

Working for EU agencies: Systematic career management or pure happenstance?

Working for the European Union has been a dream for many people since their young age and they have taken systematic steps to make this a reality in their lives. For others, having a career as an EU expert was never something carefully planned but rather happened by coincidence. These two main approaches to having a career abroad come through in an ongoing doctoral research on EU labour mobility.

Twenty interviews with staff members of 12 different nationalities, working for three European Union agencies (Cedefop, European Training Foundation and Eurofound), were conducted by Mr. Mika Launikari (Finland) for his PhD research in early 2015. Four themes were touched upon: the motivation to pursue an international career, professional development, the life outside of work and the multicultural aspects of working in the EU environment.

Guidance support for self-directed experts

A common general feature to most respondents was a high degree of self-directedness when taking decisions on one's career development and management. For many, it was

self-evident that they wanted to have an international career whereas for the rest it was a natural development after many years of working in their own countries to embark on a professional path abroad. Guidance support, for example from teachers, trainers, psychologists and significant others was often part of the preparatory stage when the interviewees were orienting themselves towards working abroad.

Emphasis on soft skills

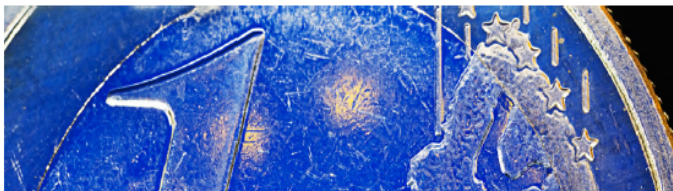
Working in the EU context means a constant development of professional competences, the respondents reported. Hard skills are vital but less tangible soft skills are absolutely necessary in the everyday office life with colleagues with diverse cultural back

grounds. These include personality-driven skills like getting along well with people and who have different worldviews (i.e. concerning cultural sensitivity), listening and engaging easily in small talk (i.e. being chatty and open) and showing curiosity for new situations and phenomena.

Making friends abroad

Living abroad can be very challenging in terms of establishing contacts with the locals in the new country. Many interviewees shared their frustration about how difficult it can be to become integrated in their new society and how time-consuming it can be to break into the circles of the locals. Not knowing the language of the country well enough was seen as an obstacle in the case of Greece and Italy at least. Having children, though, often facilitates the bridge building with local parents and opens access to the local community through day-care or school-related activities.

Mika Launikari, Finland



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