

# CAREER TRANSITIONS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF BULGARIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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*ABSTRACT:* This paper focuses on job transitions and professional development of immigrants in the United States. Using narrative as a method and exploring Bulgarian immigrants' personal experience stories, this report shares some of the findings from the author's dissertation. Upon coming to the United States, the Bulgarian immigrants experienced a different language and culture in their host country. In addition, the initial lack of recognition of their credentials forced many of them to take low-skilled jobs. However, they successfully adapted over time by improving their host language skills, continuing their education, and learning and fulfilling requirements in the local labor market so they could eventually obtain the more high-skilled jobs they desired. These Bulgarian immigrants took different career paths toward achieving their goals and aspirations. However, being highly motivated, hard-working, and persistent individuals, they not only persevered and survived, but they also said they felt successful doing their jobs in their new environment.

*Keywords:* Bulgarian immigrants, career transitions, professional development, United States

Most immigrants face barriers regarding entry into the labor market due to limited fluency in English, lack of formal education from their host country, and employers being unprepared to employ immigrants (Boeren, 2011; Harrison & Lloyd, 2013). Additionally, most immigrants' educational and professional credentials, gained prior to migration, may not be recognized (Lee & Westwood, 1996). Further, formal citizenship may not equate with immigrant civic engagement because immigrant communities "are not fully included in social and political processes" (Ebert & Okamoto, 2013, p. 1267). Finally, societal attitudes toward immigrants may not favor their integration (Berry, 1990, 1997; Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki, 1989). Therefore, there is a need to investigate immigrants', in this case Bulgarian, perceptions of immigrant work in the United States (U.S.).

Using narrative as a method to explore Bulgarian immigrants' personal experience stories, this report shares findings from a larger dissertation study, which the author conducted with 21 Bulgarian immigrants from the Chicagoland area. This paper focuses on job transitions and professional development of immigrants in the United States. All participants were given pseudonyms.

## Job or Career Transitions

The Bulgarian immigrants shared their perceptions of the transitions they made in terms of their jobs/careers. While some of the participants in the study talked about transitions in Bulgaria and the U.S., others discussed transitions that only happened in the U.S.

For example, Diliana shared her experience with job/career transitions. She said:

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Um, I will tell you only here, since I came to America. But in fact, even in Bulgaria...After I completed my higher education [in Bulgaria], um, I started a couple of months later to work in a bank for about four years. Then I came [to America]. But here, at the beginning there was a period in which I was adapting. I would say the first two to three years I had to work at jobs that are for people without any education. My first job was as a waitress. And after that I helped an elderly woman...And after that I worked as a waitress again for a couple of months. And then from 2002 I started again work at [name of bank] here with my degree and what I have studied. And after that with the trucking, it is almost ten years that I am doing it. But at the beginning, there was a period of two to three years when just because of how the circumstances were, and most of everything because you are an immigrant here, and you have to start somehow from somewhere, but to start such things that they do not require any education [sighs].

Diliana shared that in the first couple of years since her arrival in the U.S., she worked jobs for which she did not utilize her higher education degree. She explained that this was how an immigrant would start.

A similar view about how an immigrant starts at the beginning was expressed by Vasil. He said:

Well, this is maybe like every immigrant that is in America. To tell you, at the beginning before you get oriented, before you certify, before you have the opportunity for an experience, the experience is very important here. Well, everyone starts whatever he can work. I have passed through the common experience, right. But I already have discovered the niches for the certificates, this opportunity that is provided. And well, before I got the certificate, I have worked all kinds of work which has not been towards my specialty...[But after I got a certificate in America]...[I managed] to qualify in something, in more cultured job, say as a desk top support, software installations, these things. And the certificate is related with this type of profession. Say we have installation of devices, and so on. But as every immigrant, you start whatever you can work. Up to you complete the certificates and other courses. And from there on, in practice/in reality, your career starts.

Vasil referred to “the common experience” of an immigrant when he worked jobs that were not in his major. Vasil believed that an immigrant professional career started when he completed some formal education.

Many of the Bulgarian immigrants discussed their transitions when they already had professional careers in the U.S. Some of the job transitions occurred because the Bulgarian immigrants wanted to explore which area of work within the professional field to pursue. Viara described the career options she had considered:

I worked in different areas. You can work therapy in a hospital, retirement home, clinics. Um, I went through all [of these]. Oh, you can also go to homes, home therapy. Um, I just went through all because I wanted to see which one would be best for me, in the sense that, and it looks like, there is no easy job/workplace, but it looks like I liked the most at retirement homes because you have independence, and you see, [you are] flexible. You can go whenever is convenient for you, right. Um, and you are not dependent on other people. While if you are at [a hospital], it is nice in a hospital too, but there you work more with colleagues constantly, right, at the retirement home also.

Viara valued being independent and having flexibility at her work. After working in different areas, she was able to decide which one would be best for her to pursue.

Some of the participants perceived their job transitions as positive while others perceived these as negative.

For Petya, transition meant opening more Bulgarian schools in Chicagoland.

Um, I don't know. I don't think [there are any transitions]. Um, so what I have done, it is not exactly as transitions, but as expansions. So the aim is to have more schools, closer to people, to where they live. So we had opened new schools, where there is a need.

Petya envisioned new Bulgarian schools being created close to Bulgarian families with children.

Some of the participants expressed why they did not like job transitions. Negative perceptions revolved around participants' work environments and their occupational choices. Snejana felt that she was changing jobs due to the lack of opportunities to choose where to work.

Transition....Maybe transition....I have been from one sphere to another. And mainly this happened here because... I don't know if this addresses exactly the question. But mainly I have worked, let's say it a little bit whatever it came by chance. A little bit I have worked and I have not searched. More or less, I have taken whatever came along the way. And so. You do not have a lot of opportunity to choose and to stay without a job, from this point of view. And transitions happened because of these reasons. And at the moment I am in this sphere of the trucking business. I mean I have not done that before. And so, it is quite different from what I have studied, but it is at least something.

Some immigrants reflected on their past work experience when they worked jobs that were not in their specialty or for which they did not need education. Snejana stated that now she worked at something new and very different from her education.

Dimitar had a pessimistic view about his job/career transition:

The transitions are this, it is not a transition [laughs]. It is downhill for me because from a higher level you go to a lower level, which is with a similar activity, but the level is much lower.

Dimitar believed that before coming to the U.S. he had reached a higher level of work in Bulgaria. However, in America he perceived this was not the case and that by going to work in another industry he could not maintain the same level.

Findings from the section of job/career transitions are the following:

1. The Bulgarian immigrants experienced job/career transitions both in Bulgaria and the U.S.
2. During the first couple of years after their arrival in the U.S., the Bulgarian immigrants were employed mainly in low-skilled labor.
3. The Bulgarian immigrants had both positive and negative perceptions of their job/career transitions.

### **Professional Development**

Bulgarian immigrants shared what steps they had considered for advancing in their careers and how they had being successful at their current jobs/occupations. The Bulgarian immigrants perceived language as important for their professional realization. Many of the participants in the study believed that without English they would have not had careers in the U.S. A number of participants also elaborated on learning new things and upgrading their skills at/for work.

Dimitar talked about the need for being current in your professional knowledge:

As in all, no matter what job you work, current, not current, previous, you just have to follow everything new, to be updated, as they say, in every moment, in any time. Otherwise, you lose positions. Things develop extremely fast. Technologies develop extremely fast. What was five years ago, it is already old, as it is in the automobile industry, not to talk about in aviation and in other industries. So you constantly have to find a way, the best is self-education, [laughs] in any time of the day and night. This is it.

Dimitar believed that a person had to be competitive in his industry. According to him, the best way to keep up with the fast-pace changes, including new technology, was self-education.

For Snejana, who was just starting a new job, to be successful in her work meant she needed to learn what was required of her. As she said, “to understand better how, um, what is required from me, how it [the work] is done.”

Boyana reflected on her learning experience and requirements at work:

Um, the steps [for advancement and being successful in current job/career] are that I try to learn everything that is new, as there are constantly new computer programs. Here we had again some computer programs that were very difficult to some people. And for me it is not easy, but here I learned this new program too; I got into it too. And I try with everything that my work requires to manage and to learn it so that I could keep up with everyone and even do better....And I think this is a success, to manage to be able to succeed with all new things, and stay current with all requirements which are posed in front of me in my work.

Boyana shared that to be successful at her work she was learning new things that employees had to know. Boyana felt successful with mastering new technology and with learning and managing everything required of her.

Similarly to Dimitar and Boyana, Vasil stressed the importance of learning new technology in his professional field. For him, the main steps for career advancement were obtaining certificates. As Vasil said:

Continuation of the certificates; always to consider opportunities for development. I receive magazines that publish the last things [in IT]. And the desire to read and to develop in this [career] always. It is like this with technology, right? To be successful, I have to study constantly every six months at the least.

Vasil believed that he needed to learn about novel developments in his professional field. He also considered opportunities for development such as studying for and obtaining certificates.

Apart from learning and upgrading their skills, the Bulgarian immigrants were also taking courses, taking tests and exams, passing certificates for career advancement / success, and participating in training sessions. For example, as part of her professional development, Vesela was taking continuing education classes:

Um, I inform myself constantly of the advancements. I take continuing medication classes. I read literature on the side...Continuing education [classes] are mandatory, but they are also interesting and useful. Um, the additional things are already my initiative.

To learn new things for her work, Vesela was reading as a self-directed learner and taking the required continuing education classes.

Desislava discussed trainings. Reflecting on her past experience with obtaining qualifications, she said, "When I was in Bulgaria, I constantly qualified myself [went through trainings], I mean I designed courses for pre-qualification and qualifications in the field I am, education." Diana also shared her experiences, "I take additional courses so that I will be able to qualify for something else one day." She was currently taking classes, hoping to have a better professional choice in the future.

How some of the participants viewed the steps for job/career advancement/success was influenced by their work preferences. For example, Kamen understood the steps for success as acquiring experience that can improve one's situation. He stated:

To gain experience so that you can work for yourself. And you define how much you have to work per day. When you work for others, he [the employer] forces you [to work] for more, and more, and more. [To advance/succeed is] to go on your own, and after that, it can become better.

Kamen valued working independently.

Some of the Bulgarian immigrants identified certain personal characteristics that were important for advancement and success in their careers. The most frequent response was being responsible for work. For example, Krum elaborated on the steps he considered to be successful in his work:

To do your job responsibly. Um, what you set as a price, you should leave the way it was set initially. Because many contractors do otherwise. They say the price only to take the job, and after that they start changing everything. The clients become frustrated, and it becomes...it is not what the client has expected. The client had expected one thing, the contractor is bringing another, and the relations get spoiled. What we do is to try to stick to what we say. Maybe 99% of what I say at the beginning is what stays till the end. The price will change only if there is something unexpected. But this is a rule I stick to. The other thing is always to be at work... We have settled [for the project], we have said we will take that [price], and if we said we will take it, we will complete it [the project/work]...And this is it. Just do your job responsibly.

Krum explained what being responsible meant in his work, while Diliana brought a different view about steps for one's advancement and success:

Um, the steps are simply, a person has to be actively alert and to look around for potential opportunities around herself. Because sometimes, well, an opportunity comes at a given time, but after that it is no longer valid/actual. So in my view, well, I am running my own business and a person has to be with open eyes and to look around for opportunities around her. And if in a given moment, she has such an opportunity, not to lose it, to catch/seize it, and to do something.

For Diliana, to advance in one's career was related to being active and not missing an opportunity.

Asen presented other personal qualities for advancing at work in his profession:

Um, again, persistence, aggressiveness, um, to defend my point of view. I had to be a very good student during the whole time because I wanted to advance quickly. And this is it. In general, these three things. And to be capable [to do

things]. You have to be able to learn. And not to forget the most important thing – how to handle stress. Because in this job many people have tried and are trying at the moment to do something. It is not that they are lacking something. It is just they cannot handle the stress. Because in our profession, there is a lot of stress.

Asen believed that it was crucial in his profession for a person to be able to deal with stress.

Two of the participants pointed out that it was important for a person to have a desire to have a job for his/her professional development. Simeon believed that personal attitude toward work, such as having desire, is important for one to find a job. As he said, “When the person has a desire, everything falls into place.” For Vasil, the steps for his professional development were continuation of the certificates and his desire to continue studying for the next level of the certificates.

Findings from the section of Professional Development indicated that Bulgarian immigrants considered the following steps for advancement or success in their current careers: learning new skills and updating knowledge by taking courses, taking tests and exams, obtaining certificates, and participating in training. Bulgarian immigrants also perceived that certain personal characteristics and attitudes toward work were important for advancing or being successful in one’s career.

### **Going Through Changes After Coming to the U.S.**

Bulgarian immigrants perceived they went through some changes after coming to the U.S. According to Berry (1991), change occurs on the physical, biological, political, economic, cultural, social, and psychological levels (as cited in Vargas-Reighley, 2005). The Bulgarian immigrants in the study discussed how they underwent economic, cultural, social, and psychological changes.

#### **Changes on the Economic Level**

When coming to the U.S., the Bulgarian immigrants evaluated their work prospects for the U.S. labor market. Many of them realized they would not be able to work in the occupation they were in in Bulgaria. Their Bulgarian credentials were not recognized in the U.S. This confirms other studies’ findings about recognition of foreign credentials in the U.S. (e.g., Fang, Zikic, & Novicevic, 2009; Rabben, 2013).

In general, recent immigrants often work in low-skilled occupations, especially during the first years of residence in the U.S. (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). These Bulgarian immigrants also had to find other types of work that were different from the jobs they were engaged in while in Bulgaria. Pressed by the immediate need to earn a living, many took on low-skilled occupations, which confirms the findings of authors, who identified the downgrading of immigrant skills and brain waste (e.g., Batalova, Fix, & Creticos, 2008). Many of the Bulgarian immigrants said that when one comes to America, he/she needs to start at zero. However, although these

Bulgarian immigrants felt that they had to start at zero by obtaining jobs in low-skilled occupations, they still had higher goals for themselves.

### **Changes on the Cultural Level**

Berry (1991) stated that changes on the cultural level include linguistic, religious, or educational shifts. One of the first things some of the Bulgarian immigrants considered was learning the English language. They enrolled in courses to improve their language skills and later entered the U.S. higher education system. Some of the participants shared that they experienced additional stress from the demands of the new educational system, together with the necessity of going to work. Furthermore, it is important that immigrants are aware of differences in cultural norms and environments with respect to work in their home and host countries (Yakushko et al., 2008). During his first job experiences in the U.S., while working for a large U.S. corporation, Vasil learned about the organizational system of work in the U.S. Another participant in the study, Bisera, advised her immigrant clients to watch American movies as a way to learn the English language and ease the adjustment to the foreign life.

### **Changes on the Social Level**

By coming to the U.S., immigrants' relations with members of their families and communities are often negatively affected (Yakushko et al., 2008). For these Bulgarian immigrants, social changes included losing old relations and being exposed to new kinds of relationships at work. For some of the younger immigrants, the social changes included being part of an organizational hierarchical structure and having supervisors or managers.

### **Changes on the Psychological Level**

Berry (1991) noted that on the psychological level, changes in values, identities, abilities, and motives may occur. The acculturation construct is multidimensional, involving change across multiple levels. It is assumed that the dominant group initiates a change in the acculturative group. Chiswick and Miller (1995) discussed incentives to learn the dominant language in the immigrants' host country because they could have a better job. The Bulgarian immigrants in this study considered the incentives, including attending English language classes and continuing their education opportunities. Some of them expressed higher levels of motivation to make changes and succeed. Some of the immigrants in this study shared how they changed their motivation to understand different aspects of life in the U.S. For example, Boyana who was once a traditional-age student in Bulgaria became a non-traditional student in the U.S. When coming to the U.S. in her 50s, she realized that she needed to study again to succeed, and according to her, this was not the usual age people pursued formal education. However, once making the decision to enroll in a higher degree program in the U.S., Boyana was persistent because she wanted to succeed in her new life. To achieve her goal, she needed to complete her program of study. Boyana found strength she did not know she had and completed it within the two-year time frame she wanted. Similar to Boyana, Vesela also considered



becoming a non-traditional student. She was a single parent and wanted to study to better provide for her child.

To conclude, upon coming to the United States, the Bulgarian immigrants in this study experienced a different language and culture in their host country. In addition, the initial lack of recognition of their credentials forced many of them to take low-skilled jobs. However, they successfully adapted over time by improving their English language skills and continuing their education. In addition, they continued learning and fulfilling requirements in the local labor market so they could eventually obtain the more high-skilled jobs they desired. These Bulgarian immigrants took different career paths toward achieving their goals and aspirations. However, being highly motivated, hard-working, and persistent individuals, they not only persevered and survived, but they also said they felt successful doing their jobs in their new environment.

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