

Cross-Cultural Education Journal



Discussions of Interest to Immigrants

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Faith Lutheran Church

Should I Sacrifice My Dignity to Make a Living?

*“Welcome one
another as
Christ welcomed
you, for the
Glory of God.”*

Romans 15:7

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Introduction

Many immigrants must take lower-level jobs than they could have in their native countries. They come to the United States looking for greater opportunities than they might have at home. But they are hampered because they do not have credentials that are recognized by their employers and/or they have difficulties with the English language. They are forced to take lesser jobs and feel that in doing this they are “sacrificing their dignity” to support themselves and their family. In this essay we discuss this concern and explore alternative viewpoints and constructive responses.

Recognition of Previous Education

Even though an immigrant may have a high level of education in their home country, their credentials may not be recognized here. Equivalency may be difficult to determine or their educational level may truly not be equivalent to that in the United States for a degree or other credential. Also, the potential employer simply may not be willing to take a risk on the employee’s qualifications.

In the United States, employers can be sued for mistakes made by their employees. Thus, even though the employer might believe that the employee is well-

qualified, if there is any question of proof, the boss may offer the person a lower-paying job with less responsibility to be safe. By offering a lesser job, the employer is protecting himself, and feels assured that if the employee is truly over-qualified, at least he can do the job well.

Language Difficulties

Language is a significant problem for immigrants if they do not have a strong background in English. For immigrants from India, this problem may not be as severe; English is the official language of commerce there and most educated Indians have had extensive training by qualified instructors. Immigrants from other countries, which do not have English as a primary language, can be at a disadvantage. Even though they may have received extensive English instruction, their instructors may not have had a full command of the language, or their instructors may not have known American colloquialisms.

The first language problem can occur in getting past a job interview. The immigrant without a command of English may have difficulty communicating with an interviewer. Also, if an educational equivalency test of the technical capabilities of the immigrant is available, it may not help if the immigrant cannot fully understand the test because of language barriers.

Once an immigrant gets a job, language difficulties can continue. An immigrant's boss may become frustrated trying to communicate and offer challenging assignments to those with whom he can talk to more easily. Thus, the immigrant cannot demonstrate his or her capabilities; this limits opportunities for advancement.

Co-workers with better English language skills may be polite to the immigrant but know they can take advantage of him. They can get the boss's attention more easily. The immigrant may perform his work adequately, but has to rely on a co-worker to explain it. Thus, the co-worker may get some of the credit for the work. Although this may upset the immigrant, he should be aware that even among US-born citizens, with English as their primary language, communication skills vary. A worker with lower technical skills, but better communication skills, can still have an advantage over co-workers.

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Visa Problems

The type of visa an immigrant was able to obtain to enter the country may create problems. For example, the H-1B visa is commonly used by employers to bring qualified people into the country. Under American law, all U.S. employers have a right to obtain H-1B status for foreigners with professional or special skills. However, limitations imposed on immigrants with H-1B visas may prohibit them from looking for other employment. Thus, an employer can have an advantage over an immigrant. An immigrant with visa problems should consult a lawyer who specializes in them.

Cultural Problems

In some cultures, it is considered impolite to complain. Thus, an immigrant may endure a lesser job because he does not want to offend the boss or others around him. Or, the immigrant may not know how to approach the boss. But what an immigrant may think is complaining may be what Americans consider to be "feedback." Many Americans, including bosses, want "feedback." They want to know if something is not working so they can fix it. That helps them to be more competitive in their business.

Attitudes of Americans

Most Americans do not resent immigrants. They understand that immigrants who are educated, qualified and responsible contribute to the overall economy. Indeed, except for Native Americans, all Americans are immigrants or the descendants of immigrants who came here looking for opportunities. Most Americans feel having friends with diverse backgrounds enriches their own lives. However, Americans generally expect immigrants to fully embrace the culture and to not impose foreign cultures and languages on the country. This does not mean that immigrants should reject traditions from home in their private lives. It is important to remember and respect our cultures of origin and pass knowledge of them onto younger generations. And it is important for children of immigrants to visit the lands of their ancestors if possible; it gives them a feeling of knowing who they are and where they came from.

Remedies

The biggest obstacle to immigrants, whose native language is not English, is communicating. Immigrants should take advantage of all opportunities to improve their English skills. English Language Learner or ELL classes (also known as English as a Second Language or ESL classes) are easily found in large metropolitan areas such as Seattle and its suburbs. In addition, "Talk Time" conversation help sessions such as are being offered at Faith Lutheran Church in Redmond and at other locations can provide additional opportunities for practice. Also, immigrants should practice their English with one another, even though it is easier to speak their native language. As English language skills increase, immigrants can seek American friends more easily. This will help them to further increase their capabilities. Having American friendships gives immigrants opportunities to ask knowledgeable English speakers to explain commonly used slang terms and answer other questions about the language and culture. Knowing the culture will allow immigrants to understand how to assert themselves effectively without being either too aggressive or too timid.

Proficiency in the English language is the primary key to success for immigrants in America. Studies show that those immigrants who master the English language do better than those

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who do not.

Cultural Roadblocks Specific to Chinese Immigrants

Tao Yuan Ming was a Chinese poet who lived from 372 to 427 AD, during the Dong Jin Dynasty. In one of his poems he tells the reader “Don’t bend your back for rice.” In saying this he means to not “sacrifice your dignity” working under the domination of others. He followed his heart to retire from a comfortable job as a government official and become a farmer to support his family for 22 years.

Tao Yuan Ming wrote this line at a special time in Chinese history when rulers were all powerful. Intellectuals like Tao Yuan Ming felt hopeless when they reflected on domination by their leaders, but they resisted by “not bending their back.” His poem was considered a beautiful story that people discussed to inspire themselves. For its time, the poem was helpful to people to enrich their spirit and help them endure. But many who still embrace this philosophy today suffer for it.

In the past, especially during the time of Tao Yuan Ming, farmers had to depend on weather, natural resources and powerful people so they developed dependent, submissive, obedient personalities. If they did not do this and an overlord decided they should die, they were put to death. Thus, they had to “sacrifice their dignity” to preserve their life. People were forced to exchange their dignity for food and survival.

Today’s economics in America dictate that the issue of “sacrificing one’s dignity” should not exist. But Chinese people have a certain spiritual deep-felt attachment to the past. As a result, they sometimes have difficulties fitting into Western society.

Many Chinese people today can use one word to describe their feelings: fear. They have a fear of independence. They cling to old ideas, even though they know they must change, but they are afraid. They feel more comfortable with the “slave” mentality of dependence. Freedom to make decisions carries with it responsibility for the results. Part of the “comfort” in being dependent comes from the limited responsibilities one has.

Immigrants, who lived under the Communist Party regime in China, have difficulty overcoming their fears even though they no longer have the threat of powerful party officials governing their actions. Today, in

America, people do not need to worry about working so hard for “rice.” But they need to take actions personally to improve their lives. In America they are free to pursue their dreams, but they must take the steps to do this. Others will not do it for them.

Immigrants cannot always find a job for which they are qualified because of cultural and/or language difficulties. But they have the power to seek education and improve their skills so that they can fit into their new homeland and become Americans, as so many have done before them.

Dignity from a Christian Standpoint

From a Christian standpoint, “dignity” is based on what we are in the sight of Jesus Christ and what He has done for us. Several references from the Bible can illustrate this. (The following references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.) The Apostle Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 15:10, says “...by the grace of God I am what I am...” Paul goes further to define what we are in Romans 8:17 where he says, “...we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...” This means everything really belongs to Christ and by grace we share in what is His. In other words, our dignity and worth are established in Christ, not in what we do. Thus, all honest and beneficial labor is honorable and worthy of respect. Jesus was a carpenter before he began His ministry.

With this in mind, Paul helps us to survive and move ahead in Philippians 4:10-12 where he says, “...I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” The benefit to people in being content to help them live a Christian life is illustrated in Paul’s letter in 1 Timothy 6:8-10 where he says, “...People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction...” Paul does not condemn striving here, but he warns that we need to know what is really important to maintain our spiritual growth in Christ. We must ask ourselves if we are allowing our “dignity” to be based on external circumstances such as the prestige and pay associated with a job. Such a definition of dignity is really social pride which is based on looking better or more important than one’s neighbor. True dignity does not rely on such an insecure and external basis; it rests on the secure and unassailable

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Faithful people, raising up people of Faith

If you wish opportunities to further explore what has been discussed here or additional topics of interest to immigrants and others, you might like to contact Rainbow Zeng at the address above.

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basis of a Christian life.

Conclusions

Immigrants should not have to feel they are “sacrificing dignity” to take lesser employment than that for which they feel qualified. The positive approach is to determine what can be done to increase opportunities and take steps to make that happen. In many cases, even though an immigrant’s previous education may not be fully utilized, new prospects for improved employment may occur. What appears to be a step backward today may be a stepping stone to new opportunities tomorrow.

Some highly educated immigrants may look down on doing manual labor. But, due to what Americans refer to as the “Protestant Work Ethic,” working with your hands is not looked down on as it may be in other cultures. All work has dignity if it is performed honestly and well. Most Americans start working in low-level jobs and command better jobs as they increase their skills and educational level, and are promoted for excellent work. They do not consider this to be a “sacrifice of dignity.” In fact, most people in modern societies must continue their education to maintain and improve their skills throughout their careers. The world is continually changing; we must take responsibility for ourselves to keep up with the changes.

There is no “right” answer for immigrants. We cannot easily answer “yes” or “no” to the question of whether or not “dignity should be sacrificed.” Each person must do what he or she feels is best. If a person has a choice, they certainly should not “sacrifice their dignity.” But if they do not have a choice, they should do what is necessary to feed their families, and they should understand that the basis for true “dignity” does not lie in the level of the work they perform. They can keep in mind that America has so many opportunities that any perceived “sacrifice of dignity” does not have to be permanent. America allows upward mobility for people who are willing to do honest and beneficial work. Thus, a “sacrifice of dignity” can be only temporary as a person works toward improvement and seeks long-term goals. If a person feels they are “sacrificing their dignity,” they should determine if they are just allowing themselves to submit to external pressures.

Many immigrants hide their feelings more than Americans, so it keeps them from honestly addressing the issues affecting their lives. For some, this means they must strive to understand their motivations and develop coping skills. We hope that this article will help encourage people to face their problems so they can find solutions.