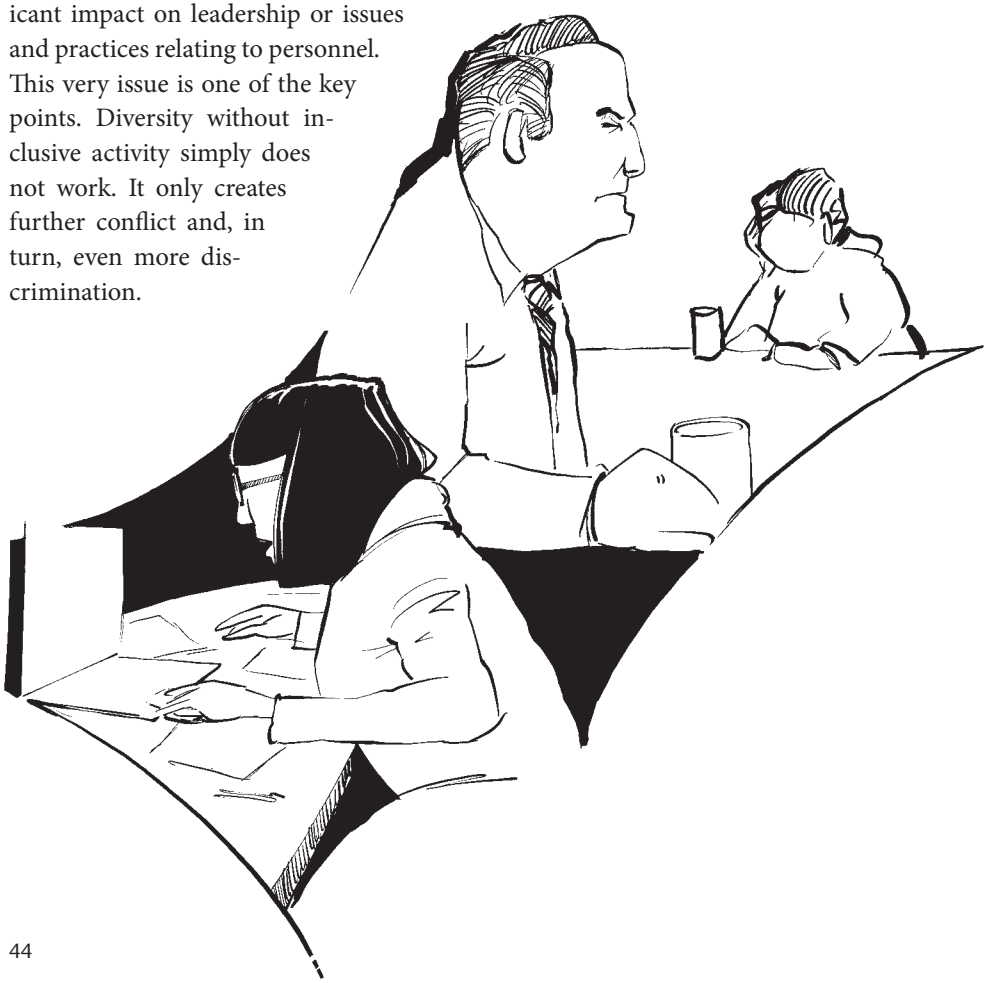
3. Support anti-racist actors

All of us have different conditions and opportunities to get involved in these issues; not everyone can do everything all the time. It is a simple but important way of supporting the work of others – especially anti-racist work done by racialised people, groups and organisations. They are often overloaded and underpaid. Most anti-racist work is done voluntarily while doing other jobs and having other responsibilities. In Finland, you can support the Anti-Racist Forum, Ruskeat Tytöt and various other initiatives taken on by racialised Finns in order to work for a more equal society.

Source (edited version): Jasmine Kelekay: *Black Lives Matter berör även Svenskfinland*, agenda.fi, June 17, 2020

Neglecting the special needs of ethnic minorities – which is common in Finland – may also be regarded as a form of racism, although it is originally intended as equal treatment. The problem is that inequality tends to become invisible amongst majority groups – in this case, Finnish staff. You do not recognise it because you are not familiar with it. Then there is a lack of insight that it occurs within your own organisation, and you believe that it only happens elsewhere.

This is what our companies miss out on. We lose talented workers because we are not good enough at identifying and appreciating skills and experiences that are not typically "Finnish". Studies have shown that most organisations in Finland are not ready to change their routines and processes or leadership to promote diversity – despite the increasing diversity of their staff. The diversity work carried out has not had a significant impact on leadership or issues and practices relating to personnel. This very issue is one of the key points. Diversity without inclusive activity simply does not work. It only creates further conflict and, in turn, even more discrimination.



It may well be the case that organisations are not really interested in reducing discrimination. As long as immigrants continue to be discriminated against, there is access to a cheap, flexible labour force who will perform the tasks that Finnish workers will not do.

This is common, and a significant problem among, for instance, health care workers who are brought in from abroad to work in Finland (e.g. the Philippine nurses), and also among other immigrants. There is talk of a "skills settlement" – i.e. foreign workers are not allowed to perform tasks that correspond to their qualifications, experience or level of competence.

Many immigrants feel that the same rules do not apply to them as to other workers. They are not listened to and their views are not considered to the same extent, and there is often an uneven distribution of workload between different groups of workers without a plausible explanation. This may seem unfair to a worker, but the problem goes far deeper. Every individual needs to be treated with respect and dignity. These issues may seem unimportant, but if the employer does not address them, the consequences can be serious resulting in both physical and mental health problems.

"I've been told I'm three times more efficient than they (the Finns) but they get paid three times more than me."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

Diversity work can lead to further problems

A common problem with diversity work in organisations today is that, despite all the good intentions, it does not change existing (racist) structures and attitudes for the better; it only makes them worse. Very often the focus is on cultural differences among employees and in the work with a tendency to regard inequality as simply existing and unchangeable.

If new workers come from a certain country, you may perhaps inform the others in the organisation about what you consider to be that country's culture, its cultural differences and typical ways of acting for that nationality. Some organisations may invest in a pamphlet that is distributed among employees with the intention of creating better understanding among its staff. The problem here is that you "essentialise" cultural differences. This means that you see cultural differences as a defining part of a person instead of seeing them as individuals with their own way of thinking, acting and reacting regardless of their origins. In so doing, stereotypes and prejudices are reinforced instead of being dispelled. In reality, there are often greater differences between individuals from the same culture than between individuals from different cultures. Research has also shown that how people act and react in the workplace has more to do with the situation, company culture, environment and atmosphere than with the characteristics of an employee.

> **"They feel more comfortable conversing in Swedish. Until I ask or say something, they continue to speak Swedish even though everyone can speak English. I don't know whether this is deliberate or not."**
>
> WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

No one is just their ethnicity

When you essentialise workers in this way, you prevent them from becoming equal members of an organisation. In diversity work in Finland, employees are often categorised into one of two groups, "Finns" or "non-Finns". The groups are then treated as more or less homogeneous, even though there are obviously large differences within both groups.

Very often, no distinction is made between where immigrants come from, how they arrived in Finland, how long they have been in Finland or whether they are first-generation or second-generation immigrants.

Nevertheless, immigrants are treated differently. For instance, immigrants from Africa and the Middle East are discriminated against more often than immigrants from within Europe. The exception is people who have come to Finland for a specific job, such as experts and managers in the corporate world, or restaurant workers who have been recruited to create an authentic ethnic experience for restaurant customers. These types of workers are not regarded as immigrants, but global workers. Even so, research has shown that they may have similar challenges to those who are considered to have come to Finland as immigrants.

In fact, enormous diversity exists within all groups.

Not all women are the same, not all men are the same, not all Finns are the same, and not all ethnic minorities are the same. We don't all have just one characteristic. We may also be single parents, academically educated or low-skilled, belong to a sexual minority, or perhaps we are physically disabled. We all belong to many groups with different needs at the same time, and thus we cannot make generalisations. At the same time, we need to be aware of difference and of how we socially construct difference in the workplace since it is we ourselves who decide what we regard as different. These differences are entrenched in how we talk about them.

Diversity work must be continuous

Another problem with much of the diversity work carried out in the organisational world is that it lacks continuity, and it is not integral to all the functions of an organisation at all levels. It might simply be a one-off event where you organise a cultural diversity training day and thereafter consider the matter settled. But a diversified workplace and a culture change do not happen in one single development day; they require constant attention. It is often the case that

organisations put energy and focus on the immigrants to help them understand Finnish customs and behaviour so that they can adapt better to working life in Finland. But, in order to create a working environment where everyone can work together, this work must involve all employees – not just those who have come to Finland.

Internal systems and processes for working with diversity do not necessarily mean that there is an "inclusive culture" in the workplace either. This can only be achieved by raising awareness, increasing understanding, and encouraging reflective thinking at all levels. Nor is it enough for management alone to have a diversity mindset, or just the department comprising workers from different cultures to receive diversity training. Inclusion is a matter of organisational culture which needs to penetrate the entire workplace.

"There must be natural ways to have a good everyday life. If you don't have friends, where do you turn?"

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

"I have to be a lot nicer than I really am to succeed in Finland."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

Lack of information – a constant problem

A constantly recurring challenge – as mentioned in previous studies and among the people we have met during the project – is a lack of information.

First of all, the language is a challenge. The immigrant employees may not speak Finnish or Swedish. All too often they will not understand the documentation available in the workplace – available usually in the native languages only. It may well be about their work contract, or other official documentation which they need to know about. As a result, they are unaware of their rights and obligations, and may not even know that such documentation exists. At best, they will have been informed of everything they need to know when they arrive; but, they may have received all the information orally and in one single session in a language that may be strange to them. In short, there will be too much to take in. You cannot possibly remember the information, nor will you know where to turn if questions arise on occasions when you know you do need to ask about something.

Another challenge may be how you are expected to communicate within the organisational world in Finland. In the Finnish workplace, it is often expected of an employee to approach the manager without hesitation to discuss any difficulties or problems. But not everyone feels able or wishes to contact the manager; so it is important to be responsive, inquire, listen actively and be attentive.

"They should have checked my health before I was allowed to do a three-shift job but no one checked even though I had already done two weeks of three-shift work … I don't know my rights. My boss doesn't realise that I don't know."

WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

“I didn’t think it would be like this here in Finland”

To put research and statistics alongside reality, we arranged two workshops in the spring: one for employees, the other for employers.

During the first workshop, employees were divided into two groups. One group consisted mainly of people carrying out tasks in “low-wage” industries. All of them were immigrants from third countries outside the EU. The other group consisted of people with varying professional backgrounds, e.g. office, factory, catering and health care.

The structure of workshops

Workshop with employees:

Participants: healthcare staff, greenhouse workers, engineers, restaurant staff, day care staff, shop assistants, office staff from different countries in Europe, Africa and Asia.

Purpose: to hear the experiences of participants working in Finland and to learn about what has worked and not worked and what they feel they needed but did not get. The participants discussed and exchanged thoughts in two groups: one in Swedish and one in English. In both workshop groups, participants were assured that everything they said would be treated confidentially.

Workshop with employers:

Representatives from the private, public and third sectors (Southern Finland and Ostrobothnia)

Branches: Retail, industry, healthcare, education, municipalities.

Purpose: To hear the experiences of employers about working with diversity, their challenges, the requirements to make it work better, what they would do differently if they could, flaws in legislation.

The groups were asked to share specific experiences, thoughts and finally consider what could be done better and differently in the future.

"We daren't always speak out if something is wrong"

In the first group, many participants mentioned the appearance of the reception at their first place of work. Everyone was aware that they were being employed in industries with a shortage of labour and, as a result, you might have imagined a warm welcome. Similarly, you might have imagined that these workplaces would understand that these people were coming from countries where their cultural background and language differed noticeably from the Finnish language and culture. But it wasn't quite like that.

Almost immediately, several participants experienced, for example, conflicts in communication. What may seem like frank and honest communication to a Finn might sound blunt and cold to an immigrant.

> **"I started working as a school teaching assistant and was told that I should know that I was an assistant, not a teacher. The professional hierarchy was difficult to understand; I got the feeling I wasn't respected even though I could speak Swedish. It felt as if I had to keep a low profile, follow the rules and do something extra to get appreciation."**

Several participants said that there was little understanding, if any at all, that someone not born in Finland might have difficulty keeping up with the pace of absorbing all the details presented in the first introduction (which was rarely repeated). Also, the established routines of a workplace which may seem straightforward to someone familiar with them may seem complex to someone arriving from outside.

> **"They rattled off a load of trivial details and asked if I understood. I said yes even though I didn't understand anything."**

> **"It was almost like bullying. I tried my best and wanted to learn and when I began, I always asked how to make sure it would be right. Then they got annoyed so I stopped asking and didn't dare tell anyone how I was feeling. I felt that they were talking behind my back and many times I cried and felt alone. It was not a good**

working environment. You have to be asked and supported if you are hard-working and want to learn even though you come from another country."

Language confusion was also mentioned. Although most people had at least an elementary knowledge of Swedish when they started working, they found it difficult to keep up when discussions went too quickly or when they were about more complex matters.

"They used complicated words and talked far too fast. They abbreviated some of the words, so I had no idea what they meant at all. It wasn't the kind of Swedish I had learned on the course."

"Everything seemed fine and I got a traineeship at a kindergarten. The tutor liked me, so did the kids. Then the supervisor failed me; when I asked why, I was told I had to learn more Swedish. Even so, I had done all the work as expected and in the way which was considered correct. And all the time, I kept trying to learn the language better."

For those who have no knowledge of Finnish or Swedish at all when they arrive, the situation can be even worse – especially if the workplace they go to has little or no interest at all in looking after them and caring for their well-being in Finland, but simply wants them to do their job.

Then it becomes even more important that an employer takes responsibility for ensuring that employees really understand their rights and, above all, their obligations. Landing in a new country to be confronted by languages and systems very foreign and different constitutes a momentous chain of events. On top of all that, to try and absorb such things as Finnish labour legislation, collective agreements and supervision of interests in the workplace is probably too much to expect of any human being.

This also came up in the workshop, when two participants mentioned problematic experiences at their initial places of work.

"If you don't know the language and there is no interpreter, the employer should provide the most important information in the employee's mother-tongue. It must be simple and only the most necessary details because there is so much new information to take in when you first arrive. This would solve a lot of problems."

“On the very first day, there should also be an interpreter to go through the employment contract … how much should you get paid, what kind of working hours you have, etc. These matters are obvious to Finns but not to someone from Vietnam.”

“It’s not enough to provide all the information on the first day of work – and then never again.”

“The employer should go through the employment contract meticulously, every point, and make sure that the employee has actually understood everything, and correctly. That is the responsibility of the employer.”

“If you’re alone in Finland – where do you turn if there’s a problem? What residence permit should you have? What are you supposed to do? If no one can help, you’re left out in the cold and that’s not acceptable.”

Another issue which several workshop participants had missed concerned the insights of both employees and Finnish colleagues about people from different backgrounds having varying propensities to speak up if something was not right. Then it would be important to involve the entire collective in welcoming a newly arrived individual and create a sense of trust to help the newcomer feel that support is available when necessary.

"We daren't always speak out if something is wrong"

Several also called for understanding: very often, those who have moved to Finland have no social networks at all. This causes problems if you feel alone and left out. These problems are even more pronounced for those who have families.

"I'm a single parent with no family. When my daughter became ill, she wasn't allowed to be in kindergarten, and I wasn't allowed to stay at home with her for more than three days. The situation became very difficult to resolve. The employer should have a better understanding of an individual worker's family situation. And I don't know where to get help either."

"I have to work three times as hard"

The other group consisted of low-income and middle-income earners. The workshop was conducted in two languages, Swedish and English; not everyone had a common language. Everyone who was part of this group could speak English.

Many in the group highlighted the difficulties of entering the labour market in Finland as a foreigner or if you had a foreign-sounding name.

"That's before you even get into the organisation. Just because of your name, the chances of getting a job can be very slim."

"When I first came to Finland, it was impossible to get a job."

"I have chosen to work in very international companies because my first name and surname do not appeal to (indigenous) Finnish companies."

One participant thought that it was easier for foreigners to get a job in Ostrobothnia than in other parts of the country in the light of his own experiences and those of his acquaintances. This is perhaps because for many years foreign workers have been brought into Ostrobothnia to work, to a great extent, in the large greenhouses.

As in the first group, language problems were highlighted. Here, it concerned colleagues speaking Finnish or Swedish amongst themselves in the presence of a foreigner who did not understand either language. The big problem was, however, not receiving enough information and that much of the documentation available was in a language you did not understand.

> **"Previously, you had to sign there and then, but now they let you take the contract home (to look at). Even then you don't understand everything."**

Employees are also expected to know what they are entitled to: wage levels, working hours, holiday rights, etc. The problem may well be that they have never received that information from anyone.

> **"In Finland, it is assumed that people are familiar with the legislation. The holiday is defined in the law … but it's really hard to understand because you have so little experience [of working in Finland]."**

> **"I've been working at this company for eight years and I still don't know the wage classes and degrees of difficulty of work. Some people say it's important, others say it's not. They're not going to sack you but you should still have a right to know."**

> **"If you've been working for many years, you should get a rise but we don't know anything about that."**

> **"I have problems with health care. I didn't know I should have asked about it. They should have checked my health before I was allowed to do a three-shift job but no one checked even though I had already done two weeks of three-shift work … I don't know my rights. My boss doesn't realise that I don't know."**

However, they feel that it may be OK that not everything is translated into a language that they understand.

> **"At the company where I work, almost all documentation is in three languages. Sometimes it's in Finnish if it's about factory workers and then I don't understand anything, but the good thing is that there's a way to solve this. Your colleague can translate or perhaps there's an English version somewhere. But most of the documentation in daily life is in Finnish or Swedish … and that's very inconvenient."**

> **"All documentation is in Finnish. But I don't see that as a problem … if I don't understand, I ask."**

> **"It would be time-consuming if they had to translate everything. That would be an additional cost to the company."**

The experiences can be conflicting at times. You feel that it is stressful and unsafe with a short-term contract, but you still feel happy at your place of work. Some people may feel frustrated when they do not understand all the important documentation or do not know their rights, but at the same time they are very understanding, saying that you cannot expect that from an employer. This is not at all unusual. It is common and natural for contradictions to occur in people's stories, especially if they are complex or sensitive issues, which can be due to various factors.

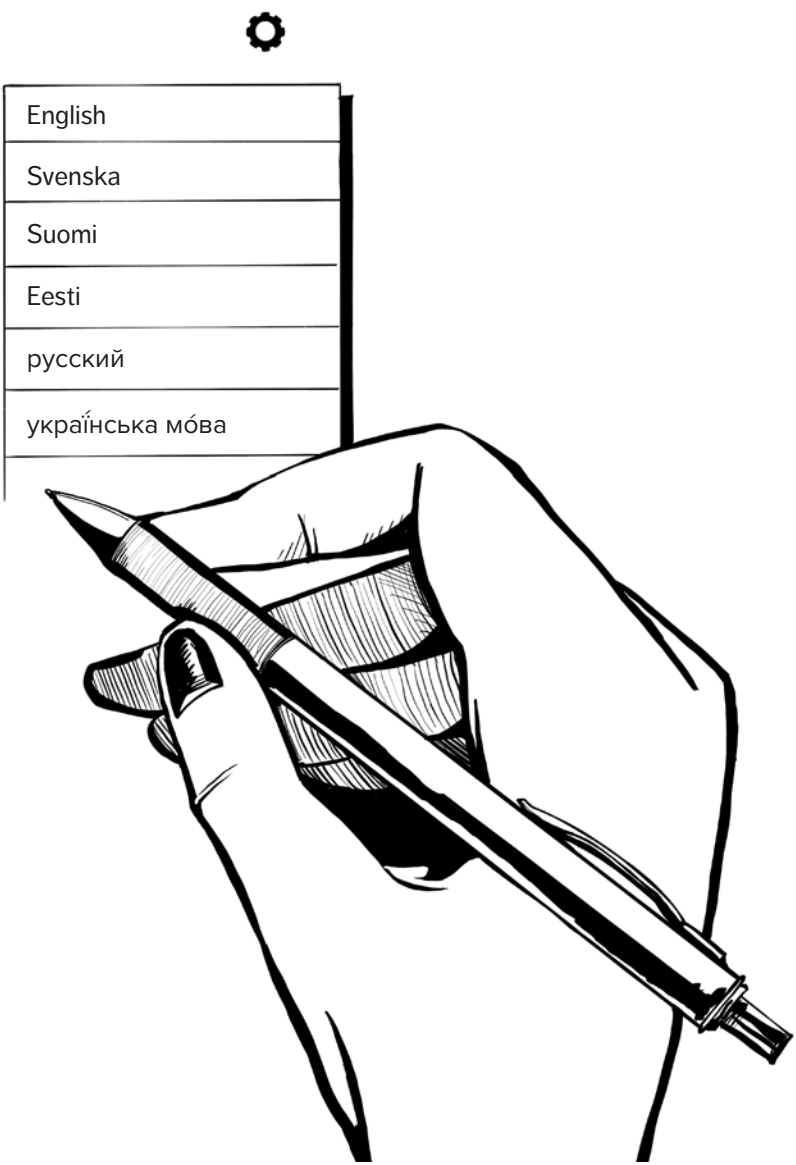
For instance, it could be about their loyalty to the employer. They may feel grateful to have been given an opportunity and do not wish to seem ungrateful or disloyal.

It could be about fear. You don't want to be critical because you don't want to lose your job.

Then again, it could well be that it is simply difficult to admit – to yourself and to others – that you have been subjected to racism or discrimination. Or you just don't understand that you are being discriminated against.

> **"The most animosity I get comes from my colleagues. We immigrants have to work harder than the local residents … It makes you better at work and so we do it a little better. Colleagues don't like it because they see it as a threat because you work three times as hard."**

Contract



"I've been told I'm three times more efficient than they (the Finns) but they get paid three times more than me."

"I feel I have to work a lot harder than I should."

"There are only a few foreigners working in the factory and they have short-term contracts. I don't know if it's racism or if it's because they need to have Finns there. I've been working on short-term contracts for three years. Sometimes I'm angry and I don't feel secure (due to the short-term contract) but, on the whole, I feel happy at the company."

Despite the various types of problem, many still think that the employer treats them well.

"I only experience racism from my clients. "

"I'm doing my best to change my situation internally, that's why I'm still here. It's a good company."

Some employees have also realised that their employers had defended them if a customer had behaved racially. For instance, one participant mentioned a patient who refused to receive care from them because they (the participant) came from Africa. Then the on-call doctor stepped in and said that if the patient wanted care, it would be [the participant] who would administer it. The patient left without receiving care.

For many of the participants, the workshop work seemed to have opened their eyes to the racism and discrimination they had been subjected to in Finland and in the workplace without really understanding what it was about. They had probably experienced situations where not everything seemed right but could not actually pinpoint what was wrong. While at work, many realised that it was a question of discrimination. But the fact that they were not alone in their experiences was for many a great 'light-bulb' moment.

So, what should one do?

The employment stage:

This report does not focus on the actual stage of employment, but on the well-being of the employees after they have been taken on. However, the recruitment process is so important in the context of diversity in organisations that it must be mentioned. Studies have shown that it is difficult to get a job in Finland if you are a foreigner or have a foreign-sounding name. In our workshop for workers, a recurring frustration was the difficulty in even reaching the job interview stage. Job vacancy postings may be designed in a way that discriminates against foreigners and those conducting job interviews may not be trained in diversity issues or even aware of their own prejudices that influence the decision-making process. A transparent, fair and inclusive recruitment procedure should be created to make it easier for immigrants to find work in Finnish organisations.

Those moving to Finland for work may also need help with many practical issues: from moving around and finding housing to medical care for family members or finding day care for children.

Moving to another country can be very uncertain and stressful and have a negative impact on mental health regardless of your income bracket: low, middle or high. The new employee may therefore need help and support before, during and after the move.

Introductory programme

Diversity amongst personnel is rarely taken into account, nor are the special needs of immigrants at the introductory stage. On the contrary, a study of introductory materials and manuals in Finnish organisations has shown that they construct stereotypical images of Finns vis-à-vis immigrants. They present norms and expectations that immigrants are expected to adapt to while the Finns' suspicion of cultural diversity is legitimised. In practice, the intention of the material has completely the opposite effect.

The employees must be given important information about matters such as rights and obligations in a language they understand. The same is true for the employment contract. It may sound obvious, but you must know what you are signing.

The introductory programme must be detailed and well thought out to give the new employee the best start possible. Don't make assumptions about the new employee – ask questions instead. Feel free to use open questions to find out more about your new employee.

Communication

Create effective, open, responsive, sensitive and regular communication. Make sure it is in a language and communicated in a way that the recipient can understand. Make sure it is easily accessible. Do not expect your colleagues to come to you if they have a problem or if something is not working. You need to ask and be responsive too. Be aware that some employees may shy away from saying how things really are because they do not want to run the risk of their colleagues getting angry with them or freezing them out, thus making the work situation even more difficult. Remember to lead by example.

Effective diversity training

An effective way to work with diversity issues and create an inclusive culture is to use sensitivity training. This applies to the entire organisation, not just the new arrivals or those who work with diversity in the organisation. The aim is to create an organisational culture where you learn to respond to each other regardless of where you come from. You learn to be sensitive to other people and their situations, not just those who come from another country or culture, and to be able to adapt to different methods and styles of working. You learn, for instance, how to talk about different things, even difficult things, sensitively and how to apologise if there has been a misunderstanding or if you have hurt someone by mistake, which can happen when dealing with other people.

Regularity

Diversity training and sensitivity training should be regular and continuous. One pamphlet, one course or one workshop will not be enough to create an inclusive culture. It is an ongoing process.

All levels of the organisation

Diversity training and sensitivity training should involve everyone at all levels in the organisation. Creating a new culture is not just about introducing incoming staff or the teams where they work into diversity issues. Nor is it enough for just managers to be trained in diversity and inclusion issues. It applies to the whole organisation.

Support networks

New arrivals generally lack support networks. Helping them with this and making contacts with others can be very important for them and their families to be able to create and maintain a happy life in Finland. As an employer, you must understand that an employee's quality of life outside the workplace or working hours has a major impact on job satisfaction and performance. A system of support networks can also benefit Finnish people who have moved from another location.

Mentor, coach, friend systems

You can pair up new employees with people who have been in the workplace longer – both Finnish and immigrant – so that they always have someone they can turn to if they need help or have any questions. This may involve issues such as how to apply for sickness benefit or taking the newcomer on leisure activities for employees. You need to be clear about the role and responsibility of a mentor, coach or friend: for instance, introduce the new employee to others, have lunch together regularly, take them on various activities, tell them about important issues which apply to the organisation and regularly check up on how the new employee is getting on.

Complaints handling system

There should be a clear system for handling complaints so that everyone knows how to use it and who to turn to. In this way, complaints can be made safely without the risk of being classed as difficult. You can provide the option of making complaints anonymously.

Be proactive

It is important to think ahead and put in place support systems to strengthen wellbeing at the workplace; anticipate and prevent problems instead of 'putting out fires'. It is good if the support or help is targeted and tailored; not everyone has the same needs. To succeed, you must get to know your employees and

understand their situation. Not only communication but also systems of mentors, coaches and friends can be very helpful. Inform your employees regularly about the help available.

Resources

Specific resources need to be earmarked and allocated for diversity work. These necessary resources will be well worth it in the end.

Follow up

Have regular follow ups on how things are going. What is working? What could be improved? What should be done differently? It is important here to delegate various tasks to responsible individuals. If you notice that action needs to be taken or things need to be improved, it is important to decide who is responsible and when follow up action is required.

Checklist

- ☐ The employment stage
- ☐ Introductory programme
- ☐ Communicate systematically and effectively
- ☐ Effective diversity training
- ☐ Regularity
- ☐ All levels of the organisation
- ☐ Support networks
- ☐ Mentor, coach, friend systems
- ☐ Complaints handling system
- ☐ Be proactive
- ☐ Resources
- ☐ Follow up

Employees: More language courses, clear info and confidential feedback

During the workshop, the participants got to make a wish list about things that they did not receive when they started working in Finland.

- Learning the language at work
- Mandatory language courses for employees
- Quota of foreign employees
- Anonymous recruitment process
- Monthly, confidential feedback
- Invest more in preparing staff if foreign employees join work communities
- Treat everyone fairly, not just on paper but also in practice
- Simple, clear information (with an interpreter present) about rights and obligations; also go through the employment contract properly to ensure that the employee has understood the information correctly; even on paper

Employers: The will is there, but the tools are lacking

The employer workshop was attended by organisations that work with, and have experiences of, diversity at the workplace. They were from the private sector, the public sector and the third sector with operations in both Ostrobothnia and southern Finland. The purpose of the workshop was to hear from organisations and their experiences of diversity work and to have a discussion about what would be required to facilitate this work specifically and more generally from a political and legislative point of view.

This workshop revealed that many people experience challenges in diversity work and that the experiences are very similar in spite of differences in the industry and where they operate in Finland. It may be due to an excessively

strict regulatory framework, that they find it difficult to get a hearing for their ambitions, that their own organisation does not want to invest and that they lack tools for implementing this work in the best way. Many of the participants felt that much more needs to be done in their own organisation and although they were motivated to do so, they either lacked support from the management or quite simply the tools to work with diversity issues.

"You feel like giving up sometimes. It's not easy, this stuff … I feel as if I'm failing as a human resources manager, I haven't even been able to start working on diversity because the mass needs to understand that this is everyone's thing … It's all departments, not just those who have foreign labour. We need to work more extensively on this."

"Good initiative to start addressing these matters. There are challenges, structures we have to sort out … Coaches and mentors … But, honestly, why don't we have more of this stuff?"

"In the private sector, there are no language statutes … You can take on whoever you want. [In the public sector], do we do it on purpose? [...] Are we making it difficult for some to get employment in town? Where do we draw the line with language issues? I was sceptical — if the job market doesn't respond to the fact that we require languages, will we be doing ourselves a great disservice?"

"We're really bad at picking up those who are here and supporting entrepreneurship. We're taking the easy way out."

"The pace of work today is so terribly demanding; everything should be done so efficiently. There's no time to think about things like this. It was like leadership issues before; you didn't want to make time for it. This is also leadership. We need to talk about it and set aside time for it."

"It's not just the employee's duty to keep track of things. Every employer should look in the mirror. We focus on their obligations. It is also our duty to say what their rights are. Every [employer] can make a bit more of an effort."

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Finland is in desperate need of more labour. But it is not enough that we put a dictionary and a collective labour agreement in the hands of those who move here to work.

For this report, researcher Ingrid Biese and journalist Jeanette Björkqvist met with a group of people who have come to Finland from different countries and backgrounds. They talked about racism in everyday life and at work, exclusion from the labour community, lack of information and misleading job descriptions.

> **"Why are we the only ones expected to learn? Why don't Finns need to learn to better understand where we all come from?"**
>
> – WORKER WITH FOREIGN BACKGROUND

Drawing on existing research, statistics and the unique interview material, the authors paint a picture of the reality for many who have moved to Finland for work. The report also presents tips and measures that employers can use in practice.

AGENDA folkhälsan