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A Balancing Act in Times of Crisis: Inclusion at Work and Career Advancement of Migrants in Austria

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Introduction

Recent events, foremost the Covid-19 pandemic have globally affected labor markets and employment of migrants and other vulnerable groups such as refugees. In connection with well-known challenges that migrants face when entering labor markets in receiving societies, these events lead to the following questions to be addressed in this chapter: *How do major crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic impact migrants' inclusion at work and their career progression? How can organizations support such inclusion?* We address these questions in the context of Austria, an EU member state, with a sizeable migrant population, and a complex web of employment-related integration support for these.

Migrants face multiple challenges when entering the receiving country's labor market and aiming to progress in their careers. These challenges are context dependent (Aigner & Bešić, 2023), and crisis might exacerbate them (Bešić & Aigner, 2023). At the macro level, migration and integration policies, as well as policies addressing the recognition of qualifications (Kirilova et al., 2016; Stadler et al., 2010), affect employment, career development, and the overall integration processes. At the organizational level, company policies can have an impact on migrants' inclusion at work and their career

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perspectives (see Ortlieb et al., 2021; Barnard et al., 2019; Bendl et al., 2010, 2012). And at the individual level, migrants, despite frequently being highly qualified, are thus often discriminated against (see Weichselbaumer, 2017) and end up in low-wage professions, characterized by little chance of career development (Aigner, 2019; Harris & Todaro, 1970; Piore, 1979).

To better understand these challenges and their role in migrants' inclusion and career progression in light of the global pandemic and its impacts regarding the ethnically diverse workforce in the specific case of Austria, in this chapter, we position ourselves in the career-related literature (e.g. Zikic & Klehe, 2021; Crowley-Henry et al., 2018; Zikic, 2015; Bendl et al., 2012). Various studies have addressed challenges migrants face when entering receiving country labor markets (e.g. Syed, 2008; Shirmohammadi et al., 2019); however, less is known about their agency in dealing with such challenges, especially in a crisis setting. By addressing strategies migrants employ with regard to employment and career progression during a crisis, this chapter sheds light on the individuals and their adaptation to the changing environment. We contribute to career literature by showcasing various paths migrants take to progress in their careers in challenging circumstances, and we thus answer calls for a better understanding of migrant career trajectories in different contexts (see Crowley-Henry et al., 2018).

In terms of our methodological approach, we conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with HR managers, representatives of support organizations, and migrants between 2020 and 2022 in Austria. The qualitative data analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

We proceed in this chapter by first outlining the literature, and second, our methodology, before addressing the findings as well discussing these in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Migrant Inclusion at Work and Career Trajectories: Pluralist Challenges and Agency

The challenges migrants face when entering labor markets and aiming for career progression are well known and multifaceted. The vulnerability of migrants at the workplace and at the intersection of labor markets at macro, meso, and micro level is caused by problems related to overall national contexts, networks, employment relations, and individual acculturation (see Lee et al., 2020).

One challenge at the macro and meso level consists of positioning migrants in meaningful employment, which fits their skills and educational background. In practical settings, however, de-skilling and de-qualification processes often take place upon entering the receiving country's labor markets, when education and qualifications acquired in the country of origin are not recognized, and migrants are frequently positioned in low-skilled or at least lower-skilled employments than they are qualified for (Kirilova et al., 2016; Stadler et al., 2010; Currie, 2007). The dominant narrative deploys that pre-migration-acquired qualifications and abilities remain in theory celebrated assets, however, in practice turn into a barrier for career development. Thereby, target policies need to be addressed to reduce barriers to meaningful employment and employment discrimination, which, in turn, have negative effects on overall settlement processes (Udah et al., 2019).

At the organizational level, company policies can have an impact on migrants' inclusion at work (see Ortlieb et al., 2021; Barnard et al., 2019; Bendl et al., 2010, 2012). The praise of the promotion of equality and diversity, in turn, in practical settings changes to inequalities in accessing the workplace and social inclusion at the workplace (Omanović & Langley, 2023). Successful organizational integration is associated with language skills, the acquisition of social knowledge and skills, as well as networks with colleagues (Rajendran et al., 2020). The attitude of employers (Fossland, 2013; Schein, 1988; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Omanović & Langley, 2023), hard and soft barriers, can be counteracted by the provision of language-support programs, mentoring programs, and a positive work climate (Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2022), which organizations in theory provide, but in practice often fail to implement. Additionally, as a result of crisis, companies face a lack of funding for labor market and company integration programs (see Ortlieb et al., 2021), which, moreover, limits the measurements that can be directed toward successful work integration and career progression of migrants. In addition, support organizations responsible for labor market integration measures and initiatives shifted their focus elsewhere (e.g. on furlough programs) during the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving limited focused support (see Bešić et al., 2021).

At the individual level, migrants, despite frequently being highly qualified, are often discriminated against (see Weichselbaumer, 2017) and are found in low-wage professions, characterized by little chance of career development (Aigner, 2019; Harris & Todaro, 1970; Piore, 1979). Mismatched employment often leads to settlement difficulties, precarious work contexts, accreditation problems, and identity-based discrimination (Sert, 2016). Lack of meaningful integration in the labor market, combined with a lack of German language knowledge, or an absence of networks and support measures

(Brücker et al., 2014; Esser, 2006) accelerate the social exclusion of migrants, thereby counteracting successful long-term settlement. Crises such as Covid-19 accelerated existing inequalities, and processes of social exclusions, counteracting settlement processes all the more (Barker, 2021; Bešić & Aigner, 2023). Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the digital divide and thereby obstructed job applications, participation in training, and successful employment throughout times of social distancing during Covid-19 (Bešić et al., 2021; Aigner & Bešić, 2023; Barker, 2021).

Fewer studies address migrant agency within job search and employment, which is, as we show further below, crucial in unfavorable times such as the Covid-19 crisis. Still, research has shown how migrants can proactively move toward better employment quality including, for example, career planning (see Zikic & Klehe, 2021; Bešić & Aigner, 2023).

Overall, studies suggest that career patterns of migrants (including skilled migrants) are affected across the aforementioned levels. Crowley-Henry et al. (2018) in their systematic literature review of skilled migrants' careers identify career patterns instead of career paths, which can vary due to the multifaceted factors that affect job entry and progression in receiving societies. As we show in our results further below, the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic have led to a rethinking of employment and career trajectories by migrants.

Austria's Culturally and Ethnically Diverse Labor Force

Austria has a long-standing history of immigration, shaping its sociodemographic profile and diversity of workforce. From the 1960s and 1970s onward, labor migration, specifically, the guest worker migration from Turkey and former Yugoslavian countries, shaped Austrian post-Second World War history of immigration (Aigner, 2017). Throughout the 1990s, refugee movements, such as those occurring as a result of the break-up of former Yugoslavia, further defined the immigration history and, in consequence, the ethnically diverse workforce of contemporary Austria. The 1994 Austrian membership of the European Union, on the one hand, and the EU enlargements of 2004, 2007, and 2013,¹ on the other hand, additionally shaped—as a result of the free movement of labor policies of the EU—the diversity of the Austrian

¹ EU enlargement 2004: Estonia; Latvia; Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Cyprus.

EU enlargement 2007: Bulgaria, Rumania

EU enlargement 2013: Croatia

workforce. Regarding the migrant population of EU member states in contemporary Austria, predominately citizens from Germany, Romania, Croatia, and Hungary reside (Statistic Austria, 2022). Regarding third-country nationals, citizens from Serbia, Turkey, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, as well as Afghanistan, Syria, and, lately, the Ukraine, reside in Austria, a considerable number of those having entered as refugees (ibid.).

Recently, two main refugee movements have increased Austria's workforce diversity. The first, predominately originating in Afghanistan and Syria, peaked in 2015 with approximately 88,000 refugees entering Austria (ibid.; BMI, 2023). However, subsequently, the overall number of asylum seeker numbers dropped between 2019 and 2021, but peaked again in 2022, with over 112,000 applications, predominately from Afghanistan, India, Syria, and Tunisia (ibid.; BMI, 2023). Additionally, since February 2022, approximately 95,000 displaced persons from Ukraine have entered Austria by early 2023 (ÖIF, 2023). Over 70% of Ukrainian refugees are women and minor children (ÖIF, 2023).

As a result, a culturally and ethnically diverse workforce shapes the Austrian labor market at present. In 2021, approximately a quarter of the Austrian population (25.4%) had a migrant background, and 22% of the Austrian labor force (in total 839,632 persons) had no Austrian citizenship (Statistics Austria, 2022; BMA, 2022). The number of migrants in employment rose alongside the overall immigration rate, specifically, EU labor migrants of "new" EU member states since 2004 increased from 2020 to 2021 by 8% (17,197 persons) (BMA, 2022). Among the migrant labor force, in 2021, the majority of migrants (16%) were employed in the sectors of *manufacturing and trade*, followed by *catering* (11%), as well as the *building industry* (11%) (ibid). The sector of *health and social services*, in which 6% (50,717) of the total migrant labor force was employed, increased by 12% (5612 persons) within the sector from 2020 to 2021 (ibid.).

However, some sectors rely more heavily on migrant labor than others. For example, in the sector *agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry*, 53% of the employees have a migrant background, followed by the sector *catering and gastronomy* with a 51% share of migrant labor. In the sector of *catering* almost 50% of the migrant labor originated in the "new" EU member states,² 19% were third-country nationals from outside Europe, and 17% were European third-country nationals (ibid.). Additionally, the sector of the *building industry* with a 31% share of migrant workforce, followed by the sector of *transport and storage* with a 27% share of migrant workforce, rely strongly on migrant

²The "new" EU member states consist of EU member states joining the European Union after 2004.

workforce (BMA, 2022). In the *health and social service* sector, 17% of the labor force had a migrant background in 2021 (ibid.). In the *health care* sector, a quarter of the workforce came from “old” EU member states,³ 36% from “new” EU member states, and a further quarter originated from European countries outside the EU (ibid.).

Overall, the data explains that migrants are employed in a mixture of sectors, but that increasingly important sectors for migrants are the sectors of *health care* and *catering*. In addition, employments in those sectors may range from temporary low-skilled work to (in fewer cases) highly skilled jobs with options for career progression (Ortlieb et al., 2021).

Generally, the employment and labor market inclusion of migrants remains a challenge for policy makers, organizations, and individuals. On the one hand, institutional barriers (e.g. barriers with regard to the recognition of qualifications), and, on the other hand, discrimination at the labor market entry points, as well as the individuals’ lack of networks and credentials, coupled with the unfamiliarity with the labor market (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Verwiebe et al., 2019) contribute to challenges at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Austrian labor market faces shortages across specific sectors (e.g. in care and technology), which has led to a more vocal role of employers when it comes to enabling and including migrants in the labor market.

Methodology

To answer our research questions, *how major crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic impact migrants’ inclusion at work and their career progression, and how organizations can support such inclusion*, we conducted a qualitative study, based on 36 semi-structured interviews, in 2 separate spheres, to highlight the career advancement and employment opportunities of migrants during Covid-19 from differing perspectives. In Upper Austria, 18⁴ interviews with experts and officials and 18⁵ interviews with migrants were carried out. Mainly theoretical and snowball sampling (Patton, 2015; Denscombe, 2010) were

³The “old” EU member states consist of EU member states joining the European Union before 2004.

⁴The first nine expert interviews (E1–E9), which were carried out in 2020 and 2021 were conducted as part of a study on the impact of Covid-19 on labor market integration and work inclusion by the first two authors. The second set of nine expert interviews (E10–E18) were conducted by the third author as part of a dissertation project on labor market integration, work inclusion, and diversity management.

⁵The 18 interviews with migrants were conducted as part of the dissertation project of the third author.

used to reach out to experts as well as migrants. We interviewed 18 experts, including 3 HR managers, 2 project managers, 9 handling officers at employment support organizations, 2 trainers, 1 coach, and 1 social worker (see Table 14.1 for an overview). Furthermore, we interviewed 18 migrants, with differing countries of origin. The interviewees originated in “old” and “new” EU member states (e.g. Slovakia, Romania, Germany), but also arrived from outside the EU (e.g. Mexico, Kazakhstan, Iran), covering the age range from 28 to 60 years. The sample consisted of 7 men and 11 women (see Table 14.2 for an overview).

The interviews were conducted between November 2020 and August 2022 and took between 20 and 70 minutes. During the operationalization of the field work, we used two interview guides for experts, and a third interview guide for migrants. Both semi-structured interview guidelines for experts included questions which were directed at measurements taken to combat de-skilling processes, at support tools utilized by companies and support organizations to support labor market integration of migrants and refugees as such, to employ migrants in meaningful positions, before, during, and after Covid-19. Additionally, the implementation of support measures for career advancement was investigated in light of Covid-19. Migrants, on the other hand, were interrogated about their experiences of employment, their work placement in meaningful positions, their experiences of training and possibilities of career advancement, and workplace inclusion in light of Covid-19.

Table 14.1 Overview of interviews with experts

Officials	Gender	Job Title	Organization	Interview Date
E1	M	Handling Officer	Private support org. 1	2020
E2	M	Project Manager	NGO1	2020
E3	M	Handling Officer	Private support org. 2	2020
E4	M	Handling Officer	NGO2	2020
E5	M	Handling Officer	NGO3	2020
E6	M	Trainer	NGO1	2020
E7	M	Social Worker	NGO1	2020
E8	M	Handling Officer	APES	2021
E9	F	Handling Officer	NGO4	2021
E10	M	Handling Officer	Support Organization	2021
E11	F	Coach	NGO	2021
E12	M	Handling Officer	Support Organization	2022
E13	M	Handling Officer	Support Organization	2022
E14	F	Project Manager	Support Organization	2022
E15	M	Trainer	NGO	2022
E16	F	HRM Management	Company	2022
E17	F	HRM Management	Company	2022
E18	M	HRM Management	Company	2022

Table 14.2 Overview of interviews with migrants

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Age at		CoO	Education CoO	Additional Education Austria	Employment before migration	First employment after migration	Present employment
			immigration	24						
B1	M	31	24		Germany	Apprenticeship	Course	Butcher	Butcher	Quality management butcher
B2	F	52	31		Romania	University	Course	Sales pharmaceuticals	Research in timber products	Sales management
B3	M	31	28		Slovakia	University	No	Quality engineer	Industry consultant	Job seeking
B4	F	40	28		Moldavia	University	No	Translator; teacher	Sales personnel	Office work
B5	F	40	24		Romania	University	Course	Lobbyist	Department management	Pregnancy leave
B6	F	38	27		Slovakia	Nursing Diploma University	Nostrification of diploma	Nurse with diploma (DGKS)	Elderly care	Nurse with diploma DGKS
B7	M	40	36		Mexico	University	No	Research (waterpower)	Research	Research
B8	F	42	21		Slovakia	Nursing Diploma	Nostrification of diploma	Nurse with diploma (DGKS)	Elderly care	Nurse with diploma (DGKS)
B9	F	48	19		Romania	High School	No	Waitress and cleaner	Housekeeper	Low-skilled job production
B10	F	50	35		Kazakhstan	University	Repeat of the educational path from CoO	Management of hospital station; specialist doctor	Doctor	Specialist doctor

B11	F	45	35	Romania	Nursing Diploma	Nostrification of diploma	Nurse with diploma (DGKS)	Cleaner	Nurse with diploma (DGKS)
B12	M	28	24	Romania	Apprenticeship	No	Carpenter	Logistic and repair	Logistic and repair
B13	M	29	28	Libya	University	University	International trader	International trader	International trader
B14	F	53	33	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Nursing Diploma	Nostrification of diploma	Nurse with diploma (DGKS)	Low-skilled production	Nursing assistant
B15	F	29	23	Hungary	University	No	Student of midwifery	Cleaner	Midwife
B16	M	38	31	Iran	University	University	Quality manager, engineer	Music teacher	Store manager food trade
B17	F	44	28	Bulgaria	University	University	Student law	Law assistant	Consultant at IT company
B18	M	60	20	Iran	University	University		Newspaper sales	Self-employed physiotherapy

Note: CoO Country of Origin

The interviews were predominantly conducted online or by telephone (due to Covid-19 restrictions during the interview process) and were carried out to the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The digital interviewing process can be understood as equivalent to face-to-face interviews. One advantage ascribed to digital interviewing processes is the removal of the interviewer effect, as a greater social distance is created between the interviewer and the interviewee, while at the same time the interviewees feel more comfortable in their own home environment and are therefore more likely to give detailed answers to questions (Thunberg & Arnell, 2022).

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded with MAXQDA. The qualitative data analysis followed an inductive grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); therefore, it was “data driven”. Applying this approach, during the initial coding process open codes evolved out of the data material, in a second coding process by axial and selective coding, the main themes evolved. Those focus on (1) challenges and opportunities regarding employment and career advancement through training; (2) sector-specific career development strategies of migrants; and (3) meaningful employment in times of crisis and social integration at work. Those will be presented in the following section in detail, in which we aim to highlight how major crisis, such as Covid-19, affect migrants’ inclusion at work and career development, and what role HR management and support organizations play in the receiving country context, as well as the career advancement of migrants in light of the global pandemic with a specific focus on Austria.

Findings

Our findings show that crises such as Covid-19 impact in multiple ways the migrants’ inclusion at work and their career advancement. Furthermore, the findings indicate the drastic impact on the abilities of support organizations and companies to implement training measurements and provide paths to career advancement. Our findings point to multiple impacts of crises, often specific sectors were differently impacted than others, mostly accelerating existing barriers, as a result of social distancing and a consequent switch to digital communication, while at the same time, a number of positive side effects evolved. For example, the crisis triggered new forms of coping strategies adopted by migrants, which contributed to a restructuring and turn taking, a replanning, of career advancement or employments. Specifically, the following themes evolved: (1) *Challenges and opportunities regarding employment and career advancement through training*; (2) *career development strategies*

of migrants—sector-specific challenges and opportunities; and (3) Meaningful employment in times of crisis and social integration at work.

Challenges and Opportunities Regarding Employment and Career Advancement Through Training

During Covid-19, a major change occurred as suddenly the world went into lockdown mode and social distancing. Social distancing was followed by a unique switch to digitalization regarding work and employment-related measurements, from training to language courses, to job applications, and employment as such. This acceleration of digitalization became a challenge as well as an opportunity at the organizational level, the companies and the support organizations, but similarly affected migrants' employments and labor market integration (and beyond) equally. For support organizations, going digital resulted in managerial, technical, organizational, and financial challenges, both on an individual level and on an organizational level (e.g. Orru et al., 2021). The majority of experts from support organizations and company HR representatives pointed out that the digital divide was a challenge to overcome when reaching out to migrants, specifically, in regard to career advancement. A handling officer exemplified in this respect:

What was and still is a challenge, of course, is our support with application documents, because the clients, if they don't have a computer at home themselves, are then partly dependent on other people who help them to complete these application documents, and this is now an empowerment approach and to help the clients to become independent, [this situation/Covid-19] is really not ideal, because the clients cannot work on the applications themselves [.....]. (E5)

The majority of the interviewed migrants, on the other hand, and depending on their digital skills, were appreciative of the courses that were on offer and made use of the opportunity created by lockdowns and social distancing. However, career advancement courses and professional training courses were mainly provided by their employers, thereby only useable by and useful to already employed migrants, leaving specifically unemployed migrants and job seekers to their own devices (Aigner & Bešić, 2023). A 28-year-old migrant, who originally was a carpenter in Romania, and presently works in low-skilled employment in the logistics and repair sector reasoned:

Yes. Of course, that is also an advantage of the company where I work. Training courses, also for foreigners, for example, there are German training courses, in which

you can register and learn German. And this is always an alternative, particularly now in Lockdown with online German training courses, where you can learn German and so on. I think that's also good from the company's point of view, that there's such possibility and that the company provides this possibility and it's all paid for by the company. You don't have to pay anything or anything like that. (B12)

As pointed out by most experts and migrants, trainings provided in specific sectors, for example, for the technical sector, were difficult to deliver due to social distancing and the need to do training on site. The pandemic, therefore, also impeded training possibilities in some sectors due to the sheer impossibility to attend personally and face to face on site. A German migrant indicated in this matter:

Well, I would say that further training in the technical area already exists, partly because of the increasing technology. Everything is becoming more and more extensive, the machines are becoming more extensive and so on, so the technical staff has to keep learning and learning and learning. Further and further training, but the normal production employee is probably less likely to undergo further training. In the office area, I can't define it so precisely, whether or not, but it also depends on whether you think it makes sense or not. And now, in the Corona case, it is much more difficult anyway, so I would say that at the moment probably no one continues his education. (B1)

Career Development Strategies of Migrants: Sector-Specific Challenges and Opportunities

Overall, the majority of experts, as well as migrants, noted that the migrants' strategic response to the challenges of lockdowns, possible unemployment and furlough work, as a result of Covid-19 appeared twofold. First, it seemed attractive to make use of additionally available time to engage in further career development by participating in online courses, if such possibilities arose. Alternatively, university education or courses subsidized by employers were another option to take. Consequently, opportunities as a result of the crisis arose for migrants: Using the extra time often created by the circumstances of the pandemic to advance their skills and acquire additional qualifications. This was summed up by a handling officer of career advancement programs, from a support organization, the following way:

It was always latently there, but Corona has reinforced that 100%, that awareness, so to speak, "Now I also have the time, now I can also think". I have also noticed in

the counselling that in many cases the requests for a change of profession or a change of career have increased significantly. (E12)

A 29-year-old migrant from Libya, who worked in international trade, acquired a university degree in Libya and was at the time of interview in the process of further university education in Austria, exemplified the possibility of making use of the additional time to gather education:

Well, I started the master's program at the beginning of Covid-19. I had a little bit more time and that's when I had a little bit more time to study. And also, the company also welcomed it, because the studies were in a way related to my work. So, it was kind of an improvement to do that. So, it was both. It was my decision to take the time and the intention of the company was to support an employee's career development. The company, so HR, always looks at personal and career development programs for the team and when I came with the proposal, they helped me make that happen. (B13)

Second, as indicated by a large number of experts and migrants alike, it appeared a strategic response to overcome negative side effects of lockdowns and Covid-19 impacts, to switch careers specifically toward professions and sectors in demand, often essential sectors, such as health care (nursing). Such switch often occurred from sectors most adversely affected by Covid-19, and with most job losses or income cuts as a result of furlough work, such as occurring in the catering industry. The motivational factors to switch professions, as reported by the interviewees, included the interest in less precarious work situations, being in demand, and a raise in income. Shortages in specific labor segments were observed as opportunities for and by migrants, strategizing about taking different directions in their career professions, thereby professionally advancing and additionally being able to move to professions with higher incomes. In this respect, a handling officer of a support organization claimed that:

I've experienced it that way before, although now the urgency—or let's say—the clarity of how we [...] are dependent on care in hospitals or in nursing homes, so the awareness has risen, not only among legislators and employers, but also among migrants, migrant women, in the sense that "I'd have a job that's safe". Of course, you have to like that job, because it's not very pleasant, but I think that some awareness has already been created in the sense of "I'm going into an area where I'll have a secure job and a secure salary and where I have job prospects/perspectives". [...] This is a consideration that perhaps Corona has made people even more aware of. (E10)

Despite the recognition of such shortages by the macro-level organizations, for instance, by governments, the entry barriers for migrant workers were not lowered, when it came to specific qualifications needed, for those sectors in demand. According to most experts interviewed, while companies made an effort in recruiting, being aware of the situation of labor shortage, the legislative restrictions, nevertheless, remained in place. A handling officer from a support organization suggested:

I personally know 2 large companies, but basically it is the case that skilled personnel is really needed, especially in the medical field [...] although there are very rigid frameworks and structures. Whereby the companies can't help it, they actually make an effort and try to somehow to find personnel. But we have other obstacles and framework conditions that are difficult. Because the care sector is regulated, formal recognition is required, and without that it is not possible. Companies and entrepreneurs are trying very hard, but it is very difficult at the moment—difficult. (E11)

Contrary to sectors with labor shortages, other sectors, such as the catering sector, were affected the opposite way by Covid-19. People lost jobs or were sent into furlough work, and often appeared to have no other choice but to redirect and replan their careers, as was argued by a majority of experts and migrant interviewees. A handling officer reported:

The shortage of skilled workers has actually always been an issue, in this intensity and also due to Corona, I would see it much more intensified now, because the industry was affected by short-time work [furlough work] and therefore many people were forced to look for alternatives. So, an insane number of employees have now moved away from the catering industry. (E12)

Many of the interviewed migrants highlighted the change Covid-19 drastically caused for possibilities of employment. An Iranian migrant exemplified, that due to labor shortages, the pandemic had opened up further employment opportunities for migrants, albeit solely regarding specific sectors, which were in demand of labor.

But it is not so simple. [...] it is not easy because I have sent out more than 100 resumes and applications. It was not easy at all in the beginning. [...] - 7 years ago—as a normal employee, as a shelf supervisor in the grocery store, but they didn't give me a chance. They said "You are a foreigner, you don't know German and we'll give this chance to an Austrian". They said that so honestly. That was already very, very different—8 years ago.

Right now, it's great because all the stores need employees and they are giving opportunities to foreigners. At the moment everything is perfect, but 8 years ago everything was already full. I sent way too many applications, way too much with PES, again and again, but I couldn't get a chance. (B16)

Meaningful Employment and Social Integration at Work in Times of Crisis

The positioning of migrants in meaningful employment corresponding to their skills has been hotly debated prior to Covid-19 (Kirilova et al., 2016; Stadler et al., 2010; Currie, 2007). Language skills and cultural and social knowledge amount to essential assets for social integration at work (Fossland, 2013; Schein, 1988; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Omanović & Langley, 2023). A majority of interviewed experts from Austrian support organizations and companies argued that language skills were generally and independent of the crisis, a precondition for the recognition of educational qualifications acquired abroad. A handling officer indicated:

And the typical entry-level jobs often, because it's so often also about language barriers or the qualifications from the home country, if there is a university degree or another school degree, which are perhaps not yet recognized in Austria, or there are no certificates, then there are indeed already opportunities to catch up on these degrees in Austria, but of course you first need the language skills for it and that is a very long process. (E5)

Equally, the majority of interviewed migrants communicated similar points. An Iranian migrant with an engineering background from his country of origin also mentioned the importance of the ability to speak German to achieve successful labor market integration and meaningful job placements.

But I have been in Austria since 12/2012, you could say that. Since then, I have been in Austria. In the first year I couldn't work properly, because I was already working for a band and took part in concerts and so on, because I still had language problems. I could only speak English, but in Austria you really need German. you absolutely need German. And that's why I couldn't find a job [...]. (B16)

Often formal recognitions of university degrees obtained in the country of origin are considered essential for meaningful employment by Austrian companies (Titelbacher et al., 2021). In this project, a number of interviewed experts stated that reasons behind the rejection of home country

qualifications by companies can be—besides the recognition of the education itself—attributed to payment schemes. For companies, to employ migrants in low-skilled sectors, despite high-skilled qualifications, has multiple advantages, as reasoned by a support officer:

[...] there are also many companies that hire people with qualifications they have brought with them, but do not want to pay them[migrant workers] accordingly, but rather in auxiliary activities. And they demand formal recognition where it is not necessary. (E2)

Covid-19-specific impacts regarding meaningful employments were also reported by a majority of interviewed migrants. A viewpoint the interviewees repeatedly highlighted was related to a perceived *hierarchy of migrants* when it came to labor market integration and work inclusion, and, in consequence, meaningful employments. Covid-19 and subsequent shortages in specific sectors of the labor market appeared to be a game changer in those hierarchies, leading toward more equality in the workplace. An Iranian migrant observed:

Now it doesn't matter if you're a foreigner or not. But in the past, [...] it was the case that Austrians were always in first place, then EU countries. Austrians, then EU countries. Or you can put it this way: Austrians, Austrian citizenship, the current EU and then the other countries. You can say it like this. You have always been on the 4th place, that's why you could never find anything. But now for the past 2 years everything has become great, everything has changed. It has become much better, yes. With the current company it doesn't matter. [...] I think because of Corona, I think. [...] Because for 2 years it has already become quite better. (B16)

Finally, Covid-19 impacted on the overall work situation. Social distancing measures and the inability to work together with colleagues and meet them in person impacted the possibilities of the advancement of social inclusion at the workplace. A 40-year-old Romanian woman with a university degree reported, similar to a number of interviewees, on the inabilities to meet face to face during the pandemic:

The colleagues in my department work in various locations in Austria and the corporate headquarters are actually in [...]. Of course we meet somewhere for meetings—less so now—but before the lockdown or pandemic, we always met somewhere, and that was mostly in [...], because one of the colleagues was there and that was actually the middle ground between Western Austria and Eastern Austria. (B5)

Thus, although the pandemic-related restrictions have largely been lifted in Austria since mid-2021, various long-term impacts on work inclusion remain. For instance, the current situation at the labor market, with increased prominence of labor and skills shortages across sectors, partly as a result of the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the overall labor market, is favorable for job entry of migrants. On the other hand, local and global challenges around the recognition of qualifications and language skills as well as potential underemployment remain, but new developments at the policy level might ease the challenges for some migrants (see also Anderson et al., 2021; Sommarribas & Nienaber, 2021). For instance, the enlargement of opportunities for remote and flexible work, as well as the lowered entry barriers for skilled third-country nationals with experience in occupations of labor shortages (even without a formal degree), might simplify and lower barriers to employment for some migrants. Others, however, might remain marginalized, including those migrants already situated in the receiving country, in the case of our project, in Austria, but with limited chances for labor market entry and career progression (e.g. asylum seekers).

Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, we analyzed how major crises, such as Covid-19, affect migrants' career development and inclusion at work. Thereby we highlighted the barriers, challenges, and opportunities that a crisis like Covid-19 conveys.

Going digital caused challenges at the individual level of migrants' possibilities to participate in digital training courses as a result of the digital divide (Bešić et al., 2021; Aigner & Bešić, 2023). However, new opportunities were also created, as migrants understood the phase of lockdowns and social distancing, brought about by the pandemic, as an opportunity, and utilized strategies to turn the negative side effects into advantages, thereby planning and re-planning their careers (Bešić & Aigner, 2023). One common deployed response to the crisis was to turn to alternative employments in sectors in demand, such as health care and nursing. Those were perceived as better paid and with more secure employment contracts, partially opening up new career advancement opportunities. Moreover, career re-planning took place as a strategic response to unemployment or furlough work in sectors with low labor demand during times of crisis (such the catering industry). Migrants also turned to opportunities created by added available time as a result of the pandemic to pursue further education and gain additional qualifications, thus planning their career more carefully (see also Zikic & Klehe, 2021).

The positioning of migrants in meaningful employment corresponding to their skills appears to be obstructed by barriers of the macro-level legislations and policies, as well as around companies and employers insisting on additional qualifications on top of abroad-acquired education, or by excessive waiting periods to formalize and acknowledge in CoO-acquired qualifications. This is an issue globally (Kirilova et al., 2016; Stadler et al., 2010; Currie, 2007) and has not changed during times of crisis, at least in the case of Austria (see also Dobusch & Kreissl, 2020). Additionally, it is, irrespective of the crisis, convenient for organizations to downgrade wages by employing migrants without recognition of skills and qualifications (Brunow & Jost, 2022). However, the Covid-19 pandemic might have also served as a game changer specifically in some sectors, where labor shortages occurred. Additionally, the hierarchical structures of a - by the interviewees detected- *migrant employment hierarchy* were broken up.

Successful social integration at work continues to be associated with language skills, the acquisition of social knowledge and skills, and the attitude of employers (Fosslund, 2013; Schein, 1988; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Omanović & Langley, 2023), which has been proven to be the case in the Austrian context also. The acquisition of language skills in the Austrian employment context remains a necessity for labor market integration, and even though language courses are provided, both by support organizations and employers, those were heavily impacted by the pandemic due to the challenges of going digital, in turn overall impeding labor market integration. Furthermore, a positive work climate and so-called welcome culture as a precondition for successful integration at work (Gabrielli & Impicciatore, 2022) continues to be a, in theory, celebrated asset, but in practical contexts, as outlined in our findings, only partially operationalized, whereby in times of social distancing, social integration in work was hindered by little possibilities of social interactions.

Hence, the pandemic caused disruptions to pathways toward successful work integration. The impact of Covid-19, a global crisis, subsequently, appears to have impacted—at least in the Austrian context—as a double-edged sword regarding labor market integration, work inclusion, and career advancement of migrants, creating opportunities, on the one hand, while accelerating challenges and drawbacks, on the other.

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