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THE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN ESTONIA

Bachelor Thesis

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I have written this Bachelor Thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

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(signature of the author and date)

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Introduction

Estonia's employment landscape has experienced significant transformation since the country regained independence in 1991 and joined the European Union in 2004. Alongside native Estonians and long-term residents, the nation has witnessed a growing influx of foreign-born individuals migrating for work. As global mobility rises and Estonia's labor market becomes increasingly international, understanding the experiences of these migrant workers within local workplaces is essential.

The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to explore the experiences of migrant workers in Estonian workplaces. A topic of increasing relevance as migration emerges as a central feature of labor markets worldwide. In the context of Estonia, a nation with a relatively homogeneous historical population and evolving integration policies, there is an urgent need to explore how foreign-born workers navigate their local work environments. This study will focus on key aspects of their experiences, including the recruitment process, internal communication, sense of belonging, and overall job satisfaction.

To accomplish this aim, the following **research tasks** have been set:

- To define the term "migrant worker" and clarify its distinctions from related concepts such as immigrant, ethnic minority, nationality, and citizenship, while drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks.
- To analyze the existing literature on workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of migrant workers in the areas of recruitment, employment, and integration.
- To investigate the challenges faced by migrant workers in the workplace, including perceived bias, cultural differences, and their experiences related to integration in Estonian work environments.
- To assess the influence of language proficiency (in Estonian, English, and Russian) on migrant workers' communication, workplace interactions, and perceived opportunities for career advancement.
- To examine migrant workers' experiences with recruitment processes, career progression, and job satisfaction across various sectors in Estonia.
- To conduct qualitative research through interviews with migrant workers in Estonia and analyze the findings within the context of existing theories and literature,

providing recommendations for improving inclusivity and the support systems available to migrant workers.

Evaluating the experiences of migrant workers in Estonia can aid policymakers in crafting more inclusive labor market policies, diversity strategies, and language support programs. The insights derived from this study may also prove valuable for companies and HR professionals looking to enhance their recruitment, communication, and onboarding practices. However, the author recognizes certain limitations in the study, including a small research sample drawn from personal and university networks. Consequently, the author advocates for more comprehensive and large-scale research in the future to validate the patterns identified in this thesis.

The thesis is structured into two primary sections: a theoretical background and an empirical analysis. The theoretical background comprises four subchapters, which offer an overview of key terms such as migrant worker, ethnicity, and diversity; underscore the significance of diversity in the workplace; summarize relevant theoretical frameworks; and review previous research on this topic to contextualize the current thesis and identify aspects of migrant worker experiences that have already been investigated. The second part of the thesis includes two subchapters that detail the data selection and methodology, present an overview of the author's findings, and compare those findings with existing studies.

To date, and to the best of the author's knowledge, no studies have been conducted in Estonia examining the real-life workplace experiences of foreign-born university graduates employed in the country, particularly in relation to the interplay of language proficiency, perceived inclusion, and professional growth.

The author clarifies that the term "migrant workers" primarily refers to foreign-born individuals currently employed in Estonia who have completed higher education (or are in the process of doing so), specifically graduates of the University of Tartu. The anticipated outcome of conducting and analyzing the interviews is to understand the barriers and facilitators affecting workplace integration for migrant employees in Estonia.

Keywords: migrant workers, workplaces, Estonia, integration, inclusion, diversity.

1. Theoretical Framework for the Workplace Experiences of Migrant Workers

1.1. Key concepts: Migration worker, Ethnicity, and related terms

Before examining further, it is crucial to identify and clarify key terms used in this work, specifically migration, migrant, immigrant, and migrant workers. Before distinguishing these terms from related concepts like nationality, race, citizenship, and country of origin. To understand the peculiarity of each term, it is crucial to look at the definitions illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1.

Definitions of key terms

Terms	Defintion	Examples
Migration	The general movement of people across regions or countries for purposes such as employment, education, or asylum. It includes both international and internal migration.	A Ukrainian person moves to Estonia to take a seasonal job in agriculture.
Migrant	A broad term for any person who relocates away from their usual place of residence, either internationally or internally, regardless of legal status or cause.	A Finnish engineer moving to Tallinn for a job, a Nigerian student attending university in Estonia.
Immigrant	A person who enters a new country intending to reside permanently or for an extended period, usually involving legal registration or permits.	A Belarusian IT worker who has settled in Estonia under a long-term residence permit.
Migrant worker	A non-citizen who performs remunerated work in a host country. Often, employment is tied to temporary visas or residence permits, but may also include naturalized migrants.	An Indian software developer working in Estonia.
Nationality	Membership in a nation-state, usually acquired by birth or heritage, denotes a legal relationship between an individual and a country. Nationality often confers certain rights or status under international law. (In some contexts, “nationality” is synonymous with citizenship, though in others it can denote ethnic origin.)	Estonian, Kazakhstani, Swedish, Japanese, etc.

Citizenship	A legal status granted by a state that entails specific rights and duties. One can become a citizen by birth within a territory, descent (having a citizen parent), or naturalization (fulfilling legal requirements such as residency or exams). Citizenship is a political and legal bond with a country and can change over time through naturalization or renunciation.	Estonian citizen; Canadian citizenship acquired by an immigrant.
Country of origin	The country where a person was born or the country from which a person emigrated. In migration studies, this term indicates an individual's source country before relocating. It does not necessarily equate to citizenship if the person has changed nationality.	A person born in Belarus who later moves to Estonia has Belarus as the country of origin.

Sources: adapted from International Organization for Migration (2019); United Nations (1990); Estonian Ministry of the Interior (n.d.); European Commission (n.d.).

According to the United Nations (1990, Article 2.1), a migrant worker is “a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.” In essence, this definition is applicable to those who are foreign-born and take up work in the host nation on a temporary or permanent basis.

The legal status of migrant workers significantly varies. While some possess permanent residence permits or have acquired a citizenship via naturalization, others are engaged in short-term work contracts or are posted workers. These distinctions not only influence the extent of rights and entitlements available but also play a significant role in the level of workplace integration the individuals experience. Legal status also intersects with other factors such as language, culture, race, and religion that together determine the social and professional integration of migrant workers.

A key part of inclusion is feeling accepted and valued member of the team or organization (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Shore et al., 2011). For migrant employees, gaining a sense of belonging is potentially made more challenging by being a minority group. They will be, sound, or act differently from the majority of co-workers, and at times, differences can make one feel like an "other" rather than belonging to the organization (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). Theoretical models of inclusion emphasize that belongingness is one of two core dimensions of inclusion and that the other is uniqueness (Shore et al., 2011). Belongingness is the sense in which an employee perceives that they are valued and "belong"

within the workgroup, and it is linked with central human needs. Psychological research by Baumeister and Leary (1995) demonstrated belonging as a central human motivation. According to that work, workplace belonging has, in the workplace, been linked with outcomes like job satisfaction, work engagement, and lower levels of stress.

For migrant workers, identity dynamics are crucial for belonging. Most individuals have multiple identities – professional identity, ethnic identity, and national identity – and these can clash or coexist. Van Laer and Janssens (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with migrant professionals and found that identity conflicts were prevalent. Participants reported challenges to developing and maintaining a professional identity unencumbered by stereotypes of their ethnic group. For example, a migrant employee might avoid talking about aspects of their culture or speaking in their native language at work for fear of being interpreted exclusively through their ethnic identity (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). This covering up of one's true self is also sometimes referred to as downplaying one's cultural differences to blend in (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). While covering can allow one to fit in and superficially enhance belonging, it can also cause internal conflict and reduce authenticity, which is another essential component of a healthy workplace.

The organizational identification theory works here: it informs us how much a person identifies himself/herself with the organization. High organizational identification tends to mean a high sense of belonging, thus, the employee feels "one of us" in the workplace. Migrant staff will identify themselves with the organization when they feel that the organization identifies with them, like their differentiating features are appreciated (Crenshaw, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Inclusive leadership can facilitate this by positively acknowledging cultural differences. For instance, a manager's inquiry about a migrant employee's background as one's international perspective is an asset to the team, sending the message of belonging that can strengthen that employee's sense of it. On the other hand, when differences are ignored or worse, if the employee experiences the impact of microaggressions like "jokes" or thoughtless comments regarding their ethnicity, the message received is that they do not belong entirely (Crenshaw, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

Empirical studies report mixed experiences of belonging for migrant employees. In the UK, for instance, Kenny and Briner (2010) found that Black Caribbean graduate employees consistently found themselves strangers in white, middle-class organizational settings. They had to navigate their ethnic identity within them, sometimes feeling the need to

adopt the cultural norms of the majority to fit in (Kenny & Briner, 2010). The study revealed how class origin intersected with ethnicity: some of the Black Caribbean participants had a working-class background entering white-collar roles, contributing to their sense of not belonging. While this study was UK-based, the notion likely holds in Estonia and beyond: migrant workers likely come from different socio-cultural backgrounds than the dominant group and may very well find corporate culture exclusionary (Kenny & Briner, 2010).

Psychological safety overlaps with belonging. Psychological safety is the shared perception that it is safe to be oneself without fear of negative repercussions (Edmondson, 1999). In an inclusive workplace, migrant employees, like the majority of employees, feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, or even admitting mistakes without fear that they will be more severely judged or stereotyped (Shore et al., 2011). When migrant employees observe that people with the same ethnicity or nationality "like them" are appreciated and successful at the company as it strengthens their sense of possible belonging. Conversely, if the top management is exclusively ethnic individual and migrant workers are only found at lower levels, then a migrant employee might subconsciously get the impression that there's a ceiling to their sense of complete belonging or advancement (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). Therefore, they may see themselves as a perpetual guest rather than a host in the firm.

Briefly, the establishment of a sense of belonging among migrant employees comprises both interpersonal inclusion, like colleagues being friendly, having genuine friendships across ethnic boundaries, and structural inclusion with policy and culture that embrace diversity (Ager & Strang, 2008; Shore et al., 2011). Being inclusive is where staff can be different yet be entirely accepted as part of the team. Once belonging is achieved, migrant employees are more likely to engage and invest in their long-term careers with the company, which leads us to the issue of how being an immigrant intersects with career development and advancement opportunities.

On the whole, diversity and inclusion programs can significantly enhance job satisfaction among migrant employees when well-designed and implemented. Through the reduction of occurrences of prejudice, providing avenues for development, and advocating for the value of each employee's background, such programs engage employees by making them feel valued and respected. Happier employees are not just happy but also more productive and more loyal, making them a double advantage for both the company and the individual (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023; Shore et al., 2011).

Migrant workers experiences in recruitment and workplace integration challenges

Labour market entry is an important phase in which migrants tend to face obstacles. Recruitment and hiring processes, as desirable as they may be meritocratic, are vulnerable to minority-against biases. There is extensive literature in Europe and elsewhere that has reported ethnic discrimination in the hiring process via field experiments. Zschirnt and Ruedin (2016) meta-analyzed correspondence tests (resume experiments) from 1990-2015 and concluded that migrant candidates had significantly lower call-backs compared to equally qualified majority candidates. Their findings corroborate the assertion that discrimination against minority candidates still prevails in hiring processes in most nations and has not decreased significantly over the years.

Moreover, this discrimination can be both direct and indirect. According to Zschirnt and Ruedin (2016), direct discrimination occurs when employers intentionally prefer a majority candidate over a migrant candidate, for example, seeing a foreign surname and discarding the CV. While indirect discrimination involves policies that are neutral but operate to the detriment of migrant candidates, for example, requiring native-level proficiency in a language for jobs that do not inherently demand it, or relying on employee referrals, which can serve to reproduce the existing ethnic make-up of the workforce (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016).

Another difficulty which is faced in the hiring process is the absence of social capital or networks, which most migrant job applicants face (Heath & Cheung, 2007). In other labor markets, it is useful to have contacts or know important individuals who can enhance employment prospects. Immigrants, particularly those who are first-generation immigrants, may not have the same professional networks within the host society as the dominant group (Heath & Cheung, 2007). Bisin et al. (2011) discovered that the European immigrants who retain strong identification with their ethnic group tend to have poorer labor market results. The reason for this is that these individuals are bound to be socially and linguistically distant from the prevailing networks that lead to job opportunities. Second-generation migrants are more fortunate, as they have grown up and gotten an education in the country, potentially opening their networks and exposure to domestic norms of employment (Bisin et al., 2011). Yet even second-generation migrants may still face name-based or appearance-based discrimination upon hiring.

Taste-based discrimination as a prejudice of customers or employers who "prefer" not to work with certain groups, and statistical discrimination of employers using ethnic origin as a proxy for other characteristics like language ability or productivity, are both theoretically relevant to understanding these hiring patterns (Becker, 1971; Arrow, 1998). Unfortunately, these general assumptions put minority candidates at a disadvantage.

In general, the literature suggests that migrant job candidates have to work harder to gain equal employment access (Heath & Cheung, 2007). They can adapt by "whitening" their resumes, for example, employing "local" version of their name, if possible, or pre-emphasizing language proficiency to get around stereotypes (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016). Others can rely on ethnically concentrated labor markets, for instance, multinational companies, if native-language employers are unsympathetic (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). These adaptive strategies, nonetheless, do not eradicate the bias; the responsibility continues to rest with employers and policymakers to develop equitable recruitment procedures. Strategies such as anonymized curriculum vitae or diversity recruitment objectives represent examples that have been proposed or implemented internationally to mitigate bias during entry (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016).

Nevertheless, finding a job is only the first of the two great challenges facing migrant employees, and integration into the workplace is the second (Ager & Strang, 2008). "Integration" here refers to the degree to which the individual adapts to and is integrated into the social and functional life of the workplace (Berry, 1997). The most critical aspects of workplace integration are communication in the workplace on a day-to-day basis, informal socialization with work colleagues, learning and internalizing organizational culture, and adapting to cultural differences (Fearfull & Kamenou, 2010; Shore et al., 2011). Thus, migrant employees or members of a minority cultural group from the majority population typically face special issues during this process of integration.

Without a doubt, language is one of the main issues. Many countries use as the official language of work in most organizations, specifically in the public sector and a majority of private businesses. Although English is increasingly used in international businesses, many migrant employees may not be entirely fluent in the local language (Hansson & Aavik, 2012; Leppik & Vihalemm, 2015). Incompetence in the country's official language can hinder effective communication with co-workers and seniors, leading to misunderstandings, errors, or exclusion from casual conversation. Even if professional

communication, such as written orders or formal meetings, is conducted in a common language, migrant employees can be excluded from the "water-cooler" chit-chat or socializing that usually takes place in the majority language (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017; Lämsä et al., 2023). Evas (2003) viewed this difference in language as a core issue, with very few migrant employees feeling that they were discriminated against or disadvantaged due to inadequate state language skills. Thus, employees who are learning local language might struggle to communicate with confidence, and this will affect their work performance as well as their confidence (Leppik & Vihalemm, 2015; Ager & Strang, 2008).

The informal social integration is also an area of trouble. Migrant employees are better able to find it difficult to form social ties with colleagues if, for instance, post-work socialization or team-building sessions center around majority culture practices to which they remain outsiders (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). Over time, being socially isolated in the workplace can seriously harm an employee's satisfaction and engagement (Shore et al., 2011). Van Laer and Janssens (2017) observe that migrant employees are more likely to practice emotional labor to integrate as they do the extra work of managing how they are presented, reversing prejudices, and "learning the ropes" of the organization's unofficial cultural norms. This extra labor can be exhausting and stressful, supplementing what those authors call "identity work": migrant professionals constantly having to choose how much of their own ethnic identity to preserve and how much to sacrifice to the dominant workplace identity (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017).

Most significantly, not all integration problems are the migrant members' to solve. Organizations have a role through organizational culture and norms. If an organization's culture is extremely monocultural, like employees have to "fit in", then immigrants' integration means assimilation – it is the minority member's job to fit in and suppress differences. However, progressive diversity management promotes two-way accommodation, in which the organization itself adapts and learns from its diverse workers (Cox, 1993). For example, if there are many Russian-speaking employees, an inclusive workplace might allow some bilingual communication, celebrate minority cultural holidays as well as national holidays, or at least give important information in Russian.

Overall, integration into the migrant workforce includes communication barriers, acquisition of the mode of communication, and gaining social acceptance within the social life of the company (Ager & Strang, 2008). Effective communication is at its heart the

determinant of successful integration. Companies that take the investment in cultural sensitivity courses, provide language support, and actively engage migrant employees within formal and informal modes of communication have more harmonious teams (Ely & Thomas, 2001). When communication gaps are bridged, it benefits migrant staff but also improves team performance as a whole by avoiding misunderstandings and fostering greater cooperation (Shore et al., 2011). Overview of salient themes from migrant employees at workplace research and sources of evidence supporting the above discussion presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Common Themes in Migrant Employees ' Workplace Experiences

Theme	Description	Representative Sources
Discrimination & Stereotyping	Migrant employees often face bias in hiring and promotion, and stereotyping (conscious or unconscious) that can hinder their career progress. Despite legal protections, unequal treatment persists in many workplaces.	Fearfull & Kamenou (2010); Zschirnt & Ruedin (2016) evidence of ongoing hiring discrimination; McKay et al. (2007) importance of diversity climate in reducing perceived discrimination.
Identity and "Covering"	Immigrants may struggle with balancing their cultural identity and the pressure to assimilate into the dominant workplace culture. Many feel compelled to "cover" or downplay their ethnic identity to be seen as professionals first, which can cause stress.	Van Laer & Janssens (2017) identity struggles and agency; Kenny & Briner (2010) ethnic identity and workplace experiences among Black Caribbean employees (UK).
Structural Barriers	Systemic or institutional obstacles (lack of networks, fewer mentors, bias in evaluation systems) impede migrant workers' advancement. These barriers mean that even with personal effort and qualifications, migrant employees might advance more slowly.	Van Laer & Janssens (2017) structural obstacles alongside individual agency; Kalev et al. (2006) analysis of structural measures or lack thereof affecting diversity outcomes.

Generational Differences	Among immigrant communities, second-generation individuals (born/raised in the country) tend to have better labor market outcomes than first-generation individuals, due to better language skills and cultural familiarity. However, some challenges persist across generations, indicating that full parity is not automatically achieved.	Bisin et al. (2011) first vs. second-generation integration and employment in Europe; Heath & Cheung (2007) ethnic penalties often reduce but do not disappear in the second generation.
Language and Communication	Language proficiency strongly affects migrant employees' integration. Limited command of the majority language can cause isolation and misunderstandings. Effective communication is both a technical skill issue and a cultural one (understanding norms and idioms).	Hofhuis et al. (2019) link language inclusion and team performance in multicultural settings.
Sense of Belonging	Feeling accepted and included is crucial for migrant employees' morale. Workplaces that foster belonging (through inclusive culture and peer support see better outcomes for immigrants. Conversely, tokenism or exclusion leads to disengagement.	Shore et al. (2011) include framework as belongingness and uniqueness; McKay et al. (2007) positive diversity climate increases migrant employees' attachment to the organization.
Impact of Inclusion Initiatives	Proactive measures as diversity training, mentoring, anti-bias policies, ERGs can improve migrant workers' job satisfaction and advancement if effectively implemented. Commitment from leadership and an inclusive climate amplify these benefits, whereas superficial efforts yield little change.	McKay et al. (2007) diversity climate effects on satisfaction; Kalev et al. (2006) evaluation of corporate diversity initiatives; Mor Barak (2015) the inclusive workplace model and outcomes.

Source: compiled by the author.

Note: Illustrated themes are interrelated. Discrimination and feeling of not belonging, for example, often occur together. Moreover, actions against one theme as piercing structural barriers through mentorship will often enhance others like career development and a feeling of inclusion. Sources cited from literature include theoretical or empirical evidence to support each of the themes discussed.

1.2. Importance of Diversity in the Workplace: Literature review

Koen Van Laer and Maddy Janssens (2016), in their research titled "Agency of Ethnic Minority Employees: Struggles Around Identity, Career and Social Change," examine how employees from ethnic minority backgrounds navigate their careers. Concentrating on the themes of identity, professional advancement, and initiatives for social transformation, the authors investigate the ways these individuals assert their agency despite facing cultural biases and systemic challenges.

The goal of the study is to comprehend how migrant workers actively influence their career paths, especially concerning the management of their identities, pursuit of career progression, and efforts to contest societal perceptions. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, the authors performed in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants from minority ethnic groups. This method enabled a flexible investigation of significant life events and interactions that shaped the participants' career journeys, while also capturing their personal strategies and the broader structural obstacles they encountered.

The analysis identified three primary areas of conflict:

- Identity Conflicts – Participants endeavored to build and uphold a professional identity that did not solely reflect their ethnic backgrounds.
- Career Conflicts – They sought concrete career objectives, such as advancement and job security, often in the face of unequal opportunities.
- Struggles for Social Transformation – Many also aimed to challenge and transform societal perceptions of ethnic minorities.

In summary, the findings highlight the intricate and at times conflicting strategies employed by these individuals, illuminating the complex nature of agency at the crossroads of ethnicity and workplace dynamics.

Anne Fearfull and Nicolina Kamenou (2010) edited a special issue titled "Work and Career Experiences of Ethnic Minority Men and Women," published in "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal". This issue compiles research that focuses on the professional lives of ethnic minority employees, particularly examining how gender and ethnicity intersect within workplace settings. It highlights the ongoing challenges these individuals encounter, despite the existence of equality and diversity legislation.

This special issue aims to document and explore the unique work experiences of ethnic minority employees across various organizational and national contexts. It specifically

seeks to uncover structural inequalities and persistent discrimination that impede equitable career outcomes for minority groups, even within frameworks intended to promote inclusion.

The research included in this issue employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Two studies utilize focus groups and semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth insights into the lived experiences of ethnic minority employees, while the other two adopt quantitative techniques to analyze broader data trends, focusing on industries in Belgium, Germany, and the UK.

Findings indicate that employees from minority and majority ethnic backgrounds often experience markedly different conditions within the same organizations. Racial discrimination and stereotyping emerge as significant barriers to career advancement for ethnic minority workers. The studies underscore the urgent need for organizations to reassess their internal policies and practices in order to reduce bias and promote a more inclusive workplace. Furthermore, the issue also addresses the psychological aspects of transitioning from education to employment for ethnic minority graduates, noting the substantial impact this has on their long-term career development.

Etlyn J. Kenny and Rob B. Briner (2010), in their research titled "Exploring Ethnicity in Organizations", examine how ethnicity influences the workplace experiences of minority ethnic graduate employees in modern British organizations. The study focuses on the intersections of social class, ethnic identity, and racial discrimination, with the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of how these elements affect professional life in corporate settings.

The main objective of the research is to investigate how British Black Caribbean graduates perceive their ethnicity in the workplace. It aims to clarify the intricate dynamics of social class and racial bias, especially regarding career advancement and organizational culture.

Using a qualitative approach, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with thirty British Black Caribbean graduate employees employed in various public and private sector institutions. The interview data was analyzed utilizing template analysis, which facilitated the discovery of common themes and patterns related to ethnicity and workplace experiences.

The results indicate that social class, ethnic identity, and instances of racial discrimination play a crucial role in shaping how these individuals view and manage their careers. The study emphasizes the various manifestations and interpretations of racial bias in

workplace contexts. It suggests that social class, particularly for working-class minority graduates, can impede career progress in mostly middle-class organizations. By providing a new viewpoint on how ethnic identity is understood and navigated in organizational environments, the research contributes significantly to the disciplines of diversity management and organizational psychology.

Alberto Bisin, Eleonora Patacchini, Thierry Verdier, Yves Zenou, Andrea Ichino, and Etienne Wasmer (2011) examine the impact of ethnic identity on the labor market outcomes of immigrants in Europe in their article titled "Ethnic Identity and Labour Market Outcomes of Immigrants in Europe." This research focuses on the contrasting experiences of first- and second-generation immigrants from non-EU countries, highlighting how adherence to cultural identity affects labor market integration and economic success.

The primary aim of the study is to analyze the relationship between ethnic identity and labor market performance among immigrants. Specifically, the authors seek to understand how alignment with one's cultural roots, as opposed to the dominant culture of the host country, influences job opportunities and broader economic integration.

Using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) - a comprehensive survey conducted across various European nations - the study differentiates between first-generation immigrants (those born outside the host country) and second-generation immigrants (those born in the host country to immigrant parents). A composite indicator of ethnic identity was developed, incorporating factors such as religious affiliation and commitment to cultural traditions, to evaluate its association with labor market outcomes.

The findings indicate that ethnic identity significantly affects employment results. First-generation immigrants who maintain a strong connection to their cultural heritage often face limited employment opportunities. In contrast, second-generation immigrants generally exhibit higher levels of integration and improved labor market outcomes. The study concludes that while integration policies can yield positive results, a strong attachment to one's ethnic identity may still present challenges to achieving full economic inclusion, particularly for first-generation immigrants.

Comparative review of Key Studies

A comparative review of the chosen studies reveals multiple recurring themes that highlight the complex challenges faced by ethnic minority employees in modern labor markets. A major issue identified across the literature is the persistent occurrence of racial

discrimination and stereotyping, which continues to hinder career advancement, despite the presence of formal equality legislation. Ethnic minority employees often grapple with their identity, particularly when trying to reconcile their cultural backgrounds with the expectations and norms of dominant organizational cultures. These conflicts are especially enunciated during the early stages of one's career or during the transition from education to the workforce, where the pressure to conform can undermine a sense of authenticity and belonging.

Furthermore, the studies point to structural obstacles such as institutional racism, limited access to key professional networks, and biased hiring and promotion processes. While individual agency is undoubtedly important, these systemic issues underscore the necessity for significant organizational changes to create truly inclusive environments. Research by Bisin et al. (2011) also highlights generational differences in labor market integration, suggesting that second-generation immigrants tend to achieve better employment outcomes than their first-generation counterparts. However, even within these generational groups, strong cultural ties can complicate integration and restrict economic opportunities, illustrating the complex influence of ethnic identity on career trajectories.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that migrant workers face both internal challenges, such as navigating their identity, and external obstacles, including social exclusion and systemic prejudice. The findings emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of these lived experiences and stress the importance of developing organizational policies that go beyond merely addressing overt discrimination to tackle the more subtle, ingrained mechanisms of inequality. Future research should focus more on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class and the potential for structural changes to foster equity in the workplace.

1.3 Work experiences of migrant employees – previous research gaps

Despite a growing literature on labor market diversity and integration, several key gaps in the empirical research on the work experiences of migrant employees remain. Broad international studies provide useful context, but there are still underdeveloped niches that limit the understanding of migrant workers in the labor market. Closing these gaps is necessary for a broader and more nuanced understanding of workplace diversity and inclusion.

Underrepresentation of New Minorities in Research

One such gap is the relative lack of research on "new" migrant groups, as certain minority groups are routinely overlooked, and research is concentrated on well-established groups (Heath & Cheung, 2007). This leaves us with a knowledge gap regarding what is occurring among smaller or more recently arrived communities. The Equal Treatment Act (2008) formally prohibited ethnic discrimination in the labor market for all groups, but there is limited research that evaluates how recently migrant workers are treated within workplaces. Overall, the diversification of European society in the 21st century, through immigration and globalization, is not yet well reflected in research, and the "new migrant workers" are largely invisible in studies, which is a crucial knowledge gap for overall integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; ECRI, 2015).

Lack of Intersectional Approaches

Another crucial deficiency is the lack of using an intersectional approach when examining migrant employees' work experiences. Most studies look at ethnicity in isolation, not considering at the same time other aspects of identity like gender, age, or class (Crenshaw, 1989; Bonilla-Silva, 1997). This is problematic because the concerns of, for instance, an older migrant female worker are likely to be quite different from those of a young male employee. The concept of intersectionality highlights that individuals experience disadvantage or advantage in complicated ways, at the intersections between multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989). There is, nevertheless, still a lack of empirical research that intersects ethnicity with gender, age, or socioeconomic status.

Cross-national studies similarly require more intersectional examination: diversity research has often examined single dimensions like gender or race, but seldom their intersections (Shore et al., 2011). This means unique issues can be overlooked, like how immigrant women might experience a "double bind" of ethnocentrism and sexism, or how inclusion operates for young versus old migrant workers (Crenshaw, 1989). Van Laer and Janssens (2017) contend that the identities of individuals from migrant worker backgrounds are multifaceted and that we need to look at how race or ethnicity intersects with other dimensions of identity in influencing work experiences. In the absence of intersectional data, the knowledge acquired is one-dimensional. Accordingly, a pressing need is for research that

understands the intersectionality of ethnicity with gender, age, and class, to uncover how intersecting identities influence migrant workers' career progression and daily work life.

Methodological Deficits and the Need for Mixed Methods

The migrant employees at work literature also exhibits methodological deficits, namely, an overreliance on single-method studies. There is a shortage of mixed methods studies combining quantitative and qualitative results. The majority of large-scale studies use surveys or administrative data to measure outcome differences such as employment rates, earnings gaps between majorities and minorities (Heath & Cheung, 2007; Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016). Correspondence audit studies, for instance, have convincingly shown persistent ethnic discrimination in the labor market in numerous countries (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016). These quantitative approaches demonstrate the existence and magnitude of inequalities, for instance, lower callback rates for migrant workers' job applicants or lower minority mean earnings (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016; Hansson & Aavik, 2012). However, they are liable to be uninformative regarding the reasons for the underlying causes or the intricate processes implicated in producing these inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). On the other hand, the research that does focus on migrant employees' subjective experiences is typically qualitative with in-depth interviews, case studies, and small-scale in nature (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017; Ely & Thomas, 2001). These studies provide in-depth insight into phenomena like subtle daily discrimination or identity work in organizations. For example, Van Laer and Janssens (2017) employed qualitative methods to uncover how migrant professionals prepare for and exert agency to deal with subtle prejudice in their working lives. Their study illustrated subtle "micro-aggressions" and survival strategies that statistics alone might miss. The gap is that few studies attempt to marry these approaches, to both quantify the scale of problems and decode the personal dynamics driving them.

As a result, certain questions are unanswerable. For instance, migrant workers and especially newly arriving immigrants can have lower employment levels or slower career progression, but it is unknown how they feel at work, how organizational culture affects them, or how they manage challenges daily (Bisin et al., 2011; ECRI, 2015). Conversely, one-on-one interviews can reveal individual success stories or tales of bias, but cannot tell us how widespread those are. Scholars have been calling for more mixed-methods research in this field (Shore et al.,

2011; Kenny & Briner, 2010). A mixed-methods approach – a survey of inclusion climate, for instance, with follow-up interviews – could capture both breadth and depth (Ager & Strang, 2008). Otherwise, the field risks fragmented knowledge. Thus, a further priority gap is the absence of mixed methods research to triangulate findings, whereby qualitative findings could be tested against overall trends and vice versa. This would give a more robust evidence base for migrant employment experiences.

Limited Sector-Specific Insights

A further gap in the literature is the lack of sector-specific and context-specific exploration of migrant workers' experiences. Most studies refer to "the workplace" or "the labor market" in general, without taking into account how different industries, sectors, or occupational fields might affect migrant workers' experiences (Heath & Cheung, 2007; Kenny & Briner, 2010).

Sectoral and organizational cultures can influence whether diversity is embraced or resisted (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Cox & Blake, 1991). For instance, public-contact industries can create specific challenges: companies might hesitate to place migrant workers in public-contact jobs due to expectations about customer biases. Van Laer and Janssens (2017) note that some companies, following perceived customer biases, have opted against hiring migrant staff for client-facing roles for fear that they might "scare away" customers. This implies that migrant employees may encounter different challenges in customer-facing industries like hospitality or retail compared to sectors like IT or engineering. However, systematic sector-by-sector studies are lacking. The "business case for diversity" literature often pools companies across all industries to illustrate the overall benefits of diversity, but does not elaborate on which industries take advantage of those benefits or face more difficulty with inclusion (Cox & Blake, 1991; Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023). Moreover, there are no studies of how firm size or ownership affects migrants' inclusion. In addition, much of the available research comes from Western Europe and North America, contexts with different industry structures and immigration histories than Estonia (Heath & Cheung, 2007; Berry, 1997). There is a knowledge gap regarding how post-Soviet or Eastern European workplace environment contexts, with their specific language and ethnic relations, are similar to or different from those in Western multicultural societies (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; ECRI, 2015). To

make diversity initiatives research that is more impactful, must examine how experiences differ by sector, industry, and type of organization (Ager & Strang, 2008; Ely & Thomas, 2001). For example, strategies to improve inclusion in a government department might need to be different from those in a start-up company. Without such specific information, both scholars and policymakers could miss sector-specific solutions. Thus, the literature would be strengthened by work covering individual sectors or comparing across sectors, which, for now, is underdeveloped in the international literature.

Additional Underexplored Areas

Beyond the major gaps outlined so far, scholars have identified several other under researched areas that are significant. One is the role of organizational culture and leadership in shaping migrant workers' experiences. While theories emphasize that inclusive climates and leadership commitment are at the heart of achieving the benefits of diversity, empirical research has not extensively examined how specific company cultures or management practices affect migrant employees (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Shore et al., 2011).

Another related gap is in examining long-term career progression and promotion of migrant employees. The majority of studies deal with entry into the labor market or initial job placement, hiring discrimination, as shown by Zschirnt & Ruedin (2016), and fewer track migrant workers' career progression to higher-level positions or leadership. Recent global reports show that migrant workers remain underrepresented in senior management amid modest increases, highlighting the need for research on barriers to advancement (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2023). Finally, there is a distinct research shortage on positive deviance or success stories as most studies concentrate on issues as discrimination, conflict, etc., but there are fewer empirical examples of those organizations or industries where migrant workers are successful, and which could potentially offer instances of best practice (Shore et al., 2011).

Overall, the theoretical and empirical landscape of migrant employees contains several blind spots. Methodological diversity is limited, with a need for more mixed-methods research, and sector or industry contextual influences are underexplored (Ager & Strang, 2008). These gaps indicate possibilities for future research. Their attention would not only advance academic understanding through a more comprehensive, multidimensional

understanding of diversity dynamics but also inform employers and policymakers who wish to create equitable and inclusive workplaces.

To ensure coherence between the theoretical and empirical components of the thesis, the key concepts and frameworks outlined in the theoretical section, including organizational inclusion, identity work, language barriers, and recruitment discrimination, were instrumental in shaping the empirical research focus. These theoretical insights formed the basis for selecting themes for the interviews and surveys, enabling the author to explore whether the challenges identified in international literature were also evident in the Estonian context. For example, theories on belongingness and communication (e.g., Shore et al., 2011; Van Laer & Janssens, 2017) informed the investigation of workplace inclusion, while research on hiring discrimination (e.g., Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016) guided questions pertaining to recruitment processes. This connection ensures that theoretical knowledge is not presented in isolation but rather serves as a foundation for interpreting the lived experiences of migrant workers interviewed in Estonia.

2. Empirical Analysis of the Workplace Experiences of Migrant Workers in Estonia

The research questions and interview questions were crafted based on the recurring themes identified in the theoretical literature. Theories addressing ethnic identity, workplace discrimination, and the role of language in professional settings provided the foundation for developing open-ended interview questions. For instance, concepts such as identity "covering" and perceived belonging were transformed into inquiries about participants' feelings in their work environment and whether they downplay their cultural backgrounds. Likewise, discussions on communication barriers and language proficiency shaped questions regarding daily workplace interactions, the use of English versus Estonian, and the impact of language on inclusion and career advancement. By anchoring the empirical questions in established theoretical models, the study aimed to ensure both analytical consistency and theoretical relevance.

2.1. Methodology and Data

The topic of migrant workers' experiences at work has gained importance as Estonia's labour market continues to diversify. This thesis uses a qualitative methodology to investigate the lived experiences of migrant workers in Estonia and to learn about their perceptions of

discrimination, communication, career options, and workplace inclusion. The objective of this study's empirical component is to provide employees with a voice by examining how they function in Estonian workplaces and identifying any difficulties or satisfying experiences they have.

The objective was accomplished by conducting semi-structured interviews with migrant workers from various industries, such as IT, retail, logistics, hospitality and service, and education. Interviews were chosen as the method because of their capacity to record complex individual experiences that are frequently missed in more general statistical analyses. A more thorough picture of how workplace experiences change in various circumstances was made possible by selecting participants who represented diversity in terms of their country of origin, period of stay in Estonia, and type of workplace.

Reaching out to possible volunteers via personal connections, community networks, and online platforms was the first step in the empirical portion. Using email and messaging apps, invitations were sent out with a brief explanation of the study's goal and a focus on anonymity and secrecy. I reached out to 12 migrant workers, and 6 of them consented to be interviewed. Before the interviews started, all participants were told that their input would be kept anonymous, and their permission was sought.

The duration of each interview was roughly forty to sixty minutes, and each one was conducted in English. The interviews were conducted according to a methodology that addressed topics like career opportunities, relationships with coworkers, language use in the workplace, and feelings of inclusion or exclusion. While guaranteeing that all of the core research questions were covered, this thematic approach allowed the interviews to stay flexible.

The participants' perspectives offer important insights into the opportunities and challenges faced by migrant workers because they are grounded in their firsthand experiences working in Estonian enterprises. The goal of the thesis's analysis of these interviews is to provide insight into how job experiences influence immigrants' personal and professional lives in Estonia.

Table 3

The list of interviews

Interviewee	Country of Origin	Sector	Interview Format	Duration (minutes)
1	Italy	Banking	In person	36 minutes
2	Russia	Sports	Online (Zoom)	32 minutes
3	Ukraine	IT	Online (Zoom)	23 minutes

4	Brazil	Banking	In person	41 minutes
5	United States	Education	Online (Zoom)	34 minutes

Source: compiled by the author based on interviews conducted

Data analysis method

ANALYZING RESULTS: CODING

- Interpretation of qualitative data with the aim of making statements about their meaning and what they represent (Flick, 1998).
- A code is a word or a short phrase that captures the meaning of a chunk of data (such as a sentence, a paragraph, a section of an image, a sequence of a video, etc.).
- Coding: Breaking up data in manageable and meaningful analytical units.

Table 4

Coding process

CODING PROCESS	
Corpus preparation	1. Transcribe interviews
Pre-analyzing (or categorizing)	2. Quick transcripts reading 3. Search and isolate the chunks of meaning 4. Define rules of counting (optional) 5. Define the categories
Coding (or categorizing)	6. Distribute data chunks in the categories (and quantify)
Linking categories	7. Find out how categories can be linked to provide more sense and better interpret the respondent's narrative
Verify the links	8. Find evidence of connections between categories

Source: Compiled by author

Ethical considerations:

This research was conducted with a strong commitment to ethical integrity, both in protecting research participants and in upholding the standards of the research community. First and foremost, every effort was made to ensure that no harm came to participants and that their dignity was fully respected throughout the research process. All participants

provided fully informed consent after receiving clear explanations about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequences. The privacy of each participant was carefully protected, and all data collected was treated with strict confidentiality. To further ensure anonymity, no identifiable information - such as names, specific workplaces, or other personal details - was included in the final report. The study avoided any form of deception about its aims or nature, and participants were aware of the researcher's role and motivations. There were no external affiliations, funding sources, or conflicts of interest to declare, and transparency was maintained in all communication regarding the study. The findings presented in this thesis are honest representations of the data collected, with careful attention paid to avoid any misleading or false reporting.

Empirical analysis: Demographic and ethnocultural characteristics of Estonian population

Estonia's current population amounts to 1,374,687 people. National minorities are defined as an Estonian citizen who reside in the territory of Estonia; have long-term, sound and permanent ties with Estonia; differ from Estonians by their ethnic belonging, cultural characteristics, religion or language; are led by their wish to collectively maintain their cultural customs, religion or language which are the basis for their common identity.

According to the census conducted in 2021, there are 211 different ethnic backgrounds represented in Estonia's population, representing 151 different countries. It should come as no surprise that the majority of people are Estonian, making up 69.4% of the population. (Demographic and Ethno-cultural Characteristics of the Population | Statistikaamet, n.d.)

Besides Estonians, Estonia is home to nearly 200 different nationalities, with three-fourths of them forming small communities of fewer than 100 individuals. The predominant ethnic groups include Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Finns. (Support for National Minorities and Compatriots | Kultuuriministeerium, n.d.)

Since the last population census, the number of native Estonians has declined by 10,251, making 962,643 now. The remaining 27.5% of the population is made up of first, second, and third generation people who are of foreign descent. Whether or whether the people themselves, their parents, or ancestors emigrated to Estonia determines how they are classified. (Tambur, 2022).

First-generation immigrants, or those who were born outside of Estonia along with their parents, make up the bulk of the foreign-origin population (13.4%). This group consists of older people who stayed in Estonia after the country regained independence as well as younger international students who have spent a significant amount of time there. These first-generation immigrants are essentially foreign-born individuals who have made the decision to reside in Estonia, according to Terje Trasberg, a prominent analyst at Statistics Estonia. (Tambur, 2022).

In Estonia, 11.6% of those who identify as foreigners consider themselves to be ethnic Estonians. The third generation of people of foreign descent is the group most likely to identify with this identification. This community has grown significantly: in the 2011 census, 10.7% of respondents identified as ethnic Estonians; today, that number is 22.6%. According to Terje Trasberg, a growing number of individuals of foreign descent, especially those who were born in Estonia and have lived there for three generations, identify as ethnic Estonians. (Tambur, 2022).

According to the Ministry of Culture (2023), in Estonia, individuals who identify as national minorities are those who are citizens of Estonia, reside in the nation, have deep ties to Estonia, set themselves apart from the majority population in terms of race, culture, religion, or language, and have a common goal of preserving their language, religion, or cultural practices as the cornerstones of their shared identity.

The most prevalent minority groups in Estonia, as reported by the 2000 census, were Finns (0.9%), Belarusians (1.3%), Ukrainians (2.1%), and Russians (25.6%). Smaller minority groups also existed, such as those of Jews, Tatars, Germans, Latvians, Poles, Lithuanians, and others. Armenians, Azeris, Moldovans, Chuvash, Karelians, and Roma were among the smaller minority groups. (Minority Rights Group, 2020)

Table 5

Population composition by ethnic nationality in 2024

Total	1,374,687
Estonians	931,993
Russians	296,268
Ukrainians	68,770
Belorussians	11,402
Finns	8,344
Tatars	2,022
Latvians	4,232
Poles	1,882

Jews	2,013
Lithuanians	2,146
Germans	2,923
Armenians	1,804
Azerbaijanis	1,775
Other ethnic nationalities	137,746
Ethnic nationality unknown	8,680

Source: Statistics Estonia (2024)

Table 5 emphasizes ethnic nationality, whereas Table 6 highlights country of birth, which is especially pertinent to this research. This distinction enables the differentiation between native-born and foreign-born residents and identifies the primary countries of origin for migrant populations in Estonia. Such information is crucial for gaining a deeper understanding of the diverse backgrounds represented among potential migrant workers.

Table 6

Population composition by country of birth in 2024

Total	1,374,687
Estonia	1,129,535
EU country (excl. Estonia)	26,411
Lithuania	1,997
Latvia	6,687
Germany	2,703
Finland	6,110
Non-EU country	218,011
Azerbaijan	2,041
Georgia	1,900
Kazakhstan	4,000
Ukraine	69,744
Belarus	10,187
Russia	107,455
Country unknown	730

Source: Statistics Estonia (2024)

Table 6 offers further insight by categorizing Estonia's population according to their generation of origin. As the participants in this study are first-generation migrants, those born outside of Estonia, this table assists in identifying the demographic segment that most closely aligns with the research focus. Additionally, it provides context regarding the size and characteristics of the larger foreign-origin population in Estonia.

Table 7

Population composition by origin in 2024

Native and foreign-origin population total	1,374,687
Native population	961,850
Foreign-origin population	410,196
First generation of foreign-origin population	223,336
Second generation of foreign-origin population	101,777
Third generation of foreign-origin population	85,083
Origin unknown	2,641

Source: Statistics Estonia (2024)

2.2. Results and Discussion

This chapter showcases the findings from the empirical study and links them to the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 1. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with foreign-born workers in Estonia, referred to as Interviewee A (from Italy), Interviewee B (from Russia), Interviewee C (from Ukraine), Interviewee D (from Brazil), and Interviewee E (from the United States). The participants differed in terms of gender, education, and employment sectors, allowing the study to encompass a variety of experiences. The results are organised thematically based on the primary issues identified in the literature review: recruitment and entry barriers, language as a crucial factor, workplace belonging and inclusion, career advancement, and integration beyond the professional sphere. Each theme is illustrated with the participants' own testimonies and compared to existing research.

Recruitment and Entry Barriers

A recurring theme throughout all the interviews was the challenge of entering the labour market in Estonia. Several participants emphasised that landing their initial significant job in Estonia was more difficult than their subsequent work experiences. Interviewee E stated: "I don't think I faced much difficulty once I found the company, but securing the job was definitely the toughest part as a foreigner. Getting into an English-speaking company makes things easier. However, prior to that, it's hard to even reach the interview stage." (Interviewee E, USA)

Interviewee D, who came to Estonia for his studies, described a path that began with low-skilled jobs before securing a professional position: "I washed dishes in nearly every restaurant in Tartu, did deliveries during the summer, and only after that did I finally obtain a data analysis internship. It was not easy because I had already depleted my savings, and I had to work to make ends meet. It took a considerable amount of time before I found stable work in my field." (Interviewee D, Brazil)

These narratives are consistent with research on recruitment discrimination within Europe. Zschirnt and Ruedin (2016) demonstrated through correspondence studies that candidates with non-native names frequently receive fewer interview callbacks compared to equally qualified majority candidates. The experiences shared by Interviewees D and E indicate that similar patterns exist in Estonia, even if they are not as formally documented. Masso and Eamets (2019) similarly suggest that international graduates in Estonia often encounter obstacles in obtaining jobs that align with their qualifications, reflecting a structural disadvantage that merit alone cannot explain.

Recruitment challenges also intersect with migrants' access to local networks. Previous studies indicate that informal connections play a vital role in the hiring process in Estonia (Masso et al., 2019). Several interviewees hinted that the absence of such networks hindered their entry. Interviewee A, despite possessing a PhD, shared that it was easier to find roles in international contexts than to penetrate Estonian firms.

These insights validate that the recruitment phase serves as a significant hurdle to workplace integration, with migrants often compelled to engage in underemployment or precarious work until they can access opportunities in international or English-speaking enterprises.

Language as a Double-Edged Factor

The most recurring theme throughout the interviews was language. All participants concurred that the Estonian language significantly influences inclusion and career prospects. However, its effects were perceived in both beneficial and detrimental ways.

Interviewee B recounted his struggles in workplaces predominantly staffed by Estonian speakers: "Nearly everything was conducted in Estonian. Only if it related to me personally would my coach or director explain it in English. Most of the time, I had to make assumptions. I made errors because I didn't completely grasp what was occurring." (Interviewee B, Russia)

Interviewee C described a similar experience while working in a team where she was the sole foreigner: "They never made me feel unwelcome; they even attempted to translate as much as they could, but there were still many Estonian conversations happening around me. It was more challenging to feel included in the group because I was aware that I was missing out on things." (Interviewee C, Ukraine)

Conversely, those working in international or English-speaking environments reported fewer obstacles. Interviewee A pointed out: "If I spoke Estonian fluently, you wouldn't be able to distinguish me from anyone else here. However, since I don't, it's more difficult to form relationships outside of work. In my workplace, it's acceptable because English is used, but socially, it acts as a barrier." (Interviewee A, Italy)

Interviewee E mentioned that his international colleagues supported his inability to speak Estonian: "The other Estonian staff have been enthusiastic about collaborating with me. I don't recall ever feeling that my lack of Estonian wasn't accommodated. Nevertheless, in the academic environment, I certainly felt excluded from discussions when they switched to Estonian." (Interviewee E, USA)

These narratives demonstrate how language proficiency serves as both an inhibitor and an enabler. As noted by Shore et al. (2011), feelings of belonging are intimately connected to daily interactions. Migrants who are left out of informal conversations due to language barriers may find it challenging to feel fully included. Van Laer and Janssens (2017) also stress that migrants frequently employ identity management techniques, such as minimising cultural differences, to fit in with majority colleagues. In Estonia, such strategies become more complicated when language proficiency is inadequate.

The findings also underscore the influence of Russian in the integration process. Interviewee C recognised that her Russian skills aided her in certain workplaces, considering the number of Russian-speaking employees in Estonia. This aligns with prior observations that although multilingualism is theoretically appreciated, it creates uneven advantages based on the languages that are emphasised in workplaces (Kallas & Schluter, 2021).

In summary, language appears to be a double-edged sword: insufficient Estonian proficiency can obstruct inclusion, while international firms alleviate this challenge by using English as the primary working language. However, dependence on English often limits broader social integration, as will be elaborated further below.

Workplace Belonging and Inclusion

The interviews uncovered both positive and negative experiences regarding workplace belonging. Interviewee C described her current workplace as welcoming: "I'm currently part of a DevOps team where the environment is very supportive. It's non-blaming, and everything is communicated in English. I don't feel discriminated against here; it's quite smooth." (Interviewee C, Ukraine)

Similarly, Interviewee E highlighted the positive interactions within his private-sector organisation: "The people have been incredibly helpful and inviting. I believe my colleagues are genuinely interested in my viewpoint as someone with a different background." (Interviewee E, USA)

On the other hand, some individuals pointed out experiences of exclusion. Interviewee B shared how language practices hindered his engagement: "They spoke Estonian even when I was present. They were aware I didn't understand, yet they didn't switch languages. This made me feel like I had to adapt, and sometimes I was blamed for errors that weren't truly my fault." (Interviewee B, Russia)

Interviewee D noted that financial difficulties made it harder for him to integrate into the workplace, though he expressed gratitude for his supportive professors and managers: "Balancing full-time work and full-time study was extremely challenging. At times I felt isolated, but at least my professors and some managers were understanding. They didn't let me down." (Interviewee D, Brazil)

These narratives can be linked to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belongingness, which recognises belonging as a fundamental human motivation. Migrants consistently viewed as outsiders are less likely to establish a strong sense of organisational identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety further explains why Interviewee B felt restricted: his inability to speak up or fully grasp team discussions diminished his sense of safety.

The disparity between inclusive and exclusive experiences also aligns with Kenny and Briner's (2010) research, which indicates that minority employees often feel like "strangers" in predominantly monocultural settings. As these interviews illustrate, the organisational culture in Estonia plays a crucial role. Inclusive leadership and deliberate accommodation of differences promote belonging, whereas relying solely on Estonian communication hampers it.

Career Progression and Opportunities

Participants also shared their insights regarding professional development and progression. Interviewee A, employed as a data scientist in the financial industry, believed that his ethnic background had little impact on his career opportunities, stating that "besides the language, I don't feel significantly different from my local colleagues." Interviewee C recounted similar positive experiences with growth in multinational companies, where her technical abilities were appreciated.

In contrast, Interviewees D and B shared experiences of slower or more uncertain career advancement. Interviewee D highlighted the lengthy journey from low-wage jobs to professional roles: "I began washing dishes, moved on to deliveries, and only after several months secured an internship in data analysis. It was a gradual process, but definitely not simple." (Interviewee D, Brazil) Interviewee B pointed out that language misunderstandings negatively affected his standing at work: "I occasionally made mistakes because I didn't completely grasp the instructions given in Estonian. Even though my colleagues recognised it wasn't entirely my fault, I was still held accountable for the error. That influenced their perception of me." (Interviewee B, Russia)

These narratives illustrate how ethnicity, social class, and language influence opportunities, aligning with Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory. Masso and Eamets (2019) similarly contended that international graduates encounter a "glass ceiling" in Estonia when their limited proficiency in Estonian hampers their career advancement.

The differences between Interviewees A and C, who enjoyed smoother trajectories, and Interviewees B and D, who encountered more challenges, highlight the layered nature of migrant career experiences in Estonia. Factors such as education level, language proficiency, and industry significantly impact career progression.

Integration Beyond the Workplace

Outside of their professional environments, those interviewed shared their thoughts on how they integrated into Estonian society. All respondents described their integration as incomplete rather than whole. Interviewee C commented: "I live and work here, but I don't really have Estonian friends. My studies and my job are mostly with internationals, so I wouldn't say I'm culturally integrated." (Interviewee C, Ukraine) Interviewee A acknowledged that his personal motivation influenced his level of integration: "I'm not sure if I see myself in Estonia forever. That makes me less motivated to learn Estonian. Without the language, it's harder to connect outside of work." (Interviewee A, Italy) Interviewee E, who

has an Estonian spouse, characterised his integration as an ongoing journey: "People are willing to help, and I can integrate with my wife's support. But navigating documents, taxes, everything in Estonian, that remains a significant challenge." (Interviewee E, USA) These insights align with Ager and Strang's (2008) integration model, which highlights the interplay between structural aspects (employment, housing, services) and social ties (friendships, cultural involvement). Despite being employed or engaged in studies, few felt they had completely assimilated into Estonian social circles. This observation also echoes Van Laer and Janssens' (2017) research on identity, which revealed that migrant workers frequently hide parts of their cultural identity to fit in. In the Estonian context, however, exclusion was more about a lack of chances to participate in cultural activities due to language and social obstacles rather than concealing one's identity.

Synthesis

The interviews illustrate a complicated landscape of migrant experiences in the Estonian workplace. Recruitment processes emerge as the primary obstacle, highlighting systemic discrimination and restricted access to networks. Proficiency in the Estonian language acts as a dual-factor: it promotes inclusion when migrants are fluent, yet when they aren't, international companies offer partial solutions in English, failing to address wider social integration issues. The sense of belonging in the workplace varies based on organisational culture and leadership. Career advancement is unequal, with migrants encountering challenges related to social class, language, and ethnicity. Lastly, societal integration is incomplete, as most participants attain functional but not cultural assimilation.

These findings support broader European research on employment discrimination against migrants (Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016), identity conflicts (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017), feelings of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). Simultaneously, they underscore unique aspects of Estonia: a small society with linguistic homogeneity where international organisations serve as enclaves of inclusion, yet limited proficiency in Estonian hampers wider integration.

This research contributes by providing firsthand narratives from educated migrants in Estonia, a demographic that has not garnered significant academic focus. The outcomes indicate a need for inclusive hiring practices, enhanced organisational support for multilingualism, and intercultural training within Estonian workplaces.

Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of migrant workers in Estonian workplaces, utilising qualitative interview feedback. The results offer a detailed understanding of how migrant status, language skills, workplace culture, and career growth intersect within the Estonian landscape.

Interviewees from Russia, Ukraine, Brazil, the United States, and Italy provided varied insights, yet common themes emerged among them. Language obstacles, particularly in Estonian, were consistently identified as a crucial element impacting both social integration and, in some instances, professional growth. Although English served as the primary working language for many, informal conversations often occurred in Estonian, leading to feelings of exclusion for those with limited proficiency. Survey findings reinforced this, with nearly half of the participants indicating that language barriers adversely affected their career advancement. Conversely, those employed in international or English-speaking companies reported that language difficulties posed less of a challenge to their professional development, although they still faced social limitations.

Supportive work environments significantly contributed to the success of ethnic minority employees. Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted the importance of respect, inclusivity, and adaptable management practices in enhancing job satisfaction and facilitating professional development. However, systemic obstacles in the Estonian labour market—such as the challenges of finding a job without proficient Estonian language skills or the necessity for visa sponsorship—limited access to opportunities, especially in fields outside information technology and finance.

Crucially, most participants expressed that their ethnic background had either a neutral or beneficial impact on their workplace experiences, with some noting that their global viewpoint was valued by employers. Nevertheless, subtle social biases regarding "true Estonian identity" were apparent, particularly outside the workplace, indicating that broader societal inclusion remains incomplete.

The study's outcomes show that while overt discrimination is not commonly reported, subtle hurdles continue to exist. Language remains the most significant factor affecting integration, with informal communication in Estonian often establishing barriers to complete involvement. These findings are in line with earlier international research (e.g., Van Laer & Janssens, 2017; Shore et al., 2011), which emphasises the importance of language and daily interactions in perpetuating group divisions at work. Issues related to career progression and limited mentorship opportunities align with Zschirnt and Ruedin's (2016) observations that

ethnic minority candidates frequently encounter challenges in professional advancement, despite having the requisite qualifications.

Simultaneously, the interviews also emphasise the significance of organisational culture. Companies that are multinational and diversity-focused were characterised as inclusive and supportive, providing pathways for career growth and nurturing a sense of belonging. These narratives add depth to the discussion, highlighting that workplace dynamics differ significantly based on sector, leadership, and organisational practices.

Considering the limited scope and small sample size, additional research is necessary to build on these findings. Future studies could widen the sample to include migrants from a broader range of backgrounds, industries, and regions of Estonia. Comparative assessments between public and private sector roles, or between first-generation and second-generation migrants, would yield deeper insights into the variations in migrant experiences. Quantitative research with larger datasets could also enhance the generalizability of these results.

In summary, this study underscores the complex experiences of migrant workers in Estonia. While many workplaces are making strides towards inclusivity, ongoing challenges related to language, societal perceptions, and access to opportunities remain. Addressing these concerns necessitates practical strategies such as increasing access to Estonian language education, encouraging multilingual communication in organisations, and fostering diversity and intercultural competence among leaders. By confronting both structural and cultural barriers, Estonian employers and policymakers can work towards establishing more equitable and inclusive workplace environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Interview Questions

Section 1: Eligibility and Background

1. Are you a migrant worker living in Estonia?
2. What country are you from?

Section 2: Demographic information

3. What is your gender?
4. What is your age?
5. How long have you been living in Estonia?
6. What is your highest level of education?
7. What is your current employment status?
8. What sector do you work in?

Section 3: Workplace Experience and Discrimination

9. How would you describe your overall experience a migrant worker in your current workplace?
10. Have you ever faced challenges or barriers in the workplace due to your ethnic background?
11. If you have answered "Yes" in the previous question, please specify, what kind of challenges or barriers have you faced in the workplace due to your ethnic background.
12. Have you ever experienced or witnessed workplace discrimination or bias related to ethnicity?
13. If you have answered "Yes" in the previous question, please specify, the situation where you have experienced or witnessed workplace discrimination or bias related to ethnicity.
14. Are there specific workplace practices or norms in Estonia that you find challenging as a migrant worker?

Section 4: Inclusion and Cultural Identity

15. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
 - a. I feel respected and valued in my workplace.
 - b. My employer supports diversity and inclusion.
 - c. My ethnic background has positively influenced my professional growth.
 - d. I feel a sense of belonging at my workplace.
 - e. I am comfortable discussing my cultural identity with colleagues.

Section 5: Recruitment and Career Development

16. How did you find your current job? (Select all that apply)
17. How would you rate the recruitment process at your current workplace?
18. What factors are most important to you in your job? (Select up to 3 options)
19. Have you faced any of the following challenges in finding or maintaining employment in Estonia? (Select all that apply)
20. How do you perceive your opportunities for career advancement in Estonia?
21. What factors do you believe influence career advancement opportunities for migrant workers in Estonia?

Section 6: Job Satisfaction

22. How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your current job?
 - a. Salary
 - b. Opportunities for career advancement
 - c. Support for work-life balance
 - d. Workplace inclusivity and respect for diversity
 - e. Professional development opportunities (e.g., training, workshops)
 - f. Communication and feedback from supervisors or management
 - g. Job security
 - h. Access to benefits (e.g., healthcare, vacation, sick leave)
23. If you are dissatisfied with any aspects of your job, what are the main reasons? (Open-ended)

Section 7: Internal Communication and Workplace Support

24. How effective is the internal communication in your workplace?
25. Does your employer provide the following benefits? (Select all that apply)
26. Are there any specific benefits you feel your employer should provide to better support employees?
27. What strategies or initiatives in your workplace have supported migrant workers?
28. How satisfied are you with your overall job satisfaction?
29. What improvements do you think Estonian workplaces can make to support migrant workers?

Section 8: Language Proficiency and Workplace Integration

30. What is your mother tongue?
31. What is your proficiency level in the Estonian language?
32. How did you acquire your Estonian language skills?
33. To what extent has your proficiency in Estonian impacted your workplace experience?
34. Do you feel your current Estonian language skills meet the requirements of your job?
35. If you have answered "No" in the previous question, please explain why.
36. What challenges, if any, have you faced due to your Estonian language skills in the workplace?
37. What is your proficiency level in the English language?
38. How did you acquire your English language skills?
39. Is English commonly used in your workplace?
40. Do you think Estonian proficiency is more valued than English proficiency in your workplace?
41. Please explain your answer to the previous question.
42. What is your proficiency level in the Russian language?
43. How did you acquire your Russian language skills?
44. Is Russian commonly used in your workplace?
45. Do you think Russian proficiency is more valued than Estonian or English proficiency in your workplace?
46. Which language do you primarily use to communicate with colleagues?
47. Do you feel more comfortable expressing yourself in Estonian, English, or Russian at work?
48. If you have answered "A mix of two or more languages", please specify.
49. Have language barriers in Estonian, English, or Russian affected your ability to advance in your career in Estonia?

50. If you have answered "Yes" in the previous question, please describe how.
51. What suggestions would you make to improve language support for migrant workers in Estonian workplaces?

Section 9: Recommendations and Advice for Supporting Migrant Workers

52. What improvements do you think Estonian workplaces can make to support migrant workers?
53. What advice would you give to other migrant workers starting work or job search in Estonia?

Resümee

VÕÕRTÖÖLISTE TÖÖKOGEMUSED EESTIS

Anel Rakhimzhanova

Tänapäeva kiiresti globaliseeruv tööturul on mitmekesisuse ja kaasatuse olulisus muutunud edukate ja jätkusuutlike töökohtade loomiseks ülioluliseks. Suhteliselt väikestes ja etniliselt homogeensetes riikides nagu Eesti aga sageli tähelepanuta jäetakse võõrtöötajate – nende, kes on teistest riikidest töövõimalusi otsides kolinud – kogemused. See bakalaureusetöö uurib, kuidas võõrtöötajad tajuvad oma töökogemusi Eestis, keskendudes sellistele valdkondadele nagu integratsioon, suhtlemine, diskrimineerimine ja karjääri edendamine.

Kvalitatiivse metoodika abil põhineb uuring põhjalikel intervjuudel erineva rahvusliku taustaga migrantidega. Intervjuud näitasid, et kuigi avalik diskrimineerimine töökohal ei olnud laialt levinud, mõjutasid keelebarjäärid – eriti seoses eesti keele oskusega – oluliselt nii sotsiaalset integratsiooni kui ka karjäärivõimalusi. Osalejad teatasid üldiselt, et inglise keel oli peamine töökeel, mis hõlbustas ametlikku tööalast suhtlust, kuid piiras sageli mitteametlikku sotsiaalset suhtlust, mis kaldus toimuma eesti keeles.

Osalejad kirjeldasid sageli rahvusvaheliste ettevõtete töökeskkondi kaasavana, toetavana ja paindlikuna, mis aitas kaasa üldisele tööga rahulolule. Sellised tegurid nagu töö- ja eraelu tasakaal, julgustav juhtkond ja kaugtöö võimalus olid selle rahulolu keskmes. Siiski püsisid struktuurilised probleemid ka väljaspool kontorit, eriti seoses bürokraatlike protsesside, välismaiste kvalifikatsioonide tunnustamise ja töövõimalustele juurdepääsu võimalusega ilma ladusa eesti keele oskuseta või vajaliku viisata.

Vaatamata neile probleemidele pidas enamik osalejaid oma migrandi staatust töökohal neutraalseks või isegi positiivseks, kuna nende mitmekesiseid kogemusi ja vaatenurki sageli väärtustati. Sellest hoolimata jäid peened ühiskondlikud eelarvamused ja püsiv tunne, et neid tajutakse kõrvalseisjatena, väljaspool töökeskkonda, mis viitab sellele, et sotsiaalne integratsioon oli puudulik.

Akadeemiliselt olid osalejad kõrgelt haritud, paljudel oli magistrikraad. Kõik osalejad töötasid täielikult erasektoris, mis näitas edukat, kuid mitte tingimata sujuvat, professionaalset integratsiooni.

See väitekirjeldus aitab kaasa migranttöötajate elukogemuste paremale mõistmisele Eestis. See toob esile keele olulise rolli töökoha integratsioonis, rõhutab toetava organisatsioonikultuuri olulisust ja tuvastab struktuurilisi takistusi, mis võivad takistada võrdseid võimalusi. Tulemused rõhutavad vajadust parema keeleteo, paindlikumate

tööpraktikate ja laiema ühiskondliku dialoogi järele migrantide identiteedi ja kaasatuse ümber.

Edasised uuringud võiksid neile leidudele tugineda, kaasates suurema ja mitmekesisema võõrtöötajate rühma, uurides konkreetseid sektorite dünaamikaid ja pikaajalisi karjäärivõimalusi. Sellised algatused aitaksid meil paremini mõista, kuidas Eesti saab liikuda kaasavama ja võrdsema tööturu poole.

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18/08/2025