

Eastern European workers still needed in construction.

Skilled workers from eastern Europe are still in great demand says Paul Muller from recruitment and placement company TecLine. Working with a group of educational establishments, his company have launched a series of technical training courses for people from the eastern part of Germany.

"We're looking beyond the immediate crisis", explains Muller, TecLine's Commercial Director. "The effects of our aging population and the lack of young people coming onto the employment market mean that there is still a structural demand for foreign workers in construction and other sectors. Young Dutch people simply aren't taking the technical career options. And even if that started to change, although there is no sign of it, the inflow still wouldn't be enough to compensate for the outflow of older workers".

He challenges the proposition that it is simply a matter of money that finds eastern Europeans taking work in the Netherlands in sectors like construction, metalworking and electrical engineering. "They are good workers, they are happy to do installation work and to travel long distances to do so. They are accustomed to that already, as in their own country they are often only home at weekends. If you have jobs spread over a large geographical area, they are available to be deployed anywhere."

He acknowledges that the crisis has led to a dip in demand. The consequence is that it is mostly Germans who now remain. Recruitment also started there in the past. When this pool was fished out, attention turned to the east, first to Poland and the Czech Republic and then on to Bulgaria and Romania.

The group which will start the new training course over the coming year will consist of Germans. "We're starting with a group of around thirty." They have completed the basic level of education in Germany, but they have not completed their intermediate vocational education. "This means that they are not able to describe themselves as 'Facharbeiter', and they would normally have continued to work in unskilled roles, for a lower salary. We want to give this group a second chance in the Netherlands."

Amsterdam - Five days a week working with a company, and two evenings of college: the practical trainees from the east of Germany will have to work hard.

The incentive is that they will be able to use the diploma they will achieve to obtain a permanent contract with the company they worked for during the course. The first year intake are aged between 22 and 26. That means they are no longer tied to education and can work full time for a company", explains Muller.

"We are looking for young Germans with no ties. This is to keep the risk of drop-outs to a minimum." Older people will have established themselves at home, and would miss all that if they remained permanently in the Netherlands. They would be more inclined to be longing for home. If despite these intentions the younger people are similarly affected by homesickness, then at least they won't return home empty-handed, and their diploma will also be valuable in the eastern European countries.

In Germany as well as in other countries in central and eastern Europe, craftsmanship is much more highly valued than in the Netherlands. "A tradesman with a diploma is respected there." The target group for the new course lack that crucial piece of evidence: a completed higher-level training.

Sectors of the labour market where these Dutch "Facharbeiters" will be welcomed include metalworking, electrical engineering and construction. Funds for the training will come partly from what Muller calls "the statutory sources": government subsidies. The remainder will be paid by TecLine, who will offset these costs through the charges paid by their clients.

Muller talks about "Germans", but in practice the people in question come from the former East Germany, a distinction which was formally scrapped twenty years ago. The people TecLine will work with do nevertheless all come from "behind" the former Iron Curtain. While no physical barrier now exists, the socio-economic boundary seems to be alive and kicking. It is no longer a barrier to traffic to the West, but rather the opposite: a major labour migration has commenced.

The professional training courses have been designed in collaboration with training providers and the ROC in Amsterdam. "Our hope is that in coming years the intake will rise to several hundred trainees annually." The plans also anticipate an expansion in the range of courses on offer.

The delivery of the training is flexible, for example where the training location is concerned. "It isn't reasonable to expect someone who has put in a full day's work to travel right across the country in the evening," says Muller, "so we will be setting up small classes on a regional basis.

Reputation

Muller believes the attraction of working in the Netherlands for German and other Eastern European professionals is the reputation of both the working climate and the country and its culture. "There are other countries where they could find work, certainly if they are good workers."

The emergence of abuses, exploitation and extortionate prices for poor accommodation have put the recruitment of East Europeans in a bad light. But this doesn't apply to the professional tradesmen he works with. "This is something you see at the lower end of the labour market, for example among asparagus pickers. Our clients are paying for high-quality skilled workers, professionals. We have to compete on the European market for people like that, as they can find work anywhere. So you need to offer decent conditions. If their accommodation isn't up to scratch for example, they will simply turn around and leave."

The hope is that in the long run, when their week's work is done the young workers will not automatically return to their home countries for the weekend. Or perhaps it would be better to say, they will go home, but their homes will now be in the Netherlands. As Muller says: "One element of the training is lessons in the Dutch language. Ideally it would be nice to see them pairing up with a Dutch girlfriend. There's nothing like that for promoting integration!"