

Defining Skill: The Many Forms of Skilled Immigrant Labor



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INTRODUCTION

In the world of work, skills encompass more than just education. Expertise and abilities gained on the job, informally, or through specialized training programs can be adapted and used in a number of different settings. Yet, because skills are so often narrowly equated with level of education, the value of the work performed by low-wage workers (native-born and immigrant alike) is frequently devalued or overlooked entirely. From construction workers to gardeners, many low-wage immigrant workers are in fact quite skilled, but are frequently labeled as “less skilled” because their levels of formal educational attainment are relatively low or because the jobs they perform require little formal education.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how certain immigrant workers acquire a wide range of skills and apply those skills in the United States. Using data from a large survey of workers, it is intended to broaden our concept of “skills” and begin to change the language we use to describe these workers.

MEASURING IMMIGRANTS' SKILL LEVELS

Our comprehensive study¹ of work and mobility among Mexican migrants shows that most labor migrants with little schooling are quite skilled. Moreover, international migration from Mexico to the United States in particular is more than simply a strategy to earn higher wages; it is also a pathway to transferring and acquiring skills across borders, facilitating mobility within occupations or industries. The skills and knowledge that migrants possess include easy-to-measure elements of traditional human capital, such as education and language skills, but also incorporate technical, social, and cultural abilities that are more difficult to measure. These harder-to-measure skills include working knowledge and technical skills learned informally through observation, trial and error, and interaction on and off the job in home communities and abroad. Additionally, migrants acquire interpersonal competencies in new workplace environments that are hard to measure—such as teamwork, leadership, customer service—along with innovative and culturally specific approaches to work.

The skills that migrants acquire are socially and culturally situated in that they are place-specific and learned on the job. Some skills are explicit, technical, and job-specific, while others are tacit and for this reason may not be recognized and valued by employers. But if a migrant is able to demonstrate his or her skills to employers, these skills can make valuable contributions to the migrant's mobility prospects and to the U.S. economy.

Our findings challenge well-established perceptions of individuals working in low-wage service jobs—such as janitors, maids, or caregivers—as socially invisible workers performing tasks requiring little or no skill or special training. Nowhere is this truer than in the perception of “unskilled” migrants in the United States. In particular, unauthorized migrants with little schooling usually learn through observation, trial and error, and informal interaction in their home communities, as well as in their U.S. communities. Because this group of workers is commonly seen as unskilled by virtue of their relatively low levels of education and formal training, their labor market contributions may be overlooked and their mobility paths are often poorly understood.

Economic studies of the ways in which immigrants are incorporated into the U.S. labor market demonstrate that an immigrant ranking high on one or more of the “human capital” characteristics—that is, on education, English-language proficiency, or work experience—will achieve wage and occupational gains. This group of immigrants is typically referred to as “skilled.” In contrast, immigrants who run low on these human capital characteristics are assumed to be relegated to jobs that provide limited or blocked mobility. This group is typically referred to in the literature as “unskilled.” Most Mexican and Central American labor migrants fall into the unskilled category by virtue of their low levels of education, without regard to their actual labor market history, since there have been very few attempts to measure that history. Thus, scholars often incorrectly assume that skills and occupational advancement are reserved for immigrant workers with high levels of education.

However, this is not the case. To study skills acquisition and social mobility, we argue that we must have detailed information on the work histories of migrants on both sides of the border, before and after migration. To date, we have interviewed roughly 320 so-called “unskilled” migrants and former migrants in Mexico and the United States, as well as experts in immigrant-heavy U.S. industries such as construction and manufacturing, agriculture, retail and hospitality, and personal services.

To help illustrate our argument, the following section features some key examples of migrant worker trajectories in select industries—namely, construction, agriculture, retail, hospitality, and personal services. These cases demonstrate that many immigrant workers who are assumed to be “unskilled” in fact possess highly specialized skills of great economic value to both their employers and the industries within which they work.

IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN SELECT INDUSTRIES



Agriculture

Agricultural workers are generally under-appreciated. Studies of migrant workers in the agricultural industry in the United States portray a disadvantaged worker relative to other migrant-heavy industries. Migrants laboring in agriculture and farm-work generally earn lower wages and experience more periods of unemployment than non-migrant workers. Migrant workers typically live in poor housing conditions and are regularly exposed to hazardous chemicals. Moreover, farm-work tasks are seen as simple and repetitive and, because of a steady stream of migrant labor in the agricultural sector, these workers have regularly been characterized as easily replaceable, transient, and unskilled labor. In contrast to these perceptions of the disadvantaged and unskilled migrant farmworkers, we found substantial skill transfers, skill development, and social mobility among the migrant farm workers in our study. Of the male migrants who entered agricultural jobs upon arrival in the United States, for example, 80 percent said that their agricultural experience and knowledge of planting and harvesting crops in Mexico helped them learn new ways of doing things in their agricultural jobs abroad. Being able to recognize when to harvest a cucumber according to specifications learned in Guanajuato facilitated learning how to pick fruit in North Carolina.

This is finely illustrated through the case of Arnulfo, who was able to successfully transfer agricultural and husbandry skills learned on the job in Mexico to his work in the United States. Arnulfo labors at a commercial hog-raising farm in Utah, overseeing a section that functions independently. Each section raises pigs, which are then shipped to slaughterhouses. Among the three hundred sections that comprise the farm, Arnulfo's section ranks first in the number of pigs born and their rate of fattening. He credits his working knowledge on the care and reproductive behavior of pigs from his experience working at a similar facility in Mexico.

Migrant farmworkers also experience social mobility in the U.S. labor market. One migrant, Jaime, mobilized old skills learned off the job at home in Mexico to engage in what migrants call *brincar* (job jumping), first within the agricultural sector, and later across industries to construction. Drawing on his migrant network, Jaime landed his first job as a picker on a farm that raised cattle and harvested fruit and vegetables. One day his supervisor inquired if anyone among the workers had the skills to build a corral. Jaime came forward and said that he had some woodworking skills, having helped his father, a master carpenter, build a doorframe and cabinet in the family home. Upon seeing the corral Jaime built, the ranch owner was so impressed with his craftsmanship that he referred Jaime to neighbors and eventually to a residential builder and developer who recruited Jaime from agricultural work. In his new job he reskilled, acquiring new knowledge about tools for working with wood and new approaches to work. As Jaime explained, "I learned to be more efficient and precise."



Construction

As in the United States, construction and bricklaying are time-honored crafts in Mexico. The construction industry provides ample opportunities for transferring skills as well as learning new ones through on-the-job training and apprenticeships. We can see this in the case of Marco, a young migrant from Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico. Before migrating to the United States, Marco worked as a *chalan*, an entry-level worker in the career line of an *albañil*, or skilled mason. In Mexico, the *albañil* is a craftsman who knows how to mix the brick materials, mold the bricks, and lay the bricks, all without any technologically advanced tools. Moreover, the skills of many *albañiles* expand beyond brick production and are integrated into other skill sets—e.g., the construction of adobe and stone walls and fountains and the installation of stone and tile flooring, patios, and countertops. Basically, the Mexican bricklayer is trained to work with all materials except for steel, wood, and glass. In Mexico, as in the United States, the *albañil* is a very prestigious occupation but requires little formal schooling as skills are learned on the job. As a *chalan*, Marco learned how to make adobe structures and lay brick and tile.

Marco moved to North Carolina in 1990, when the urban construction industry was experiencing tremendous growth because of the housing and real-estate boom, and found a job as a construction laborer. At first, his tasks were restricted to maintaining the construction site and helping co-workers. With time, however, he had the opportunity to demonstrate his plastering skills to his employer and to learn framing and ceiling work from his fellow construction workers. He, like many immigrant workers, was able to transfer his existing skill set to his U.S. job. Though the construction technologies in Mexico and the United States differed, his construction skills learned at home facilitated his learning new ones in the United States. By 1993, only three years after arriving in the United States, he had worked his way up to crew leader. Today, Marco is a supervisor of a multi-million dollar condominium project in North Carolina.

Marco is not alone in transferring skills and achieving upward mobility: almost two-thirds of the 300 immigrants we interviewed had construction work experience in their home communities and half of these reported transferring these skills to their U.S. jobs. As a number of migrant construction workers told us when we asked where they acquired their skills, “*yo traje la técnica*”—I brought the technique with me. In some cases, the skill sets that immigrants bring from their home communities have influenced industry techniques. The most widely used construction-related skills that migrants bring are tile making and installation, bricklaying and masonry—skill sets that U.S. employers frequently refer to as Mexican craft specialties. One builder told us that the masonry skills of Mexican and Guatemalan workers drove him towards using more stone and less wood in construction projects. On the suggestion of his workers, one landscaper replaced cement with mud and sand in the construction of stonewalls and fountains. As the landscaper explained, his affluent clients preferred the aesthetic of this handmade technique—a more natural look—and it gives him an edge on his competitors who primarily rely on cement.

Another migrant, Francisco, relayed to us how proud he felt when his employer recognized and valorized his skill. Through a friend, Francisco secured a job as a mason in a construction company that specializes in residential patios. Here, his work experience in the construction industry in Mexico enabled him to assist his boss in many ways, but one experience stood out:

“ One day we were building a brick chimney for a barbecue grill. Our job was to build a circular stone chimney. I realized that [because of my past experience] ... one had to *sacar la línea*, install a mason’s line or twine, which is the line that keeps the stones straight on the wall and thereby allows for greater accuracy and faster laying. When the boss came to check up on our work, he asked who installed this line. Upon finding out that I had installed it throughout the chimney foundation, front and back, the patron said, ‘*¡Qué buena cabeza tienes, qué buen trabajo!*’—‘What a good head you have, what good work.’ As Francisco explained, ‘I will never forget that moment.’”



Retail, Hospitality, and Personal Services

There are few opportunities for transferring skills, reskilling, improving social mobility, and job jumping in the service sectors of the U.S. economy, where almost 40 percent of the men and women in our study labored as janitors, dishwashers, gardeners, parking lot attendants, chambermaids, and live-in domestics when they first arrived in the United States. Because of this, many of the men purposefully drew on personal contacts and, when possible, transitioned out of their low-wage jobs as dishwashers and janitors and other service workers (60 percent) to more desirable and better paying ones in construction and automotive repair (25 percent), where wages are higher and opportunities for advancement are greater.

The mobility opportunities for women in retail, hospitality, and personal services were much more limited because they entered a smaller range of jobs in the U.S. labor market compared to men and thus had fewer opportunities to acquire new skills and transition to better positions. As countless other studies have found, immigrant women with low levels of education are concentrated in niches in the service and hospitality industries where they work in low-wage, undervalued, and low status jobs as domestics, janitors, and entry-level food service workers—jobs that offer few avenues for upward mobility.

Despite the low wages and low status associated with these positions, all the women reported transferring on- or off-the-job skills in cleaning, cooking, and caregiving from Mexico to their U.S. jobs. That is, though limited in the choice of jobs, their labor market experience in Mexico proved to be relevant and adaptable to jobs in the U.S. labor market. Women working in food manufacturing and restaurants also said they were able to transfer cooking skills learned on and off the job in Mexico to their jobs in the United States, but—unlike women who labored in domestic work—those in food manufacturing and the restaurant industry reported being able to apply their skills and sometimes transition to better jobs within the industry, from food preparation workers to jobs as waiters or assistant cooks in restaurants. In these jobs they reported wage increases and increased autonomy, and also spoke of learning new and improved skills, such as preparing different types of food and developing customer service, teamwork, leadership, and English skills.

Take the case of Carmen. In Mexico, Carmen was a cook and domestic in a private home of a factory owner in León. She incurred a debt and migrated to Washington, D.C. with the goal of paying off the debt. When she arrived in the city in 1995, she found work as a bus girl in an Anglo-owned Mexican restaurant, earning \$5.50 an hour. Though she spoke no English, she was eager to learn. She watched television in English and practiced with the co-workers at the restaurant. In less than a year, Carmen was promoted to food preparation assistant. In this job she prepared salads, placed condiments on plates, and arranged them for delivery to customers. Carmen was quick to remark to the lead cook that they were using the wrong chiles for the chiles rellenos dish. Both the chef and manager were quite taken by her initiative and spunk, so asked her to teach them how to prepare the dish “the Mexican way.” By the time she left the restaurant, having paid off her debt and returned to Mexico to be with her family, she had been promoted to one of two lead cooks, was earning \$12 per hour, and had acquired enough English to communicate with her manager and co-workers.

CONCLUSION

The cases of Oscar and Arnufo working in the agriculture industry, Marco and Francisco working in construction, and Carmen in food service demonstrate several important factors about skill transfers, reskilling, and employment opportunities. First, a lack of formal education and credentialing among migrants in the U.S. labor force does not correlate with any inherent lack of ability, desire to learn, or ambition to advance in life. Quite the contrary—by the very act of migrating they have demonstrated a determination to better their opportunities. Second, migrants with low levels of education nonetheless bring skills from Mexico that they can frequently mobilize in their sojourns in the United States. Third—contrary to the scenario of dead-end, low-wage jobs—migrants learn considerable new skills while abroad and utilize them to advance their careers in the United States. Indeed, more than three-quarters of the respondents reported learning new skills abroad, and some of this reskilling took place in jobs that are often seen as offering few paths to mobility, such as agricultural work.

Our research has broad implications for U.S. immigration policy, which confers preference to “skilled” immigrants who rank high on traditional human capital characteristics, such as education levels and other formal credentials, but limits the entry of “unskilled” migrants—a classification that ignores the substantial informal skills they bring to U.S. labor markets. In considering changes to our immigration laws, it would be wise to consider more carefully what we traditionally mean by the term “skilled” workers and design fairer and more effective immigration policies that match our immigrant labor pool’s abilities to the specific needs of U.S. industry—thereby recognizing the economic contributions of all migrants.

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ENDNOTE

1. The analysis set out here is based on the fuller and more broadly contextualized findings of a five-year study conducted by the author and her co-authors, which draws on research including interviews with 320 Mexican migrants and return migrants in North Carolina and Guanajuato, Mexico. Jacqueline Hagan, Ruben Hernandez-Leon, and Jean-Luc Demonsant, *Skills of the "Unskilled": Work and Mobility among Mexican Migrants*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).