

# “...you have to face the fact that you're a foreigner”

## Immigrants' Lived Experience of Communication and Negotiation Position Toward their Employer in Iceland

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### Abstract

There is a growing need for highly skilled employees in the Icelandic labor market which will increasingly need to be filled by highly skilled immigrants. Despite offering knowledge and skills that are in demand, there are indications that these immigrants are facing barriers when it comes to compensation, opportunities and promotions. The study seeks to explore how highly skilled immigrants in Iceland experience their negotiation opportunities, their negotiation position and communication with their employers. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with immigrants from other European countries. The interviews were analyzed and interpreted according to phenomenological methodology. Four themes emerged in respondents' perception; Icelandic, “accent free,” “you have to face the fact that you're a foreigner...” “everybody has this little kind of kingdom...” and feeling of never being good enough.

**Keywords:** *Immigrants, highly skilled, communication, negotiation position, Icelandic, devaluation, social capital, network*

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### Introduction

Icelandic society is undergoing tremendous changes and experiencing one of the fastest growing rates of immigration in Europe. Historically, immigration in Iceland has been low, with foreign citizens at or below 2% for most of the past century. In 2016 this rate has risen to 7.9% and currently, 12.6% of the population is foreign-born (Statistics Iceland 2016). Immigration is furthermore projected to increase in coming years as is the need for a highly skilled workforce (Ingimundardottir 2015). Immigrants holding university degrees are thus an increasingly valuable resource in the Icelandic labor market.

The education level of immigrants in Iceland is not comprehensively recorded, however, a number of surveys may give some indication of the situation. According to different survey results, under 50% of the immigrants who responded are employed in a position relevant to their education and they feel that their education is underutilized (Jonsdottir, Hardardottir & Gardarsdottir 2009). Polish immigrants report that almost 70% of them are employed in a position that does not put their education to use. Of the respondents in the survey, 27.1% held a university degree while 52.8% had completed secondary education (Chlipala & Jonsdottir 2014). Finally, 75% of Polish and Thai immigrants in Iceland reported being employed in a position not relevant to their education (Arnardottir and Haraldsson 2014).

Similarly, no comprehensive data are available on the comparative salaries of highly skilled immigrants and their peers in the Icelandic labor market. A comparison of Polish migrant workers' wages in Oslo,

Copenhagen and Reykjavik revealed that the migrants in Reykjavik received the lowest wages compared to the host country average (Friberg, Arnholtz, Eldring, Hansen & Thorarins 2014). Thai and Polish immigrants also indicate average salaries significantly below the national average in Iceland (Arnardottir & Haraldsson 2014). These results suggest that the education and experience of university educated immigrants in Iceland is underutilized and undervalued in the Icelandic labor market, leading to wasted resources.

One way for employees to influence their career, present their knowledge, skills and abilities and subsequently improve their position or compensation, is through negotiation with their employer. The current study aims to examine how highly skilled immigrants in Iceland experience negotiations with their employers; how they perceive their negotiation position vis-à-vis their employer and finally, what factors appear to hinder or facilitate possibilities of integration of interests.

## Immigrants in Iceland

Icelanders' attitudes towards immigrants have tended to be positive (Önnudottir 2009) and Marozzi (2015) found that Icelanders came fifth lowest in perceiving a socio-economic threat from immigrants in a comparison of 47 European countries and regions. Still, Icelanders place a strong emphasis on immigrants' assimilation to the local culture (Önnudottir 2009) and immigrants are more likely than Icelanders to experience microaggressions, everyday prejudice and discrimination (Petursdottir 2013). Immigrants, especially those highly-skilled, furthermore experience discrimination through being assigned jobs that do not utilize their education (Arnardottir & Haraldsson 2014).

While managers in the Nordic countries share many characteristics, such as being employee-oriented and individualistic, Icelandic managers differ in relying significantly less on formal rules than do their Swedish, Norwegian and Danish counterparts and more on unwritten rules and seeking advice from their co-workers (Smith et al. 2003). Thus it is important for newcomers to management positions in Iceland to learn the unwritten rules and forge connections with their co-workers. A further characteristic of Icelandic business culture, identified by Vaiman, Sigurjonsson and Davidsson, is that it is "...compounded by lack of diversity and tight personal networks in managerial relationships and ownership..." (2011:259). The personal and professional network is therefore particularly valuable in the Icelandic labor market.

The contribution of highly skilled immigrants can be an extremely valuable resource for Icelandic businesses, but only if valued and appreciated by employers. Studies indicate, however, that these resources are undervalued and underutilized (Chlipala & Jonsdottir 2014; Thorarinsdottir, Georgsdottir & Hafsteinsdottir 2009). Immigrants frequently experience exclusion and barriers resulting from lack of language skills and limited networks, but also resulting from employers' devaluation of their skills and education (Arnardottir & Haraldsson 2014; Barak & Levin 2002; Salmonsson & Mella 2013; Van Ngo & Este 2006). The effects of these barriers as well as the experiences of immigrants in many countries have been studied, however, research is lacking on the experiences of university educated immigrants in the Icelandic labor market, especially regarding their negotiating position and communication with their employer.

This undervaluation of skills and education has been termed "brain waste" by Mattoo, Neagu and Özden (2008:255), who found that immigrants on the US labor market struggled to find jobs that utilized their skills and education. Research has documented this brain waste in countries around Iceland, such as in Denmark (Nielsen 2011), in Sweden (Berggren 2013), in Norway (Fosslund 2013), in the UK (Csedö 2008) and in Canada (Bauder 2003). While lack of language skills is a key barrier in all of these studies, Csedö (2008) emphasizes that although advanced language skills are necessary, they are not a sufficient qualification for attaining a higher position; the key is how the immigrants signal the value of their skills and education to their employers during negotiations.

The Icelandic labor market is highly unionized and wages governed by centralized collective agreements (Friberg et al. 2014). Nevertheless, employees in mid- to high-level positions generally negotiate their salaries, benefits, responsibilities, and promotions, at least to some extent. These negotiations can be on

the form of formal job negotiations, or as everyday negotiations that can have great impact upon careers, both in terms of salaries and advancement, yet negotiators are often unaware of their significance or that they are in fact negotiations (Kolb & Porter 2015).

## **Employee-Employer Negotiation**

Employees frequently feel powerless and in a weaker position in negotiations with their employer and thus may not attempt to negotiate. The propensity to initiate negotiation varies among individuals and can greatly influence the outcome of negotiation. Being in a lower status position weakens the propensity to negotiate, as can be seen with women and other lower status groups (Bowles, Babcock & Lai 2007; Gerhart & Rynes 1991). Individuals are also less likely to initiate negotiation when they experience a weaker power position than their counterpart, and one of the strongest sources of power at the negotiating table is having other feasible alternatives (Fisher & Ury 1981).

A common misconception in salary negotiations is that the employer gains if the employee refrains from negotiation. This fixed-pie bias ignores the value creating potential of negotiation that is based on exploring interests and utilizing differences in valuation (Thompson 1991). Most negotiators fall prey to the fixed-pie bias, assuming that their counterpart has identical interests to their own and that the negotiation will only be about dividing the pie, missing the opportunity to expand it (Thompson & Hastie 1990). This partly explains why employees hesitate to initiate negotiations with their employers; they experience the interaction as a win-lose conflict involving limited resources where they are the weaker party and the employer the stronger party. Employers who encourage this view may reap some short-term gains, but they also risk missing out on opportunities to create value through a discussion of interests, such as how they can meet employees' needs and how employees can contribute.

The likelihood that an employee attempts to negotiate for better compensation or job conditions, i.e. the propensity to initiate negotiation, rests on cultural (Volkema & Fleck 2012), structural and situational (Gerhart & Rynes 1991; Reif & Brodbeck 2014), and personality factors (Magee, Galinsky & Gruenfeld 2007). The key aspects explored here concern the position of the employee vis-à-vis the employer, i.e. power and status (Magee & Galinsky 2008), which are a function of the employee's resources and the opinion that others have of the employee. Immigrant employees may experience more limited resources and a lower status than their native-born coworkers (Behtoui & Neergaard 2011) resulting in them being more likely to accept lower salaries and poorer work conditions (Friberg et al. 2014).

Elfenbein (2015) found that the strongest predictor of individuals' success in negotiation was self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1977:79) as "the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes." Self-efficacy influences whether individuals initiate negotiations and state strong claims (Volkema, Kapoutsis & Nikolopoulos 2013). The assumption is that if individuals have the information or knowledge needed and feel capable of taking action, they will be motivated to do so. For immigrants faced with negotiation, they must feel that they have the information to recognize and utilize negotiating opportunities and that they have the language and social skills to undertake the interaction.

## **Power and Propensity to Initiate Negotiation**

The majority of employees does not attempt to negotiate during job interviews (Gerhart & Rynes 1991), but those who do stand to gain considerable value as the initial gains compound throughout their careers. Many factors influence the propensity to negotiate, but not all the outcomes are positive. Bowles, Babcock and Lai (2007) found that attempts to negotiate can result in a negative backlash, in particular when women attempted to negotiate. This negative backlash may not, however, be solely based on the negotiator's gender, rather, it may result from the perception that women hold a lower status in society (Hogue, Yoder & Singleton 2007). Thus the backlash may result when a lower-status individual, such as an immigrant, attempts to initiate negotiation.

In order to experience a position of power, employees must feel that they possess some resources, i.e. knowledge and skills that the employer needs (Magee, Galinsky & Gruenfeld 2007). Furthermore, employees must believe in their abilities to be successful in negotiation, or have self-efficacy (Volkema & Fleck 2012). Having other viable options, such as having another job offer or believing that other jobs are available, can lead to a feeling of increased power at the bargaining table (Kim & Fragale 2005). Having other good options means that an employee can walk away from the negotiation if the employer does not make a better offer.

## How Status Affects the Negotiation Position

Magee & Galinsky (2008) have pointed out the need to disentangle the concepts of power and status in negotiation research. They define power as having control over valuable resources in society while status has to do with the respect an individual or group is paid by others in the society. While both of these concepts are of importance in negotiations between employees and employers, status is of special concern since it is reliant upon the opinions and attitudes of others and only to a very limited extent under the individual's control.

How individuals experience their status at the bargaining table is influenced by the attitude of others (Fragale, Overbeck & Neale 2011). Social networks play an important role in status; the individual derives support from the social network and the network can also be a valuable resource (Behtoui & Neergaard 2012). The recognition of education, experience and other credentials is also important in order for individuals to experience stronger status (Miles & Clenney 2010). When the credentials and contributions of immigrants are devalued and distrusted as experienced by the immigrants in the studies by Van Ngo and Este (2006) and Salmonsson and Mella (2013), the employee experiences disrespect and lower status.

Status affects the negotiation position depending on the difference in status. When low-status individuals receive offers from high-status individuals they are more likely to accept the offer without attempting to negotiate (Brett 2001). Furthermore, an offer from a high-status negotiator has more legitimacy and will more likely be accepted by a lower-status individual (Miles & Clenney 2010). Finally, there is a tendency to view high-status individuals as more competent, strengthening their position (Miles & Clenney 2010). The prejudice that immigrants experience (Petursdottir 2013) sends the message that they enjoy little respect (Salmonsson & Mella 2013; Van Ngo & Este 2006), that their status is low, and thus their negotiation position is weak.

## Social Capital and Network

Social capital can be both positive and negative. According to Bourdieu (1986) social capital is the potential advantage that can result from connections, communication and inclusion in groups and networks. Portes (2014) is critical of an overly positive view of social capital and emphasizes the potentially negative aspects, such as when a strong social network and group cohesion results in discrimination and exclusion of those who are not part of the network.

Social capital is created through interaction, communication and networks (the structural dimension), trust, relationship and obligation (the relational dimension) and a common language, symbols, and narratives (the cognitive dimension) (Lee 2009). Social capital is created through the connections between groups and individuals and to some extent the benefits that individuals derive from their qualities, such as intelligence, education and experience, are derived from the individuals' position in the social structure. Thus more social capital affords greater access to opportunities to utilize intelligence, education and experience (Burt 1997). According to Behtoui and Neergaard (2012) higher education increases access to social capital, however, being an immigrant or a woman means lower status and negatively affects one's social capital. Immigrants tend to rely on social capital created through connections with other immigrants for psychological and social support, but their access to connections to

the majority is limited and thus they lack the kind of social capital enjoyed by the majority (Van Ngo & Este 2006).

Individuals can tap into their social network to find information about available positions and opportunities in the labor market, however, the results are reliant upon the social position of the individual (Smith 2000). Thus the value of the individual's social capital depends on whether the connections reach the upper or lower strata of society, e.g. high socio-economic status is more valuable than low-to-mid socio-economic status. When the individuals who enjoy high socio-economic status tap into their network they benefit more from weak ties (the connections with individuals who are friends of friends) than from strong ties (connections with friends), while the individuals in the low-to-mid socio-economic group derive much more limited benefits from their weak ties because those ties do not reach the upper levels of society (Burt 1997; Smith 2000). The social capital of lower status groups thus appears less valuable in the labor market and the higher status groups are in a stronger position to leverage their social capital for access to higher positions and better salaries (Sidel, Polzer & Stewart 2000; Smith 2000).

Information on salary ranges for different positions is not always openly available and thus access to a social network is an important means of accessing such information (Smith 2000). The availability of information on average salaries or salaries for particular positions influences the salary requests individuals make (Bowles, Babcock & McGinn 2005). When the salary range for a job is widely known then women are more likely to make the same salary requests as men. If, however, the information is vague or unavailable, then women are likely to make significantly lower salary requests than men. And if it holds that this difference can be attributed to differences in status rather than gender (Hogue, Yoder & Singleton 2007), then it is also likely that immigrants, who frequently experience lower status and weaker position, will be more likely to make lower salary requests when salary information is scarce.

Language is one of the key factors in social capital and members of the network must have a common language that facilitates their interaction (Lee 2009). The importance of language skills for immigrants in Iceland is clear and is closely related to job security and opportunities to be a valued member of society (Hardardottir, Loftsdottir & Skaptadottir 2007). Numerous language courses are on offer but do not provide sufficient opportunities to master the language because to become sufficiently fluent in the language one must use it as part of the community (Skaptadottir & Olafsdottir 2010). Immigrants who seek to practice their language skills need to be included in an Icelandic-speaking network. This presents a dilemma where access to social capital in the community is reliant upon adequate proficiency in the language and limited proficiency leads to exclusion from this social capital.

The Icelandic language is a cornerstone of the culture and identity of Icelanders and played a significant role in their fight for independence ("to be inserted after review"). Protectionist language policies guard its 'purity' against the influence of foreign languages: "Foreign words were considered unacceptable as Icelandic culture was unique and should not be corrupted" (Hilmarsson-Dunn 2006:297), and efforts are made in the school system to preserve the language and eradicate unacceptable pronunciations. This may render the public intolerant towards variations in pronunciation or foreign-sounding accents.

The objective of this study is to discover the lived experience of immigrants with a university degree of their communication and negotiation position toward their Icelandic employer and obtain an understanding of the significance of the immigrants' experiences of living and working in Iceland. The research question is: *What is the lived experience of immigrants with a university degree of their communication and negotiation position toward their employer in an Icelandic labor market?*

## Method

Phenomenology is well suited because it is widely used by researchers to conduct in-depth interviews that capture the essence of people's lived experiences and to reveal their underlying structural realities (Martinez 2000).

We advertised for participants on facebook sites that were specifically tailored for foreigners who live in Iceland. Of the twelve immigrants that we interviewed, nine were female and three were male, all of them had a university degree, had lived in Iceland from two to fourteen years and they ranged in age from 32 to 48. One of the immigrants had a Ph.D., seven had Master's degree of whom two also had a law degree and four had a Bachelor's degree. Most of them had extensive previous work experience in their home country and some of them had worked and lived in other countries outside their native countries before moving to Iceland. Their workplaces in Iceland were a bank, university, law firm, elementary school, travel agency, recreation center, preschool, social counselling and a landscaping contractor. Our interviewees moved voluntarily to Iceland from the Netherlands, Poland, Germany, United Kingdom, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain, Portugal, Turkey and the Czech Republic. All of the interviews were conducted in English, except one in Icelandic, and they lasted from 40-75 minutes. In addition, eight of the interviews took place in one of the researcher's office at the University, two in the interviewee's office, and two via the internet. Interviewees were asked about, for example, the main motivation or reason for moving to Iceland, if they lived with their family, and if they had a career in their home country. Moreover, they were asked about the main responsibilities on the job, if their education matched with their responsibilities in their current job, and how they felt about their interaction with their colleagues and supervisors. Finally, they were asked about which language they mainly used on the job and if they could describe the hiring process and discussion about salary, responsibilities and vacation time. We asked probing questions in order to obtain more depth and a further understanding of the essence of their communication and negotiation experience. Interviewees' names were changed into pseudonyms.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to phenomenological methodology using three steps of analyzation: description, reduction and interpretation (Lanigan 1988). The first step is the phenomenological *description*, which involves the interview process and transcription of the interview. Here it is important for the researcher to be aware of her opinions and biases and put her judgments and beliefs aside (Orbe 1998). The second step is *reduction*, which involves examining the narratives from the interviewees for essential themes. The researcher needs to determine "which parts of the description are essential and which are not" (Lanigan 1988:10). Finally, is the *interpretation*, which is the third step in the analyzation process in where the initial themes are reduced once again to identify the most essential feature of the phenomenon but also to relate to the themes to one another and to the research question.

## Findings

The interviewees' experience of living and working in Iceland revealed several themes. Most notably, their experience was characterized by language barriers, being a foreigner, lack of networks and the feeling of exclusion and devaluation. The following four themes that emerged from the interviews will be discussed: Icelandic, "accent free," "you have to face the fact that you're a foreigner..." "everybody has this little kind of kingdom..." and feeling of never being good enough.

### Icelandic, "accent free"

Many participants in this study stated that the key to the Icelandic society and to have a chance to be accepted, foreigners need to be able to speak Icelandic without an accent and use the correct grammar. Maria explains: "...if you speak the language a lot of doors will open...if I want to appear to be an educated individual...then I better not speak Icelandic because then no one would believe that I have a Master's degree..." And Winston, who had participated in numerous courses in Icelandic says: "...I am starting to feel ashamed for not being able to speak Icelandic fluently..." Moreover, all of the participants claimed that not being able to speak Icelandic fluently without an accent was a major hindrance that made them feel very uncomfortable, Sara says:

*...if they think you cannot speak [Icelandic], they are just staying away...you don't speak to these people, they are like strangers to you...we are just listeners...they don't want to hear what you are saying...you can feel it, they are not trying to talk to you. This is also making me very uncomfortable...*

Some of the participants were having a hard time understanding work procedures. Moreover, they were really worried about not being able to do their job well enough as they were having trouble understanding the discussions during the staff meetings. Lisa explains her experience with her Icelandic coworkers: "...the meetings are all in Icelandic, and I was told that they don't have an obligation to translate anything...I asked for clarifications for months...I didn't get them." Linda who had a similar experience as Lisa says: "...when the entire meetings are in Icelandic...and when a complicated question arises then I politely ask [the Icelandic coworkers], if they can explain to me in English..."

Despite the fact that some were very successful in their jobs, not being able to communicate in Icelandic or speaking it with an accent created the feeling of uncertainty. For example, Peter says: "...it doesn't matter if you are speaking good English you need to speak in almost every single job you need to speak Icelandic." However, Daniel who speaks Icelandic well explains his experience after the economic crash in Iceland 2008: "...we still tried to do things internationally, but it was very clear that things were going very Icelandic and that put me in a disadvantage..." Even though Daniel speaks Icelandic, he still struggles for acceptance of being treated equally in terms of salary, promotions and other opportunities. The language barrier created that sense of insecurity that stayed in their subconscious mind that had an effect on their experience. Anita talks about her interaction with her Icelandic colleagues: "...if someone wants to misunderstand something they were...I'll never be taken seriously as the rest." As a result of this feeling of insecurity and not being appreciated, two of the interviewees in this study left the country and a few others left their previous jobs and started their own company.

### **"...you have to face the fact that you're a foreigner..."**

The word "útlendingur" (foreigner) is a value laden and negative label in the eyes of the immigrants of this study that symbolizes ignorance, inferiority and being less of a person. This is an underlying feeling of not being confident, intelligent nor good enough for the job. Anita explains her negative feeling of being a foreigner when she heard Icelanders talking about her:

*Oh god, 'útlendingur sem talar' (a foreigner who can speak) and it's a foreigner, what can they know...from the minute I came to this country, you always hear 'helvítis útlendingur,' (bloody foreigner) and it just stays in your head...it was always someone who was trying to take advantage of things...all the lower staff sent me for the office for like drinks or things from kitchen...*

Many of the interviewees experienced different treatment than Icelanders when discussing salary, promotion, communication and negotiation about salary. In addition, they state that even though they had discovered that they were paid less than Icelanders, despite holding a Master's or Doctoral degree and the Icelanders did not, they had to accept that. For example, Daniel felt discriminated against after he found out that he had not received the same treatment as his Icelandic colleagues. He said that foreigners had to watch what they say when communicating with their Icelandic colleagues, and he states: "...you have to swallow your pride and communicate with people you don't like...it is still not easy...you realize ...how you have been treated compared to your colleagues...both financially and career wise...it is a hard pill to swallow." This is a sign of oppression as the immigrants are kept down with limited hope of getting up and Anita states: "There comes a stigma with being a foreigner..."

For some of the participants, being a foreigner made them insecure about themselves and if something was not going as planned or expected at work, they even blamed it on being a foreigner, for example Sara explains an instance related to this experience: "...I was feeling very bad or...wrong...and I said to myself...I am a foreigner that is why..." However, Winston, who is working for an international company in Iceland where he mostly speaks English, is quite satisfied with his status: "...I don't see myself as a foreigner. In a sense...I don't feel like an immigrant if people ask...I don't need to prove myself in anything so I just consider myself as an expat just living here." Winston is successful and quite satisfied in his job, but when discussing the idea of him working for an Icelandic company he says:

*...If I want, I can just start working for an Icelandic company...come on it's a snake-pit...because...especially as a foreigner, because then I think it will be totally different because then you have to face the fact that you're a foreigner, especially when you're like at the*

*management level. Then things are being decided and you can just follow orders or just pack your bags.*

So for Winston working in Iceland for an international company is a positive experience where he does not have to think about the fact that he is a foreigner or worry about not being fluent in Icelandic and thus not being accepted. However, when discussing the idea of working in an Icelandic company Winston's opinion is in tune with the other participants' experiences in this study that being a foreigner is related to insecurity and that is something Winston does not want to experience.

### **“Everybody has this little kind of kingdom...”**

Some of the immigrants claimed that the fact that they were not Icelanders and not capable of communicating in Icelandic excluded them from other colleagues, prevented them from building networks and from becoming friends with Icelanders. Moreover, they felt excluded from others in the workplace and there was a sign of loneliness and not having anyone to turn to with their thoughts and issues that came up at work. Lisa explains: “...I had no colleagues what so ever...like I really need having people that I could discuss ideas with...I didn't have that...” This exacerbated the situation of feeling excluded from the people they interacted with on a daily basis both at work and in the community. Lisa continues: “...in Iceland you have to have a connection with the community to have access to many things, I mean I think that it is very obvious in every job place in Iceland and I didn't have that.” But not knowing the right people and not having the appropriate network it seems impossible to connect to other people, as Daniel explains: “Everybody has this little kind of kingdom within their organization...and tries to protect it instead of working together and that is a very Icelandic thing.”

The interviewees are ambitious people with university degrees and who desire to be successful in their jobs. Many of them realized that they had been treated differently from the Icelandic employees in similar positions, both financially and career wise. Maria, who was hired on a yearly basis, explains her experience: “...I would definitely feel more secure if I would get a longer contract...but I never know what is going to happen next...and this also applies to other foreign teachers.” In addition, the immigrants were kept longer on a trial basis before they were offered a full contract, but some of them are still living in the uncertainty of being rehired every year like Maria. And some of say it is impossible to get a promotion and to climb up the corporate ladder. Anita explains:

*it was just no space for growth..it is absolutely not the market for someone that wants...to achieve more goals and to be taken seriously and on top of that, god forbid, wants to have similar salary. It has never been...possible in Iceland...*

It is very difficult for foreigners who don't have the networks or social capital to climb up the career ladder and to become successful. In addition, lack of social capital also means that it is harder to have access to information about salaries or what people are actually getting paid. María explains: “I think salary is something that is not being discussed in Iceland. I have tried...but the doors are closed...I still don't know if my salary is good or fair.”

Many of the participants seemed satisfied with their salary and they trusted that they were being paid as everyone else in the same position, but they had limited information about other people's salary so they did not have anyone to compare it with. However, by coincidence three of the participants found out that they had been receiving different treatment on the job; they experienced a hindrance in progressing on the job due to lack of network and get a promotion. Anita was one of those who discovered this difference in salary:

...I had the occasion of seeing everyone's paychecks once very accidentally and that really just did it... the difference was enormous. And it has never been close of even half of their salaries, two people that were just with high school education...

Most of the participants did not seem to feel that they had the right to negotiate their salary and they did not know to whom to turn for that matter nor did they have the connections for it. Nicole describes: “..."

foreigners work for a low salary...and they are not aware of their rights.” The fear of losing their jobs plays a role as well as a lack of social network in order to obtain appropriate information for employees in the Icelandic labor market. However, Winston, who works for an international company with international connections has a different experience:

*So application-wise it has always been kind of smooth because there always was a person...I didn't have to knock on the door...I was always being introduced by people who either were in the company or that I got to know later on...they knew who I was so I haven't got any troubles in actually I haven't experienced any troubles in Iceland, everything has been very smooth.*

Winston is in a sense privileged compared to the other participants in this study because he already had clients through his own network. Thus he did not need to build a new network with Icelanders and overcome some of the barriers that others in this study need to do like learning Icelandic, socializing with Icelanders to build network and earning trust. He has the international network already.

### **Feeling of never being good enough**

The interviewees emphasized the feeling of constantly having to prove themselves and not feeling good enough especially when trying to negotiate their salary or other responsibilities related to the job. Daniel seemed surprised when he realized that negotiations weren't about his contributions in the company, rather they were about whether he would keep his job or not. He explains:

*...negotiation was always not about kind of gradually move in salary for example...it was more...about keeping the job, about getting the extension...and you had the feeling you always kind of had to prove yourself...I mean I think no one really ever looked at my grades or certificates from the University. I think that was never ever looked at, or even considered.*

Daniel also claims that his education did not help him rather it was his connections, he states: “... education was always something people didn't care about...only the connection...” and Peter has a similar experience as Daniel but he also talks about not feeling appreciated for his knowledge and education that results in the feeling of never being good enough when talking about his employer: “... people want to have employees speaking three languages, Icelandic, good English and maybe some Russian or Polish and they want to pay you base salary, lowest they can have...”

Most of the interviewees felt the same about having to prove that they were good enough for the job. For example, Lisa says when she was trying to negotiate her salary: “...I always had to justify...and someone with ten years of professional experience...with the qualifications...I don't understand why I have to prove myself...” Others said they had the same experience with their employer that they should be grateful to have a job and that they were in fact very fortunate to be working in this country.

Iceland was considered to be a land of opportunity before the 2008 economic crisis and many of the immigrants in this study decided to come to Iceland for the opportunity. Rosa explains:

*...they offered me the job that was at the time when not many Icelanders wanted to [do this job]. So I was lucky and stayed there since then...this was the best job I could get, so I couldn't choose...when you are a foreigner you cannot choose.*

Most of the immigrants experienced that they should be grateful having a job. For example, Maria who does not speak any Icelandic says that she feels insecure about keeping her job: “I am in a pretty vulnerable position because this is a job I depend on, and if they don't hire me where would I find a job here in Iceland?” And Anita had a similar experience: “...we are already giving you so much you should be so grateful.” Although Daniel speaks Icelandic very well, his experience resembles the others': “... they were always, to me, in the position of doing me a favor type of thing.” The immigrants felt less valued because of their foreigner status and that they were not taken seriously due to the language barrier.

## Discussion

This study sought to understand how highly-skilled immigrants in Iceland experience communication and their negotiating position vis-à-vis their employer. Results indicate that these highly-skilled immigrants face considerable barriers when negotiating with their employers for compensation or to get into positions that take full advantage of their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Just like employees typically feel that the employer is in a much stronger power position in negotiation, our respondents feel powerless, particularly because of the lack of *language* proficiency that limits their ability to share their knowledge, apply their skills and engage in a network. The language and accent constantly identifies them as foreigners, something that for most is negative. They tend to feel that they are in no position to initiate negotiation. This supports Lee's findings (2009) that language is one of the key factors in building social capital and network.

Moreover, the immigrants experience feelings of exclusion for *being a foreigner*, lack of network for information, resources and opportunities, and having their credentials discredited or devalued. They experience limited career options, they worry about their position and they feel they have to accept whatever is offered without attempting to discuss other options or interests. This finding is in line with Salmonsson and Mella's (2013) that immigrants often experience exclusion and barriers due to lack of language skills and limited networks, but also resulting from employers' devaluation of their skills and education, which may even lead to discrimination in the workplace (Arnardottir & Haraldsson 2014; Barak & Levin 2002; Van Ngo & Este 2006).

Whatever undermines one's status also undermines one's negotiating position. The lack of language proficiency undermines the immigrants' status and their feelings range from shame to feeling second-class. There is a general feeling of having to accept whatever is offered or that having a good position is due to luck rather than their own effort. Not having a strong *network* or feeling excluded from a network sends a negative message regarding status. This is in line with Bowles, Babcock & McGinn's (2005) study that women, who frequently experience lower status and weaker position, make lower salary requests when salary information is scarce.

And finally, feeling *constantly questioned, the feeling of not being good enough for the job*, that their contributions and credentials are ignored or devalued is demoralizing for the immigrants. A resource that can bring value to the table and enhance their power is ignored or dismissed by the employer. As a result some have resigned from good positions and others started devaluing themselves and feeling like they have no place as a highly-skilled employee in an Icelandic organization. This supports Arnardottir and Haraldsson's findings (2014) that highly-skilled immigrants experience discrimination through being assigned jobs that do not utilize their education. However, Winston, one interviewee who works for an international company where the main language is English, had a different experience. Possibly because he already had clients through his own network and did not need to build a new network with Icelanders and overcome some of the barriers that others in this study needed to like learning Icelandic, socializing with Icelanders to build networks, and earning trust. He has the international network already. This is an interesting finding that needs to be examined further.

## Conclusion

The experiences of our respondents suggest that the Icelandic labor market may not be fully prepared to accept immigrants who are highly-skilled and educated professionals into the upper levels of organizations. While the biggest hurdle appears to be the language, overcoming the language barrier does not solve everything; employees of organizations that have adopted English as their working language still face barriers on the form of exclusion from networks and feeling that their contributions and credentials are devalued. Negotiation, and the subsequent opportunities for value-creation, appear to be underutilized.

This study brings light to a lived experience of a small group of educated immigrants from various countries in Europe on their communicating and negotiating position with their employers in Iceland. Another group of immigrants may have a different experience from the group of immigrants in current study. It is therefore important to examine more immigrants from other continents that work in Iceland in order to understand this phenomenon better. Finally, it would be interesting to examine the lived experience of human resource managers who hire and work with immigrants in the Icelandic labor market.

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