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Exploring the [un]likelihood of successful integration of skilled and unskilled immigrants into the hospitality industry

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Abstract

When viewed from a global perspective, in terms of the number of workers in a particular sector, the hospitality industry is perhaps the most populated. Not only is it the most populated, it is also one where you find perhaps the highest concentration of immigrants. It is also the one with the highest record of staff turnover and employment relations issues. Lately, issues regarding immigrant integration and engagement within the South African hospitality industry have begun gaining traction in South Africa's social science research ecosystem. Remarkably, even though several studies pertaining to immigration integration in the hospitality industry have looked at aspects such as legal/employment, economic impact, gender, economic geography side of the engagement and or integration, there is a lacuna in terms of the nature and extent and associated uncertainties with regard to the integration of immigrants in the hospitality industry in South Africa. This is what the researchers set out to achieve in this paper through the use of a suitable theoretical review method so as to enable a critical and rigorous appraisal of previously conducted research. The researchers found that no matter how challenging it is to recruit immigrants in the hospitality industry, they remain an attractive option for their hospitable attitudes, cheapness, and overt eagerness to remain in what they consider to be greener pastures. They drew from several works in order to advance the notion that the hospitality industry needs more immigrant workers to survive.

Keywords: Workforce diversity, Immigrant Integration, Hospitality industry, South Africa

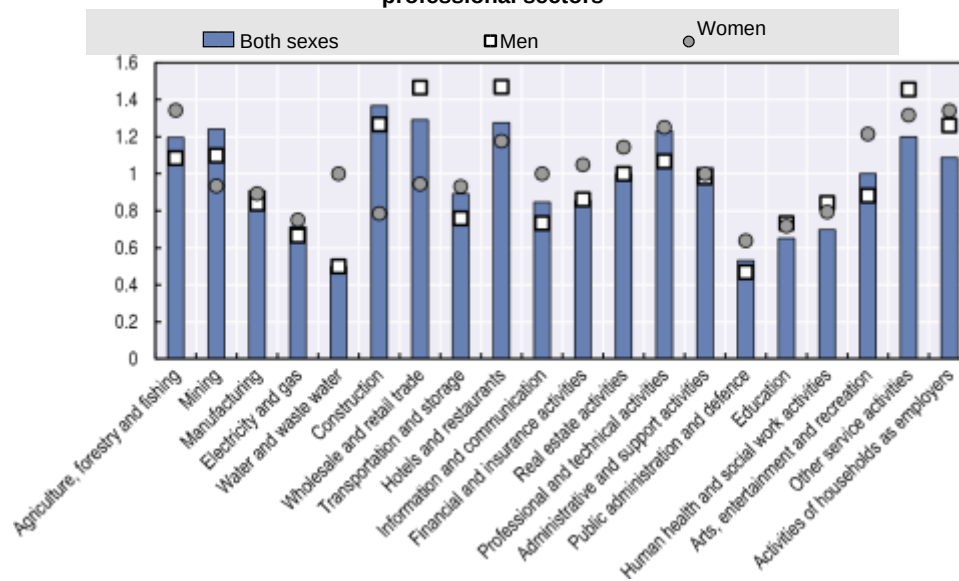
Introduction

The hospitality industry is arguably the most populated in terms of human resources. The industry is also one with the highest rate of staff turnover. Arguments for this phenomenon are varied. In some cases, especially in developing countries such as South Africa, fingers are pointed in the direction of low wages, conditions of service and poorly implemented employment laws. There have also been reports of absence of soft skills among locals. Little wonder therefore that the industry records a high number of litigations (ILO, 2012). Low wages, long working hours are unfortunately not the only reasons why the industry is fraught with

labour issues. Lately, South Africa's hospitality industry has been labelled as the destination for cheap labour (Bac, 2018) perhaps owing to several factors chief among them being practitioners' preference for immigrants. This somewhat aligns with the views of Vettori (2017) that considering "the nature of work in the hospitality sector and the consequent abundance of low paid and low skilled precarious jobs in the sector...", "migrant workers are often willing to settle for almost any wages and any work conditions just to survive."

It is noteworthy that the hospitality industry is not the only one that has experienced the influx of immigrant labour. In South Africa, various industries and sectors have also experienced the surge and are also dealing with issues of integration of immigrants into their own sectors and industries. In the figure below, it is clear that immigrants in the construction, trade, hospitality and professional are overrepresented.

Figure 1. Immigrant workers are most overrepresented in the construction, trade, hospitality and professional sectors



Source: OECD/ILO (2018), How Immigrants Contribute to South Africa's Economy, OECD Publishing, Paris.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264085398-en>

The assessment of immigrant integration and engagement within the South African hospitality industry is gaining traction in South Africa's social science research ecosystem. Interestingly, much of the work done so far either looked at legal/employment relations (Vettori, 2017; De Beer, Rogerson & Rogerson, 2014), economic impact (Vallabh, & Kutsi, 2018; Machisa, Muresherwa, Steyn, 2018), gender (Vettori & Nicolaides, 2019; Steyn, 2014), economic geography (Zampoukos, & Ioannides, 2011, Rogerson & Visser, 2011) side of the engagement and or integration. What one finds in these reports is a lack of engagement of the nature and extent and associated uncertainties with regard to the integration of immigrants in the hospitality industry in South Africa. This is what this paper achieves by undertaking a comparative assessment using countries such as Australia and Canada, which have reported immense influx of African immigrants (Connor, 2016) to examine the obstacles to the effective integration of immigrants in the hospitality industry.

Methodology

Considering the intent of this study, the theoretical review method was applied so as to enable a critical and rigorous appraisal of previous research. Although this was an arduous undertaking, it nonetheless facilitated the collation and interrogation of the necessary secondary data that assisted with the enquiry which uncovered new insights helping us to understand the pertinent issues of integration of immigrants into the hospitality industry. We



submit upfront that our choice of research method is consistent with Dey (2005) and Mogalakwe (2006) who are in agreement that this method of research allows a researcher to select pertinent documents for his or her research. For an all-encompassing and authentic review, we consulted widely by including technical reports, published and unpublished works and monographs despite the views of Podsakoff et al (2005) who regard only works published in journals as accurate science.

Our review began by first gathering documents – reports, published and unpublished works – and thereafter categorising them to fit the purpose of the study. After this was achieved, we then turned our attention to those documents which relate to issues of integration of immigrants in the hospitality industry as well as Western examples of such experience.

The paper is presented as follows: First, we look at the term ‘marginalization’ from the lens of Aasland and Tyldum (2016, p.93) who describe aspects of marginal position and lack of negotiating power of immigrant groups as arising from marginalisation and discrimination. We believe that this approach foregrounds our paper. The next section looks at some of the factors that encourage the preference of migrants to locals in the hospitality industry. This is followed by a descriptive discussion of the obstacles to integration of immigrants into the local hospitality industry. The article is finally concluded with implications for practice and theory.

Marginalisation

Several writers (see Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Messiou, 2012; Petrou et al., 2009; Munn & Lloyd, 2005; Razer et al., 2013) argue that marginalisation takes various forms – formally and or informally within particular time and place. Gale (2008) defines “marginalisation as the process by which individuals and groups are ignored or relegated to the side-lines of political debate, social negotiation and economic bargaining – and kept there.” This suggests that people or groups of people may be politically, socially and or economically marginalised. Furthermore, it is possible to find that those who are for instance politically marginalised may also be marginalised economically.

Often, the criteria used to marginalize people or groups are categorised as homelessness, age, language, employment status, skill, race, and religion (Gale, 2008).

The question that begs an answer with respect to the focus of this study is: are immigrants a marginalised group? In response to this question, we draw from the views of Griffith (nd) to forward that immigrants endure restrictive lifestyles accompanied by hate crimes, discriminatory social and political encounters. In relation to this view, Ngeh (2011) concurs by stating that as a marginalised group, immigrants suffer structural exclusion as well as unequal power relations in comparison to locals. In this case, it is not uncommon to observe that immigrants will easily fall prey to discriminatory labour practices and even socioeconomic deprivations. Basically, our attempt to understand the obstacles to the effective integration of immigrants in the hospitality industry, we argue that immigrants are susceptible to relegation and abandonment owing to their desperation, poor language skills, and a host of other factors.

Why does the hospitality industry prefer immigrants?

Skill shortage is a phenomenon that is obvious in organisations and several fields of specialization. As a result, employers in various sectors of the economy have expressed the need for human capital from other countries in order to fill the skills gap. For instance, at some point in South Africa, Cuban doctors were recruited to assist in local hospitals. According to Mateus, Allen-Ile, and Iwu (2014), developed countries such as Canada, the United States and New Zealand rely on immigrant workforce to augment their skills set owing to either ageing population, emigration, and so on. It is also for these reasons that countries such as Australia



and Canada have immigration policies that allow experts in different areas of specialisation to have access to the country to fill the skills gap and contribute to the growth of their economies.

The skills gap in industries does not preclude African countries. Allais (2012) argue that skills shortage in South Africa is as a result of lack of investment in skills development, investment in education, structural changes such as unemployment and training and retraining of employees. To address the issue, the South African government initiated the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA) in 2000 with the broad aim of empowering its citizens largely the previously disadvantaged persons. The ultimate aim was to fight poverty, and to create employment opportunities (Horwitz, & Jain, 2011). Even with initiatives such as this, several sectors still struggle to find and fill gaps in their employment needs. The hospitality industry is one of them. South Africa's skills gap is said to be a function of the disparity between secondary and tertiary schooling. In many instances, the segregated schooling system of the past is blamed (McGrath & Akoojee, 2007, Mateus, Allen-Ile, & Iwu, 2014). With South Africa's education system ranked poorly in global comparison (Gramm, nd) one can argue therefore that the hospitality industry is suspicious of local qualifications hence the preference for immigrants.

The uniqueness of the hospitality industry is derived from the nature of services it offers. These services require various skills sets, which must be executed with professionalism (Tesone, 2012). For this reason, hospitality industry around the world continuously seeks the services of non-native employees to meet the needs of the industry. As such, expatriate services are often sought to fill the gaps in the industry. The use of immigrants to cover for the shortfall in the hospitality industry nonetheless is fraught with consequences, one of which is the controversy surrounding the preference of immigrants to local labour. This is especially pertinent on the back of the high unemployment rate in South Africa (Legrain, 2014). This was even more evident during the 2008 economic recession where several domestic workers lost their jobs.

Nevertheless, employers continue to prefer the services of immigrants because they are willing to accept lower wages that the nationals will not accept (Watts, 2018). Also, it is believed that immigrants are more willing to undertake uncongenial and stressful tasks. Research has shown that the quality of services provided by employees in the hospitality industry improves when there is a mix of skills from the nationals of the country and those from outside of it (Sadi & Henderson, 2005). Interestingly, those who are prone to exploitation in the hospitality industry are usually the ones from poor countries (ILO, 2012; Kalitanyi & Visser, 2010). Even though countries such as Australia and Canada are known to regulate their hospitality industry, there are also cases where migrants from poor countries have had to endure long hours of work, and several other uncondusive conditions of work. Similar experiences have been shared by immigrants in the hospitality industry in South Africa. Obindjah (2018) reported some cases of racial discrimination, threats, abuse and unethical practices meted out to immigrants.

The perception is that immigrants do not have legal rights to stay and work in South Africa and therefore employers are at liberty to impose conditions of service with impunity. Besides the perspectives provided above, there are equally several reasons why the hiring of immigrants in the hospitality industry is a challenging experience for both employer and employee. Essentially, foreign nationals, whether they are qualified or have professional experience, still find it hard to find a job in a credible organisation that could highlight these qualifications. According to Pullen-Sansfacon, Spolander and Engelbrecht (2012), challenges associated with migration and immigrants' search for jobs in a host country are three-pronged namely political, ethical and professional. Some of these are discussed below.

Obstacles to integration of immigrants into the hospitality industry

Poor language proficiency

Not speaking the official languages of the host country fluently constitutes a hindrance to the process of integrating immigrants into a company. Connell and Burgess (2009) argue that language ability is a major disadvantage in the recruitment of immigrants, especially if they do not speak the official language of the host country. In fact, English language aptitude plays a crucial role in many countries in the world. However, non-English speaking immigrants, especially from Spanish speaking nations, often report lower levels of English proficiency on arrival in host countries (Chao & Levine, 2004).

In Canada, the knowledge of English and French is considered as the key to integrate into a company's workforce. Failure to speak and understand those languages represents an important gap in the economic development of immigrants in the host country (Sinacore et al., 2011). Nevertheless, Abdelkerim and Grace (2012), in contrast argued that even with very good English language skills needed in the host country, skilled immigrants still face prolonged unemployment. This is the case of members of the new emerging African communities (NEAC) in Australia. For this perspective, some countries set up mainstream agencies for language training of immigrants in order to easily integrate them within the host society. For instance, the Canadian government introduced a system of language training for immigrants, which they also funded. The way this worked was such that upon arrival in Canada, the migrants first had access to social and health services in which English and Cantonese were taught (Sakamoto, Wei & Truong, 2008). These measures are being taken with respect to skilled immigrants, so that they are able to make full use of their education and experiences (Chao & Levine, 2004). However, in most cases, language training is only intended to provide immigrants with a useful knowledge of both English or French, but does not stretch to precise occupational or professional labour market language needs (Chao & Levine, 2004).

Poor recognition of foreign credentials and work experiences

In some English speaking countries such as Canada and England, foreign nationals find it difficult to achieve successful integration into the workplace owing to the negligence of some employers to recognise their distinctive qualifications and experiences (Friesen, 2011). Harvey (2012), explains that in order to protect the company, some employers have a duty to refuse access to foreign labour if they are unable to verify the quality of their qualifications and skills, which in turn creates a prospective for exclusion. In other words, some employers or professional accreditation bodies, fail to assess the merit of immigrants' qualifications and work experience obtained in countries located in remote regions of the world (Grant, 2008). Moreover, many qualified foreigners also have difficulty accessing transcripts and registrations from their country of origin.

In Canada, for example, a significant number of foreign nationals face complications in recognising their social work qualifications. This indicates that recognition of qualifications is the main obstruction to the integration of immigrant labour, particularly for those who clearly belong to ethnic minorities (Danso, 2009 cited in Pullen-Sansfacon, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2012). As a result, they are confined within the revolving doors between the credential assessment agency, professional associations, and regulators (Sakamoto, Wei & Truong, 2008).

Australia, one of the few nations that have embraced thousands of refugees from different regions every year, also faces difficulties in integrating foreign labour into local companies. In fact, members of the new emerging African communities (NEAC), although they are educated, skilled and experienced in several fields, have difficulty integrating into Australian businesses, due to the lack of recognition of their qualifications (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012).

Labour market discrimination

Discrimination is also seen as one of the factors hindering the integration of immigrants into the workplace. According to Binggelli and Dietz (2013) cited in Krings et al., (2014), when it comes to considering qualified and experience personnel, foreign nationals receive little attention.

The following are several forms of discrimination in the workplace, especially concerning the integration of immigrants into a company of the host country.

a. Higher education discrimination

Skilled immigrants often face difficulties in accessing organisations although they are highly educated. In 2006, Ontario (Canada) received a large number of skilled immigrants, of whom 25% (the majority) had a university degree and were engineers (25%), while only 6% of Canadians had a university degree. Despite the large proportion of foreign engineers, only a few have found employment in the field of engineering even though they are better educated than their Canadian counterparts (Sakamoto, Wei & Truong, 2008). Schmidt, Young and Mandzuk, (2010) contend that denying access to highly skilled and educated immigrants in Canada once they arrive has not only no economic sense but also raises problems of discrimination. For example, some highly skilled members of the new emerging African communities find themselves working as taxi drivers or doing unskilled jobs well below their qualification levels (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012).

b. Discrimination practices in the hiring process

Recruitment often occur through agencies; however, discrimination in hiring practices is also seen as a barrier to access international training services such as IETs, in order to provide employment for skilled immigrants (Schmidt, Young & Mandzuk, 2010). These hiring practices stall immigrants' professional careers and therefore fail to grant them certification that will allow them to apply for work in the host country. Although IETs finalise the courses needed for certification, finding employment stays a major challenge (Schmidt, Young & Mandzuk, 2010).

An interesting characterisation of the migrant worker is that he stands at the end of the hiring queue (Aasland & Tyldum, 2016) and with such marginalised position, the migrant will at best receive and take up lower paying jobs with minimal or no benefits because after all he is in condition to negotiate better offers.

c. Prejudice and discriminatory behaviours

Theories about prejudice and discrimination suggest that international employees are often targets of discriminatory behaviour. Indeed, highly skilled immigrants are perceived as capable competitors in the labour market compared to the least qualified members. In fact, it is reported that the most highly skilled immigrants are those who are most exposed to discriminatory practices. In South Africa, immigrants are preferred to locals because they settle for low wages, are often undocumented and as a result, are susceptible to threats by employers either in the form of dismissal or that the authorities may be called in if they do not comply with work conditions (Naki, 2017).

d. Racial and ethnic discrimination

Some studies have found that immigrants are often exposed to several forms of discrimination in the workplace, including racial discrimination in the search for work (Pullen-Sansfacon, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2012). In the United States, for example, minority immigrant groups often encounter difficulties in accessing jobs for which they are qualified, and also earn less than their white counterparts simply because they are most likely to be subject to professional discrimination (De Jong & Madamba, 2001). Blacks and Hispanics face professional incompatibilities in comparison to whites and Asians. They make up the highest rate of unemployment and poverty in the United States (De Jong & Madamba, 2001). They are also

more likely to work part-time or to practice sub-trades not related to their skills and qualifications (De Jong & Madamba, 2001). The same goes for Canada where skilled immigrants, especially non-Caucasian immigrants (non-whites), suffer from substantial downward mobility upon their arrival in the country and yet find it difficult to cope with unemployment, therefore they struggle to achieve economic integration (Grant, 2008). Furthermore, some researchers have discovered that those who are the most victims of unemployment in certain European countries are Turks, Asians, Balkans, Eastern Europeans and Latin Americans (Chao & Levine, 2004).

e. Gender discrimination

In some countries such as England, qualified women are often discriminated against when it comes to finding suitable employment. Harvey (2012), for example, found that although they are qualified, these women encounter additional barriers because of their family structures, family responsibilities and other obligations. These however delay their accreditation process and inevitably hampers their ability to find employment or secure promotion.

Moreover, female immigrants from Asia, Turkey, Africa and the Middle East have predominantly low employment rate in European countries (Chao & Levine, 2004). Unlike England and other European countries, the economic integration of women and men in the United States of America is more leaning on the side of women. In fact, researchers have found that it is more often positive for women than men to integrate into American organizations. This makes room for more autonomy (Chao & Levine, 2004).

f. International stereotypes

The global stereotype on foreign nationals as a group suggests that immigrants are unreliable and therefore incompetent. But these stereotypes differ remarkably between groups from different countries of origin. For instance, In Switzerland, people from Germany and France are compared to Asians living in the United States. They (Asians) are a very competent and very competitive group in the labour market. But, on the other hand, they are not sociable. However, because of those stereotypes, Asians' lack of sociability can be a barrier to their employability, even though they have the qualifications required by the company. Similarly, Cortina (2008) cited in Krings et al. (2014), argued that female immigrants and successful black professionals are more likely to experience selective incivility in Switzerland simply because they are perceived as competent and ambitious.

Lack of local work experience

In several countries, companies sometimes require immigrants to have local work experience so as to be able to recruit suitable candidates. Indeed, many firms already have predispositions with regard to who should hold key positions in their units. Some prefer to recruit immigrants who have work experience in the country while some prefer to recruit internally first. These reasons limit immigrants' employability as well (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008). Interestingly, Vettori (2017) argued that immigrants would rather use a job that pays poorly as a stepping stone to gain some local experience which may further a promotion or a more formal job opportunity.

Lack of specialist employment services

Some countries do not have international recruitment agencies that facilitate recruitment procedures to provide those in need with the opportunity to find more suitable employment in the country in which they are located (Dowling, Festing & Engle, 2008). So often, those who find themselves in foreign countries without the assistance of specialist employment agencies tend to end up with low-paying jobs, which have no job security, no benefits of any kind including leave allowances and insurance. According to Jinnah and Cazarin (2017), this is

even made worse by the fact that immigrants in this category may not have formal working papers and therefore are not legally entitled to any legal benefits such as pension, medical benefits.

Political constraints and policy limitations

Despite governments' effort to fight against barriers related to race, ethnicity, gender discrimination; immigrants still face difficulties to access employment. (Sakamoto, Wei & Truong, 2008). Although some governments' policies promote the recognition of immigrants' skills and qualifications, many immigrants still find it difficult to obtain the additional training required. This is often an obstacle to the integration of immigrant workers in Quebec (Canada) (Pullen-Sansfacon, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2012).

In addition, the United States of America does not have explicit immigrant integration policies or programs, with the exception of refugee programs, unlike other major immigration countries such as Canada and Australia. Despite this, most immigrants are sponsors of family members or employers who play an important role in ensuring their adaptation in the host country (Chao & Levine, 2004).

On the other hand, in many countries, such as Canada, the teaching of English and French does not extend to the specific language needs of the labour market in many cases, which may be an obstacle to the employability of immigrants (Chao & Levine, 2004).

Moreover, accredited organisations specialising in the certification of immigrant skills not only take time to recognize the validity of their diplomas and transcripts, but also fail to deliver them with long-awaited certifications. This prevents their employability in some companies within the host country, and they find themselves lost between credential assessment agencies, professional associations and regulators (Sakamoto, Wei & Truong, 2008).

In Australia, immigration issues, problems linked to the integration of immigrants into Australian organizations, are often criticised. Economic debates on the recent financial crisis, unemployment for foreign labour, etc. become a subject of political and public interest. When this economic crisis hits the society, the minority groups are more likely to be threatened in the country (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012).

Discussion

Failing to find adequate employment to survive economically in the host country, skilled immigrants instead, offer their skills to organisations that may have no need for those specialist skills. This is how foreigners who speak other languages besides English are easily accessible in sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, retail, clothing, catering and construction (Bayari & Iwu, 2018). In the United Kingdom for example, many immigrants are forced to occupy the positions of the unskilled and semi-skilled individuals, which is better than soliciting informal labour networks. Though competent, skilled and brilliant, immigrants have no choice but to access employment opportunities in the small business sector. In South Asia, many immigrant women work as domestic employees although they have qualifications (Young, 2004:28 cited in Connell & Burgess, 2009).

It must be noted that it is not only in the South African hospitality industry that the integration of immigrants is problematic. Even with all the competencies and laudable credentials, immigrants scratch for means of livelihood in other sectors such as transport, entertainment and construction. Unlike other major immigration countries such as Canada and Australia, South Africa does not have explicit policies or programs for immigrant integration supported by its government, with the exception of a limited number of programs for refugees. However,

work is not facilitated by a flexible labour market that could make it easier for immigrants to find work.

The notion of diversity management evokes a fundamental point, which is that organisations stand to profit from having a diversified workforce (Roberson, 2019). However, the integration of immigrants within South African businesses is a process characterised by intense challenges. The reasons for this complex integration are based on the restrictions of employment imposed by the government, the inability of organizations to sponsor a qualified immigrant employee, the incompetence of Home Affairs to deliver on time the relevant visas, the lack of immigration and training structures, limited right to work due to minor circumstances and discrimination. Despite the strong values that immigrants can bring to a company, despite their charisma and dynamism to work effectively, and despite their previous qualifications and skills, they are mostly unemployed, while those who are lucky to find work are saddled with unpleasant jobs with very meagre remuneration which have nothing to do with their qualifications. These immigrants agree to work for these companies, simply to survive in the host country.

For most migrants, their first job experience is in the hospitality industry (Jordhus-Lier, 2015). This suggests that the migrant worker is willing and ready to start earning an income out of a desperate desire to support himself and those he may have left behind in his home country. It also suggests that the hospitality industry is easier to penetrate given its label as an industry that readily accepts and offers low-paying jobs. Given this desperation, it is not surprising that the migrant is susceptible and in fact will condone any form of unfair practice meted out to him. In fact, Aasland and Tyldum (2016), said that their desperation leads them to “accept jobs with low status, harsher working conditions and lower pay – conditions that the non-immigrant population is unlikely to accept” (p. 92). As far back as 1979, Piore summed this up by saying that this sort of work aspiration is consistent with the intention to quickly earn money for the purpose of supporting families back home.

Conclusion

What is clear from the above discussions is that no matter how challenging it is to recruit immigrants in the hospitality industry, they remain an attractive option for their hospitable attitudes, cheapness, and overt eagerness to remain in what they consider to be greener pastures. But beyond this, some studies on skilled immigrants in South Africa have shown that they (both the employer and employee) confront serious challenges. In the absence of ‘meaningful’ employment in South Africa, they create their own businesses and create jobs for many. Although the value of this entrepreneurial uptake has not yet been fully assessed in regard to employment creation, some researchers have argued that immigrants have set up employment opportunities owing to (1) their inability to find meaningful employment, (2) their entrepreneurial energy, and (3) their desire to earn more so as to provide for their families in their native lands. Thus, brain gain contributes to the growth of the gross domestic product of South Africa. Many companies are afraid to recruit immigrants because of some doubtful stereotypes. Indeed, immigrants are perceived by nationals as a threat to the security and economic integrity of the country; often blamed for enlarging the labour market, snatching jobs from South Africans and forcing employers to offer anyone the lower wages that they have accepted. Owing to this, the South African government has begun refining its immigration policies. Immigrants are accused of imposing a burden on South Africa's health and education services. They are also accused of having brought about the rise in crime and violence in the country (Soami-Mabiala, 2013).

Migrant labour is a complex discourse. Therefore, we cannot claim that this paper has exhausted all the issues that pertain to immigrant integration in the hospitality industry. Having said this, we suggest further studies that take an interest in better ways of integrating



immigrant labour. This suggestion is made on the back of a report by Elejalde-Ruiz (2017) that found that the “hospitality industry needs more immigrant workers to survive”.

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