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## **Settling Up**

By Tamara Straus

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## Settling Up

Upwardly Global places skilled immigrants in jobs worthy of their talents **BY TAMARA STRAUS**

IN 2000, WHILE WORKING for a national refugee resettlement organization in New York City, Jane Leu decided that the federally funded system of matching immigrants to careers was a failure.

“We didn’t have an incentive to focus on [the] quality” of the placements, she remembers of her six years of putting highly educated, English-speaking foreigners in low-skill jobs. “It was just about quantity.”

So with no funding, a borrowed laptop computer, and her kitchen table as a makeshift office, Leu started the nonprofit Upwardly Global, whose goal is to help highly skilled immigrants reclaim their careers in the United States.

The beginning was rocky. With no funds and no employees, Leu was limited to one-on-one sessions with job seekers, reaching out to foundations for grants, and making employers aware of a hidden talent pool: 1.3 million bilingual workers with degrees and professional experience in every possible white-collar profession.

Successes trickled in. By 2002, the organization received its first grant and hired its first paid employee. In 2003, Leu’s work was recognized by the Draper Richards Foundation when she became its first fellow, earning a \$300,000 grant.

Today, Upwardly Global employs 29 people to serve some 600 job seekers a year. With offices in San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, the organization also relies on its wide network of volunteers. Since 2006, it has helped place 400 people with 300 employers such as Google, Genentech, Wells Fargo, the Gap, Safeway, and the Fresh Air Fund. Although Upwardly Global remains a small nonprofit with an annual operating budget of less than \$2 million, it is widely credited for highlighting decades of “brain waste,” says Jeanne Batalova, an analyst at the Migration Policy Institute. It is also the first organization that reintegrates professional immigrants into the American workforce.

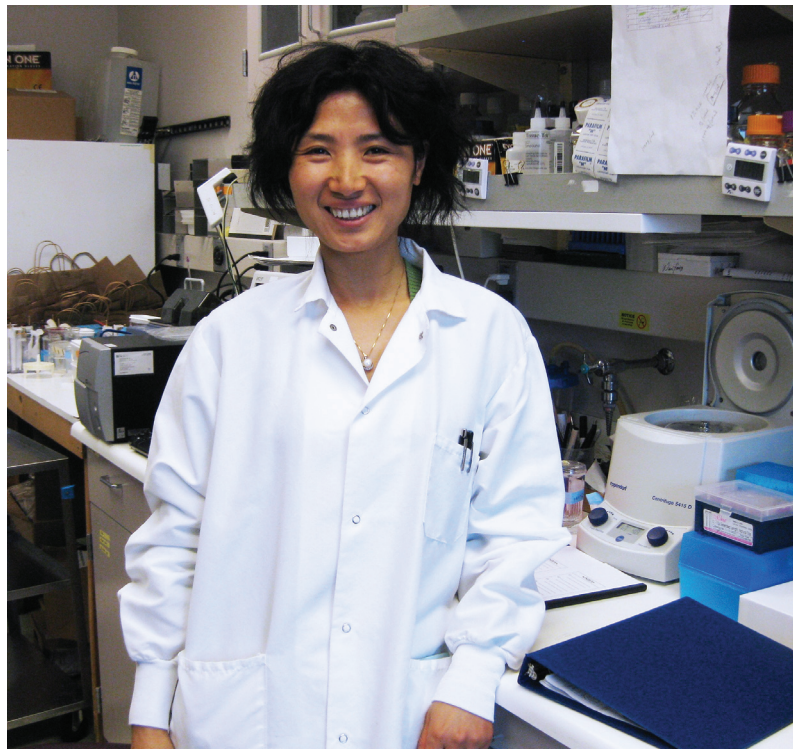
“For the most part, the United States didn’t pay to educate these immigrants, so it’s all a net gain for us, in terms of their entrepreneurship and tax dollars,” explains Leu. “Just a little bit of help unleashes their potential.”

“Simply put, our organization meets a long-unmet need,” agrees Nikki Cicerani, who became executive director in April 2009.

### JOB HUNTING, AMERICAN STYLE

Wenfang Shi first heard about Upwardly Global through a television advertisement in the summer of 2008, shortly after moving to

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*Without Upwardly Global’s help, Wenfang Shi had trouble pursuing her research career after moving to the U.S.*

Northern California to be with her husband. Having already served for four years as a postdoctoral researcher at Ohio State University, Shi assumed her job search would be different from that of other immigrants. Even without her U.S. workforce experience, Shi seemed to be an attractive job candidate. She holds a bioscience degree from one of China’s top five medical schools and worked as an associate professor in immunology at two leading Chinese research universities. She is the equivalent of an Ivy League academic.

But after applying for numerous jobs without getting an interview or even a callback, Shi felt demoralized. “All my life I was used to succeeding in all that I attempted, so this was a very big blow to me. I took it as a personal rejection,” she remembers.

At an Upwardly Global workshop, she learned that the path to getting a job in the United States is very different from in China. Shi’s Upwardly Global mentor helped her create an American-style

résumé that listed her job objective and skills, and craft a cover letter that translated her prestigious educational and employment background. Shi also learned the importance of such cultural signifiers as the firm handshake. “In China, a firm handshake would not be appropriate in any setting,” says Shi with a laugh.

Next, she applied for a job at Stanford University. Although Shi felt utterly qualified for the position, she again received no response. Her mentor suggested an aggressive course: telephone the hiring manager, ask specific questions about the position, and present her qualifications with ambition and confidence. Ultimately, the department invited her in, and after four rounds of interviews and a presentation, Shi now works as a research associate at the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University Medical Center.

Cicerani says that job-hunting experiences like Shi’s are typical for Upwardly Global clients. “In the United States, 70 percent to 80 percent of people find their jobs through networking,” she notes. “That is just not the case in the rest of the world.” If you go to a top university, she says, “you may take a single test and then just get the top job in the top company. The idea that you would have to network or interview is a foreign notion.”

As a result, a good half of Upwardly Global’s work is explaining the specifics of American job searches. Most of Upwardly Global’s clients—who must be authorized to work in the United States, proficient in English, and university graduates with two to 20 years of professional experience—are stumped by such interview questions as “How do you handle stress?” (The answer from one client: “I take a nap.”) To help its clients avoid such faux pas, Upwardly Global offers hands-on, eight-week workshops that include sessions on résumé writing, self-marketing, networking, interviewing skills, and “Surviving the American Workplace.”

### EDUCATING EMPLOYERS

From its inception, Upwardly Global has marketed itself as a resource not just for job seekers, but also for employers seeking to diversify their workforce and gain international expertise. Deloitte, the Pepsi Bottling Group, and JPMorgan Chase are among the multinational companies that have formed specialized partnerships with Upwardly Global. After JPMorgan Chase formed its partnership in 2006, the financial services giant quickly hired 22 Upwardly Global clients.

The nonprofit offers its partners access to both its talent pool and its educational workshops about hiring skilled immigrants. These workshops are eye-openers, says Cicerani, because recruiters often do not understand the challenges newcomers face in the American job market. “The level of comfort with hiring a candidate who has an accent, who doesn’t have U.S.-based experience, who graduated from a university they may not have heard of—creates resistance,” she says.

Michael Privitera, vice president for public affairs at Standard & Poor’s, a unit of the McGraw-Hill Companies, is a recent partner of

### NETWORK THE NEWCOMERS

Help immigrants understand American employment practices

Teach employers about newly arrived workers’ strengths

Partner with governments to harness immigrants’ talents

Upwardly Global. He heard about the organization on National Public Radio and thought its mission fit well with McGraw-Hill’s volunteer program and diversity initiatives. In October 2008, 15 job seekers were matched with 30 McGraw-Hill volunteers for an eight-week workshop. Privitera’s mentee, an urban planner from Minsk, Belarus, recently got a position in the New York City Department of Planning.

Privitera thinks that hiring highly skilled immigrants is a no-brainer. “To have profes-

sionals with other experiences, who grew up speaking other languages, and who have a better understanding in many cases of what markets in other parts of the world need and require,” he says, “really just gives the hiring company an advantage for information, market intelligence, and contacts.”

### WELCOME BACK

Next year, Upwardly Global will mark its 10th anniversary, as well as its second period of operating during a recession. The first, following the dot-com bust, occurred just after Leu founded the nonprofit.

The economic downturns have put added pressure on Upwardly Global to come up with innovative growth strategies, says Anne Kirwan, managing director of the San Francisco office. On the one hand, she notes, the organization has shelved its plans to open Upwardly Global offices in Minneapolis and Miami. But on the other hand, the Chicago operation used funding from the state of Illinois to create [www.CareersForNewAmericans.org](http://www.CareersForNewAmericans.org), a Web site that offers detailed information on Illinois’ licensing requirements for 11 professions. The state of Illinois has good reason to support this project: 26 percent of Illinois residents are immigrants, and the state is in need of trained professionals. Upwardly Global hopes to replicate this public-private partnership model with projects in other locations.

Upwardly Global is also working with the Welcome Back Initiative, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that advises immigrant health-care professionals. Welcome Back does not match its clients to employers, but it does have eight U.S. offices. Upwardly Global is thus “looking at how we can work together more closely and provide services in places where they’re already set up,” says Kirwan.

Government refugee agencies are likewise reaching out to Upwardly Global because they realize that they have little to offer professional job seekers, says Kirwan.

When will the work of Upwardly Global be done? Leu says she started the nonprofit “to fix a market failure” in which there was a supply of professional employees and an absence of demand from employers. So the end goal of the organization, she says, is “to create and fix the demand side of the equation.”

At that point, says Leu, “the market will be clear. The doors will be open to anyone who comes. We’ll have better systems to evaluate foreign education, and a standardization of credentials around the world. Then you’ll really see a free flow of labor in the same way you see the free flow of goods and services.” ■