

Training for young construction workers from eastern Germany.

Crisis or no crisis, the demand for foreign personnel is bound to increase over the next few years because of our aging population profile and the low inflow of young workers. These are the views of Paul Muller of TecLine International, a company finding placements for skilled professional tradesmen from central and eastern Europe. In order to meet this demand he is establishing professional training courses for young people from the former East Germany.

TecLine International have been active for many years now in the placement of staff from central and eastern Europe in a number of sectors of the Dutch labour market, including the construction sector. According to Paul Muller, one of TecLine's three Directors, these are hardworking people who don't have difficulty in working away for a week on an installation job. There is often no work in their own countries, or they make so little from it that they can hardly make ends meet. The European labour market offers a way out. Despite the crisis there are still plenty of foreigners working in the Netherlands says Muller. "You might think nobody is still active on the Dutch labour market, but in fact nothing could be further from the truth. There are still tens of thousands involved in construction. This indicates that there is a structural demand for this kind of labour." Up to now the firm have been offering project-based solutions, but Muller is now heavily involved in setting up a training company for young workers from the former East Germany, to allow them to work on the Dutch labour market. The first 100 will be taking part in a pilot project in 2010.

It may seem like a rather strange move to take at this time, but what we are doing is to look beyond the immediate crisis. The aging population profile makes it certain that there will be manpower shortages in a few years. Our own young people don't want to get their hands dirty: that was confirmed by a recent UWV report. Every sector, whether you look at construction or the vehicle manufacturers, is trying yet again to attract more youngsters. They have all been fishing in the same pool for years, without any systematic attempt to find long-term solutions. We are introducing an innovative concept by looking at young workers from abroad.

Why east Germans?

Professional tradesmen are far more highly respected in that culture than they are in ours. The Netherlands has a typical knowledge economy. Parents in our country are pleased when their children do well in the CITO tests at the end of their basic education, as this means they can go on to an academic school. The value placed on practical skills is far lower. But in Germany things are different.

Is the education system different there?

Education is basically the same as in the Netherlands, partly theoretical, partly practical. If you get the qualifications you can call yourself a professional in your field, but if you don't pass the exams you will spend your life as a labourer. That's not a pleasant prospect for a lot of young people. We are targeting the group of young people who didn't complete their education successfully. People between 22 and 26, old enough to understand that this is a real opportunity for them. They are highly motivated.

Why don't they try again in their own country?

It often doesn't work out, because new, younger people are coming along all the time. So, we want to offer these young people a second chance by giving them a professional training in the Netherlands at Intermediate Vocational Education (MBO) level 2 or 3. We are doing this as a collaborative venture with approved training bodies and ROCs. The

aim is for them to be employed by our clients, the construction companies. But we do build in an escape route: if they find it impossible to manage away from home, they will also be able to use the diploma to find professional work in Germany. We now have confirmation from the authorities that this is permitted, if they take another exam.

Contractors sending their workers for German lessons?

That's what it comes down to. We give "our" people Dutch lessons, but some of our clients send their personnel for German lessons. These businesses are facing up to the future. Wisely in our view, because the labour market is never going to go back to what it was.