**It’s a tough struggle even if someone opens the door:   
How language affects international migrants’ work inclusion**

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**Abstract**

We analyze highly qualified international migrants’ experiences of access to work and workplace inclusion in host locations from the perspective of how these experiences are (co-)shaped by language. Based on qualitative pilot studies in the German-speaking part of Switzerland and in Finland [UK data to be added], some commonalities and differences are identified. Migrants with less job market bargaining power appear under greater pressure to know the local language(s), presenting a further challenge in valorizing their professional qualifications and forcing them into often less desirable niche positions. However, migrants with sufficient qualifications to eventually land high-level jobs that can be carried out in English may also find themselves in precarious positions where they need help from others. This pattern appears more pronounced in a context with fewer migrants (Finland in this case). We find some indications of how such help can be institutionalized, pointing towards firm-level and societal implications of the study.

Keywords: Migration, migrant, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, language-sensitive International Business, employment, workplace inclusion

*Introduction*

Language is known to influence migration decisions and outcomes, not only as a pull factor towards particular locations (e.g. Adserà & Pytliková, 2015; Koikkalainen, Lulle, King, Leon-Himmestine & Szkudlarek, 2022) but also playing a key role in societal inclusion upon arrival. One of the key challenges which international migrants face within their host countries’ labor market is related to language (e.g., Farashah, Blomquist, Al Ariss & Guo, 2023; Fitzsimmons, Baggs & Brannen, 2020; Tharenou & Kulik, 2020), because they mostly have another native language than their potential employers, superiors, work colleagues, or customers, although working can also be an opportunity for language learning (Seilonen & Suni, 2023). Yet, language is still not considered as a core aspect of diversity in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) research and practice, despite recent calls for it to be considered as such (e.g., Ciuk, Śliwa & Harzing, 2022).

Our purpose is thus to contribute to EDI research on migration with a specific focus on language as an underaddressed diversity dimension in EDI. We aim at bringing EDI into dialogue with language-sensitive research on International Business and Management, which has yielded important insights into the effects of language diversity in professional contexts. We also believe that there are numerous ways in which language-sensitive International Business and Management can benefit from EDI, for instance regarding its focus on overcoming discrimation and inequality in organizations (see e.g., Gagnon, Augustin & Cukier, 2022), and its conceptualizations of diversity and difference (for an overview, see e.g., Ciuk et al., 2022).

Language-sensitive International Business and Management research to date suggests that allmigrants’ work life experiences are to some extent affected by their (perceived lack of) host context language skills (see e.g., Humonen, & Angouri, 2023; Lønsmann, 2023; Śliwa, & Johansson, 2020). In general, there is ample evidence in language-sensitive research in International Business and Management as well as in sociolinguistics that individuals working in a non-native environment are disadvantaged in numerous ways. We focus on international migrants’ experiences of workplace inclusion in their new locations, specifically from the perspective of how these experiences are (co-)shaped by language in its societal context.

Going beyond established research on white-collar migrants such as organizational expatriates (see e.g. Andersen, 2019), we answer recent calls to include also other categories of migrants including forced ones (e.g., Gaibrois, 2015; Humonen & Angouri, 2023) by focusing on all kinds of highly skilled migrants (defined as holding at least a bachelor degree). In line with Tharenou and Kulik (2020) who emphasize the importance of high quality relationships with organizational insiders who help accommodate and integrate migrants into organizational life, we specifically focus on the interplay between migrants and relevant others in shaping how migrants’ professional paths unfold. Nannestad, Svendsen and Svendsen (2008) frame such activities in terms of “lubrication”, or bridging social capital.

In empirical terms, we draw upon semi-structured interviews (Smith, 1995) to qualitatively explore highly skilled migrants’ accounts of interactions with such relevant others – both migrants and non-migrants – in the course of their own efforts to integrate into organizational life, and how these interactions may enmesh with surrounding organizational and societal context. Our research is situated in Switzerland and Finland [UK data to be added later]. Better insights into these interactions will have implications for the organization of professional life across Europe due to the tight links between language skills, employment, and migrants’ societal integration (see e.g., EU, 2010; Harrison, Harrison & Shaffer, 2019).

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

***1.1*** ***The emerging interest in language diversity in EDI research***

Diversity, inclusion and shifting demographics are key trends impacting future workplaces, as the CIPD's (2020) ‘People Profession in 2030’ report highlights. It has thus become a top business imperative to help create a more fair, diverse and inclusive society (Hasselaar et al., 2021). Even though linguistically diverse teams have long been on the rise (CIPD, 2021), language has not been systematically considered as a core dimension of diversity in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) research and practice to date, however (Ciuk et al., 2022). The debates tend to focus on a small range of diversity dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, and race (see e.g., Haar, Roche & Ghafoor, 2022). Nevertheless, language diversity has been addressed by some Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion scholars. Some earlier studies mentioned language skills as an inequality-relevant category (e.g., Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010; Choules, 2006; Lutz, Herrera Viva & Supik, 2011; Ogbonna & Harris, 2006; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012).

Recently, language has for instance been addressed in a conceptual paper by Ciuk et al. (2022) who propose a framework for the implementation of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion agenda in multinational corporations taking the example of language diversity, and a number of studies are beginning to draw attention to language as a key factor in workplace inclusion/exclusion. For instance, Theunissen & Van Laer (2023) showed how language requirements can lead to migrant workers being perceived as different from ideal worker notions. Pointing at the role of history in the evaluation of accents, Śliwa, Aguzzoli, Brewster & Lengler (2023) found that workplace accentism experienced by Brazilians in Portuguese can be interpreted as rooted in the historically sedimented unequal social structure and relations formed during the colonial past. In terms of equity, in a study from Canada, the bottom earners were women of color working in a non-native language (Fitzsimmons et al. 2020), which in addition points at an intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of language and race.

Addressing language diversity – both in terms of the variety of language and in terms of variety within a single language in the form of accent or similar (Ciuk et al., 2022) – as a dimension of diversity is essential both from an employer and an employee perspective. Inclusiveness has become a topical theme in the HRM field (Lauring & Jonasson, 2023), with a concern for the inclusion of members of marginalized social identity groups at all levels of organizations in order to truly enhance organizational success through inclusion (Shore, Cleveland & Sanchez, 2018). Staff’s linguistic diversity can be an important resource that organizations can capitalize on; yet, where linguistically diverse talent is located in companies has been largely neglected to date (Groutsis, O’Leary & Russell, 2018).

Because language-based stereotyping and discrimination (Kulkarni & Sommer, 2015) can have significant work and career outcomes for individuals and groups (Ciuk et al., 2022), it is also essential to combat language-based discrimination (Formanowicz & Suitner, 2020; Kim, Roberson, Russo & Briganti, 2019; Woo & Giles, 2017), or ‘the unfair treatment of an individual or group of individuals on account of their language or speech features such as accent’ (Ng, 2007: 106). Instead, companies need to foster linguistic inclusion (Ciuk et al. 2022), or the feeling of being ‘part of critical organizational processes such as access to information and resources, involvement in work groups, and ability to influence the decision-making process’ (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998: 48).

This is key from a social justice perspective on diversity (e.g., Hasselaar et al., 2021), and helps achieving important societal outcomes, such as ‘(re)building an economy of belonging at a global level’ (Newburry et al., 2022: 1). At the same time, linguistic inclusion is fundamental for a company in terms of equal access to information, internal knowledge sharing as well as employee motivation and thus retention (Gaibrois, 2019). In this regard, it is key to consider organizational inclusion across all dimensions of diversity, as a collective, reciprocal effort, rather than the responsibility of individuals who belong to non-dominant groups (Ciuk et al., 2022).

* 1. ***Language as key factor for international migrants’ work inclusion/exclusion***

A number of recent studies in language-sensitive research in International Business and Management have investigated the role of language for migrants’ workplace inclusion/exclusion. Humonen and Angouri (2023) highlight how prevalent language ideologies may lead to exclusion of migrant workers related to whether their use of language is perceived as legitimate or not. Similarly, exclusionary experiences of foreign academics in the UK were related to a partly misrecognition of highly skilled migrants due to language differences (Johansson & Śliwa, 2023). Wilmot (2024, forthcoming) also demonstrates how non-native language users may experience a credibility deficit when interacting with dominant groups, and accordingly be (unjustly) positioned as less competent. A study from Luxemburg on the other hand showed how language skills promoted professional migrant women’s workplace inclusion (Langinier, Pündrich & Al Ariss, 2023). It is important to notice, however, that these women generally stemmed from privileged social classes that enabled them to develop the language skills required to succeed in their professional field. Contrasting collaboration in physical and virtual settings, Back and Piekkari (2024) revealed that while migrants’ language-based discrimination takes more interpersonal and overt forms in physical spaces, it becomes more organizational and subtle in virtual spaces. Several studies have addressed the role of language proficiency specifically for refugees’ workplace inclusion. Hokkinen & Barner-Rasmussen (2023) demonstrated how refugees’ approaches to learning the local language Finnish as a means for workplace inclusion in Finland was related both to the local context and to the refugees’ personal situation. A recent study on refugee internships in Denmark (Lønsmann, 2023) showed that the refugees rarely had opportunities to practice the local language, which lead to frustrations, not least because the refugees had viewed the internships as a road to paid employment.

Equal linguistic competence may have different locale-specific work-related consequences for individuals who differ on other dimensions, such as gender or ethnicity, triggering contextual dynamics associated with national or cultural stereotypes (see e.g. Holvino, 2010). Language skills are a component of human capital which can facilitate or hinder inclusion into the new context (e.g., Zikic & Voloshyna, 2023), or ‘linguistic landscape’ (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), in which the importance of various languages is communicated by their presence and use (or lack thereof) in public spaces in a particular territory. In linguistic landscapes characterized by exclusionary language ideologies, such as the *standard language ideology* (Lippi-Green, 1997) or the *one-nation-one-language ideology* (Woolard, 1998) and/or related political discourse and decisions such as the Brexit vote in the UK (Jonczyk Sédès, Miedtank & Oliver, 2023), migrants’ language skills may act as a marker of Other (Wilmot, Vigier & Humonen, 2024) that can result in feelings of non-belonging, exclusion, and other destructive psychological states with potentially severe long-term effects (see e.g., the recent literature review by Hillman, Fowlie & Macdonald, 2023).

Organizations, too, have ‘linguistic landscapes’ that impact organizational members’ linguistic identity and perceptions of belonging (Bordia & Bordia, 2015), and their internal dynamics may reflect societal-level language ideologies (Barner-Rasmussen, Gaibrois & Wilmot, 2024). This begs the question of what can be done in organizations to dampen the negative effects of exclusionary external context, thereby helping ameliorate migrants’ work-life experiences in their destinations? Migration research places much emphasis on national migrant integration policies, but this societal-level tool may be too coarse to manage organizational and social context in the workplace. Our approach is more attuned to the latter levels of analysis.

Organizational research on boundary roles (see e.g. Aldrich & Herker, 1977) has informed a line of international management research focusing on how key individuals keep the multinational corporation together. Some of this research has pointed to their role in integrating teams across cultural and linguistic boundaries (see e.g., Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov, & Mäkelä, 2014) and shown that organizational context may limit the extent to which this can be done (Mäkelä, Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, & Koveshnikov, 2019). However, this research has focused on boundary individuals and paid less attention to the perspective of others touched by their actions. Other recent work has applied a participation lens to the international workplace to show that macro-level social phenomena such as language ideologies can block the professional participation of some organizational members (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024). But this research has not yet explored the role of interpersonal dynamics in perpetuating – or indeed tackling – such dynamics.

Hence there is high potential to improve our understanding of migrant work-life inclusion by focusing on the role/s that relevant others – migrants as well as non-migrants - play in how migrants’ professional path unfolds. Such roles should be seen in their organizational and societal context, but we believe that carrying them out can also recursively help shape organizational practices and maybe even societal ones.

1. METHOD

*2.1 Research contexts*

Switzerland, Finland, and the UK were chosen as research contexts for their contrasting migration and language landscapes. They differ with regards to the proportion and the countries of origin of migrants, the countries’ official languages, and the number and status of the languages used in public life. At the same time, all are high-income countries, which is important for the sake of comparability.

*Switzerland* has the largest share of migrants (29.0% in 2020) of the top 20 migration countries in Europe, and ranks among the top 10 European countries by refugees and asylum seekers (McAuliffe & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Switzerland has four official languages, German (spoken by 62.6%), French (spoken by 22.9%), Italian (spoken by 8.2%) and Romansch (spoken by 0.5%) (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2019). The German-speaking region is characterized by diglossia (Jaworski & Piller, 2008), or a parallel use of Swiss German in everyday oral communication and standard German in written and formal oral communication (Bickel, 2000). English is only used regularly by a minority (41%).

*Finland* has relatively few migrants, due to a restrictive immigration policy, with 8.0% of the total population born abroad by end 2021 (Statistics Finland, 2023). Finnish and Swedish are national languages with equal constitutional status (FinLex, 2017). Finnish, only spoken in Finland, is the registered first language of 87.6% of the population (Statistics Finland, 2019). The figure for Swedish is 5.2% (Statistics Finland, 2019). 45.2% of Finns know English (languageknowledge.eu, 2019). Other languages are marginal.

In *the UK* in 2021, 14.5% of thepopulation was foreign-born (Migration Observatory, 2022). It is a predominantly Anglophone environment (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014), where the de facto national language English (Mac Sithigh, 2018) is required for full participation in public life. Only 1.7% speak English badly or not at all (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Multilingualism is frequently portrayed negatively in the press (Coleman, 2009), and comparatively few adults are conversant in another language (Eurobarometer, 2012). English is bolstered by its position as the language of globalization (see e.g., Crystal, 2003).

*2.2 Data collection*

This paper is based on pilot data involving semi-structured interviews with 9 highly skilled migrants and refugees in German-speaking Switzerland and workshops with 12 individuals with a similar profile in Finland. The pilot phase aimed to explore emerging topics and thereby prepare the next data collection stage in 2024, when 15 individuals each in Finland and the UK will be interviewed following the same sample selection principles and interview protocol as in Switzerland.

The Swiss data consist of interviews with 7 people from the five most represented countries of origin of foreign residents and 2 refugees from two of the five most represented countries of origin of recognized refugees. The sample included a Syrian refugee with a bachelor degree in mathematics who works as an intercultural translator, a refugee from Eritrea with a degree as school teacher who is in his second year as a plumber apprentice, a Portuguese biologist holding a PhD employed at a multination corporation as senior researcher, an Italian teacher with a PhD in Italian literature, a German doctor, an Italian import-export manager holding a degree in Business language, an energy engineer from Kovoso working for the public administration, a French jazz musician holding several degrees from various music conservatories, and a French director of a French educational institution who holds a doctorate in nuclear energy. Data were collected in November 2022-March 2023 via semi-structured interviews (Smith, 1995) using a research-based protocol. In the spirit of active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), we aimed to provide starting points for the respondents to engage in the general topic of the role of language for their workplace experiences in the host country. To establish rapport and ensure that interviewees were able to express themselves freely, the interviews were carried out in a language of the interviewee’s choice (Marschan-Piekkari & Reis, 2004; Welch & Piekkari, 2006). The interview languages in Switzerland were Standard German, Italian, French, and English.

In Finland, the 12 workshop participants included 3 Syrian refugees, 1 Iraqi refugee, 2 migrants from Ghana, 1 migrant each from Pakistan, Armenia and Palestine, and 3 Finns[[1]](#footnote-1). They participated in a set of three research workshops focusing on language challenges and solutions in relation to migrants' integration in Finnish professional life, where they presented their own experiences and commented on each other’s experiences and viewpoints. All participants were highly educated and many were academically active, e.g. as PhD students. Some knew each other from earlier integration programs and/or interactions in the academic context, and the Iraqi refugee and one of the Finns worked for the same major Finland-based multinational. Other individuals also participated in the workshops, mainly local academics. The Chatham House rule[[2]](#footnote-2) applied and explicit permission to use the recorded conversations as research data was sought and granted at the beginning of each workshop, which took place in late 2021. They were conducted in English.

*2.3 Analytical Approach*

We follow an interpretive approach aimed at understanding research participants’ subjective experiences (Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011, p. 247). This approach views knowledge production as an act of human interpretation, particularly as it relates to the social world (Prasad, 2005). Attention to context is a fundamental part of this approach (Piekkari, Gaibrois & Johansson, 2022). Our analysis procedure consisted of three steps: (1) independent analysis of the respective data set by the first author who conducted the interviews in Switzerland respectively by the third author who led the workshops in Finland, (2) comparison and discussion of findings from individual analysis with the co-authors, and (3) self-reflexive documentation and analysis of own insights and realignments during steps 1 and 2. During the analytical process, we focused on commonalities and differences in the interviewees’ accounts in order to identify key themes (Berg & Lune, 2014).

1. **Initial findings** 
   1. *Overview*

Previous research has identified language ideologies that prevail in Europe and specifically in Finland and Switzerland (e.g., Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024). We find the *one-nation-one-language* ideology (Woolard, 1998) respectively in the Swiss case the *one-region-one-language* ideology (Blommaert, 2011) to be particularly relevant for how highly qualified migrants’ professional paths are shaped by the interplay between themselves and relevant others as they unfold in an organizational and societal context. Specifically, all respondents had mustered significant personal resilience and perseverance to establish themselves in the host country, and all had been successful in the sense of being able to stay and build a career, or at least find employment, yet most had experienced othering or rejection due to limited local language skills. High levels of professional expertise enabled some to partially deflect local language fluency demands by drawing on the competing language ideology of *English as the language of globalization* (Phillipson, 1992). This was more common among the workshop participants in Finland than the interviewees in Switzerland. A key finding that emerged by the comparative stage was that the migrants’ interactions with relevant others played a different role in Finland than in Switzerland. This shows how local context differences delimit the space available for independent migrant agency, or migrants’ “capacity to navigate the social environment of a new country and to become integrated in the host society and in the host economy” (Isaakyan, Baglioni & Triandafyllidou, 2023: 122).

*3.2 Finland: Relevant others in key role*In Finland, which has significantly fewer migrants than Switzerland, our respondents had been highly dependent at key stages of their professional development on support, help and/or “scaffolding” by others – locals or other migrants – in their near organizational context. The quote below, by an Iraqi refugee who had obtained a permanent management-level job at a Finland-based MNE, illustrates such a support process, which had in this case subsequently evolved into more formalized organizational procedures and practices to support new migrant employees:

“The deal was that I would stay at [MNE] for a couple of months as an intern. (…) I remember this first conversation we had when you said, I was asking NN about maybe job opportunity at [firm] and NN told me that hey, maybe you take the initiative, I will help you to open the doors. And NN booked a few meetings for me with the right people and through one of the conversations, I basically landed the job and I stayed at [MNE].”

A Syrian refugee, now working permanently in another major Finland-based MNE and having attained Finnish citizenship, highlighted the role of friends they had made during their first months at the firm, when they did not yet have a permanent contract:

“I was first [at current employer] as an internship. Then I got the three months contract and then one year contract, and then I applied internally for the permanent job. So those things really helped me to get better, to feel better about people. I have a lot of friends in the company. I don’t know, I couldn’t even proceed without them but it took time.”

While relevant others had helped the respondents along in important ways, they were not necessarily the ones who had proactively driven the relationships into positive outcomes from the migrants’ point of view. Both the Syrian refugee above and one of the Ghanaian migrants had had to work very hard on their social relationships to develop them to a point where they could benefit professionally from them. The Ghanaian, who now held a temporary contract at a third major Finland-based MNE, explained:

“I work at [Finland-based MNE], and coincidentally, when I was a cleaner, I was cleaning at [the same firm]. [laughter] So whilst cleaning, I used that as an opportunity to build relationship with the employees. […] So through that, we had that kind of very good relationship and I was treated like […] being part of them. So I started learning from them [and] through that, I also learned from them to how to succeed in my application as an external person.”

Another Syrian respondent elaborated on how they in turn tried to support other migrants in the SME where they worked:

“Always what I have done is that I would support another foreign person to get to some level. So [in] the company, all the company employees are foreign people basically. What I’m doing is that I would offer the first job for that person, and then play with his CV, like giving him more assignment and then he gives more back.”

Several respondents also pointed to the major emotional labor required from the migrant to stay attached to the organization, even in the presence of supportive others.

*3.3 Switzerland: The need to balance labor market demands and societal expectations*Relevant others played a more limited and multi-faceted role in the Swiss data, where only two respondents mentioned them. An energy engineer from Kosovo working for the regional public administration told of a relevant other who had taken action against stereotyping processes at the workplace:

“A Frenchman at work told me ‘you are lucky to be able to be here’. I answered: ‘I have a diploma as everybody else here’ and went to see my boss. My boss then talked to the Frenchman’s boss, and the Frenchman stopped working with us.”

A 39-year-old refugee from Eritrea who hold degrees as school teacher from Eritrea had received support, not by an individual but by an institution, to secure an apprenticeship as a plumber:

“The system here does not offer refugees over 30 much possibilities. I for instance applied at several supermarket chains for an apprenticeship as vendor. However, I was never taken, because the age limit for apprenticeships seems to be 25 in Switzerland. Through a specialized agency, I finally got (…) the apprenticeship as plumber I am doing now.”

Among the respondents in Switzerland, who are as mentioned all based in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, a more obvious commonality was restrictions in job market opportunities due to not speaking German or Swiss German. This did not significantly affect migrants in highly qualified and/or highly demanded positions, but interviewees with limited English and/or lower levels of expertise felt that they had to (indeed “could not afford not to”) learn the local language while at the same time identifying suitable niche positions and occupations on the labor market. This links to the fact that there is both a strong *one-region-one-language* ideology (Blommaert, 2011) in Switzerland, and also parallel use of Swiss and Standard German, with the Swiss German dialect being one of the most powerful markers of regional identity (Watts, 1999). An Italian teacher who holds a PhD degree and had taught Italian and Latin at high schools in Italy, recalled a job interview for a school in rural German-speaking Switzerland:

“When I told the interviewers that I would prefer to hold the job interview in Standard German rather than in Swiss German, I immediately felt that they did not appreciate. In fact, from that moment on the atmosphere during the interview was like I were sitting in an interrogation.”

A refugee from Syria, who holds a bachelor degree in mathematics and works as an intercultural translator, succinctly put the dilemma that migrants in the German-speaking part of Switzerland face as follows:

“The Swiss[-German] context requires people to choose which language to learn, Swiss German or Standard German.”

A French person, the director of a French educational institution, also highlighted the challenges that ‘learning Swiss German on the streets’ poses for people with a migrant background. His statement strongly suggests that migrants’ access to the labor market and long-term career development might be negatively impacted by having had to prioritize Swiss German:

“It happens […] that young people with an immigration background do not understand the way I speak Standard German, because they tend to speak in Swiss German dialect. The same does not happen to me with Swiss Germans. I therefore think that the strong emphasis on Swiss German is something that closes doors to young people with a migrant background.”

Finding a position in this complex linguistic landscape therefore often came with a price especially for migrants who did not work in highly qualified and/or highly demanded jobs such as doctors, as they were often unable to fully draw on their original qualifications. Rather, several stated that they actually worked in occupations below their qualification level, or in a field that was not their first choice.

1. **Discussion**

Migration is a key feature of our time and the integration of migrants is a major challenge for host societies. Employment plays a key role in this important process, thrusting employers to the centre stage. Despite the arguments in support of capitalizing migrants’ cultural and linguistic diversity (Groutsis et al., 2018), migrant job seekers often struggle to get a foothold in the job market that corresponds to their qualifications and talents/ and to leverage their full potential. This is the case also in the study reported here, where we have especially highlighted the role of language, but also its interplay with other factors in specific local contexts.

Barner-Rasmussen et al. (2024) highlight the importance of societal-level language ideologies for organizational- and individual-level dynamics but do not elaborate on possible variation in which language ideologies are available as social resources for which categories of actors. Our data suggest that language ideologies emphasizing English and the benefits of multilingualism are available for migrant groups such as international students, some ‘elite’ temporary migrants (e.g. expats), and for locals, but less so for migrants who want to integrate in the local job market. The Swiss findings illustrate how a strong *one-region-one-language* ideology (Blommaert, 2011) and the parallel use of Swiss and Standard German makes labor market access and workplace integration challenging for migrants, of whom only those in highly qualified and/or highly demanded professions can afford not to speak at least Standard German. Those with less bargaining power often work in positions below their qualification level, thus facing devaluation of their professional competence (Śliwa & Johansson, 2014).

Our Finnish pilot data do not include respondents working in local languages, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the same pattern is present also there. What the Finnish data add is that also those migrants who qualify professionally for high-level jobs that can be carried out in English have to travel a long, precarious and often emotionally taxing path to get there. Perhaps due to the much lesser prevalence of migrants in Finnish working life compared to Switzerland, the role of relevant others who open doors and provide “scaffolding” or different kinds of support along that path, appears more pronounced in the Finnish context. The pilot data also shed some light on who may act as such relevant others. It is often superiors in the near vicinity of the migrant, such as nearest supervisors. Notably, migrants who have advanced to such positions can take on this role for other migrants. We also find some evidence that such support can, over time, become institutionalized, both in terms of firm-level practices and in the form of specialized institutional actors.

Our study thus highlights that for migrants who want to integrate in local job markets and are facing a language barrier, societal insiders can play an important micro-level role in helping them get started in the job market or to gain acceptance in the workplace. Concerted efforts by such individuals can in turn gradually help shape organizational policies and practices even in bigger firms, as in the case of the Finnish MNE documented above. We tentatively suggest that over time, the lobbying power of such organizations may have societal-level effects. However, we emphasize that in all the cases we have studied, the level of persistence and resilience required by the migrants themselves to get a foothold in the job market is significant. This, combined with the fact that the support by some relevant others can be described as exception rather than rule, illustrates that a systematic approach to reducing language-related stumbling blocks for migrants’ workplace access and inclusion is still much needed.

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1. Two of these participated to represent the experiences of Finnish managers. The third was a researcher married to a migrant who took part in the workshops out of professional interest though not as part of the research team. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)