



THE POLITICS OF SKILL

RETHINKING THE VALUE OF "LOW-SKILLED" IMMIGRANT WORKERS

By Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe

MARCH 2012

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ABOUT PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION

The Immigration Policy Center's *Perspectives* are thoughtful narratives written by leading academics and researchers who bring a wide range of multi-disciplinary knowledge to the issue of immigration policy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THE IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER

The Immigration Policy Center, established in 2003, is the policy arm of the American Immigration Council. IPC's mission is to shape a rational conversation on immigration and immigrant integration. Through its research and analysis, IPC provides policymakers, the media, and the general public with accurate information about the role of immigrants and immigration policy on U.S. society. IPC reports and materials are widely disseminated and relied upon by press and policymakers. IPC staff regularly serves as experts to leaders on Capitol Hill, opinion-makers, and the media. IPC is a non-partisan organization that neither supports nor opposes any political party or candidate for office. Visit our website at www.immigrationpolicy.org and our blog at www.immigrationimpact.com

The political discourse surrounding the incorporation of immigrants into the U.S. labor market tends to sort immigrant workers into two broad and mutually exclusive categories: *high-skilled* workers who are valued by many for their contribution to economic growth, and *low-skilled* workers who are viewed by some as causing a glut in the U.S. labor market and thereby displacing low and middle-income native-born workers. For the most part, these categories are structured around formal education. Workers possessing a level of formal education equal or superior to the median in the United States are on one side of this divide, while workers with less formal education than that threshold are on the other.

Not only do “high-skilled” and “low-skilled” immigrants receive vastly different analysis in immigration studies, but they are often treated differently in immigration policy and public opinion. Although a large majority of visas in the United States are granted for family reunification purposes, some highly skilled immigrants may be able to obtain visas based on the specialized knowledge they can furnish the economy. In contrast, immigrants considered low skilled, while occasionally able to obtain temporary work visas in narrow segments of the economy, are excluded from long-term work visa programs. As a result, many come to the United States without authorization. They have been subjected to intensive workplace raids and historically high levels of subsequent deportation under both the Bush and Obama administrations. Debate over future immigration policy reform often pivots on the question of skill contribution. Most current proposals favor expanding immigration opportunities for those immigrants with high levels of formal education.

This skill-based divide in immigration policy has strong backing in public opinion, where the stark contrast in appraisal of immigrants considered high skilled versus low skilled is noteworthy. Empirical surveys have found that, across the board, U.S. citizens strongly prefer highly skilled migrants over migrants considered low-skilled, and that this bias against immigrants considered low skilled remains fervent irrespective of the education level of the citizens queried or the intensity of labor market competition they experience. In public opinion, in policy debate, and in scholarly analysis, skill is a powerful criterion used to brand, assess, and compartmentalize migrants. The perception of an immigrant’s skill level thus has real and profound consequences for their economic participation, political inclusion, and social integration in the United States.

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Since 2006 we have conducted extensive research that focuses on the skill contribution of Latino immigrant workers. In the process, we have come to question the high skilled vs. low skilled dichotomy. We do so first and foremost by challenging the assumption that skill is primarily derived from formal schooling and classroom education. Our focus is on immigrants whose access to formal education is limited, but who nonetheless have been able to acquire significant skill through informal or on-the-job learning processes. Specifically, our research examines the labor market participation of Latino immigrants in the U.S. construction industry;

a workforce with relatively low levels of secondary and post-secondary education. The U.S. construction industry continues to rely heavily on Latino immigrants, even during the current industry downturn.

Through this [multi-year study](#), we have interviewed over 200 Latino immigrant construction workers and conducted an additional 100 interviews with employers, training experts, and industry analysts. These interviews were conducted in two urban research sites, Philadelphia and North Carolina’s Research Triangle Region, in order to capture the effects that different local labor market institutions have on immigrant knowledge deployment and development. Through this research, we show that a significant proportion—close to 60 percent of immigrant workers interviewed—migrate with deep and sophisticated construction knowledge. Many of those who arrive with this experience were employed as master craftsmen in building trades in their respective sending communities. Moreover, we find that Latino immigrant workers in both labor market settings continue to develop skills while at their U.S. jobsites. They explore and even innovate new construction techniques and carve out new pathways for training immigrant co-workers and new labor market entrants.

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However, contrary to what labor market theories might predict, these improved skills and strategies for learning often remain invisible. As a result, Latino construction workers remain confined to the category of “low-skilled,” and suffer the political and economic consequences that this status implies. Moreover, because the innovations that Latino workers make are undervalued or obscured, employing firms and the larger regional economies in which they participate lose out on this important source of learning, upgrading, and growth.

Effective solutions to this problem require a better understanding of why the skills of less-educated immigrants remain invisible. Again, this is not simply the result of fewer years of formal education. Rather, it has to do with the concept of *tacit skill*—a term that is well represented within management scholarship, but until now has not been incorporated into studies of less-educated immigrant workers. Tacit skill is ability that is learned through hands-on experience, rather than through formal training or classroom instruction. Tacit skill is critical to many immigrant-heavy industries, including the construction industry. In this context, learning does not occur in a standard classroom setting, but rather through intensive interaction with materials and exposure to different building environments and contexts. Additionally, workers learn skills with the help of other co-workers who ensure their colleagues learn how to finish different tasks and gain exposure to different materials.

For the construction industry in particular, brick-laying provides a useful example of tacit knowledge development. Mastery of this skill results not from classroom training or a worker’s ability to read and follow written or verbal instructions. Rather, it is derived from their accumulated work experience, which provides them with the visual and tactile cues needed to sense important, yet subtle, differences in the consistency of the mortar and its

appropriateness for a specific style of construction. To learn this particular craft, a student of bricklaying usually starts by observing and imitating the work of more experienced workers. The student also hones his skills by repeating tasks and, in the process, receiving extensive feedback on the execution of a task from supervisors and skilled co-workers. Yet, because it is often difficult to fully articulate and verbally describe the source of a mistake, this guidance often requires additional demonstration in order to show the student how to achieve quality standards. Ultimately, this iterative and on-going process of learning enables the student to cultivate an intuitive sense of what works for a given construction project and what is needed to resolve a specific building-related challenge. But because this skill is learned on the job by interacting with others, it is hard to explain to those who do not have the same work experience. It becomes a kind of “know-how” that is impossible to describe.

Furthermore, for Latino immigrants in particular, tacit skill can be especially hard to demonstrate as a result of differences in building styles, technology use, and construction techniques that vary from country to country. Construction styles in the United States differ markedly, for example, from those in Mexico. Because employers and co-workers (as well as policy analysts) may be unfamiliar with these construction approaches and the tacit skill on which they depend, they may overlook the expertise of Latino immigrants and may wrongly classify them as unskilled or under-qualified for a job. In so doing, they may ignore the ability of immigrants to combine and even transform knowledge as they move from one work environment to the next and, in the process, contribute to innovations in building style and technique.

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The centrality of tacit skill to construction work has created shared challenges for immigrant and non-immigrant workers alike. Historically, actors in the construction industry—with workers at the forefront—have responded to concerns that their tacit knowledge might remain invisible and undervalued by creating institutions to formalize the social relations and processes of on-site experimentation through which that knowledge is developed. Building trade unions, arguably the most effective of institutions for skill-building in construction, have demanded that explicit signifiers, such as employer-sanctioned apprenticeships and closely related occupational ladders, be widely adopted to promote and reward skill development. In doing so, labor unions have helped to greatly enhance the industry status and bargaining power of their members. Moreover, union-supported institutions, knowing that construction work remains highly variable and context specific, have accomplished this without standardizing all forms of worker knowledge.

As this suggests, a cookie-cutter approach to skill development and certification would be inappropriate and ineffective. Rather, labor unions have, to varying degrees, created flexible institutions that encourage continuous learning and that facilitate on-going innovation in the face of constantly changing construction standards and styles. As a result, they are in a strong

position to defend the knowledge contribution of construction workers. Even though they have experienced a recent decline in membership, they remain a powerful force in structuring the construction industry, exercising political sway to inform labor and wage standards.

For the most part, however, immigrant workers are excluded from formal institutions for tacit skill development and certification, like union-sponsored and federal-level apprenticeships. This is not to say, absent these supports, that Latino immigrants are unable to apply their skills and know-how. To the contrary, we have identified numerous instances in which prior knowledge is tapped and further enhanced by immigrant workers and crews in an effort to improve construction techniques. Still, the lack of institutional representation makes it almost impossible for Latino immigrants to fully demonstrate this contribution to non-immigrant co-workers, supervisors, and employers—much less leverage these skills for occupational advancement and worker protection. This institutional gap penalizes immigrant workers as well as their employers, who may be unable to harness this talent as a source of continuous innovation and upgrading.

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An essential first step toward creating institutional supports for immigrant skill development and deployment involves shifting the conventional narrative surrounding less-educated immigrants—in particular, providing stronger evidence of their knowledge contribution and industry impact. Efforts by advocates and scholars to lend support to less-educated immigrants tend to concentrate on their vulnerability and exploitation. For immigrant-heavy industries, construction included, this often involves tales of egregious labor and safety violations and of unethical practices of wage theft by unscrupulous employers. While many of these accounts may be true, in isolation these accounts are also potentially damaging; for nowhere in these accounts of victimization is there sufficient room to celebrate and support the knowledge contribution of less-educated immigrants to our industries and economy.

This suggests the need for immigrant advocates, including sympathetic scholars, to highlight the knowledge and expertise of less-educated immigrants, including transferable skills learned initially through their work experience back home. This also includes featuring innovations Latino immigrants make at their U.S. worksites that contribute to essential improvements in industrial productivity and quality standards. We need to acknowledge the role they play in revitalizing laggard industries in this country, saving vital U.S. jobs and businesses along the way. This contribution should not be equated with lower labor costs that result in cheaper goods and services. Rather, we need to capture immigrants' actual contributions as resourceful, knowledgeable, and inventive workers who are deserving of better wages and enhanced industry status as a result. A smattering of stories of this type has emerged in recent ethnographic accounts of immigrant work in agriculture, manufacturing, and construction. However, they are still too few, and are rarely presented together as an integrated challenge to dismissive portrayals of less-educated immigrants. It is time for an alternative narrative that is

accessible to the broader public; one that is not overly celebratory, but instead acknowledges the real asset that immigrants who are dismissed as “low-skilled” represent for our economy and for our society.

This is not to say that the shift toward a more positive narrative should obscure stories of vulnerability and exploitation. But embedding accounts of immigrant struggle within more powerful narratives of immigrant talent, ingenuity, and integrity will ultimately help strengthen the argument that immigrants of all types deserve greater recognition and better treatment for the valuable work they perform.