

**OPINION COLUMNS & BLOGS**

For Wichita business, work life is all the richer for employing refugees

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We own a thriving start-up here in Wichita, and we are doing what we can to make our community a better place. Our company is called Technology for Humankind and we make Filimins, Wi-Fi enabled touch lamps that connect people across town or across the globe.

When we began this journey three years ago, we could not have imagined that we ourselves would connect with people from other countries in the meaningful way that we do. Thanks, however, to U.S. resettlement agencies such as Wichita's International Rescue Committee, that is just what we have been able to do.

At TFH, we strive to employ the best workers, and we think we succeed. Part of our assembly is done via contract with the Wichita Women's Initiative network, which assists women in transition from situations involving domestic violence or other hardships. The majority of our assembly is done in our warehouse by our dedicated employees.

Among them are individuals who are relatively new to Wichita, and who come from oceans away. They are people brave enough to take perhaps the biggest risk of their lives. They are refugees who have fled violence and unrest in their respective countries.

The things that make our refugee employees among the best are the same things that make good employees anywhere: they are reliable, dedicated, accurate, and fast. If we were only to consider the bottom line, it has worked well for us to have these employees on our staff.

However, if we were to consider the other benefits of employing our refugee workers, we are certain those benefits would outweigh the numbers. Our employees are able to contribute meaningfully to our community. They teach us about their culture, and we teach them about ours.

Such exchanges range from the serious to the silly, with break times spent learning new words, celebrating special events, or learning to sing in a round. Our workers are buying their first cars, learning to drive, taking English classes, and attending church. We learned recently that one will soon be building a home via Habitat for Humanity, and we are thrilled for her.

Recently we learned that the US government is significantly lowering the cap on how many refugees will be allowed admission to the U.S. next fiscal year. While we understand that the politics of this is complicated, we do know that our work family is all the richer for having our refugee employees as part of it.

We are grateful to the International Rescue Committee and to Eastminster Presbyterian Church and their Refugee/Immigrant Outreach Team for all their assistance, and for guiding us to our wonderful employees.

Vanessa Whalen and John Harrison own Technology for Humankind

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