

Barriers to Permanent Employment for Temporary Workers:

Examining Lawrence, Massachusetts

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Community
Development
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Paper

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Abstract

This report focuses on temporary employees within the community of Lawrence, Massachusetts, and examines the barriers they face in obtaining permanent or better temporary employment. Using qualitative data collected in a series of interviews with these workers, the report concludes that lack of English language proficiency and the absence of bridging networks that connect job seekers to employers are the dominant barriers to employment improvement among the temporary workers interviewed.

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Introduction

Almost three million Americans work at temporary jobs. These jobs are unpredictable, often low paying, and overall offer little more than a paycheck and the promise of a few hours of work. As the name suggests, temporary jobs are supposed to be temporary, a transitional step from unemployment to a permanent, full-time job. Millions of American workers, however, find themselves in temporary jobs for the long term.

The prevalence of temporary employment in many smaller labor markets makes understanding how and if temporary workers are likely to find permanent jobs more urgent. This report uses qualitative analysis of interviews conducted in 2015 and 2016 to examine the barriers, both perceived and actual, temporary workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, face as they seek better employment.

Temporary employment services (TESs) are labor market intermediaries that employers use to find short-term (temporary) labor. TES firms appear to be positioned to help tackle the growing divide between workers seeking employment and employers seeking qualified workers. As businesses demand higher skills from workers and lower-skilled jobs are increasingly outsourced or automated, TESs offer workers the chance to acquire on-the-job training and access to a network of employers previously unknown to them (Autor, 2001). However, as profit-seeking businesses, TESs also seek to maximize their short-term revenue and reduce costs, sometimes even at the expense of potential long-term growth. Providing temporary workers with additional training is an immediate cost to TES firms that may not be directly beneficial, as a better-trained worker may gain permanent employment exclusive of the TES firm. While a better-trained workforce will strengthen the local economy as a whole in the future, the benefits to a single TES firm in that amorphous future economy are easily disregarded in favor of increased immediate placements.

This research focuses on Lawrence for two reasons. First, the role of TESs and the experiences of temporary employees in smaller and mid-sized cities such as Lawrence are largely unknown. In larger cities, TESs act as an employment buffer for firms as well as a network-for-hire for job seekers (Fernandez, 2010). How do workers successfully make the transition from temporary to permanent employment in smaller labor markets such as

Lawrence, where fewer jobs or fewer types of jobs are available? Second, employment and wage (ES202) data from Massachusetts¹ indicate that for the past decade, Lawrence has had a high percentage of temporary workers relative to other cities, the state, and the region as a whole. The city-level data shows a wide divergence across Massachusetts cities similar in size to Lawrence: in Salem and Taunton, for example, less than 1 percent of employees are at work in the employment services industry group. In Lawrence, by comparison, the rate is 8.3 percent. Identifying the drivers of these cross-city differences is beyond the scope of this report, but examining the barriers temporary workers in Lawrence face when seeking permanent long-term employment may stimulate ideas for removing those barriers.

The first part of the report examines the existing literature on TESs and discusses the positive and negative aspects of TESs. The second part takes a look at Massachusetts city data on the growing temporary employment sector, further explaining the focus on Lawrence. The third section introduces the methodology, both in the data acquisition (interviews) and analysis, reviews the results and draws conclusions that offer directions for policymakers and employers seeking to improve the employment outcomes of temporary workers in smaller labor markets.

Employers and TESs

TESs, which are also known as job placement agencies, temporary help firms, contract staffing agencies, executive search firms, among other names, stand at the nexus between the supply and the demand in the labor market (Autor, 2009; Houseman, Kalleberg, & Erickcek, 2003). Compared with individual employers, they have the advantage of economies of scale: they can recruit many workers by pooling job contracts across firms and can offer more attractive schedules than one company can alone (Houseman et al., 2003). For employers, TES firms provide the flexibility to react to market changes and are a lower-cost alternative to direct hiring, as they save employers the short- and long-term costs of training, benefits, and the increased risk of high termination costs. Thus, employers are able to manage demand variability in downturns and can buffer their core staff while incurring low marginal cost of hiring and

¹ ES202 data is generated by the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

termination. Use of TESs also decreases costs associated with hiring “risky” workers. The overall effect is a reduction in labor costs and lower wages for new hires (Autor, 2009; Fernandez, 2010; Houseman et al., 2003).

In some cases, agency-referred candidates are more likely to be offered an interview than candidates who apply directly, particularly during labor shortages (Fernandez, 2010). However, employers also sometimes presume that the temporary agency job pool is more likely to contain risky workers who may not be as productive and skilled as nonreferred job seekers (Fernandez, 2010).

TES firms have an incentive to ensure that their referred candidates receive job offers, even temporary job offers, and therefore they are thought to rigorously screen and refer only the best applicants to firms (Fernandez, 2010). However, Fernandez’s 2010 research on entry-level applicants to a large employer found no statistically significant difference between the skills and the consistency in work experiences between those referred to the employer by temp agencies and those who applied directly. Indeed, while skills and industry work experience were statistically the same, candidates referred by a temp agency actually displayed deficiencies in terms of number of jobs (“job-hoppers”), employment at time of application, and criminal background. In addition, hiring managers tended to prefer those who had been referred through social networks, lending evidence for the “homophily”² hypothesis (Fernandez, 2010).

Temp agencies also benefit employers by letting them test out employees without bearing the cost of dismissal or the risk of litigation in the event of an unsuccessful match. The employer can offer permanent positions contingent on performance in the temp job (Autor, 2009). A study conducted in Denmark notes that temporary help agencies allow employers to reduce information asymmetry in hiring, enabling them to gain insights into the skills of immigrants who have been educated and trained elsewhere (Jahn & Rosholm, 2013).

The ongoing debate over the role of TESs concerns their effect on job seekers. Some view TESs as providing workers with significant barriers to the labor market a stepping stone to higher-quality jobs (Andersson, Holzer, & Lane, 2009; Heinrich, Mueser, & Troske, 2007). Others argue that temporary employment disadvantages workers by hindering more productive

² Homophily is the tendency of people—in this case, employers—to prefer job candidates who are socially similar to themselves.

employment searches, lowering future earnings and employment outcomes, and trapping workers in a secondary labor market wherein they transition from one bad job to another (Autor & Houseman, 2010; Booth, Francesconi, & Frank, 2002; Heinrich et al., 2007; Nollen, 1996). Researchers on both sides of the debate agree that low-wage temp workers who do not transition to nontemporary, full-time employment after TES employment are at a disadvantage in the long run (Andersson et al., 2009; Autor & Houseman, 2010).

Employees and TESs: The advantages

Many entry-level temp hires have circumstances or past histories that make it difficult for them to enter the labor market in the traditional way. TESs provides a means of overcoming those obstacles by strengthening applicants' networks and skills. Using data from alternative staffing organizations (ASOs), which differ slightly from traditional TESs,³ Levine, Holgate, Takenaka, and Carré (2012) find a positive relationship between length of time working through an ASO and employment characteristics six to eight months afterwards. While Levine et al. do not elaborate on the specific barriers to employment that the workers may have, Houseman, Kalleberg, and Erickcek (2003) cite criminal or spotty work history and limited experience as factors. TES firms, by acting as networks for hire, allow a unique entry point to the labor market (Fernandez, 2010; Houseman et al., 2003).⁴ Thus, TESs help integrate workers into the workforce and serve as an intermediary between public-welfare agencies and employers, making possible a smooth transition from unemployment or underemployment to formal, full-time, and more remunerative employment (Heinrich et al., 2007).

Jahn and Rosholm (2013) find that employment through TESs results in higher wages than those that found jobs independent of TESs, as well as greater likelihood of finding a job. They conclude that the shrinking of the wage gap between workers in the temporary employment sector and permanent workers implies an accumulation of human capital among the temporary workers. Jahn and Rosholm rely heavily on macro studies involving administrative data of entire countries, however. Little is known about much smaller labor

³ ASOs use the TES model, but they are "worker-centered, social purpose businesses" (Carré, Holgate, Takenaka, & Levine, 2012).

⁴ Holzer (1987) and Ioannides and Loury (2004) explore network disadvantages among low-skilled workers in depth.

markets that do not benefit from the effects of large urban centers. In the United States, research using Current Population Survey (CPS) data finds that workers employed through TES firms are worse off than those working in standard employment but better off than those who are unemployed and that temporary workers' "outcomes one year later are much closer to those of standard workers than those of unemployed workers" (Lane, Mikelson, Sharkey, & Wissoker, 2003). There can be benefits for specific disadvantaged groups, as well: Jahn and Rosholm (2013) found that foreign-born temp employees gained country-specific skills that could help them find more stable forms of employment and avoid the stigma that comes with being unemployed and receiving social assistance.

These findings suggest that TESs provide disadvantaged workers with knowledge and experience, essentially allowing them to increase their human, economic, and social capital.

Employees and TESs: The disadvantages

TES workers' job experience is very different from that of permanent workers. Perpetual job insecurity, unpredictable work content and duration, and the necessity to constantly adapt to new assignments are all typical experiences of TES workers. In addition, the workers have to manage the ambiguity of their organizational membership and the complexity of their triangular work relationship—i.e., their daily activities take place in the client organization, but their formal employers are the temporary staffing agencies (Galais & Moser, 2009). UK researchers who studied that country's Temporary Agency Work Directive noted that it fails to live up to the ethos of "flexicurity"⁵ that is gaining momentum in the European labor market and has instead contributed to "deregulation, precarization of work and further labour market segmentation" (Countouris & Horton, 2009).

High-skilled temporary workers (e.g., medical and IT professionals) are typically paid more than regular hires and have different experiences than low- or middle-skilled workers, but workers across the skill spectrum receive less training and few (often none) health or fringe benefits, and employers may use them to avoid paying higher wages to existing staff, contributing to stagnant wage and employment growth (Heinrich et al., 2007; Houseman et al.,

⁵ "Flexicurity" is a portmanteau word combining "flexibility" and "security."

2003). In addition, whether high- or low-skilled, temporary workers cannot vote in union elections or organize, which inhibits collective action at companies and may have a negative impact on the overall labor market (Autor, 2009)—for example, in the form of lower wages and inferior fringe benefits (Mishel & Walters, 2003). Temporary agencies also incentivize “high turnover, low skill investment” human-resources strategies that may hinder further human capital development in the local labor force (Autor, 2009).

Temporary employment data

Data related to industry-specific employment is scarce at the city level. Older business-pattern data from the census allows for state- or even county-level data back to 1994, but city-level data is limited to Integrated Public Use Microdata (IPUMS)⁶ and state employer data (ES202) from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.⁷ Unfortunately, although focused on the employee rather than the employer, the IPUMS data does not offer a clear picture of the local employment breakdown in smaller cities. ES202 data is derived from employers rather than individuals, which limits the analysis, as employers do not hire solely from the town or city in which they are located.⁸ As a consequence, this report focuses on employees within the city of Lawrence (i.e, people working for employers located in Lawrence) rather than on Lawrence’s residents. An additional limitation of ES202 is that the city-level data only goes down to industry group level. In the case of temporary employment agencies, the data represents the employment services industry group (NAICS 5613), which includes temporary placement, executive placement, and professional employer organizations (among other industries). This report assumes that the latter two industries represent only a small share of the employees within the industry group data at the municipal level⁹.

⁶ IPUMS is an individual-level dataset derived from the American Community Survey and the United States Census and maintained by the University of Minnesota.

⁷ ES202 data is generated by the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

⁸ Workers are considered employees of the temporary agencies they work for, so data reflects the city where the worker’s temporary employment agency is located rather than the actual placement of work. Given the local nature of temporary employment agencies, most of the ultimate job assignments are assumed to be local, but not necessarily within the same city. This possible imprecision of the ES202 data is hypothesized to be especially prevalent among smaller cities directly adjacent to large labor markets.

⁹ Since 2003, employees in TESs (NAICS 56132) have comprised from 76 percent to 87 percent of all people employed by the employment services industry group (NAICS 5613) in Massachusetts. These percentages rise even further at the county level; no city level data is available.

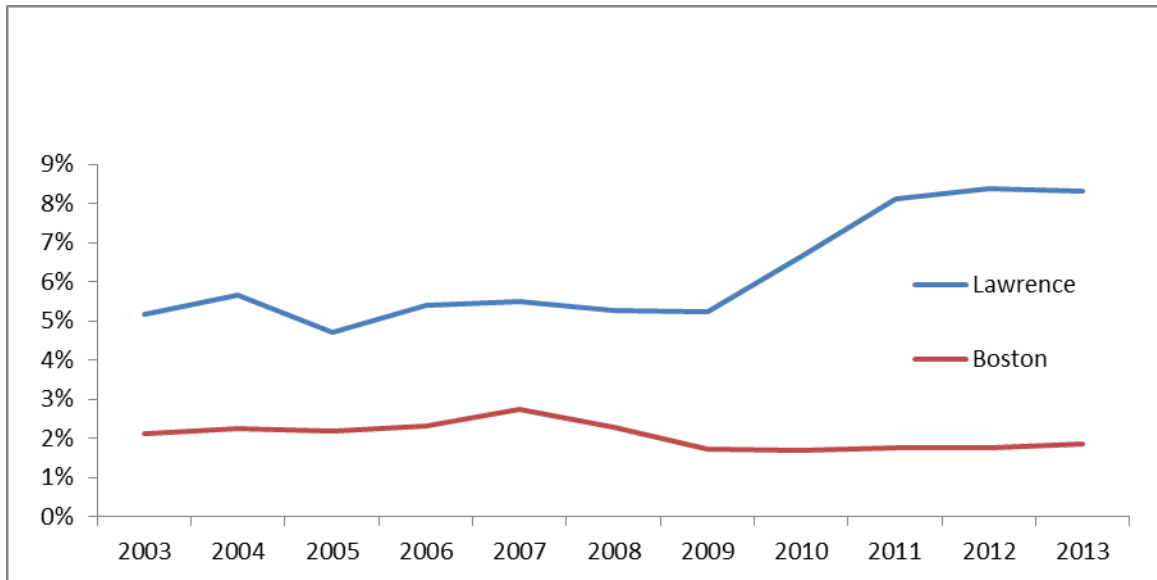
Figure 1. Percentage of residents of select¹¹ Massachusetts cities employed in the employment services industry

City/Town	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Lawrence	5.17%	5.68%	4.72%	5.39%	5.50%	5.27%	5.25%	6.65%	8.13%	8.40%	8.33%
Chelsea	3.02%	4.27%	3.95%	3.72%	3.62%	3.07%	2.77%	2.48%	2.49%	3.44%	6.29%
New Bedford	0.69%	0.86%	0.95%	1.66%	1.76%	1.45%	2.10%	2.70%	3.79%	4.20%	4.38%
Somerville	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	3.36%	3.54%	3.40%	3.80%
Brockton	1.92%	2.57%	4.22%	4.17%	4.38%	3.70%	3.01%	3.58%	3.59%	3.46%	3.67%
Malden	3.77%	3.25%	3.28%	3.26%	3.81%	3.59%	2.45%	2.49%	2.17%	2.56%	2.13%
Springfield	1.98%	1.90%	1.64%	1.95%	2.01%	1.77%	1.32%	1.76%	1.86%	2.07%	2.06%
Worcester	3.25%	3.77%	3.16%	3.44%	2.85%	2.57%	2.20%	2.34%	2.17%	1.85%	1.94%
Fall River	1.55%	1.80%	1.67%	1.38%	1.50%	1.74%	1.08%	1.35%	1.64%	1.59%	1.73%
Lowell	1.24%	1.10%	0.91%	0.97%	0.90%	0.89%	0.64%	0.72%	0.86%	1.12%	1.64%
Holyoke	0.91%	0.98%	1.43%	1.26%	1.03%	1.03%	0.95%	1.13%	1.27%	1.35%	1.44%
Pittsfield	1.43%	1.65%	1.63%	1.86%	1.76%	1.66%	1.34%	1.31%	1.40%	1.36%	1.37%
Haverhill	0.65%	0.78%	0.80%	1.22%	1.37%	1.27%	1.36%	1.70%	1.70%	1.28%	1.23%
Revere	2.05%	ND	2.28%	ND	2.70%	1.96%	1.28%	2.44%	2.09%	1.31%	1.22%
Lynn	0.71%	0.94%	1.44%	2.84%	0.48%	0.35%	0.42%	0.45%	0.59%	0.91%	1.04%
Chicopee	0.63%	0.84%	1.16%	1.24%	1.22%	1.00%	ND	ND	ND	ND	0.85%
Taunton	0.95%	0.91%	1.51%	1.52%	1.48%	1.18%	0.52%	0.57%	0.66%	0.67%	0.66%
Salem	ND	0.13%	0.32%	0.37%	0.39%	0.42%	0.33%	0.06%	ND	ND	0.62%
Fitchburg	1.15%	1.32%	ND	ND	ND	1.87%	2.36%	3.36%	ND	ND	ND
Everett	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND

Source: Massachusetts ES202 Data 2003–2013.

Lawrence has a higher percentage of employees in the employment services industry than any other Massachusetts city of similar size and demographics (Figure 1.)¹⁰. While some cities, such as New Bedford, have shown a rise in people employed by the temping sector, Lawrence has had high percentages since the outset of this analysis. In 2003, when most of the other cities were below 3 percent, Lawrence was at 5 percent, and the number of people in the employment services industry grew 85 percent from 2003 to 2013. This change represents an increase of almost 1,000 temporary workers over the 10-year period. Figure 2 compares Lawrence’s share of employees in the employment services industry with that of Boston.

Figure 2. Percentage of employees in the employment services industry: Lawrence and Boston



Lawrence is not an isolated center of employment services firms, with most of its neighbors having comparable numbers of establishments given their total employee sizes. Lawrence stands out due to the high percentage of temporary employees in the city, suggesting that the firms in neighboring cities may engage in slightly different business practices¹¹

¹⁰ The list of cities is based off the eligible cities in Massachusetts that participated in the 2014 [Working Cities Challenge](#).

¹¹ Other business practices that employment services firms may engage in include recruiting or executive placement. Employment service firms that do not engage in temporary employment placements generally have fewer employees than those that do.

Interview and analysis methodology

Individual, semistructured interviews were conducted either by the author alone or the author with a translator. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth, craigslist, and flyers emailed and posted by a local community development organization. People who either lived or worked in Lawrence and who had worked in at least one temporary job in the past year were given the opportunity to schedule an interview. Eleven volunteers, seven women and four men, were interviewed through a combination of in-person and phone interviews.

Respondents came from a variety of backgrounds. In terms of education, some had not completed high school, while others had graduate degrees. None were native English speakers. All of the respondents had several years of work experience. One respondent with a sixth-grade education had spent more than a decade in the textile industry in the Dominican Republic, but has been limited to construction and lawn care jobs since coming to the states. He partially attributes his limited opportunities to his initial temporary placement in a construction position, which has limited his US-based work experience to construction. Another respondent worked as small-business lender in a bank before moving to the states; once here, before she improved her English skills, she worked on a textile assembly line. Respondents did have marketable skills and skills that are demand, but they either lacked the ability to communicate these skills to potential employers or the employers did not value skills and experience gained outside the United States. Most respondents described their background and skill level as typical of the temporary workers they knew¹².

The interviews were intended to draw participants into a conversation regarding their temporary work experience, focusing on training opportunities, human-capital assets gained, and perceived skills needed to gain permanent or better employment. Questions also aimed to elicit the interviewee's ultimate employment goal (permanent job, better employment, or no desired change) and what steps the interviewees thought would be needed to achieve those goals.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, and participants were given \$40 to reimburse them for their time. Earlier respondents were recontacted as needed in order to

¹² Due to limited data on the skills and language ability of temporary workers in Lawrence, quantitative investigation is outside the scope of this report.

further clarify or explore emerging themes. The interview questions included background questions (name, city of work, city of residence), but, in accordance with grounded-theory design, some questions varied as the interviews progressed. (See “Background on Grounded-Theory Methodology.”) Questions on temporary work history were uniform for all respondents. (These included how many temporary jobs the respondent had in the past one, two, and five years, how many temporary employment agencies the respondent had worked with, and what the respondent did at the temporary jobs.¹³) Questions examining the reasoning behind the work choices respondents made were also uniform (e.g., why did the respondent choose that specific employment agency).

The questions did not ask about age, but observationally, respondents ranged from their twenties to their sixties. Immigration status was purposely avoided in order to encourage broader responses. Because this research was conducted under the auspices of a government-associated organization, which makes undocumented workers wary, and given the large percentage of refusals to participate, this report assumes that it was not able to capture the temporary work experience of undocumented workers. The topic was alluded to several times during the interviews in the context of its being a barrier to employment, but always in the past tense (from the perspective of the respondents). It was never explored further by the author. This report assumes that lack of legal status is a significant barrier to employment, but does not explore that factor.

Every interview also included questions that asked respondents to describe their skills, both those external to their temporary jobs well as skills learned during their temporary jobs. From these questions, the researcher then transitioned into asking the workers what a better job would look like and what skills would be needed for such a job. Since the purpose of these interviews was to engage in a conversation rather than to extract specific information, the respondents were encouraged to expand upon issues raised several times during the interviews. At the end of the skills section, there was a question related to access to language classes, but this question was not asked in any of the interviews, as language consistently was

¹³ The question about what respondents did was originally worded in terms of occupation, but the initial interviews revealed that respondents did not have a uniform interpretation of “occupation,” so instead they were asked what they did at each job and occupation was extrapolated from the responses.

raised during earlier, more general skills questions. Once language skills was raised, respondents were encouraged to expand upon their responses and talk more about why language skills were so important and what path they saw to improving their language ability.

In early interviews, respondents were asked about wages, primarily if wages had increased over a given time period. This question was intended as an indicator of skills improvement over temporary worker's tenure, but early respondents were reluctant to answer or used vague language in their responses, so the question was dropped, and a straightforward question about the most useful skills acquired was substituted. This question was usually followed by a question about useful contacts as a transition to exploring the social-network aspect of respondents' temporary positions, pivoting from one aspect of human capital to another, exploring whether a lack of networks was a barrier to employment improvement.

Each interview closed with two questions: Besides a paycheck, what other benefits did temporary work provide? And: Did your temporary work experience improve your future work prospects? Respondents had a hard time answering the first one, as they perceived the sole benefit of work to be a paycheck and saw temporary work as a path to a paycheck and nothing more.

Background on grounded-theory methodology

The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using a grounded-theory approach (Charmaz & Smith, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The grounded-theory method is a qualitative research method that can be used to abstract conceptual categories from individual experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Inductive analysis allows researchers to systematically identify themes from qualitative data. In this report, the data is the interview transcripts and the themes are the topics that arose during those interviews, revealing shared experiences. The themes were extracted during coding of interviews, which happened as the interviews were each completed. Subsequent selective coding focused on the primary themes once all of the interviews were completed. Interviews were continued until a theoretical saturation was reached (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), and the number of respondents The number of respondents reflects almost 1% of all estimated temporary workers in Lawrence. In this case, the saturation point was considered to have been reached when the themes of language barriers and networks, as well

as the drivers of the barriers (from the worker's perspective) began to repeat. Once that point was reached, the data was reexamined and the emergent themes were presented for assessment to (and were accepted by) professionals familiar with temporary workforce in Lawrence.

This methodology does limit the conclusions that can be drawn from the results. The respondents' perspectives only reflect their local environment, and the interview process creates potential for bias to be introduced both in the questions asked and in the analysis of the transcripts.

Interview results

This research began with the hypothesis that temporary workers' lack of skills or level of local knowledge would be barriers to their transition from temporary to permanent or better work. During interviews, it became clear that respondents thought that any technical skills they needed they would learn on the job. Also, it was evident that what respondents needed more than formal, skills-based classes was language proficiency. Unfortunately, the changeable hours of temporary work prevented them from accessing language training; inconsistency in employment hours meant the workers would not plan to attend classes if they could be working. Exacerbating the issue, their social networks did not provide them with access to more attractive permanent jobs, or even the better temporary positions. This is not to say they lacked or were unable to access social networks to help them find jobs, but the jobs their social networks had access to were limited to lateral employment transitions. Lack of proximity to jobs was also a barrier: respondents indicated that they either were limited in their choice of temporary employment agency or actual placements by lack of access to either a car or public transportation.

Primary among the barriers reported was lack of language proficiency. Every respondent, regardless of their English proficiency, indicated that their level of English was an obstacle to gaining better employment. One interviewee summed up the language barrier succinctly:

I think my English is not perfect and then I think I need perfect English, [or] near to perfect to have a better position on the job ... because the communication is the first step.

This interviewee described his English skills as not suited for “interviews with the boss.” He rated them at “around 80 percent” and mentioned that English as Second Language classes have helped him improve over the five years he has lived in the United States. He would like to get a permanent job at his current workplace and has noticed that the temporary workers who get hired as permanent workers have better English or special skills and experience. He put in overtime in the shipping department to learn a new skill because there were not that many temporary workers there, and he hoped that would help him get a permanent job there.

A construction worker without a high school education was sure that he could get more consistent employment if he spoke English. When asked about what skills he thought he needed to get a better job he replied:

The bottom line is that English is the most important thing. Once you know English, then you can get a job that is a little easier, a little more consistent. [Translated]

He pointed out the challenges he faces as a temporary construction worker trying to learn English:

I enrolled in a school for English, here in Lawrence ... but classes were on Saturdays, and they told me that if I missed two Saturdays, I could not continue ... I had to take advantage of when I could get work ... so I could not go, so they automatically removed me from the school. [Translated]

Most of the workers interviewed either had taken or were currently enrolled in English classes, but the inconvenience or the necessity to deprioritize the classes in favor of work means many either have to stop attending classes or are unable to dedicate their full energy to them. The cost of classes was never mentioned as a barrier, as they are often free or very inexpensive, but the inconvenience, both in terms of location and timing, were themes that continually emerged from the conversations. None of the respondents mentioned online or app-based language-learning tools.

One respondent who was able to successfully transition from temporary to permanent work credited her success to her experience in her native country, but her English-language skills also seem to have played a role. She described her application process and how she was able to have a conversation (in English) with the supervisor before she was hired, and how that interaction helped her get the permanent job. The respondent was an outgoing woman, confident in her experience, and undoubtedly well qualified for the position she applied for, but she suggested that her ability to develop a professional relationship with the woman who would eventually hire her was in part due to her English skills.

From interviewees' responses, it became apparent that the language gap crossed industries, occupations, and even language proficiency levels. One respondent, who works for a large technology firm and speaks fluent English, felt that despite being fluent, her nonnative English had still handicapped her during her application process as well as her job search.

That respondent also emphasized that her lack of employment network had also hurt her. Social networks were a concept that respondents knew well, but rarely referred to formally. The network-related responses started with respondents detailing how they found their temporary employment agencies, with most indicating that they heard about the agencies they chose through friends or family. Network ties included both those that could be considered strong (siblings, partners, spouses) and weak (distant relations, former coworkers, neighbors) (Granovetter, 1973). Bridging networks—social networks that cross socioeconomic boundaries—which Woolcock and Narayan (2000) describe as necessary and economically beneficial for improvement of socioeconomic status, rarely came up in interviews (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000), and not a single respondent described a bridging network as linked to employment outcomes.

Among respondents who were able to find permanent jobs, only two attributed their success to their social networks: the woman quoted above, who attributed her success to her ability to form a connection with her interviewer, and one who was referred to her permanent job by a friend who already worked there. One woman used connections to bargain for a pay raise: she spoke with other workers about what employment agencies they used and how much

they were paid and used that information to negotiate a 20 percent pay raise by switching to another agency. Her job remained the same, but her pay increased.

When asked about the networks they built at temporary jobs, many respondents implied that their current and former coworkers could help them find other temporary work, but none seemed confident that they could help them find a permanent (or better) job. One of the respondents who was able to get a permanent job mentioned that she had helped a weak social-network tie get a job:

Actually, one of the people that I worked with ... I have helped her finding a job to one of her relatives ... I guess if I ever need to find a job, I could ask her and see what she can help me with.

Her statement goes beyond the employment-network relationship and suggests an assumed reciprocity in the network. The reciprocity suggested in the statement was unique to the one respondent, but has been referred to in the literature on social-network theory (Desmond, 2012).

Other respondents indicated that they had robust network employment opportunities, but upon follow-up, these opportunities all appeared to be lateral. However, despite respondents' inability able to obtain permanent or better employment through these relationships, the networks were not devoid of value: respondents described friendships with past coworkers and other temporary workers that were personally enriching. It is simply that the networks did not provide clear employment benefits. These missing bridging ties were often alluded to as assumptions when respondents were asked why they thought other candidates got the job (e.g., "probably because they were friends with [the hiring manager]."

Formal skills training outside of mandatory safety training was not offered to any of the interviewees. Some even scoffed at the suggestion that the temporary employment agencies would offer such training: "The [temporary employment] agencies do not provide training; they get you work, nothing more" [translated]. The respondents were split on the value of the experience they gained through temporary work, with some seeing it as valuable, while others struggled to find any value in it beyond the pay received. How respondents answered seems to have depended on the types of temporary jobs they had. Those who worked in environments

with longer temporary contracts—contracts that extended months or even years—saw the camaraderie and stability the jobs offered as beneficial:

I got some good friends out of it, and definitely I think one of the things I learnt is that I didn't want to keep working in the factory.

The traditional benefits of temporary labor espoused in the first section of this report were partly reflected in interviewees' responses. Many said it was easy to obtain work through temporary employment agencies, and despite the presence of language barriers, most respondents were employed and said the job search was as simple as calling a few temporary employment agencies. However, many rejected the notion that they had gained useful skills or experience that would help them transition to permanent or better jobs.

Many did see improvement in their employment, with their definition of improvement varying from better pay to better benefits or just being closer to home. Interviewees almost universally cited their hard work as a foundation for finding better jobs. When asked what advice they would give other temporary workers looking for permanent work, several respondents felt that, aside from improving one's language skills, hard work was sufficient. One, who worked in a food-packing facility and had been hired into a permanent position recently, attributed her hiring to "working quickly" [translated] and her advice to other workers was to "work hard, so the boss will hire you" [translated]. The respondents saw hard work and the ability to communicate as the two most important traits to employment improvement.

Discussion

Conversations with interviewees revealed that their attempts to transition to permanent or better employment are hindered by language deficiencies and by lack of network support. Some of the interviewees had college degrees and entire careers in their home countries, but the value of their experience was diminished or disregarded because their English-language skills were not high enough. While there are undoubtedly some businesses that conduct the majority, or even all, their business in languages other than English, those businesses do not offer employment on the scale needed to create opportunities for all workers. Interviewees rarely mentioned a need for more training in areas other than language,

suggesting that it was simply not considered a necessary step to improved employment. One respondent summed it up: “I think I have enough skills ... What I need is to keep improving my English” [translated].

English language classes are plentiful in Lawrence. Any community center or public gathering place will have a flyer posted somewhere advertising low-cost or free language classes. The temporary workers interviewed for this report did not say that the classes were too expensive, just that they were unable to make classes a priority. Childcare is difficult to find and expensive in the evenings; temporary work involves changing hours and has to take priority over English classes; and sometimes respondents simply could not get to locations offering classes because they lacked a car and public transportation was not available at the needed times.

The classroom does not have to be the only place where people access language-building tools. There are numerous low-cost or free online or mobile language instruction programs and apps, but the opportunities these offer remain largely undiscussed and unexamined in the workforce development literature. None of the respondents mentioned their phones as possible conduits for language learning, though all but one had smartphones capable of providing language courses.

As for network support, it is difficult for temporary workers to build networks because bridging connections tend to be built through the workplace. Temporary work often clusters temporary workers together or limits the time workers are in a single unit, making it difficult for them to develop network ties that bridge the gap between socioeconomic classes. Temporary workers face many of the same barriers to social network development faced by the urban poor more generally. In 2015, Lawrence launched the Lawrence Working Families Initiative. As part of that initiative, the city built a center that focuses on improving the economic security of families of children in the Lawrence school system. Although the center does not focus specifically on temporary workers or detail how it will create better employment networks, it aims to expand families’ assets in a way that will improve their socioeconomic outcomes, and temporary workers will be among its beneficiaries.

Data from the 2014 American Community Survey indicates that an estimated 58 percent of residents of Lawrence speak Spanish at home, and 37 percent of Lawrence residents speak English “less than very well.” That fact, coupled with the city’s high proportion of temporary workers, might suggest that the conclusions drawn from this report’s interviews should be limited to Lawrence. However, Lawrence is not unique either in its demographic characteristics or in its economic situation as a postindustrial city close to a metropolis, and the insights gained from these interview can certainly be applied more broadly, not only to other cities, but to unemployed and underemployed workers as well.

This report has focused on the transition away from temporary work and what assets workers believe they need in order to find better jobs. It is worth noting, however, that interviewees did not describe temporary work negatively. On the contrary, many respondents were grateful they had a job in spite of what they considered their limited skills (language and otherwise). The jobs in which respondents were placed often did not provide training, income consistency, or experience that could improve their career outcomes, but they were jobs, and respondents were happy for the income that the jobs provided.

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