



Lifting Barriers to African Talent Mobility

A Project of the World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Migration

Flexible immigration procedures are required to facilitate the easy movement of skilled workers between countries and business venues. Around the world tension has arisen between governments concerned to fulfil their sovereign responsibility to manage migration, and the needs of businesses to secure access to the most talented people. Often operational investment decisions are the result, at least in part, of the ability to fill needed skill sets from accessible talent pools. As more countries enter the global competition for talent, innovative policies for resolving this tension have emerged, including preferential visa regimes and quota procedures.

One region that has tended to lag behind is Africa. While the free movement of labour is a principle enshrined in certain sub-regional agreements, often it is either not ratified or effectively implemented, while in other parts of Africa obstacles to mobility, even of talented Africans, are prohibitive, time consuming or costly. Not only does this thwart innovation and business competitiveness, it may also contribute to the so-called 'brain drain' that takes skilled Africans away from their own continent. For many businesses in Africa it is easier to employ a skilled non-African expatriate than a skilled African expatriate. Overall barriers to African talent mobility are a drag on the continent's growth and economic performance.¹ Freer movement of talented people is becoming an increasingly important issue to address as African countries pursue policies designed to encourage economic growth.

To respond to this challenge, the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Agenda Council on Migration has launched a new project focusing on lifting barriers to African talent mobility. We have developed a pilot survey instrument and approached a number of multinational corporations across a range of sectors working in Africa.

Barriers to African Talent Mobility

Across 17 African countries,² barriers to recruiting talented Africans fall into five main categories: inappropriate visa requirements; restrictive quotas; procedural obstacles; recognition of qualifications, and insufficient capacity:

Visa requirements

Surveyed companies identified a range of visa-related obstacles across numerous African countries. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, the number of different visas required (entry, exit, working establishment) was reported to have become burdensome. In Nigeria the eligibility criteria for a visa for a skilled worker were considered to be too demanding. In the case of one specific visa in Senegal, it was unclear what sort of work permit could subsequently be issued.

Quotas

A number of African countries covered by the survey promote a national preference system by imposing a quota on the number of foreign workers – 10 percent in Gabon, for example – or their sectors. Quotas are often employed as a method for protecting the national labour force; but several companies were concerned either that they were

¹ WEF Global Agenda Council on Migration (2013) *The Business Case for Migration*, Geneva: WEF

² Algeria, Cameroon, Chad, DRC, Egypt, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda

unnecessarily prohibitive, or that they were not applied consistently. In both cases quotas risk reducing the supply of talent to business rather than promoting local employment, especially where they are not regularly revised.

Procedures

In the majority of countries covered by the survey, procedural obstacles to applying for, processing, and renewing visas and work permits were reported. At the application stage, problems ranged from a lack of published information on visa requirements (Algeria, Uganda) through a lack of uniformity in visa requirements between different Embassies and High Commissions (Nigeria, South Africa) to inconsistency in instructions concerning supporting documentation such as education certificates (Egypt, Uganda). An inordinate processing time was reported in Algeria, Chad, Tanzania and Uganda; in Ghana the processing fee was considered too high; and in two other cases concerns were expressed about the discretionary power of immigration officers. In Madagascar and Swaziland responding companies had experienced difficulties in having work permits renewed.

Qualifications

In a number of the countries, it was reported that in order to be eligible for a work permit / visa, it is required to hold formal qualifications (such as a degree or diploma) relating to the position to be filled. The effect is to exclude candidates who do not hold formal qualifications, but whose in-work training, experience and vocational skills mean that they are amply qualified for the role.

Capacity

In a number of countries referred to by the respondents, these and other obstacles arose not necessarily because a legal or policy framework was absent, but because there was felt to be a lack of capacity to implement the framework. Across several responses and countries, concerns were expressed about a shortage of staff, a lack of trained staff, misunderstanding of the procedures, and too much individual discretionary power.

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We asked companies what the consequences of these obstacles were. Responses ranged from the practical – time-consuming and costly; to business impacts – inability to attract talented workers and even intra-corporate transferees; to impacts on the national economy, for example where quotas are resulting in skills gaps in the labour market that cannot immediately be filled locally. For these and more reasons, lifting barriers to the mobility of talented Africans should be a priority. In addition to a range of country-specific observations, our project has identified the following preliminary recommendations:

- Development of online systems to make processes accessible and transparent
- Where quota systems exist ensure that they respond more accurately to labour market requirements
- Simplification of visa and work permit application and renewal procedures
- Coordination in particular between labour, economic affairs, foreign affairs, and immigration ministries
- More effective consultation between government and the business sector
- Country-level training of immigration officials and consular agents
- Greater flexibility with respect to the recognition of qualifications
- Development of a mobility index on the performance of different countries with regard to talent mobility

Next Steps

The WEF Global Agenda Council on Migration will continue to survey large multinational companies and medium-to-large African companies, and also expand the survey to African governments, focusing on cooperative solutions.

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