

Expats in the Twente region; Personal experiences and future improvements

Idsart Wytzes

Saxion University of Applied Sciences, School of Marketing and International Management.

Marijn Bullens

Saxion University of Applied Sciences, School of Business, Building & Technology

Abstract: Relatively peripheral border regions are often seen as less attractive for high qualified temporary migrant workers (expats). Usually these region offer less possibilities for highly skilled migrants to find suitable work, because of the clustering of these types of jobs in core regions. Companies in more peripheral regions are thought to be less open for international experience and international cooperation. To test this assumption, several interviews with expats about their personal experiences and future improvement suggestions were held in order to get an overview of how expats feel working and living in Twente, a region which is located in the Eastern part of The Netherlands. The exploratory research findings were compared to a notable survey on expats conducted by HSBC Expat (HSBC Expat, 2015) to see whether or not the situation of expats in Twente is different than the findings of the HSBC survey for the entire Netherlands. This study reveals that there are no notable differences with the findings of the HSBC survey. Because the interviewed expats were all positive about their experiences working for companies in Twente, the future improvement suggestions were only minor. The expats did mention some small point of improvements but these points did not cause difficulties for them to stay and work in Twente.

Keywords: Expats, Twente region, interviewees, HSBC survey, comparable situation, managing diversity

1 Introduction

As a small trading country, the Netherlands has always felt the need to cooperate with foreign countries and therefore also the need for workers from abroad. The relative wealth and the relative tolerance of the people living in the Netherlands are two key components getting people to work in Holland (Lucassen & Penninx, 1994). Two relatively recent examples of this immigration of foreign workers in the Netherlands are the Turkish and Moroccan guest labourers (Prins, 1996). Because of this long experience and need for foreign workers, nowadays the Netherlands is known as being a very open country towards people from abroad. In a recent large survey conducted by HSBC Expat, 39 countries were researched based on their policy and attitude towards expats. The Netherlands was ranked 12th in this list, just behind Switzerland and Hong Kong (HSBC Expat, 2015). In this survey it is stated that most of the foreign workers in the Netherlands “head for the Randstad, a conurbation of just over 7 million people that includes the country’s four largest cities – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht”.

Because of this statement, curiosity has arisen if the picture that is painted in this survey about the Netherlands, also holds for the Twente region. Twente as a region is different in characteristics compared to the Randstad region, mentioned as the main destination for expats. It is a more peripheral and border region, without major attractive cities. The 2010 demographic data of the Central Bureau of Statistics shows that Twente had 623.432 inhabitants (Databank Twente, sd), not even one tenth of the Randstad region. Also, although the actual data suggests differently, figures, local and nationwide media are writing about Twente as being a region where ‘brain drain’ (high educated people leaving the region) is a concern for employers (Stichting Twente Index, 2011). These examples, combined with other economic developments, sketch an image of Twente as not being a favourable place for foreign employees to work or to find work. Because of this image one might argue that expats in the Twente region have a different view of their personal work and experiences than the average expat in the Netherlands.

To research if this argument is true, within semi-structured interviews among a number of expats working for companies in the Twente region we’ve identify their points of view on different aspects. Language, housing, social contacts and visa application are subjects that were discussed during these interviews. The main question that was used guide the interviews in the preferred direction was: “Which personal barriers do expats in the region Twente encounter within the companies that they work for and what future (improvement suggestions) do they have“?

2 Methodology

As mentioned above, the main question posed to write this article is: “Which personal barriers do expats in the region Twente encounter within the companies that they work for and what future improvement (suggestions) do they have“? By interviewing expats and researching literature studies we investigated whether or not expats in the Twente region confirm the picture that is painted about the Dutch expat situation in the Netherlands by the HSBC survey. The participating expats are from all over the world, from Russia, to Sudan, till South-Africa. It consists of both expats that have been working in the Netherlands for the last twenty years and expats that are here for less than a year.

The main source of information acquired by this study came from interviews. The number of participating expats to the semi-structured interviews was five (n=5), consisting of three female expats and two male expats. Two of them work in higher education, two in high-tech businesses and one for the government. Besides the interview we also consulted several other sources such as Expat Centre Twente and databases for general information. To make the construct experiences more specific the personal barriers (experiences) are defined as: “Language barriers, housing/accommodation barriers, social barriers, visa application barriers, governmental barriers and others. For the future (improvement suggestions) it is more difficult to create specific variables. We decided to leave this part of the interview as open as possible as there were no preconceptions about the answers that could have been expected here.

3 Findings

Since none of the participated expats were native Dutch speakers and because of all the expats have had an advanced level of English we did all the interviews in English and not in our mother language Dutch. The semi structured interviews did have a chronological order of subjects. Such as the basic barriers as language barriers, housing and accommodation barriers, social contact barriers, visa application barriers and governmental barriers. After the personal barriers we focused the interview on the development opportunities in general for the expat itself as well as the development opportunities in the company. And at the end of the interview we’ve tried to direct the interview to future improvement suggestion, for the companies and also for the expats. The findings are presented around a specific topic as is listed below.

3.1 Language

The language barriers was not a big obstacle because of the intermediate to advanced level of English of the Dutch people in general as well as the English level of the respondents. As one of the expats said: “Sometimes it was hard to translate all the forms by myself but most of the colleagues were able to translate some of the key words for me” or “The language was not too much a problem here in the Netherlands maybe because I understand Afrikaans. But English everyone speaks well enough”.

3.2 Housing/Accommodation

According to another expat the accommodation was much harder to arrange. “Organisation things such as accommodation were hard to find”. Sometimes the companies makes false promises to the expats for helping them with the accommodation. They did find accommodation, but not in a proper way. The most common way that the company was helping was to give some time to settle while starting to work for the company.

3.3 Social

In general, establishing contacts, was the hardest aspects in the initial phase of the staying. Some remarks of the respondents were: “Of course you have some good contact with your colleagues but it is not a social event” or “Dutch people are quite open in general but not in making the first move”. These quotes are quite similar to the observations in the HSBC expat survey where, for example one of the respondents stated “The people in the big cities are used to dealing with expats, but in the countryside you will always be that stranger from abroad”. As the Randstad region includes all these ‘big cities’ the Twente region serves as the ‘countryside’ in this example.

3.4 Company and governmental help

The governmental help and the general help of the company cannot be separated from each other. Because the company must arrange everything for the expat as well for the government. For example, the company did send an e-mail to remind the expats that they must fill in the tax forms for the Dutch government. “The Dutch government don’t send you an e-mail the remind you to fill in the tax declaration

forms compared to the Belgium of Italian government. That's the only think what I found and what I found is tricky".

3.5 Miscellaneous

After the personal barriers we did focus the interview on the personal development opportunities as well as the development opportunities in the company. Most of the expats do see good opportunities on personal level if they are staying in the Netherlands for a longer time. However the expected duration of their stay largely depends on the duration of the projects at the companies. If the companies don't have future opportunities to stay, the working visa will be withdrawn and the expats need to go back to their homeland. In other words, one aspect can't do without the other.

3.6 Expat future (improvement suggestions) in the Twente region

The interviews provide evidence that companies and higher education in the region Twente already have a high level of proficiency in dealing with expat affairs. As one of the expats was joking, "Maybe they [the company] can improve the cafeteria in order to accommodate foreign cuisine. Because not every expat relish the Dutch cuisine". Overall the companies already arranged everything to perfection in the business end.

4 Conclusion

Comparing the expat characteristics of the Netherlands from the HSBC survey, we find that the expats at the companies in the Twente region confirm the open and internationally oriented economy. Because companies are in need of expat knowledge they have to make sure to support the expats as much as possible in order to provide a healthy working and living atmosphere. As can be concluded from the results of the interviews, in general the companies that our respondents work for are very helpful towards the aspects that were discussed during the interviews. As one of our respondents said: "The company has its interest to get the person". From this statement we can deduce that there is a difference in interest between the company and the employee and the company has to invest a decent amount of time to accommodate the expats.

4.1 Expat future (improvement suggestions) in the Twente region

The general view of the respondents is that no major improvements need to be made. The work places where the respondents are employed already have developed their expat procedures in a professional way. The main reason for this, found throughout the interviews, is that the companies already have extensive knowledge about the necessary aspects to accommodate and help the expats. One could argue that this is a biased finding as the expats that we've interviewed are working at larger organizations that have foreign business relations and interests. Within smaller companies, which deal with expats on a less frequent basis or just employed a foreign knowledge worker for the first time, other results for future improvements could have been found. However, the vast majority of expats work in larger organizations and in that sense it is possible to conclude that the situation in Twente probably does not have a lot of differences as compared to the national average.

Although no major recommendations were made by expats, some small concrete changes are suggested. As one interviewee stated; "Maybe they [the company] can improve the cafeteria in order to accommodate foreign cuisine". However the lack of these kind of amenities did not negatively affect the respondents experience in Twente. Next to that, and maybe that is even a more challenging issue, is the question of the social life of the expats, as it involves their integration in society. The feeling of being an "outsider" in Twente, more than probably might have been the case in the large cities in the Western part of the country, is something for the society at large to think about, and work on more inclusive treatment of expats.

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