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## **Skilled Immigrants Struggle to Find Jobs**

By JULIANA BARBASSA 07.13.07, 1:26 PM ET

SAN FRANCISCO -

In Peru, Ines Gonzalez-Lehman directed a 14-person marketing team at a high-tech firm. After marrying an American and immigrating legally to the U.S., she found herself making copies and answering phones at the bottom of the corporate ladder.

The immigration reform bill that recently failed in the Senate would have increased the number of visas for highly educated workers. But there remain tens of thousands of skilled immigrants like Gonzalez-Lehman who are here and authorized to work, but stuck in jobs where their experience is wasted.

Learning how their industry works in the United States, finding out about openings, talking up their assets in a way that appeals to an American employer - those steps, simple to someone educated in the United States, can block the path between a newcomer and work she is well-trained to perform.

"This is clearly an under-leveraged talent pool," said John Bradley, director of human resources at the investment bank JP Morgan Chase & Co. "We're in constant need of a supply of talent and this is a viable, well-trained source that we hadn't focused on in the past."

JP Morgan Chase is among the dozens of companies actively seeking trained immigrants already in the United States through Upwardly Global, a San Francisco-based nonprofit placement agency. The organization, which also has a New York office, is unusual among immigrant advocacy groups in that it focuses solely on well-educated legal immigrants, sharpening their ability to market themselves and connecting them with employers interested in their skills.

Executive director Jane Leu got the idea when she met an Iraqi engineer and a Bosnian surgeon during a visit to a chicken processing plant in New York. Leu, then a refugee resettlement worker, thought they could do better.

"Our system was well-oiled to resettle people into low-wage jobs," she said. "But these people were passionate about their careers."

Tales of educated immigrants stuck in lowly occupations have become part of American lore: The Polish doctor working as a doorman, the Lebanese accountant who drives a cab, the Pakistani engineer who makes ends meet serving tables. New arrivals are added to the roster every day.

Leu says English fluency and what she calls the perception problem - "when most people think of Bolivians, they don't think engineers" - are big hurdles.

But the biggest challenge is connecting the newcomer to the American job search system and workplace culture.

"An immigrant can know how to do a job, but not how to get that job," Leu said.

Over 1.2 million people became legal permanent residents of the United States last year. Many brought with them professional training, along with foreign languages and the ability to work cross-culturally - qualities prized by companies that are crossing borders themselves.

But unlike Canada and Australia, which select immigrants with desirable education and connect them with jobs that put their training to use, the U.S. makes no official attempt to integrate immigrants into the economy.

To some observers, that's just as well.

"The market economy generally does a good job of connecting people," said Stuart Anderson, executive director of the nonpartisan think tank **National Foundation for American Policy**.

That approach fits comfortably within the American appreciation for those who pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

"Here, you have lots of opportunities, but it's up to you," said Jeanne Batalova, a policy analyst with the nonpartisan, Washington DC-based Migration Policy Institute. "The assumption in the U.S. is that if they bring these skills, they must have resources, so they're the ones who need least support."

But advocates say it doesn't work for everyone. Among immigrants who got degrees abroad and arrived in the past 10 years, 42 percent of Latin Americans, 21 percent of Asians and 18 percent of Europeans are doing work that requires no training, according to an MPI analysis of statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Foreigners who studied abroad lack a network of college buddies who would know about openings and get them in the door, Leu said. And they're often ill at ease with American corporate culture and its emphasis on self-promotion and individualism.

In an interview, they might shy away from giving recruiters the hard sell Americans expect, counting on epic resumes to do the talking. But their resumes are often laundry lists of job titles that don't bubble over with the action verbs Americans use to emphasize achievement, according to Leu.

Employers, on the other hand, aren't trained to recognize foreign degrees and job experience.

"In Peru, I was somebody. I was nobody here," said Gonzalez-Lehman, her hands flying up in frustration.

Upwardly Global places immigrants like Gonzalez-Lehman in mentorships and programs that prep both candidates and recruiters. She landed a job in sales at Google Inc., linking Web sites that target Hispanic audiences with advertisers interested in reaching those groups.

"Now I really feel I am an asset, I am productive," she said.

Alcides Hernandez also went from well-connected professional at the top of his field to floundering newcomer without a toehold in a foreign land.

He left a management and research job at El Salvador's largest utility company to be with his wife, whom he met while vacationing in California. He assumed his degrees in industrial engineering, his MBA and his experience setting national price structures for electrical rates in his home country would land him a suitable job.

Instead, he supported his new wife and baby juggling gigs as an electrician's helper, a teller at a courier company, and on weekends, a wedding videographer. He went to job fairs, and got no calls back.

"That was one of the most difficult years of my life," he said of 2002, the year he moved to the United States. "I had this education. I'd worked hard, moved up. But here I was so far from my goal."

Eventually a day laborer center passed him Upwardly Global's number.

Leu connected him with a mentor at Pacific Gas & Electric Co. who taught him the jargon and structure of the U.S. utilities industry. Staff helped him shorten and sharpen his pages-long resume. Leu ran him through half-dozen mock interviews, grilling him in cafes and over the phone.

When he landed an interview for a job as an electric rate analyst for the city of Roseville, he knew the industry and its regulations. He knew the terminology. And the modest, soft-spoken Hernandez could project the can-do attitude that would hook his prospective employers.

The day he got the job was one of his happiest since he arrived, he said.

"I'm part of this professional world again," he said.

For immigrants like Hernandez, having a job that fits their qualifications isn't just about getting a paycheck. It also allows them to reclaim their identity as professionals. After securing his position at Roseville Electric, Hernandez was able to build a life here that resembles the one he had at home. He owns his home, completed a second MBA, and has just earned his citizenship.

"This was what I'd dreamed of," he said. "Now I really feel I am part of this country."