

EMPLOYMENT EXPECTATIONS

ADVANCED WORKPLACE INTEGRATION GUIDE

Employment is one of the most important components of successful integration into the United States. Work provides financial independence, builds professional networks, improves English language skills, and strengthens long-term stability for refugees and their families. Understanding workplace expectations in American culture is essential because employment practices, communication styles, and legal protections may differ significantly from those in South Africa.

This section explains the structure of American work culture, professional conduct expectations, and legal protections that ensure fair treatment in the workplace.

5.1 Work Culture in the United States

American workplaces operate according to clear professional standards shaped by federal labor laws, organizational policies, and cultural expectations emphasizing productivity and accountability.

Employers generally expect employees to demonstrate:

- Reliability
- Consistency
- Initiative
- Respect for authority
- Productivity
- Professional conduct

Understanding these expectations helps refugees maintain employment and advance professionally.

Reliability and Consistency

Reliability means arriving on time, completing assigned tasks, and communicating clearly with supervisors. In many American workplaces, attendance records and performance metrics are closely monitored.

Unlike some workplaces where flexibility may be common, U.S. employers often view repeated lateness or unexplained absences as serious concerns. Even small scheduling issues can affect performance reviews.

Consistency is equally important. Employers expect workers to maintain steady performance rather than alternating between high productivity and periods of disengagement.



Example Comparison

| South African Workplace Practice | U.S. Workplace Expectation |
|---|--|
| Personal circumstances may sometimes influence scheduling flexibility | Employees expected to manage personal challenges without disrupting work schedules |
| Verbal agreements common | Written policies strictly followed |

Demonstrating consistent performance builds trust and increases opportunities for promotion.

Initiative and Self-Management

American workplaces often reward employees who take initiative. This includes:

- Asking questions when instructions are unclear
- Suggesting improvements
- Completing tasks without constant supervision

Initiative reflects the broader American cultural emphasis on independence and self-reliance. Employers often interpret proactive behavior as leadership potential.

Respect for Authority and Workplace Structure

While American workplaces encourage open communication, respect for supervisors remains essential. Employees may share ideas or feedback, but they are expected to follow workplace policies and instructions.

Unlike hierarchical environments where authority may be unquestioned, American organizations often encourage collaborative dialogue. However, disagreement should always be expressed respectfully and professionally.

Productivity and Performance Expectations

Employers evaluate workers based on measurable performance indicators such as:

- Meeting deadlines
- Completing assigned tasks
- Maintaining quality standards
- Following workplace procedures

Performance reviews are common and may influence salary increases or career advancement.



Professional Conduct

Professional behavior includes:

- Dressing appropriately for the workplace
- Communicating respectfully
- Maintaining focus during work hours
- Avoiding personal conflicts

Professionalism is often viewed as a reflection of personal responsibility and respect for colleagues.

Understanding “At-Will” Employment

Most employment in the United States is classified as **at-will employment**. This means that an employer can terminate employment at any time for lawful reasons, and employees may also leave a job without extended notice.¹

At-will employment does **not** allow termination for illegal reasons such as discrimination or retaliation. However, it does mean that job security may feel different from employment systems in other countries.

Refugees should understand that maintaining strong attendance, communication, and performance habits is essential for long-term job stability.

5.2 Workplace Conduct

Professional conduct is essential for maintaining employment and building trust with employers and colleagues.

Employees must:

- Follow safety procedures
- Respect supervisors
- Avoid workplace arguments
- Refrain from political or religious debates at work
- Maintain professionalism at all times

Following Safety Procedures

Safety regulations are strictly enforced in many industries, including manufacturing, construction, healthcare, and agriculture. Employers are legally required to provide safe workplaces under Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations.²

Employees are responsible for:

- Wearing required protective equipment
- Reporting hazards
- Following training instructions

Failure to follow safety rules may result in disciplinary action or termination.



Respecting Supervisors and Team Structure

Even in workplaces that encourage open dialogue, supervisors retain authority over schedules, tasks, and performance evaluations.

Refugees should:

- Listen carefully to instructions
- Ask questions respectfully
- Avoid challenging authority in confrontational ways

Professional disagreement is acceptable, but tone and timing matter.

Avoiding Workplace Arguments

American workplaces often emphasize conflict resolution through structured processes rather than emotional confrontation.

If disagreements arise:

- Remain calm
- Speak privately rather than publicly
- Use formal channels such as Human Resources if necessary

Public arguments or aggressive communication may be viewed as unprofessional behavior.

Political and Religious Discussions

While freedom of speech and religion are fundamental rights in the United States, many workplaces discourage political or religious debates during work hours.

These topics can create tension or misunderstandings among employees from diverse backgrounds. Maintaining professional boundaries helps create a respectful environment.

Maintaining Professionalism

Professionalism includes:

- Respecting cultural differences
- Maintaining appropriate language
- Avoiding gossip or workplace drama
- Managing emotions during stressful situations

Professional conduct builds credibility and supports career growth.

5.3 Discrimination Protections

U.S. law provides strong protections against workplace discrimination. Refugees have the same legal rights as citizens and permanent residents to work in environments free from discrimination and harassment.



You are legally protected from discrimination based on:

- Race
- National origin
- Religion
- Gender
- Disability
- Age (40+)

These protections are enforced under federal laws such as:

- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA)³

Understanding Workplace Rights

Discrimination occurs when an employer treats someone unfairly because of a protected characteristic.

Examples include:

- Refusing to hire someone because of nationality
- Paying employees differently based on gender
- Denying reasonable religious accommodations

Harassment, including offensive comments or hostile work environments, may also violate federal law.

What to Do if You Experience Discrimination

If you believe your rights are violated:

- Document the incident, including dates and details.
- Report concerns to your resettlement agency or trusted advisor.
- File a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) if necessary.

The EEOC investigates workplace discrimination claims and enforces federal employment laws.

Role of Resettlement Agencies

Resettlement agencies often provide employment counseling and support for refugees experiencing workplace challenges. Case managers may help:

- Explain workplace expectations
- Connect refugees with legal resources
- Provide guidance on communication with employers

Seeking support early can prevent misunderstandings from escalating.



Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

The EEOC is a federal agency responsible for enforcing laws against workplace discrimination.

Employees can file complaints online or through local EEOC offices. Reporting discrimination is a protected activity, meaning employers cannot legally retaliate against workers for filing a complaint.

5.4 Building Long-Term Career Success

Understanding employment expectations is only the first step. Long-term success involves:

- Improving English language skills
- Pursuing education or certification programs
- Building professional networks
- Learning workplace communication norms

Many refugees begin in entry-level positions and advance over time as they gain experience.

5.5 Cultural Differences in Workplace Behavior: South Africa vs United States

| Workplace Area | South African Context | American Context |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Authority | Respect often formal and hierarchical | Collaboration encouraged but authority respected |
| Communication | Indirect or relationship-focused | Direct and task-focused |
| Time Management | Flexible in some environments | Strict scheduling expectations |
| Feedback | May be delivered privately | Often direct and immediate |
| Conflict Resolution | Relationship-based | Structured HR processes |

Recognizing these differences helps refugees adapt more quickly and avoid misunderstandings.

Conclusion

Employment expectations in the United States reflect cultural values emphasizing independence, professionalism, and accountability. Employers expect reliability, initiative, and consistent performance. Workplace conduct requires respect, professionalism, and adherence to safety rules.

Refugees are also protected by strong anti-discrimination laws that ensure fair treatment regardless of race, nationality, religion, gender, disability, or age.

By understanding these expectations and rights, refugees can build stable careers, maintain lawful employment, and contribute meaningfully to their communities.



Footnotes

1. U.S. Department of Labor – At-Will Employment Overview
2. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) – Worker Rights
3. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) – Laws Enforced by the EEOC
4. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services – Working in the United States

