



How migrant entrepreneurs navigate in the Covid-19 era?

Migrant entrepreneurs are quick learners who make the most of their time and resources. They are good communicators who are careful with money, deal with problems head-on and like to be challenged. For most of them, survival is key. They have set up their business in a host country, often but not always of their choice, having come a long way from war or a difficult political regime in their home country. Being their own boss means they can work longer, be more flexible and earn more.

Establishing oneself as an entrepreneur in a new country offers the opportunity and challenge to embrace new values and beliefs, learn new ways of thinking and doing and understand new business rules and processes. In most cases, migrant entrepreneurs do all of that in a new language. Language and intercultural skills are very important to them. Knowing the language of the host country helps with integration and business development. This is not only relevant in terms of interaction with customers and suppliers or co-workers and employees, but very important in terms of liaising with local authorities, government bodies and administration. Linguistic and cultural integration also helps with feeling part of the local community and understanding the local culture of the host country.

As we followed research in six European countries (Bulgaria, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK) we noted that although different countries may set different rules for their entrepreneurs in terms of the support they offer to them and the legislation that governs their migration and business set up, there are a number of key considerations that are the same for all migrant entrepreneurs irrespective of the country they settle in and their country of origin. And all of these now become more acute in the context of a pandemic.

Migrant entrepreneurs are high risk takers

Moving to a new country, learning a new language and culture, and having to absorb a new set of rules and ways of doing, means they take one of the most significant risks in their working lives. Risk will affect them and their families whether they move in with them or stay back home. But somehow, they turn risk into opportunity by keeping an open mind, working hard, remaining focused on their goals, and maintaining a flexible approach.

During national lock downs, migrant entrepreneurs continued to offer their services having to take risks either by 'defense', as some put it, reducing services and staff, reducing their own salaries to cover costs or 'attack' pushing their own boundaries by moving their business online, changing focus and trying new areas of work, for instance selling new products linked to Covid-19 without being sure how well they would sell.

Migrant entrepreneurs are flexible and agile

Whatever the sector they operate in, migrant entrepreneurs show a high level of flexibility and ability to adapt to new environments. Those who have been most successful are those who are able to take an



agile approach to their business, develop and grow against all odds, learn from adversity, and find solutions to any problem. Covid-19 has been the best example of this: those in hospitality quickly moved to either online services or delivery/take away menus, adapting their services, working methods and in many cases supporting their local communities.

Migrant entrepreneurs are true to their local communities

In their majority, migrant entrepreneurs are good at networking. They usually build relationships locally and often within the context of a local migrant community. This helps with building trust and creating relationships of business and family support. But those who take the extra mile of mixing both with the local migrant community and those from the host country are the ones that have the highest rate of success.

During the pandemic, those migrant entrepreneurs that were able to connect with charity initiatives to support those most in need such as the elderly, children and key workers at school and those suffering from poverty, were the ones that were mostly appreciated by both their fellow migrant friends and the wider local community. They will be the ones that will see the fruit of their efforts and their business growing more widely.

The future may not look easy for many migrant entrepreneurs as reports show a decline in some business sectors due to the pandemic. Hospitality and performing arts seem to be the ones mostly hit, but as we move to the second phase of local or national lock downs in many countries in Europe, small businesses will suffer. Those migrant entrepreneurs that have been successful with their business will continue to focus on one thing they know best: survival. But as they do that, they also know that the pandemic will have changed they way the operate their business forever. Those who never thought they would have online services are now seriously thinking of offering them. Those who have not considered to date to change their products and clientele are already making plans to do so. And those who had little engagement with locals, staying 'safe' in their bubble with other fellow migrants, may now think twice about their approach to the local communities.

Whatever approach they take, they know that it will not be easy, but the pandemic will have taught them once again to remain focused, vigilant and flexible.

This article was developed following research as part of the project ALMA: Access to Language Methods for Increasing Migrants' Abilities to Start Their Own Business. ALMA is a European cooperation project aimed at stimulating migrants to set up a new business, providing them with practical guidelines to run their business successfully. The project is co-funded by the EU initiative Erasmus + and brings together a partnership from six countries: Bulgaria, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK.