

My First Job in America

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BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What was your first job in the U.S. (or anywhere)? Do you have a story about not understanding others or being misunderstood on the job?
2. What does a *barista* do?
3. What is your favorite coffee drink? How do you make it? Or how do you order it?

Barista at the Drive-Thru Window

My biggest challenge as an immigrant was being able to use my qualifications and experience to find work. In Brazil, I was a bilingual executive assistant with close to 20 years' experience in corporate administration. Before starting work, I got a bachelor's degree and master's degree in Education. Upon arriving in the U.S., I struggled constantly with the language barrier and people's assumption that immigrants are uneducated. With limited English, I couldn't communicate my professional experience or get recognition for my degree, so I had to settle for any job I could find. This was really hard emotionally and prevented me from making much money.

Eventually, a Brazilian friend of mine who owned a coffee shop offered me a job as a *barista*. I said my English was not too good, but he thought it was good enough. He said all I needed to do was take orders from customers at the drive-thru window. I was so happy to get a job at last; but my dream soon became a nightmare!

Wrong Orders, Dissatisfied Customers

First, it was so hard to hear and understand the orders that came through the speaker. Usually, I had to repeat the order two or three times to make sure I understood, and I often had to ask the customers to repeat themselves or speak more slowly. Most of the customers had little patience



A barista froths milk to make cappuccino. Photo by Daniel Case from <https://commons.wikimedia.org>.

with me and didn't want to take time to help me understand. I delivered a lot of wrong orders and had a lot of dissatisfied customers.

One customer got really angry and was very rude to me and told me to go back to my own country. (That was a painful experience.) Some customers tried to speak Spanish with me, but that was no help because I speak Portuguese, not Spanish. (They didn't ask me what language I actually spoke!)

Too Many Kinds of Coffee Drinks

Second, I had no idea that there are a thousand different ways to order coffee in the United States. (In Brazil, a coffee is a coffee – an espresso – and that's it.) *Americans are nuts about their coffee*, and they order it in so many different ways: "Can I have a large frozen *half caf* with double ice and

three Splendas, half coconut milk, half cream, and caramel on the side please?” What?? Too many words, too much information: what were they talking about? There were so many kinds of shots, sweeteners, milks, creams, flavors, chocolates, caramels, *OMG!* And then there was the food: plain bagels, everything bagels, many flavors of muffins and croissants, and all types of sandwiches. This was just too much for someone like me who doesn’t even drink coffee.

The first time a customer ordered “cream on the side,” I tried to figure out literally how to pour the cream down the inside of the cup. How could I keep it on the side of the cup, so it didn’t mix in? What was this nonsense way to serve coffee? I didn’t realize that “on the side” meant separated, in a different container.

Co-Workers Ready to Kill Me!

My manager *hung in there with me* for a while. He kept trying to help me and kept me on the job even when all the other staff were ready to kill me because of the number of customers who were getting upset and complaining that their coffee was wrong. There I was struggling to keep up with a bunch of teenagers to serve coffee and sandwiches. In Brazil, I was able to deal with high-level business problems and solve them in five minutes, but here in the U.S., I couldn’t handle serving a coffee! My self-esteem sank so low, and I questioned myself all the time. In the second month, I got fired.

Immigrants Do the Jobs No One Else Wants to Do

Now I look back, and I see that I learned a few things from this experience, even though it was very hard. I learned that usually only young or retired people and immigrants work at this kind of job, because most Americans want to do something that pays better. It’s supposed to be basic, easy work, but it wasn’t that easy for me because of the language. It was *definitely not my cup of... coffee!* I wish people in this country would appreciate and understand that most immigrants are

here to work hard and build a better life for themselves and their family. They often do work that other people don’t want to do.

Even if you don’t like the idea of immigration, you should realize that America was built by immigrants. We share similar values and want to contribute to the American dream. We are looking for opportunities, and we want to live in a free country. At least now I know how to make a hundred different kinds of coffee, my first lesson in American culture!

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Think about the following phrases that the author uses. If you’re not sure what they mean, can you figure it out from the context?

“Americans are nuts about their coffee...”

“half caf”

“OMG!”

“hung in there with me”

“definitely not my cup of...coffee!”

2. Where in this essay do you notice the author’s sense of humor? What parts seemed funny to you? Why? How does her style of storytelling make it funny?

3. Write about a humorous experience you have had at work or elsewhere. Make sure to include enough details so the reader can feel what it was like and experience the humor in the situation.

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