

MENDELEEV AND SPUTNIK

by Stephen Rosen

Five months and twenty days after I and my family arrived at JFK airport on a TWA flight from Rome, I started working. The plane was almost completely filled with emigrants from the U.S.S.R. It was possible from listening to their conversations to detect the various nuances in their moods—from joyful anticipation of an end to their emigration to anxiety at the approaching new hardships. A new society, new people, new language, a new job—these unknown factors always breed fear.

I do not know the average time spent by Soviet immigrants on their successful search for work in the U.S. I know that some of them have looked for work a year or more. There are other instances when this search was successfully completed within the first two months, an exception to the general rule.

There are at least two prerequisites to successfully gaining employment in the U.S. First, knowledge of the language and second, an understanding of the job market structure. An overwhelming majority of immigrants arriving in the U.S. lack both. Moreover, to study the job market one needs to know English. The best way to learn the language is most certainly at work while integrating into the American environment. To find work, you need good English; to acquire good English, you need work. But there is another critical factor. To learn the ropes of the job market, one needs to be guided by professionals through the sea of information on job-seeking techniques.

—Vyacheslav Kuteyev, applied mathematician (biostatistics)

Soviet scientific talent is now streaming westward. About 40,000 Soviet Jewish emigres are expected this year; perhaps several million will depart the U.S.S.R. in this decade. About 20 percent of the new arrivals are engineers and several percent are published professional scientists.

This wave of emigre talent is an extraordinary windfall for the U.S. economy, for U.S. science and technology, and for the academic, research, and corporate communities.

If Mendeleev, Sputnik, and surgical staples are striking examples of Soviet genius in science and technology, I can name hundreds of others: superb agricultural botanists, biotechnology specialists, biochemists, geneticists, virologists, ichthyologists, physicists, petroleum and hydro-geologists, neuroscientists, engineers, and technicians. Many have dozens, or even hundreds, of journal articles and double doctorates. Perhaps a few are future Nobel Laureates.

U.S. research directors and science managers now face challenging opportunities to hire such highly qualified cost-effective emigre talent with hands-on experience in science and technology. But these people have not yet learned American methods of self-marketing.

What should a prospective employer look for when considering a Soviet candidate?

Capitalism—what's that? Being a Soviet research scientist or high-level engineer is no guarantee of ignorance about capitalism...but it sure helps. Very few emigres know how to present the best facets of their experience and skills most likely to make money for their future employer. New emigres are uncomfortable presenting their most "bankable" talents up-front; "networking" their way into the U.S. economy; asking for advice about who to contact before applying for jobs. Make allowances: their interviewing skills are not on a par with their substantive technical knowledge.

Credentials. The Soviet Union has two different Ph.D.s. One, the "candidat nauk," is almost the equivalent of the standard U.S. Ph.D., requiring an original and publishable piece of research like the U.S. doctoral dissertation. The

other, the "doctor nauk," is bestowed after prolific research output, years beyond the U.S. doctorate. Ask to see credentials, stamped with a special Soviet Academy seal, or a U.S.-certified equivalent. Ask to see a candidate's list of patents or publications, with titles and journal citations in English, so they can be checked. Invite the candidate to: "Tell me about your work." Then listen critically to the caliber and quantity of accomplishments.

Depth of knowledge. Because they come from a planned economy, many emigres have highly specialized capabilities in unusual—and multiple—market niches. I know Soviet emigres with Ph.D.s in printing technology, foundry casting, friction, digestion, engineering cybernetics, and other specialties that U.S. markets have not identified—yet. Emigres will reward those managers who give them a chance to get up to speed and show what they know.

The language. An accent is a first impression, a minor distraction from an emigre's scientific or technical competence. Published emigres have good English writing and listening skills, but may require exposure to converse in fluent, idiomatic, functional English.

Compensation. Many emigres can be hired at entry-level positions until their language and marketplace skills are up to speed. A responsible manager understands that emigres are often eager—even zealous—to prove themselves on the job with diligence and dedication. After a few months at work, their true value emerges.

Temporary work. Many Soviet scientists and high-level engineers will not find their "dream job" in the U.S. immediately, and may be content to accept short-term assignments. If you offer this kind of work, be prepared to see an emigre-employee depart promptly once that "dream job" comes along...or to promote that person when justified. Because emigres come to the U.S. to escape persecution, they are highly motivated to succeed in their new country, their new life.

As Vyacheslav Kuteyev said after starting his first job: I am happy now; my wife, accepted in the Master's Program at Columbia University, is happy; my daughter, a student at Yeshiva of Flatbush—one of the best schools in New York, is happy; my three-year-old son is happy because his parents are happy.

And his employer, Seth Goldberg, M.D., says: His performance has been extraordinary. We're more than happy.

Stephen Rosen is chairman of the career-management and outplacement firm Celia Paul Associates, 1776 Broadway, New York, NY 10019, and chairman of the New York Association for New Americans' Science and Technology Advisory Board, 111 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003. Currently NYANA introduces new Soviet emigres to the U.S. academic, research, and industrial communities. It has resettled approximately half of all Jewish refugees who have come to the United States in the last forty years. These opinions are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of *Bio/Technology*.