

## Focus

# The state the job market is in

Hundreds of job-seekers from abroad come to Belgium each year in search of a dream post. But can the country live up to their employment expectations?

BY SABINE CLAPPAERT

**B**russels is the hub of European Union activity and home to the regional headquarters of many leading multinationals. It is considered the working capital of Europe. It may lack the trendy appeal of Milan, Barcelona or Madrid, but to many mobile young professionals with dreams of international careers, Brussels still represents the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But is Brussels, and by extension Belgium, really the promised land of European employment that it is made out to be? Does it offer ambitious young professionals the high-flying career opportunities they dream of? We take a closer look at what it takes to survive – and thrive – in the Belgian job market and whether going solo here is really as difficult as entrepreneurs make it sound.

The global economic crisis of the past few years may have driven dark storm clouds across the employment market for a while, but according to a recent survey by HR magazine *Vacature/Referenties*, things are looking up again. The improving labour market and an increasing number of baby boomers heading for retirement have lead to a rush on young, qualified talent.

A recent study by Tempo Team stated that 81 percent of employers in Belgium have plans to recruit in the coming year, while only 8 percent are considering making redundancies. Deloitte Consulting puts a specific number on its recruitment plans: it plans to hire 300 junior consultants before the end of the year and another 300 experienced consultants in 2012.

The labour market is clearly back on the move, a fact to which Belgium's small- and medium-sized companies can attest: up to 6 percent of their job vacancies are not being filled on time. "These companies are mostly looking to recruit young employees with a solid tertiary education and maximum five years' professional experience," says Johan Van Duyse of human resources management

consultancy SDWorx. "The problem is that they often cannot compete with the paychecks and perks offered by the big multinationals." And yet Belgium's SMEs [small- and mid-sized enterprises with less than 100 employees] have much to offer, says Verduyse.

"While an SME may not have the flashy brand image of a multinational, its smaller size means that every function still has a direct and visible impact on the end result. My advice to young professionals? Don't immediately go for the short-term monetary rewards. Choose a company that gives you end responsibility and where the values of the company match your own. That's how you can prove yourself and get the hands-on experience you need to take the next step."

**T**he candidate shortage appears most dire in Flanders, with 60,000 unfilled job postings and 42 percent of Flemish employers saying they don't believe they will get their vacancies filled any time soon. Brussels and Walloon business owners appear more optimistic: only 24 percent believe they won't be able to fill their vacancies on time.

"There's no denying that labour shortages in high-skill, hi-tech areas such as the major engineering disciplines and computing are acute. University graduates in these areas are sought after, particularly those with some experience who are mobile and prepared to go the extra mile," says Verduyse.

The reason for the countless unfilled posts? A giant mismatch between supply and demand. Most of today's numerous job-seekers do not possess the job skills required by the employer.

According to the CEO of Manpower Belgium, Philippe Lacroix, the origin for the problem can be found in Belgian schools and universities, which receive subsidies in proportion to the number of pupils rather than to the types of training needed. This results in

## LEARN MORE

### STARTING YOUR OWN BUSINESS IN BRUSSELS

Brussels-Europe  
Liaison Office  
63 Avenue  
d'Auderghem  
Brussels (Etterbeek)  
Monday, September  
26, 19.30 to 22.00

### EUROPEAN JOB DAYS

Berlaymont  
Rond-Point  
Schuman  
Brussels  
Saturday, October 1,  
10.00 to 17.00  
Take copies of your  
CV with you

“The minute a vacancy goes up on the jobsite Eurobrussels.com, HR managers know they will be submerged in cover letters and CVs claiming Christ-like abilities to resurrect their industry”



an enormous shortage of pupils in exactly those diplomas and degrees companies are interested in.

“It is true that the pool of skilled Belgian employees is no longer enough to fill the positions that are available so we’re only too happy to look toward professionals from other countries to help us fill these vacancies,” says Verduyse.

What are Belgium’s SMEs looking for in today’s young professionals? “Speaking Dutch isn’t that important anymore,” says Verduyse. “In most SMEs people understand and speak English. What is much more important is a flexible attitude and commitment to helping achieve the company’s business goals.”

When looking for a job in another country, speaking the local language is an advantage (and often a necessity), but with its melting pot of cultures and languages, Brussels exceptionally offers job-seekers an easy stepping-stone to an international career. In fact, a foreign mother tongue is often an easy inroad to a job in Brussels.

Linda Cappelle of International Talents, which specialises in placing native-speaking administrative staff, explains: “The demand for native speakers has doubled over the past year. Most popular are native English and German speakers. Many companies find flawlessly written and

*Interview time: Brussels offers an easy stepping-stone to an international career*

“The best advice I can give other starters is to find a good accountant who can manage the process for you”

spoken English or German even more important than an understanding of Dutch or French. In 2010 we placed one hundred native speakers in international companies in and around Brussels. That's fifty percent more than the previous year. We certainly see it as one of our most important growth markets over the next few years.”

But as the de facto capital of Europe, Brussels is also a city that attracts some of the most talented and educated youth from across the continent. The CVs in Brussels are stellar and the competition is tough. Thirty equally impressive CVs submitted for the same position is no exception.

“Getting a job in Brussels takes more than a great CV. Networking is equally as important,” advises one US expat on her blog. “It's not personal, it's professional. If somebody I know is listed as an applicant's contact, then I can more easily confirm the applicant's skills. Additionally, most HR managers know that the minute a vacancy goes up on the jobsite Eurobrussels.com, they will be submerged in cover letters and CVs claiming Christ-like abilities to resurrect their industry.”

Which raises the question: which profiles had the most success during the first half of 2011? Sales, engineering and information technology, according to vacature.com.

**A**dditionally, the strongest growing job categories over the past year were education and training (up by 67 percent), human resources (44 percent), press and communication (27 percent) and science (27 percent). The biggest dippers were: the cultural sector (down by 47 percent), graphic design (46 percent), customer services (52 percent) and mobility (55 percent).

The diploma or degree with which students enter the job markets determines their salary possibilities. Those looking to line their pockets the moment they enter the job market should consider degrees in medicine (doctor or dentist), pharmaceutical science, civil engineering, information technology and law. Starters with these diplomas have an average gross monthly salary of €2,800. Those with degrees in the arts, interior architecture, advertising and tourism have to settle for a lot less: they earn on average €1,800 gross per month.

Setting up your own business is always fraught with risk, and going it alone in a foreign country is doubly so. Renowned for its red tape, Belgium is no exception.

Regardless of whom you talk to, the advice remains the same: think twice.

A quick search online for ‘start a business in Belgium’ reveals the extent of the problem: action plans to get up and running contain no fewer than eight steps and many involve endless queues in government buildings.

Yet according to the Flanders and Brussels union for entrepreneurs (UNIZO), the number of foreigners who start a business in Belgium continues to rise. Most often, these entrepreneurs come from The Netherlands and France, with the number of Italian entrepreneurs coming to Belgium also on the rise. But UNIZO agrees that entering the Belgian system isn't always straightforward and advises non-Belgian entrepreneurs to seek expert advice first so that all requirements are met. To assist the ever-growing number of foreigners setting up a business in Belgium, UNIZO provides a starter package in English. On September 26, it will host an information evening specifically for expatriate starters. (See box on page 16 for details)

**T**hirty-year-old Christopher Flores, from the US, set up an independent communications consultancy focused on political and corporate communication earlier this year. “The most frustrating thing for me was trying to understand the local tax system. The social security system, which requires both the business owner and the business to

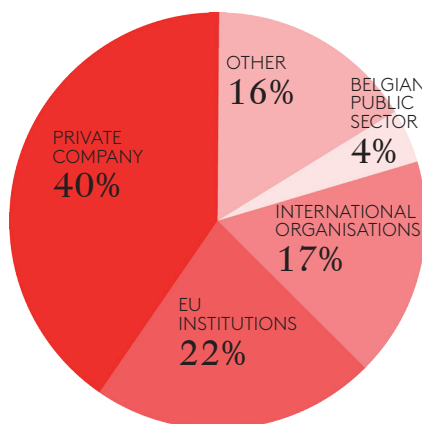
pay social security, as well as a retroactive tax system that kicks in after the first three years of business are concepts which are difficult to grasp as a foreigner. The best advice I can give other starters is to find a good accountant who can manage the process of setting up a business for you, someone who understands the system, can give advice on the best type of legal entity for your business and who then helps you to get it all up and running. It's an extra cost, but with Belgium's complex system, certainly no excessive luxury,” says Flores.

Conclusion? Getting ahead in Belgium isn't as hard as some make it sound, but it does pay to note the basics: whether you come to Belgium with dreams of a stellar career at the EU institutions, follow your Belgian

love back to his/her roots or come to set up your own business in the heart of Europe, remember: it pays to have the right degree, do the paperwork and be able to count on a few good friends in the right places. ■

#### EMPLOYMENT SURVEY

Survey taken by the Bulletin, in conjunction with B&MI Corelio, in September/October 2010. 597 participants.







**BRUSSELS-EUROPE**  
**LIAISON OFFICE**

**DO I HAVE TO REGISTER  
AT THE COMMUNE?**

**WHERE CAN I FIND  
A CRÈCHE/SCHOOL?**

**HOW CAN I RENT  
A CITY BIKE?**

**I DON'T UNDERSTAND  
MY RENTAL AGREEMENT!**

**WHAT IS A SIS-CARD?**

**WHERE CAN I LEARN  
FRENCH/DUTCH?**

**DO I HAVE TO PAY  
TAXES IN BELGIUM?**

**I'M LOST IN THE BRUSSELS  
ADMINISTRATION!**

**HOW TO SWITCH  
ENERGY SUPPLIERS?**

**CAN I VOTE IN BRUSSELS?**

**HOW DO I OBTAIN  
A WORK PERMIT?**

### **The Brussels-Europe Liaison Office can help you!**

**You can consult us on any administrative question or practical problem that arises during your stay in Brussels.**

Have a look at our website and don't hesitate to contact our experienced team for personal assistance (02/280.00.80).

This free expat service is provided by the Brussels-Capital Region.

**[www.blbe.be](http://www.blbe.be)**