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# 2024

## Global DSM Talent Study

**DSM**USA



GREATER DES MOINES  
PARTNERSHIP



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# INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, communities are paying increasing attention to the integration of global talent as a cornerstone of their workforce strategies. As the foreign-born population of Greater Des Moines (DSM) increased by nearly 50% from 2010-2020, the second-highest rate increase in the nation, the Greater Des Moines Partnership (The Partnership) sees an opportunity to ensure that these new residents are part of an inclusive regional economy. Given the continuing low unemployment rate in DSM, there is also a need to connect area organizations to these workers effectively and to build support systems to help all workers succeed together.

In the fall of 2015, The Partnership and the Partnership for a New American Economy (NAE) developed a pilot program aimed at promoting a regional approach to immigration issues. The purpose of the effort was to ensure that foreign-born persons have the education, preparation and connections necessary for success to reach their ultimate potential in DSM.

Since this pilot study, The Partnership has carried out a variety of initiatives toward increasing the region's global profile. Some highlights include:

- The establishment and launch of the Global Insurance Symposium and Global Insurance Accelerator with the Iowa Insurance Division, the Iowa Economic Development Authority and other partners, which attract industry leaders from across the globe.
- The creation and launch of Global DSM Trade and Investment Strategy in collaboration with the Brookings Institution and J.P. Morgan designed to help Greater Des Moines companies increase exports and to attract more Foreign Direct Investment to DSM. Greater Des Moines was one of only 24 metros selected to create both an export and FDI strategy, and the Brookings Institution featured Des Moines on the front page of their 2016 "The Making of Global Cities: Stories from the Global Cities Exchange" report.
- Support for the Republic of Kosovo opening the first diplomatic office in the state of Iowa in Downtown Des Moines.
- The organization of Multicultural Receptions and Roundtables provides opportunities for those in DSM to develop new relationships with others who are passionate about building an inclusive community for the region.
- The creation of the Inclusion Summit provides attendees an opportunity to discover tools and resources to build equity-centered practices, systems and organizations.
- Participation in the Regional Inclusive Growth Network through Brookings Metro. This network focuses on strengthening our inclusive economic framework for everyone who calls our region home.

Nearly a decade after the pilot study, The Partnership wanted to gather community input into the formulation of the next generation of global talent strategies. In partnership with Bâton Global, a community survey, focus groups and interviews were organized in summer 2024 to inform decisions on future directions.

# GREATER DES MOINES GLOBAL PROFILE

In the context of considering the region’s ability to integrate global talent, one can posit that people who have cultivated a global mindset, and a corresponding degree of cultural intelligence, will be better equipped to help newcomers integrate into their organizations. As part of the 2024 Workforce Insights Study: Skills for the Future, regional leaders and workers answered a series of questions to assess the global skillset of the current workforce.

The first questions asked respondents to assess their experiences with global work. More than half (53.38%) of the DSM workforce participating in the research has had some form of global work or study exposure. The most common global experience is working alongside foreign employees. This indicates that DSM has a foundation to be an attractive location for foreign-owned companies as the workforce has had exposure to global professional experiences.

EXPERIENCE	% OF RESPONDENTS
Work(ed) in the U.S. for a foreign-owned company.	5.25%
Work(ed) or volunteered outside of the U.S.	7.16%
Study(ied) outside of the U.S.	7.96%
Work(ed) in the U.S. with foreign employees.	33.01%
<i>None of the above</i>	46.62%

These individuals were then asked to share the nature and duration of their global experiences. Options included having participated in study or volunteer activities abroad, employment with a firm based outside the US, working alongside foreign colleagues, and work experiences in other countries.

DURATION OF EXPERIENCE/ EXPERIENCE	STUDY OUTSIDE OF U.S.	WORK IN U.S. FOR FOREIGN-OWNED COMPANY	WORK IN U.S. WITH FOREIGN EMPLOYEES	WORK OUTSIDE OF U.S.
< 1 YR	65.22%	18.68%	6.12%	48.39%
1-2 YR	12.32%	15.38%	17.31%	22.58%
3-5 YR	3.62%	28.57%	25.00%	15.32%
6-10 YR	2.17%	18.68%	19.06%	5.65%
11-15 YR	8.70%	12.09%	13.46%	4.03%
16-20 YR	4.35%	3.3%	9.44%	1.61%
21+ YR	2.90%	3.30%	8.74%	1.61%

As the region continues to welcome new cultures, respondents recommended that employers should consider additional communication and human skills learning and development opportunities to help foster an environment of belonging for all talent.

# STUDY FOCUS GROUPS

In August 2024, four focus groups were conducted at The Partnership. The groups convened included business leaders, educational experts, non-profit organizations, and policymakers.

Participants were guided through discussion around global talent, focusing on challenges, opportunities, ongoing or planned work in the space, possible initiatives to further work, and specific initiatives. As such, the overall envisioned outcomes of the conversations were to:

- Identify the most relevant trends, opportunities, and challenges in the region's global workforce experience and needs.
- Capture ongoing or planned relevant initiatives in the region to avoid duplication.
- Brainstorm potential initiatives to improve global talent engagement.

Form submissions, facilitator notes, and session transcripts were reviewed by the project team to identify recurring themes across challenges and opportunities, and to itemize ongoing work and potential initiatives. The focus group discussions, across the groups encompassing non-profit organizations, educational institutions, business leaders, and policymakers, highlighted both challenges and promising opportunities for enhancing the engagement of the foreign-born workforce in the region.

The following sections detail the general trends, challenges, and opportunities identified through these collaborative sessions. Feedback that each focus group offered for the Partnership to consider in future planning is also highlighted.

## FEEDBACK FROM BUSINESS LEADERS

*"Finding ways to build more accessible and culturally relevant communal spaces. That's something that we struggle with a lot. Building spaces that don't feel so homogenous or so exclusive that folks can't go out and feel comfortable going to the park."*

*"Globally...it has become increasingly difficult for non-native professionals in insurance and technology to obtain visas and find employment. This isn't a new trend, but the current political and social climate, along with the perceived opportunities, doesn't seem as realistic here."*

— Focus Group Participants

## FEEDBACK FROM BUSINESS LEADERS, CONTINUED

### GENERAL TRENDS

- **Brain Drain:** Younger workers sometimes leave for larger markets like Chicago or Colorado.
- **Shortage of Skilled Workers:** Challenge finding specialized talent like nurses and compliance/sales professionals.
- **Influx of refugee and immigrant populations:** The healthcare system and numerous industries are seeing an influx of foreign-born populations.

### CHALLENGES

- **Visa Caps:** Work visas, including H-1B for skilled professionals, H-2A for agricultural workers, and H-2B for other temporary workers, are capped, creating significant barriers to filling roles across industries. Obtaining waivers, such as J-1 waivers, is also challenging.
- **Immigration Barriers:** Ongoing immigration challenges, including uncertainty around programs like DACA, hinder employers' ability to hire and retain international talent. The lack of consistent immigration reform exacerbates this uncertainty.
- **Lack of Infrastructure and Social Support:** Many foreign-born workers face difficulties in accessing affordable housing, childcare, and transportation options.
- **Cultural and Social Integration:** Foreign-born workers struggle with a lack of integration into the broader community and feel disconnected.

### OPPORTUNITIES

- **Expanding Apprenticeship Programs:** Build on existing momentum by connecting more students and job seekers to these opportunities, including expanding apprenticeships beyond traditional industries.
- **Expanding Youth and Education Engagement:** Programs like middle school and high school internships, career camps, and partnerships with organizations.
- **Upskill:** Provide learning opportunities for the current workers to enhance skills related to working across dimensions of cultural difference.
- **Community and Cultural Spaces:** Develop more culturally relevant and accessible communal spaces for foreign-born workers and their families, fostering a stronger sense of belonging.

### POTENTIAL INITIATIVES

- **Targeted Marketing for Foreign-Born Professionals:** Amplify the region's strengths through marketing and storytelling.
- **Data-Gathering:** Gathering baseline data on the foreign-born workforce.

## FEEDBACK FROM NONPROFIT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

*“One of the things as an organization we’re seeing is that we have all kinds of jobs, but it’s the social supports that these individuals need - whether it’s transportation, or child care, or English as a Second Language - those additional supports that aren’t traditionally employer supported are needed to help them.”*

*“There’s this group of people that want to work and we want them to work but it’s the how, and so how can we bridge that cultural gap and teach soft skills or how to live and work in this culture and how it’s different than some other culture because those things are huge barriers to successful employment.”*

— Focus Group Participants

### GENERAL TRENDS

- **Migration Patterns:** There is a noticeable outflow of young people, particularly college graduates, moving to other states or their home countries. At the same time, some are returning to DSM to start families.

### CHALLENGES

- **Language Barriers:** Many foreign-born workers, particularly refugees, face language barriers that limit their ability to integrate into the workforce.
- **Cultural Differences:** Understanding of workplace norms, soft skills, and how to live in this culture.
- **Lack of Infrastructure and Social Support:** There is a need for wraparound services such as transportation, childcare, and mental health support to help foreign-born workers, particularly those coming from traumatic backgrounds.
- **Credential Recognition:** Foreign-born workers often face challenges in getting their home country credentials recognized, requiring them to pursue additional education or training despite being qualified in their own countries.

### OPPORTUNITIES

- **Inclusive Training:** Employer led or supported training for inclusive leadership development.
- **Employer Support and Education:** Help create systems and processes that support foreign-born workers.
- **Flexible Schedules:** Accommodate family structures.

## FEEDBACK FROM NONPROFIT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, CONTINUED

### POTENTIAL INITIATIVES

- **Resource Aggregator:** Aggregate services and resources from various nonprofits and businesses to streamline support for foreign-born workers.
- **Expand after-school and workforce readiness programs:** Strengthen existing after-school programs that are successfully preparing students in the Des Moines Metro for college and careers e.g., the Career Ready Collective sponsored by the Legacy Project and Sammons Financial.
- **Provide trauma-informed, culturally intelligent training:** To support the needs of refugees.

## FEEDBACK FROM EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

*“It’s increasing harder to keep our international student population engaged because our overall view is that a lot of our corporate partners have adapted a universal ‘we do not hire international students’ mentality so we’re doing everything that we can to lessen those barriers to the extent that we can.”*

*“I’ve had more international students in my inbox the past last semester than I’ve ever had before, actively seeking work in areas where our players are actively seeking people, and we can’t get them together.”*

— Focus Group Participants

### GENERAL TRENDS

- **Increased Need for Practical Work:** More students are seeking opportunities to work or gain practical, real-world experience while pursuing their studies.
- **International Students Enrollments:** Some institutions are seeing steady or increasing enrollment of foreign-born students, driven partly by parents’ perceptions of Iowa being a safe place for their children to study.
- **Increasing Urbanization:** Urban centers are experiencing growth, attracting both local and international talent, and there is opportunity in rural centers.

### CHALLENGES

- **Perceived Difficulty in Employing International Students:** There is a perceived barrier to hiring international graduates, so retaining foreign-born students after graduation is difficult.
- **Lack of Awareness of Opportunities:** Both foreign-born and rural students may lack awareness of career opportunities available within the state.
- **Perception of Iowa as a Small Town:** Many students, particularly those from outside the state, perceive Des Moines as a small town with limited opportunities.
- **Political Environment:** The socio-political climate in Iowa is deterring both international and domestic talent from choosing Iowa for employment or study.

## FEEDBACK FROM EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS, CONTINUED

### OPPORTUNITIES

- **Partnerships with Industry:** There is potential to build stronger partnerships between educational institutions and local industries to connect international students seeking work and employers seeking people.
- **Experiential Learning Programs:** Programs that offer internships or co-op placements, even at early stages of students' college careers.
- **Talent Attraction through Housing Solutions:** Addressing issues like affordable and rotational housing for internships could improve the experience for foreign-born and out-of-state students.
- **Expanding Accessibility:** There is a need to increase efforts to connect rural and foreign-born students with career opportunities.

### POTENTIAL INITIATIVES

- **Leadership Collective:** A proposed initiative would involve creating a leadership collective, or coalition of local employers, educational institutions, and policymakers, to discuss project initiatives.
- **Scaling Up Experiential Learning Opportunities:** Expanding internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships to reach students earlier in their education.
- **Branding and Storytelling to Attract Talent:** There is an opportunity to improve how the region markets itself to foreign-born talent, focusing on DSM as an attractive and inclusive place to live and work.

## FEEDBACK FROM POLICYMAKERS

*“There’s opportunity to motivate our businesses to build the skills of their employees... How can we encourage businesses to provide English language and digital literacy and develop culturally competent leaders? If we don’t have mid-level leaders, why are we not upskilling and promoting the abundance of front-line workers to the next level position?”*

*“A trust factor must be built with whoever is recognized as the community leader; this is absolutely necessary to make any inroads or connections with those communities.”*

— Focus Group Participants

### GENERAL TRENDS

- **Population Growth from Immigration:** There has been a noticeable increase in refugees arriving in Iowa.
- **Skills Gap:** The local labor market has a shortage of skilled workers and there are concerns about the aging workforce.

## FEEDBACK FROM POLICYMAKERS, CONTINUED

### CHALLENGES

- **Language Barriers:** Limited English proficiency hinders many foreign-born workers from obtaining higher-skilled positions or advancing in their careers.
- **Lack of Infrastructure and Social Support:** Inadequate housing and services to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee workers.
- **Political Environment:** Political and social attitudes create the perception that Iowa is not welcoming or inclusive.
- **Representation:** Lack of diverse leaders in the community.
- **Upskilling:** The opportunity for upskilling can presents challenges for immigrants who may have limited resources.

### OPPORTUNITIES

- **Employer Training Programs:** Businesses have the opportunity to create upskilling programs for immigrant workers, including language training, digital literacy, and job-specific skills.
- **Building Relationships with ECBOs and Faith-Based Organizations:** Ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) and faith groups can serve as liaisons and foster trust.
- **Technology:** Use new technology to bridge language barriers in the workplace.
- **Marketing:** Promote success stories and positive narratives around global talent.

### POTENTIAL INITIATIVES

- **Intentional Engagement with Foreign-Born Communities:** Create targeted outreach strategies to engage foreign-born populations and ensure their voices are represented in decision-making processes.
- **Partnership with ECBOs:** Build strong partnerships with ECBOs fostering trust.
- **Streamline Efforts:** Unite community organizations under one roof to streamline efforts and provide mentorship to help smaller non-profits upskill and build confidence in supporting foreign-born workers.
- **Cultural Mentorship Programs:** Support mentorship programs that allow business and community leaders to learn from foreign-born communities, improving cultural understanding and building trust for better collaboration.
- **Advocacy for Government Support:** Develop advocacy efforts for government funding and legislative changes to support initiatives that address the needs of foreign-born workers.
- **Incentivizing Employer Engagement:** Provide tax credits, grants, or other incentives for companies that hire and retain foreign-born talent could encourage more employers to participate in these initiatives.

# OVERALL THEMES

These sessions revealed a range of systemic barriers such as language proficiency challenges and inadequate social infrastructure. They also identified key opportunities to support the successful integration of foreign-born workers. The following summary highlights common themes from the focus groups, offering insights into initiatives that could be implemented to enhance foreign-born workforce engagement.

## CHALLENGES

- **Infrastructure and Support Services:** Limited access to essential wraparound services like affordable housing, childcare, transportation, and mental health support.
- **Language Barriers:** Limited English proficiency remains a major barrier for foreign-born workers.
- **Technical, General, and Cultural Literacy:** Many foreign-born workers struggle with workplace norms, soft skills, and overall US cultural literacy.
- **Limited Resources for Individual Upskilling:** Foreign-born workers face challenges in accessing resources for upskilling opportunities.
- **Trust Deficit:** A lack of trust between the foreign-born community, businesses, and organizations hampers collaboration and integration efforts.
- **Barriers to Foreign-born Hiring:** Strict visa caps, lengthy documentation processes, and limited understanding of the processes involved in hiring foreign-born workers create significant obstacles for employers.
- **Lack of Awareness Among Foreign-born Workers of Available Work and Resources:** Many foreign-born individuals are unaware of the job opportunities and resources available to them, partly due to language barriers and lack of access to targeted outreach.
- **Lack of Publicizing or Marketing Achievements:** Success stories and opportunities related to foreign-born workers are often under-publicized.

## OPPORTUNITIES

- **Leadership Collective:** Create a coalition of local employers, educational institutions, and policymakers to advocate for policy changes and funding.
- **Resource Aggregator:** Aggregate services and resources from various nonprofits and businesses to streamline support for foreign-born workers.
- **Capacity-Building for ECBOs and Faith-Based Organizations:** Bring these organizations to the table to help bridge gaps between foreign-born workers and local opportunities.
- **Employer Education:** Educate business on best practices, global talent availability and needs, and cultural training.
- **Integrating Language Training into Work:** Embed language learning and job-specific language skills into workplace training programs.
- **Engaging the Unskilled Workforce:** Connect unskilled or low-skilled workers with entry-level job opportunities that offer pathways for training, skill development, and career advancement.
- **Promoting Success Stories:** Amplify the region's strengths through targeted marketing and storytelling that focuses on the contributions of foreign-born professionals that could enhance the region's attractiveness and inclusivity.

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