

29 January 2024

Europe as a hotspot for global talent – Is it ready?

by Morten King-Grubert

Though Europe has come a long way, it is not yet ready to be the leading talent destination of the world. Despite progress, there are obstacles that leaders and practitioners across Europe must still overcome before the region can call itself the place where the global labour market comes to live, study, and work. An emphasis on 'living' is more important than ever in this equation.

At [Vienna Migration Conference 2023](#), we heard repeatedly that countries are facing significant labour shortages. We also heard that many businesses want to look outside their countries, and beyond the EU, to hire needed workers. Those who are already doing so have reported difficulties due to existing policies, framework conditions, and procedures around work permits.

In parallel, the annual meeting of the [European Talent Mobility Forum](#) in Barcelona provided an opportunity for myself and other stakeholders to navigate these issues at a practical level. The event convened representatives from governments, regional economic development boards, and cities working with international talent attraction from across Europe.

At both events, it became clear that businesses are hiring, and place stakeholders are heavily engaged and active in this area. But they are struggling – and they need more support from policymakers to make it happen.

Industry developments

It feels like unprecedented times in the industry as investment promotion, tourism, and talent attraction converge towards the same mission. The foreign direct investor, for instance, now needs to draw on local talent and is often involved in relocating management as well. Modern tourists, meanwhile, increasingly find themselves working remotely, at least informally, through ['workcations'](#), and in fact could be considered a potential target in the short to medium term for talent attraction, provided they have a positive experience while visiting. And what about entrepreneurs or start-up companies participating in international accelerator programmes – is it not a great opportunity to retain them in the region once they have graduated?

The conventional image of the ‘expat’ is now obsolete. While the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields are perhaps most associated with talent attraction initiatives, the business community has a more all-encompassing focus in practice, ranging from healthcare professionals to service industry workers and teachers, to name a few. Or, for example, electricians, with the green transition front and centre.

Furthermore, since the pandemic, diaspora engagement has become an even higher priority for places, with individuals living abroad seen as potential returnees to their home countries, investors, and/or working professionals.

Remote and nomad work is both fascinating and challenging from an economic development perspective, where the direct and indirect effects are different and, well, complicated. These arrangements bring opportunities for companies and workers who are seeking to balance their life and career.

Meanwhile, it remains to be seen how far generative AI, bots, and digitalisation will take us and where that will leave us concerning the skills and competences needed for the future and accompanying talent attraction endeavours.

Choosing Europe?

For global talent, Europe is an option but not *the* destination for them to live, study, and work. In this context, policymakers, place promoters, employers, and other key stakeholders must ask: Why would Europe be their choice? And what challenges do we need to overcome to *be* that choice? Here are four key elements that stand out:

Maturity (or the lack of it) among companies in the field of international talent attraction, onboarding, and retention remains a hindrance. Enterprises say they want international talent but often appear unprepared once collaboration with the public sector starts. A lack of competence in this area, the need to wade into unknown territory, and a “this is more difficult than local recruiting” realisation are some of the barriers faced by employers.

True integration means cultural onboarding across all aspects of the life cycle, requiring public and private partnerships. While migration and integration are sometimes perceived more as technical terms related to legal pathways and work permits, we need to emphasise holistic

societal inclusion as part of initiatives aimed at relocating and retaining individuals and families.

Attracting skilled workers amid more hostile (political) climates has emerged as a particularly pressing challenge. While some governments are prone to favour locally unemployed and underemployed people and those in need, others are disposed to closing borders entirely – and others fall somewhere in between. Meanwhile, there are no votes in non-voters, and internationals often cannot vote in national elections. Even though politicians generally recognise that relocating workers do not steal local jobs, they create them, embracing this stance is not always politically expedient.

Finally, while Europe is a known quantity generally, it lacks the same branding and appeal when it comes to being a career destination.

What does the data tell us?

At [Future Place Leadership](#), we recently partnered with [Linköping Science Park](#) in Sweden on a migration study of 2,600 global talents and 300 companies across Europe. The [conclusions](#) serve as prudent recommendations for Europe to elevate its performance in the global talent race.

Work-life balance takes the lead as the main factor influencing people's decisions on whether to live in another country, followed by general opportunities for developing a career and specific job offers. Places and employers, therefore, need to help each other and focus on enhancing the quality of life beyond the workplace. It is not about the location or the job: It is about both.

Barriers to living in another country, according to respondents, include (in the following order) distance from family and friends, a lack of hospitality, and challenges in (re)building a social life and social network. While the distance hurdle may not be easy to address, societies can strive to make themselves more welcoming communities for newcomers and provide access to people and connections to ease integration.

Our survey found that companies generally claim to be open to recruiting people from different backgrounds and cultures and are positively inclined towards building international workforces. Yet, employers face numerous barriers hindering them from hiring talent from abroad. Long processing times for work permits, language obstacles, and cultural challenges top the list.

Companies need to increase their focus on integration, inclusive language training, and career development opportunities. Many companies, in fact, lack know-how on working with international skills. Illustrating this point, while many responding companies deemed local language proficiency as unimportant in theory, in practice international talent often need these skills, especially if English is not used as the common language in the workplace.

Can we start here?

The labour market is a ‘war’ for talent, placing sought-after individuals in the driver’s seat in putting forward their demands to employers and locales. The talents indeed may have already won: They get to decide what they want, as they are highly sought after by places and employers alike.

The organisations across Europe that we work with increasingly agree: Let’s share talent by aligning labour market supply and demand collaboratively where we can. The intra-EU referral of talent, in this regard, is important, and boasts untapped potential, as does building partnerships across the globe. Talent Bridge Africa, to this end, is a promising initiative attracting strong local interest in Europe and Africa behind a win-win partnership. The goal is to match surplus of talent in Africa in certain industries with local demand in Europe, where the so-called bridge symbolises a ‘two-way street’ of economic benefit for both regions either by knowledge transfer, upskilling, or direct financial benefits.

It is also evident from our data that, as important as economic development is perceived by governments, it is striking that only half of our surveyed countries have a national strategy in place for international talent attraction and retention. That is another area to start.

Can we get back to the future?

The discussion among the pioneers and experts at the European Talent Mobility Forum centred around this quandary: Why is it that, after a decade in the industry of global talent attraction, we are still discussing the same topics? Where is the innovation, where are the solutions, and how can we embark on a future-oriented path if we keep taking one step back instead of two steps forward?

In conclusion - Just do it

Though this commentary opened on a dour note, we know what we need to do and the policies that must be put in place. Collaborative platforms have been established, with much happening at the EU, national, regional, and city levels. It is far past time to get to work fixing migration pathways, branding ourselves to target groups, offering the right soft-landing support, and better including migrants in our societies so they can live the life they want. At the risk of sounding like an old commercial: Just do it.

[Morten King-Grubert](#) is a Partner at Future Place Leadership and Founder of the European Talent Mobility Forum.

Contact Information

For more information please contact:

Policy Unit

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor
1010 Vienna, Austria

Email: Policy_Unit@icmpd.org

ICMPD 2024. All rights reserved. Short sections, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted in the original language without explicit permission provided that the source is acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) alone.