

A Career Guide for
the Immigrant Professional

HOW TO SUCCEED



in the Workplace

Welcoming
Center *for*
NEW PENNSYLVANIANS

*Connecting immigrants, employers,
and communities*

FINDING A JOB IN PENNSYLVANIA

As an immigrant professional, finding a job in the field in which you trained and worked before coming to the United States can be an overwhelming task, but with guidance, hard work, and focus, you can achieve your goals.

At the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians, we work with hundreds of immigrant jobseekers each year, helping them understand how to transfer their credentials from their home countries and pursue the certifications they need to continue their careers in the United States.

Many professional jobs in the United States require certification (for example, nurses, public accountants, doctors, engineers, etc.). These certifications are administered by each state, which means that **a certification from one state will not automatically be valid in other states**. The information that the Welcoming Center provides focuses on certifications for the state of Pennsylvania.

Not all jobs in your field will require certification, and the Welcoming Center is a great resource for finding these opportunities. If you are educated in a certain field, and have professional experience, you can find a job without being certified. Often, the jobs that do not require certification are lower-level jobs that pay less. When charting your career path, it is important to understand the costs and benefits of going through the professional certification process.

To provide you with the guidance you need to transition into the profession you trained for in your country of origin, the Welcoming Center has put together a series of *Career Guides* that focus on high-growth occupations in Pennsylvania. These guides explain the necessary steps for obtaining a job in different professional careers, such as engineering or accounting, as well as provide information for other jobs in each field that do not require certification. The guides can be found on the Welcoming Center's website, **www.welcomingcenter.org**.

NOTE:

We created these *Guides* after detailed research on the regulations and procedures required in Pennsylvania for each profession. Certifications and examinations change over time, so it is crucial to stay updated on developments in your field to make sure you are in compliance with all current procedures. If you have questions, always call the state licensing agency for your profession. (See our industry-specific *Career Guides* for details.)

PLANNING YOUR TRANSITION

Your professional job search will be a lengthy process that will require persistence and patience. Even if you have been working in your field for a long time in your home country, you will need to follow new licensing and certification requirements in the United States. You may need to take examinations, apply for a license or other necessary certification, go through specialized training, or gain specific work experience in the American workplace. You may also need to pay fees to take the tests or apply for licensure.

Depending on your profession, you should expect this process to take approximately 3-5 years. Due to this rather long time frame, we strongly encourage you to find a “survival-level job” in the meantime. Even if it is a lower-level job, a survival-level job in your field will allow you to build your work experience, improve technical English related to your field (even if you are a native speaker, this can be useful), and increase your network of contacts. For example, if you were an auditor in your home country, consider getting a survival-level job such as a cashier that will allow you to become accustomed to U.S. currency.

The most important things to keep in mind as you search for a job are to be realistic and to stay informed. Understanding what you need to do, the limitations you have, the requirements you must meet, and the environment in which you are working are all key in becoming a successful jobseeker. On the following pages is a list of useful steps for you to take as you begin your professional job search in the United States.

FIRST STEPS IN WORKING AS A PROFESSIONAL IN THE U.S.

Prepare yourself for your job search

First, review the steps that are required to become a professional in your field. Consider whether this timeline and costs are feasible, given your other responsibilities. For example, if you have children to support or send to college, you may choose not to restart your professional career in the U.S.

Have your degree from your home country evaluated by a reputable service such as World Education Services (WES, www.wes.org). Many U.S. licensing exams and certifications require applicants who have been educated outside of the United States to have their credentials evaluated by a professional credential evaluation organization like WES. This service will require you to pay a fee. Beware of disreputable organizations when choosing a credential evaluation service.

Create or improve your résumé (also known as Curriculum Vitae or CV).

A résumé is a one or two page document that shows your work history, education, and contact information. Take a look at samples of American style résumés at www.careeronestop.org. Be sure to list accurate dates and contact information and use simple and straightforward language. Do not use pictures, elaborate borders, or colors on your résumé. Do not include marital status or information about your family and personal life.

Find appropriate references. Most employers will ask for at least three references who can attest to your skills and give a good review of your past performance in a job. References can be either professional or personal. It will be very helpful if you have references for work that you have previously done in the United States. Some employers will also accept letters of reference (in English) from previous employers in your home country. Make sure that any references that you provide have only positive things to say about your past work.

Make sure you can pass necessary background checks. Many jobs require background checks, including credit checks, driving records, employment verification, drug tests, and criminal background checks. Before applying for jobs, make sure your credit is in order and that you are able to pass any required checks or tests. Be aware that some checks will require that you have spent at least 2, 5, or even 10 years in the U.S. Do not waste money applying if you have not been living here long enough for a background check to be valid. The FBI check required for your immigration visa cannot be reused for a job.

Stay up-to-date on the customs of the American workplace. When you prepare for an interview or an informational meeting, make sure that you know what professional attire you should wear, what materials you should bring to the interview, and how you should address the people you are meeting. If you are unsure, don't hesitate to ask a mentor or one of the Welcoming Center's employment specialists for help.

Improve your skills

Enhance your language skills. If necessary, enroll in English language classes to be sure that your level is proficient for a job in your desired profession. A list of English classes in Philadelphia is available on our website, www.welcomingcenter.org.

Take computer classes. Many professional positions that you might apply to will require specific computer skills. Research what skills you will need to perform your desired job. Also, consider learning basic programs such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, and improving your typing skills if you plan to look for a job in an office. Many colleges and universities offer evening computer classes for adult students. You may also want to see if your local public library offers free computer classes.

Obtain your U.S. driver's license. Many jobs in the U.S. require you to have a valid driver's license, even if the job itself does not include any driving. Having a license will also make more jobs available to you because you will be able to travel farther. It is common in the United States to have a 30-minute or longer daily commute by car to your workplace. You can go to the Welcoming Center's webpage on "FAQs: Identification and Documentation" for more information on how to apply for your Pennsylvania Driver's License: <http://www.welcomingcenter.org/immigrants/faq.php#drivers>.

Make contacts

Go out and network! Meeting people in your field can be a useful way to make contacts and learn more about what it takes to obtain your desired job. Networking can also lead to referrals and introductions that might help your résumé get on a hiring manager's desk more quickly. Attending lectures and job fairs, joining professional networks and clubs, and going on informational interviews are helpful techniques to find the right people in your industry. Try looking at local universities' websites to find events in your field or contact a university professor or department staff. Always have a business card or résumé available for these events or meetings so you can get your name out there and make lasting connections.

Find an internship in your desired profession. Although internships are typically unpaid, they are excellent ways of "getting your foot in the door" at companies where you wish to work. They also give you valuable U.S. work experience to highlight on your résumé.

Consider volunteering. Volunteering will give you an opportunity to meet people and gain work experience that could be attractive to potential employers. Like an internship, it also might open the door to full-time opportunities.

NETWORKING: WHERE TO START

The key to networking is to build relationships with people in your professional field. Now the tough part: Where do you find professionals in your field? Begin your networking at the following places.

Local Professional Organizations (by Industry)

Visit the websites of local professional organizations to find conferences, lectures, and even job banks. These types of organizations are often national organizations, but not part of the government. Many times, they have local chapters that can be a resource for navigating the state certification processes.

Pennsylvania Bio: www.pennsylvaniabio.org

Pennsylvania Institute of Certified Public Accountants: www.picpa.org

Pennsylvania State Nurses Association: www.panurses.org

Association of Information Technology Professionals: www.aitp.org

Local Professional Organizations (by Ethnicity)

The following networks often host social events, professional workshops, and other occasions where you can meet professionals from your region of origin.

National Association of Asian American Professionals:

www.naaaphiladelphia.org

Latino Professional Network: <http://lpnetwork.net>

International Visitors Council: www.ivc.org

Regional Universities

Universities are a good place to find people who have the most up-to-date knowledge in your field as well as find lectures or events showcasing new research or data. Connecting with professors, graduate students, and even staff is a good way to tap into the current trends in your professional field. Many universities also have international student offices where you can find assistance and resources.

University of Pennsylvania: www.upenn.edu

Temple University: www.temple.edu

St. Joseph's University: www.sju.edu

Drexel University: www.drexel.edu

La Salle University: www.lasalle.edu

Villanova University: www.villanova.edu

Arcadia University: www.arcadia.edu

Understand your options

Do your homework. Any job search will require you to do some research. You should identify what type of skills, education level, and experience are required for your desired position. You should also find out what companies in your area hire individuals in your position and make a list of the ones that you find most interesting. Next, research these specific companies by looking at their websites and asking people in the area who may have some useful information about the companies. Doing thorough research at the beginning will also make you better prepared for your interviews and more knowledgeable about the companies and industries that you seek.

Be creative. Do not limit yourself to one or two places to search for jobs. There are many different ways to find jobs in Pennsylvania. Some resources you may want to try are:

PA CareerLink: Offers an online job bank through its website, as well as personalized attention through its nine community-based offices throughout Philadelphia County. For more information, visit their website at www.pacareerlink.state.pa.us

Classified ads in city and local newspapers, or online: Craigslist (www.craigslist.com) or JobsInPA (www.jobsinpa.com) are both good places to start.

Job-specific websites: Many industries have websites entirely devoted to specific types of jobs, like the International Career Center at the World Trade Center of Greater Philadelphia, www.wtcphila.org and Pennsylvania Bio, www.pennsylvaniabio.org.

Bulletin board postings: A few places to look include community centers, libraries, and college campuses.

General job-search websites: Monster (www.monster.com) or Career Builder (www.careerbuilder.com) offer extensive listings.

Company websites: Many companies post open positions on their websites. Usually you can find these postings under “Employment” or “Career” links, listed under an “About us” webpage.

Non-profit organizations: Some non-profit organizations list job openings on general websites like The Nonprofit Center at La Salle University and Idealist.org. Note: “Non-profit” in the U.S. has a similar meaning to “nongovernmental” or “NGO” in other countries.

Word-of-mouth: There are many jobs that are never publicly posted. Instead they are in the “hidden job market.” This is why it is essential to network with people in your desired industry so you may hear about these hidden openings.

Cold calling: Often job seekers will call an employer directly and talk to someone in human resources to see if there may be job openings available, but not listed. Only cold-call companies that seem very well suited for your skills.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. You never know when someone you know might be able to point you in the right direction for your desired job. Consider finding a mentor who can help guide you through the process. A mentor can be someone who can advise you, answer some of your questions, aid you in coming up with job search ideas and contacts, and help prepare you for what lies ahead in your career path. Mentors can be a colleague in your workplace, a member of your religious community, a university professor, or a member of a professional association.

Be careful and double-check before you sign up. Whether you are seeking a training program, a certification, help from a recruiter or headhunter, or other assistance with résumé writing or job placement, make sure to ask a lot of questions and do your research before you enroll or pay any money. There are many scams out there and you need to be certain that the person or agency has a good reputation. If you require assistance or have any doubts, call the Welcoming Center.

Be open-minded. If a company offers you a position in your field, even if the position is part-time or pays less than your desired salary, be open-minded and seriously consider taking the job. A job within your field will be an investment in your future career.

DON'T BE DISCOURAGED!

Finding a professional position in the United States can be challenging. You may find that the 3-5 year time frame is too long and will not work with your circumstances. The certification process can be tough and it may be too expensive for you to afford.

If you want to pursue your career, but do not want to go through these extensive steps, you may want to consider finding a similar position that allows you to apply your skill set, but does not involve certifications or licensure. In each of our *Career Guides*, you will find a list of alternative jobs in the field that do not require as much time and money to obtain certification, or do not require certification at all. This list is a good way to start looking for those types of jobs.

Whatever you do, don't be discouraged. There are companies out there that are looking for individuals with your skills and experience – it is simply a matter of knowing how to find those companies and how to prove your value to them. If you need assistance with your job search, please contact the Welcoming Center.

DO YOU HAVE A SUGGESTION?

Now that you're here in the U.S., do you have suggestions for immigrant professionals who are new arrivals? Do you sometimes think, "If only I had known then what I know now?" Please contact the Welcoming Center to learn how you can share your experience and wisdom with others. Thank you – in advance!

DEFINITIONS¹

Below are some employment terms that will be beneficial for you to know as you begin your job search.

Background Check

A background check is a way for an employer to make sure that the information you gave them is true. Usually, you have to sign a form to give permission for a background check. There are different types. A criminal background check will show whether you have ever been arrested or charged with a crime. Other types of background checks focus on your driving record, medical history, credit history, and employment or education credentials. Certain jobs require special background checks. For example, a teaching job requires a child abuse clearance.

Benefits

In addition to paying wages, many companies offer benefits to their employees. Benefits can include paid time off (for vacation, holidays, or if you are sick), pension or retirement plans (such as 401(k) plans) and investment/stock option plans. Health insurance benefits are also offered by some employers. Some employers pay for health insurance entirely, while other employers require that employees pay part of the cost. Every company has its own list of “benefits” and its own rules for who is eligible. Check carefully with your supervisor or human resources department to make sure you understand your benefits.

Career Fair

An event that allows a large group of employers to meet with many people who are looking for jobs. Career fairs are one-day events that are often held at college campuses, hotels, or convention centers. During a career fair, employers can meet with many different applicants. At the same time, jobseekers can learn more information about these employers by speaking to company representatives. Career fairs can be useful ways for jobseekers to give their résumés directly to the hiring managers.

¹ Adapted from Job Seeker's Glossary of Key Job-Hunting Terms. Quintessential Careers.
http://www.quintcareers.com/jobseeker_glossary.html

Cover Letter

A formal letter (typically one page) that will go along with your résumé when you are applying to a specific job or contacting an employer about your interest in careers at that company. The cover letter should briefly and clearly explain why you are interested in their company and describe how your qualifications match their requirements.

Freelancer (also independent contractor or consultant):

This term refers to workers who work for a company on a contract basis and are typically hired for short-term jobs or projects. They do not work for just one company. Because of this, freelance workers are not eligible for company benefits, nor are they paid on the company's payroll. Freelancers are considered self-employed, and they must file their own taxes as business owners. As a result, a freelancer must be very careful in recording all expenses, and should expect to pay higher taxes than a payrolled employee. Writers, designers, therapeutic staff support, carpenters, and landscapers often do freelance work.

Full-Time Employee

This term generally refers to an employee who works 35-40 hours per week at his or her company. The worker often receives benefits, and is usually paid a salary rather than an hourly wage.

Internship

An internship is a temporary job that is designed for a person who is just beginning to work in a field. An internship can be either paid or unpaid. It may be part-time or full-time. Internships can offer useful on-the-job training for entry-level jobseekers who wish to gain more experience in a particular field. They can also help workers make contact with managers who might want to hire them for a permanent job.

Be mindful that many internships do not lead to permanent jobs.

Mentor

An older and more experienced person who gives you advice about your job and career. A mentor usually works in the same industry or company that you do, but has a higher position (such as a manager or senior manager). This person can offer career advice and guide you through the job search process in a particular industry by answering questions, providing information, and helping you make contacts in your field. We recommend that you find at least one mentor to assist in your career counseling process. He or she will be able to provide in-depth, timely, and personal information related to your profession and opportunities.

Part-Time Employee

This term generally refers to an employee who works fewer than 35 hours per week. Most part-time employees are not eligible for benefits and are paid hourly.

References

When you apply for a job, employers will normally ask you for references. These are people who can attest to your skills, your strengths, your character, and your past work experience. They can be personal, professional, or educational references. Be very careful not to give a personal reference such as a friend if an employer is asking you for a professional reference (which should be a former supervisor).

A NOTE ABOUT WORK AUTHORIZATION:

There are many different types of work authorization for immigrants in the U.S. The best-known is the green card, also known as legal permanent residence. However, there are dozens of other categories. Some employment statuses require that you stay with one employer, while other visas will allow you to change jobs easily. Make sure to talk to a qualified lawyer before making any decisions. If you have any doubts, contact the Welcoming Center to make an appointment at our free legal clinic, or search the American Immigration Law Association list of attorneys at www.aila.org.

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Founded in 2003, the Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that works to promote immigrant participation in the region's economic, political, and social life. These individuals enhance the productivity, profitability, and stability of the region's businesses and contribute to the state's overall economic growth.

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