

## Examples from within companies

# How employers look for and retain skilled workers

In some sectors today qualified employees are already scarce. Enterprises have to tread new paths if they wish to meet their requirements for qualified professionals and boost their attractiveness as an employer. However, these paths do not only entail opportunities but also risks – as the practical examples of medium-sized establishments presented below show.



In view of the ever scarcer supply of skilled labour, many establishments are at the present time being faced by at least two challenges: firstly they have to meet their short-term requirements for qualified professionals if they are to fill their open positions and, secondly, they have to gain and retain qualified professionals both in the medium and in the long term. In doing so there are various ways that enterprises can go about securing their requirement of qualified professionals and of positioning themselves among their competitors as an attractive employer (see, in this connection, the article by Ulrich Walwei). This means strategically orientated human resources management as well as professional personnel marketing, measures to bind staff to the company, a good management of skills, and the extension of the recruitment radius to cover alternative target groups. Using three concrete examples from everyday practice in the areas of training, employer attractiveness and foreign recruitment respectively, the following sections illustrate the innovative strategies with which establishments attempt to retain qualified professionals and the difficulties they encounter in doing so.

### Successfully filling training positions

Establishments are reporting more and more frequently that they are having problems finding applicants, both men and women, for their training positions. This trend is also confirmed by the current Qualification Monitor of the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology (BMWi) – a survey of enterprises which investigates the status and perspectives of qualifications in the German economy and which is carried out on a half-yearly basis. Here two-thirds of the establishments offering training stated that they had had great difficulties in recruiting trainees over the last twelve months. As a consequence, many enterprises are beginning to realize more and more that they have to tread new paths if they wish to fill their training positions.

This was the experience made by Frisch & Faust Tiefbau GmbH, a civil engineering company from Berlin with 120 employees and a training quota of 20 per cent in five qualified professions. Over ten years ago, this company had had no problems filling its apprenticeship posts in

a segment which is not very attractive to young people. However, in recent years, it has become more and more difficult to find trainees. Because of this, the trainee area shifted more strongly into the focus of human resources management. A comprehensive concept resting on three pillars was developed.

- **Cooperation:** The company maintains numerous contacts in order to reach young people at as early a stage as possible. For instance, it cooperates at various levels with schools, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the Chamber of Trade, various associations and non-profit organizations such as the Vocational Promotion Centre of the Specialist Community for the Construction Trade. The company offers a free training in compiling an application at school.

- **Extended target groups:** A potential source of trainees that Frisch & Faust Tiefbau have been tapping for some time now is young people with a migration background. In order to get in contact with this target group – one that is frequently overlooked – the company works together with associations that specifically deal with this group. It is now a well-known fact that young people with a migration background have especially good chances at Frisch & Faust Tiefbau. That is why increasingly more persons with a migration background are approaching the company directly. In the future, the company will also put its money on young people who are receiving means-tested unemployment benefit (ALG II) and do not have any professional qualifications or are participating in an employment promotion measure.

- **Practical experience upstream:** In order to prevent trainees breaking off their training and the unsuitable filling of positions, the company attempts to give the applicants in advance a realistic picture of the field of activity that awaits them. Twice a year, interested young people can participate in so-called "building site days" so that they can experience the work on an underground engineering site at first hand and can ask the company trainees there questions directly. Moreover a one-week period of work experience is slotted in before training starts in order to get to know the applicants better and at the same time to enable them to get a realistic impression of the company.

By specifically approaching allegedly non-trainable young people, Frisch & Faust Tiefbau has managed to access an applicant segment in which there is (at least up to now) little competition for the candidates. In this way, the company is not only filling more trainee positions, but is also enhancing its public reputation. In 2010 it was for instance given an award by the Berlin Chamber of Industry and Commerce as the best company offering training in Berlin.

### Recruiting skilled workers from abroad

A further, and perhaps not uncontroversial, strategy for ensuring a company has skilled workers is to recruit foreign workers. To make this easier, for instance, the Federal Government has simplified the recognition process for foreign occupational qualifications and has set up a bilingual Internet portal for international qualified professionals under [www.make-it-in-Germany.de](http://www.make-it-in-Germany.de). Enterprises can also find support for the acquisition of international qualified professionals on the Internet portal [www.fachkraefte-offensive.de](http://www.fachkraefte-offensive.de) and [www.kompetenzzentrum-fachkraeftesicherung.de](http://www.kompetenzzentrum-fachkraeftesicherung.de), both of which are also run by the Federal Government.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are also supported at regional level in acquiring qualified professionals from abroad. A campaign that gained recognition both nationally and internationally was the so-called "Nikolausaktion". It took place from 6 to 8 December 2011 in Stuttgart. A regional network of business and labour market actors had brought Spanish engineers to Stuttgart and had brokered interviews with companies in the region.

FAW Industrial Automation GmbH, a company from Stuttgart working in the area of control- and electro-technology with nine employees and a constant need for qualified professionals took part in the initiative and recruited three young Spanish engineers. According to the managing director, the enterprise could process considerably more orders and thus grow further if it had more suitably qualified professional employees.

The Spanish engineers recruited with the help of this initiative came to FAW at the right time because the com-

pany had just received acceptance of their bid for a fairly large contract in Mexico. The freshly recruited engineers from Spain, the management hoped, would be able to contribute a great deal to this project on account of their native tongue. The initiative was planned together with their customer, an engineering company from the area around Stuttgart.

FAW organised accommodation for the three new members of staff and took over costs for the first three months. In addition, a rented car was put at the disposal of each of them free of charge. The new staff were given support with all administrative procedures – such as registering at the Registration Office, opening a bank account and registering with a medical insurance company. However, integration into the company proved to be more difficult than expected: the three new members of staff tended to keep to themselves. They primarily arranged tasks and processes among themselves with the result that the management had difficulty following these.

The biggest problems were language and professional competence. Even if English is becoming increasingly important in many enterprises, German tends to remain the main language of communication – this also applied to the customer for whom the Mexico project was to be carried out. On the one hand, the German staff continued to speak German among themselves, while on the other a great many important documents were only available in German. In order to compensate this language deficit, the FAW had hired a teacher from the adult education centre who gave the Spanish employees German tuition twice a week, each time for two hours. The professional deficits were to be removed successively and, to do this, the Spanish staff only received small business orders at the beginning and were only sent to customers for a short time accompanied by other members of staff. Later the length of time spent in external work was extended. The aim of this all was to gradually train the new staff into handling contracts independently.

However FAW was only partially successful in achieving this. Professional and language deficits along with a lack of dedication and an unwillingness to go to Mexico caused FAW to dismiss two of the three Spanish engineers.



On the other hand, the third integrated himself well into the company. He now forms a small team with an experienced colleague and is currently working in Mexico. Since he has been there he has had the opportunity to apply what he learned over the last months piece by piece and has, in his own words, gained independence and job satisfaction through this.

In view of this contradictory situation, a final evaluation of the measure from the perspective of the company is difficult. Staff and management have invested a great deal

of time making the new staff familiar with the work but only one new employee has stayed with the company. As the managing director concludes: "If we manage to bring the employee who stayed with us up to a good technical and linguistic level, then one could say that it was positive from the point of view of the company". But even then the initiative would not be successful in purely economic terms. Nonetheless FAW would take part in such an initiative again, although it would be of central importance to incorporate lessons learned from the first attempt.

### Data and Methods

The experiences described in this article which were made by FAW Industrial Automation during the recruitment of foreign qualified professionals are based on interviews carried out for the evaluation of the "Nikolausaktion" which have not yet been entirely completed at the time of writing.

The measures and experiences of DELO & Co. KGaA described here aimed at raising their name recognition and employer attractiveness are based on interviews which were carried out within the framework of research work for the Kompetenzzentrum Fachkräftesicherung (Centre to Secure the Availability of Qualified Professionals). They can be found on the Internet under: [www.kompetenzzentrum-fachkraef-tesicherung.de](http://www.kompetenzzentrum-fachkraef-tesicherung.de). The example of Frisch & Faust Tiefbau is also described there. The information on their activities to recruit trainees was collected within the framework of a research programme that deals with the securing of the availability of qualified professionals in the MINT areas (mathematics, information sciences, natural sciences and technology) for small and medium-sized enterprises.

- In future, the company would check knowledge of German and the professional orientation of the applicants more closely.
- During the entry phase, development and preparation of the new member of staff would be decoupled from company tasks.
- Mixed teams consisting of experienced staff and the new international qualified professionals would be formed.

### Making employers better known

In a labour market which is changing at least partially from an employers' market to an employees' market, it becomes more and more important for an enterprise to boost its

name recognition and to position itself as an attractive employer. This is particularly difficult for small and medium-sized enterprises because they have neither a well-known name nor a popular product.

DELO & Co. KGaA is a medium-sized, owner-led company based in Windach in Upper Bavaria and is internationally active. Its portfolio comprises special and industrial adhesives as well as equipment systems for applications in various branches. The strongly expanding company is regularly looking for new qualified professionals whose acquisition is proving to be more and more difficult. There were over 30 job offers on the company's homepage at the end of June this year – compared to a total number of employees of 300. The company has made considerable efforts to raise its attractiveness as an employer. In recent years, for instance, it has begun to take part in competitions and actually won some important awards. Last year DELO was chosen as the TOP Innovator and as one of the best employers in Germany. This year it was distinguished as one of the 50 strongly growing enterprises in Bavaria. With such awards an enterprise can strengthen its company brand, can boost its name recognition and can build up a positive image. At the same time DELO supports further signets such as Fair Company, an award for fair, non-exploitative working conditions for young people.

In order to make it easier for new employees to get familiar with their work, DELO has developed welcoming guidelines which contain information on the entire recruitment process from receipt of application documents to the completion of familiarisation with the new job. Among the many components that are intended to help new staff get used to their new job are a welcoming event on the first day of work, support from a mentor, the compilation of a plan on how the staff member is to be introduced to his/her new job, and an early target-setting discussion. In addition the new employees receive comprehensive training regarding the product and an introduction to the basics of adhesive technology. This off-the-job training takes place in full-time and is completed with a final in-house examination. Depending on the type of activity, it can last up to three months. Along with professional aspects, the

training sessions also have social aspects. They help the new employees get used to the establishment and to get to know their new colleagues and facilitate identification with the products and aims of the company.

DELO also sets the framework for child care. In the personnel brochure of the company it says: "For you as a mother or father it is surely important to know that your child is being well taken care of while you are at work. DELO has very good contacts to three kindergartens in Windach and/or Schöffelding. We are pleased that we have had the chance to find places for the DELO children in close vicinity to our company location."

Although DELO cooperates with kindergartens in the vicinity and supports them with donations, and although the services offered by these kindergartens are of good quality and differentiated, they are seldom used by the staff of the company for parents as a rule prefer kindergartens near to where they live, ones that can also be reached easily when they are not at work and in which their children can get to know children from their own neighbourhood.

### Conclusions

The last example, but also the problems with recruiting qualified foreign professionals mentioned above, make it clear that not all measures to ensure the availability of qualified professionals and to boost the attractiveness of an employer are crowned with success. It depends on exactly how measures are implemented. It is often the details that decide whether an instrument is successful or fails. Neither at the level of individual establishments nor at the national economic level are there patent recipes to remove bottlenecks in the availability of qualified professionals. At the same time, examples show that enterprises are already today tapping new potential via innovative measures and have already been able to chalk up advantages in the competition for qualified professionals. Along with traditional incentives in the level of salaries and salary structure or further training, innovated measures for recruiting and developing personnel will gain further importance in future. Here learning from experience as regards in-house practice – both positive and negative – can prove to be very helpful.

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