

Expatriate centers: the key drivers of talent attraction and retention in European cities

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Purpose

The purpose of this research is to review the profile, the structure and the range of services offered by expatriate centers of four European cities: Amsterdam, Brno, Hamburg and Vienna, highlighting their main features and describing their best practices. Second, it will assess the function of the expatriate centers in the context of city marketing and branding strategies.

Methodology

The paper is based on a qualitative review of four European expatriate centers. The sample was defined by using secondary research and web analysis in order to identify the most relevant examples of expatriate centers in terms of their service offer, the scope of their activities as well as their status within the City. Expatriate centers of Amsterdam, Brno, Hamburg and Vienna were included in the research sample. Data collection was done through personal interviews with top managers of each center, based on an open-ended questionnaire (pre-tested with Vienna center's managers). Finally, content analysis of expatriate centers' web pages and communication materials completed the review.

Findings

Four European expatriate centers covered by the survey play an important role in enhancing the city image as an attractive place to live and work among the highly skilled migrant community. Due to their status as providers of relevant administrative, business and social services, as well as facilitators of information and networking activities, they become a high value connection between the local city government and the highly skilled migrants.

Originality / value

Talent attraction and retention is one of the key purposes of place marketing and branding strategies developed by local governments in the context of economic globalization and a knowledge economy. The in-depth analysis of four European expat centers shows that Expat centers play an extremely meaningful role in engaging highly skilled migrants in the best city experience and thus contributing to their positive perception and first-hand knowledge of the location.

Key words: highly skilled migrants, expat center, talent attraction and retention, city marketing and city branding.

Introduction: talent as a catalyst of urban competitiveness and growth

Talent attraction and retention is one of the main purposes of place marketing and branding strategies developed by local governments in the context of economic globalization and a knowledge based economy. It is the key challenge for urban competitiveness and innovation policies, especially for European cities affected by industrial delocalization and ageing population. The competitive advantage of cities is closely related to their capacity of attracting and retaining highly skilled and talented people or the “creative class” (Florida, 2002, 2008, 2010; Zenker, 2009; Zenker&Beckmann, 2013).

As highlights Braun (2008), human capital has become a key asset of the knowledge economy. The concentration of talent, innovation and creativity has a powerful “*snowball effect*” (Florida, 2008) on the economic growth and evolution of a city and a region. The geographic proximity of the most skilled and of the top creative talent is a key factor of the “*clustering force*” that significantly accelerates the cutting-edge innovation and prosperity of a location (Florida, 2008).

OECD research (2008) underlines a strong contribution of highly skilled migrants to patent applications, creation of technology firms, as well as a trend towards a more intensive international co-authorship of academic articles. The historical openness of the United States to talented and ambitious immigrants was of critical relevance to the economic success of the country in the last century (Florida, 2013). Research developed by the OECD illustrates a significant contribution to science and high-tech entrepreneurship of the US-based highly skilled migrants and researchers of European and Asian origin. Immigrants from China and India headed the 25% of Silicon Valley companies in 1988, collectively generating 52.300 jobs and USD 17 billion in sales. On the other hand, between 1985 and 1999, the 32% of US Nobel-prize winners in Chemistry were foreign scientists based in the US (OECD, 2002, p.4).

As observed by the OECD (2009), the international student policy has become an effective tool for high level skill attraction by Local Authorities, as students are regarded as a talent pool with strong future potential. Yusuf & Nabeshima (2005) emphasise the role of world-class Universities as global nodes of learning in continually enlarging and renewing the pool of skills by attracting local and foreign students and in contributing to the circulation of talent.

Profile and mobility of highly skilled

The definition of highly skilled is commonly associated with the tertiary level of education, the specific wage level and the managerial or professional job profile, although no agreed international definition exists and the three indicators can overlap (OECD, 2002, 2009; Iredale, 2001). Scientists, students, highly skilled employees, artists and creative industry members, medical staff, IT experts and entrepreneurs are used to be considered as a key highly skilled target of significant relevance to local economies (OECD, 2009). Florida (2002) suggests a work function of creating meaningful new forms and adding economic value through creativity as distinguishing characteristics of creative class members. The creative class consists of a “*super-creative core*”, with full engagement in the creative process, and “*creative professionals*” working in knowledge-intensive industries (Florida, 2002).

The mobility of highly skilled is a process directly related to the globalization of capital, information and knowledge flows that circulate within the global urban network (Sassen, 2001; Beaverstock, 2005, Iredale, 2001). As a consequence of the economic globalization, a hyper mobile talent of cross-border knowledge and culture circulates globally in search of the best professional opportunities and personal fulfillment.

The United Kingdom and Germany are the countries with the highest number of skilled expatriates, while Luxembourg, Norway and the Slovak Republic have the fewest in absolute terms (OECD, 2008, p.12).

According to the OECD research (2002, 2008), economic incentives together with a higher quality research infrastructure and proximity to distinguished scientists are among the main factors conditioning the mobility of the highly skilled. On the other hand, the growth and spread of multinational companies, the climate for innovation, facilities for business start-ups and self-employment are also of important influence on the talent mobility.

Highly skilled: a key target of urban branding and marketing strategies

Brand image of a place is a powerful tool for leveraging urban distinctiveness, competitiveness and general awareness. Places need to be relevant and attractive if they want to exercise some strategic

power in a complex and highly competitive world market. Anholt (2010), Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) claim that an urban image is created through public opinion and mental perceptions of its different targets. Anholt (2010) states that the urban perception by an external target is being formed through a long time experience and depends on the scale of personal involvement or closeness to the place. The identity of the place determines how this place behaves, its behaviour influences how the place is perceived. External image is rooted on place identity and behaviour. The stronger and more consistent are both the place identity and behaviour, the more clear and relevant is the place image for its external targets (Anholt, 2010).

For Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) the management of a city brand is closely related to influencing mental maps of relevant targets in order to create a more favourable attitude to the place. The significant role of the city residents in the place branding process has been identified by Braun, Kavaratzis and Zenker (2013) emphasising their ambassador profile in the tertiary urban brand communication. The word-of-mouth generated by urban residents and their opinions are “*naturally considered informal, authentic and insider sources of information about the place*” (Braun, Kavaratzis, Zenker, 2013).

Considering the extremely valuable contribution of the highly skilled and talented people to the urban growth as well as their potential profile as relevant urban brand ambassadors, the segment of highly skilled and talented demands particular attention from the Local Authorities.

Expat centers: an effective connection and involvement of the highly skilled in the urban brand experience

Cities develop a wide range of initiatives focused on talent attraction, from specific tax incentives to education, health and housing facilities. The experience of expat centers established by public or private institutions in four European cities is a relevant example of this kind of talent attraction initiatives.

Expat center could be defined as an organization set up by public or private initiative or, in some cases, by a mix of them, in order to provide support, information and assistance to a highly skilled local migrant community.

The profile of expat centers ranges from social networks and private clubs, created by the expats themselves or by the internationally minded local enthusiasts, to the official public initiatives, supported by local authorities. Depending on the center's profile, the range of services offered covers from relevant news and general information on the local expat community to contacts with key service suppliers and official administrative procedures of registration and permits issuing. The ultimate purpose of all kinds of expat centers, regardless of their public or private status and scope of services offered, consists in facilitating migrants' prompt integration into their new labour and social environment and connecting them with other expats and local community.

The following section highlights the main features of each of the centers included in the research sample. A comparative analysis of the most relevant services and functions of the centers is presented at the end of this section.

AMSTERDAM EXPAT CENTER

The Amsterdam expat center was established in 2008 as a joint initiative of the Immigration and Naturalisation Services by the Ministry of Security and Justice of the Netherlands along with the cities of Amsterdam, Amstelveen, Haarlemmermeer and Almere. The main purpose of the center is to provide a "one-stop-shop" services for international companies located in the area and their highly skilled migrant employees in order to significantly reduce the administrative burden related to their initial registration and working permits procedures.

The center features a precise definition of its target of highly skilled and knowledge migrants according to the specific income criteria for two age segments (younger and older than 30 year old). On the other hand, specific income criteria are established for highly educated migrants and blue card holders (highly skilled non-EU citizens).

The center employs 30 experts who provide migrants with information and consulting as well as specific administrative procedures.

Range of services

Amsterdam expat center offers a simplified procedure of issuing residence and work permits for highly skilled migrants and registering them with their local municipality.

Since 2011, the expat center officially cooperates with the Dutch Tax Administration regarding the 30% ruling or tax advantage for highly skilled migrants working in the Netherlands.

On the other hand, all general information related to different administrative procedures e.g. healthcare, accommodation, education, taxes, parking, as well as a network of trusted service suppliers for the expat community are provided by the expat center.

The expat center's web site provides all relevant information on topics and procedures for highly skilled migrants.

Funding

The annual budget of the Amsterdam expat center is of 1.5 million euros. The financing of the center is mixed, in which public and private sources of financing coexist. Private funds come from the annual membership fees of companies participating in the Partnership Programme of the expat center.

Sponsorship scheme

50 service providing companies operating in the expat market are members of the expat center's Partnership Programme. The range of their services includes all relevant sectors such as banking, insurance, childcare, healthcare, employment, relocation, language and legal services, among others. Companies interested in becoming expat center's partners should meet certain performance criteria and agree to the membership terms and conditions established by the expat center.

Core values

Guaranteed service quality and dedicated personal and friendly assistance are the core values of the Amsterdam expat center whose main purpose is to make life easier for highly skilled migrants to the city.

Main achievements

Since 2008 the Amsterdam expat center has become a trusted partner for more than 850 international companies located in the area of Amsterdam, Amstelveen, Haarlemmermeer and Almere, and more than 10.000 individual expats. The average annual increase in individual expats and companies attended has been of more than 10% since its opening.

As stated on the center's web site, in a recent survey, international companies ranked the services provided by the center at 8.7 out of 10. In the previous survey, their rank was 5 out of 10, the fact of a significant improvement in service quality.

BRNO EXPAT CENTER

The expat center of Brno was established in 2010 by the NGO Brnopolis and the City of Brno Strategic Office, whose purpose consists of enhancing the international profile of the city. The center belongs to the NGO and is supported partially by the City of Brno, the South Moravian Region and some private sponsors. The main goal of the center is to facilitate the integration of highly skilled expats living and working in Brno in the local community, providing them with all relevant information on required administrative procedures and opportunities for informal networking. The center, on the other hand, provides the City Hall with relevant information on the migrants community in the city through reports, statistics and overviews produced by the center's experts. The centre has two employees and five external consultants from Brnopolis.

Range of services

The center provides foreign people living in Brno with information and consultation services on administrative and legal procedures, offers assistance and translation services in meetings with authorities and service providers, organizes events on relevant subjects and networking activities. The target of the center is made of foreign employees, management staff and HR divisions of multinational companies, located in Brno, as well as researchers, expats' family members and foreign students.

All information, advising services and assistance to events are cost-free subject to the personal registration through the web.

During 2011 and 2012 the center attended 604 inquiries by email, personal visits, phone calls, skype and through consultations in company.

Newsletters, info-sheets, web, emails, Facebook, Linkedin and Twiter are the main communication tools of the center with expat community.

Funding

Brno expat center is funded on a mixed public-private scheme. Less than 60% of the budget is funded by the City Hall, less than 10% by the South Moravian Region and the rest, approximately one third of the budget, by private sector. The proportion is slowly changing, as more private companies are becoming sponsors. The total annual budget of the center is around 40.000 euros.

Sponsorship scheme

The center has developed a two-level partnership scheme. Large companies employing expats such as Infosys, Pixmania, GTS, RedHat are Main Partners of the centre, with a fee of 2.000 euros each six month. Main partners are offered a range of specific services for their expat employees including the priority handling of immigration matters, assistance in meetings with local authorities, welcome seminars and regular personal consultation at the company's premises, as well as a complete individual employee support after relocation.

The other level of partners is made of Referral Members, a service providing companies. These companies pay an annual fee of 400 euros in exchange for their introduction to the expat community through seminars on related subjects and visibility on the web and Facebook.

Core values

The main value of the Brno expat center is a friendly, fast and reliable service. It is flexible and efficient in finding fitting solutions for all kinds of life situations and making connection between foreigners and local creative class (eg. TEDx).

Main achievements

Gaining trust from the city officials, getting financial support from private and public institutions as well as becoming a number one contact center for foreigners living in the city.

As stated by Jan Kopkas, the Brno expat center manager: *"it is about creating a friendly multinational environment helping with integration of foreigners on all levels. It is not strictly business oriented on managers, we most of all enjoy cultural meetings, social events, networking."*

HAMBURG WELCOME CENTER

Hamburg Welcome Center was established in 2007 as a public service of the Hamburg Government and is located at the Central district of Hamburg at the premises of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce. The main purpose of the center is to provide the newcomers to the city (80.000 pax a year approx.) with relevant information about Hamburg, to offer them consulting services and to provide foreign qualified executives and students with some immigration and registration procedures. 13 people are employed at the centre.

The head of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Central district is the Head of the Hamburg Welcome Center. The center depends on the political strategy on foreigners of the Hamburg

Government. The current approach is focused on attracting not only highly qualified employees, but also less qualified and refugees. The center has a direct collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on subjects related to the migration legal procedures and with the Ministry of Labour Affairs regarding Hamburg shortage of qualified employees, such as engineers.

Funding

The budget allocated to the centre is confidential.

The centre is jointly funded by four Hamburg Ministries and seven Governments of Hamburg Districts. The annual rental costs of the centre are of 110.000 euros. Expenditures on publishing, events and information materials are of 100.000 euros a year.

Range of services

The center provides Information on all relevant topics for newcomers such as accommodation, employment, education, healthcare, childcare and leisure in Hamburg. It also offers contacts with relevant referred partners, providers of specific professional services for newcomers. Information and contact services are cost-free. For European Union residents the center issues domicile registration service. For non-European Union residents, residence permits are issued by the center. Administrative procedures are charged an official public fee.

The center organises on a regular basis events and networking activities for foreign and local citizens as well as visits around Hamburg. In order to use the services offered by the center and get information on its activities, newcomers must sign up as members. Web, email, phone and infoflyers are the main communication tools of the center.

Sponsorship scheme

Being established as a full public service, private sponsors are not admitted in order to avoid conflicts of private-public interests and lobbying by private sector.

Core values

The center offers a unique combination of information and immigration related services, the “one-stop-shop” scheme delivered by a friendly and dedicated staff. The aim of the center is to make all newcomers feel at home in Hamburg.

Main achievements

The center issues annually 6.000 residence permits and 4.000 registrations approximately, holds 25.000 information contacts and has registered an annual average of 200.000 hits on the web site.

VIENNA EXPAT CENTER

The international expat centre of Vienna was established in 2009 by the City Government of Vienna and the Vienna Business Agency as part of its policy of promoting Vienna as business location and of promoting its local businesses. The main purpose of the Vienna expat center consists of providing advising and consulting services on the “one-stop-shop” principals for highly skilled migrants and their families in Vienna. The main target of the expat center services are international employees in top positions, such as managers, entrepreneurs, researchers, scientists and diplomats as well as HR divisions of multinational companies with expats employees. It also provides specialised consulting services for entrepreneurs with migration background (MINGO program); female entrepreneurs as well as information on financing, funding, legal procedures and networking for international investors and businesses to be established in Vienna.

Range of services

Five experts work on a full-time basis at the expat centre, providing information and consultation services on all relevant subjects for the expat community. The most commonly discussed topics, according to the center’s managers, are migration law, work and residency permits, job search, founding business partners, housing issues and family related questions. The top two are migration law & legal questions and a job search.

All information and advising services are cost-free. Furthermore, welcome events, seminars on relevant subjects and social networking activities are organised by the expat center for the expat community and internationally-minded locals. The center provides expat communities with space and support for their own events and meetings. Since 2010, the center has attended 2.500 clients in consulting individual sessions and 5.500 guests at events such as lectures, seminars and networking initiatives.

Newsletters, web page, emails and expat guide are the main communication tools of the centre for the expat community.

Funding

Vienna expat center is funded on a mixed public-private scheme. It belongs to the City, but its activities are sponsored by local companies. The annual budget of the center is confidential.

Sponsorship scheme

The center has developed a partnership scheme for leading multinational companies in order to get them involved in its activities and events. Allianz, Deloitte and Bank Austria are three premium sponsors of the centre at the beginning of 2013. Smaller companies are offered specific packages and options of contribution to the center's activities according to their capabilities. All sponsors get visibility and relevance among the expat community. As an example of sponsorship, Deloitte holds quarterly a tax lunch at which professional tax advisers provide expats with information on relevant Austrian tax and social security issues in English.

Core values

All people working at the centre previously had their own expat experience abroad and speak foreign languages. According to the center's managers, their aim is to give a positive touch to some negative meaning of migration. They believe that, although there could be some difficulties and bureaucratic problems, the migration is also about integration and connection to the local community and should be a positive experience.

The center receives a great number of thankful and grateful mails with positive feed-back from its clients regarding the consulting and advisory they were provided with and the care they were taken, all free of charge and without any commercial interest.

Main achievements

Among its main achievements, the center's managers believe as the most relevant the one of becoming a part of the USP of Vienna and influencing its perception as a business location city, an attractive place to work and live not only for business oriented and decision making people, but also for their families. Building a bridge between expats and local community describes best the center's purpose.

The official key performance indicators of the centre regard the number of companies and investment brought to Vienna, as well as the number of new jobs created.

On the other hand, the center is consolidating its reputation as a must to go place in Vienna regarding all issues of the expat community. In the Internet expat forums and discussions online the center is mentioned as the most relevant source of information and advice for the expat community.

Comparative analysis of four European expat centers

	Amsterdam	Brno	Vienna	Hamburg
Status	public service, jointly created in 2008 by the Immigration and Naturalisation Services of the Ministry of Security and Justice of the Netherlands along with the cities of Amsterdam, Amstelveen, Haarlemmermeer and Almere.	public service, jointly created in 2010 by NGO Brnopolis and the City Strategic Office.	public service, established in 2009 by Vienna Government and Vienna Business Agency.	public service, established in 2007 by Hamburg Government.
Target	>highly skilled and knowledge migrants (defined accordingly to established income criteria); >HR divisions of multinational companies.	>highly skilled migrants; >HR divisions of multinational companies.	>highly skilled migrants; >HR divisions of multinational companies.	>highly skilled migrants; >all other foreign and national migrants.
Funding	public-private	public-private	public-private	public
Range of services	> information > advising & consulting > cultural and networking events; + > issuing residence and work permits; > providing municipal registration; > managing 30% truling (tax advantage for highly skilled migrants)	>information >advising & consulting >welcome seminars >events >networking activities	>information >advising & consulting > welcome seminars > events >networking activities	>information >advising & consulting >welcome seminars >events >networking activities + > registration for EU residents; > issuing of residence permits for non EU residents.
Sponsorship scheme	partnership programme for service providing companies based on established criteria and annual fee financing.	two-level partnership scheme: main partners and referral members	two-level partnership scheme: premium sponsors and service providers	none
Core values	one-stop-shop scheme; guaranteed service quality, dedicated personal and friendly service	friendly, fast and reliable service	friendly and personalised service	one-stop-shop service delivered by a friendly and dedicated staff
Main achievements	trusted partner of more than 850 international companies and more than 10.000 individual expats since 2008.	being a number one contact centre for foreigners living in the city.	>being a part of the USP of Vienna and influencing its perception as a business location city; >reputation as a must to go place in Vienna regarding all issues of the expat community	being a service of great relevance for the annual average of 80.000 newcomers to the city

After reviewing four European expat centers from the perspective of their profile, range of services and scope of activities targeted at highly skilled migrants, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. All centers surveyed share a strong public profile, endorsed by the City Government, the City Business Agency or the City Strategic Office. All of them receive public fundings, but for only one of them this is a unique source of financing. Three other centres have developed a mixed public-private scheme of financing through Sponsorship Agreements. In addition, one of the centres has recently started charging expats service fees as another source of financing.
2. The main target of the expat centres are highly skilled migrants, although only in the case of Amsterdam there are some precise income criteria established for this profile. Employees of large companies and entrepreneurs, as well as their families are the most common users of the services offered by the expat centers. On the other hand, all centers have a direct connection with the HR divisions of large companies, employers of highly skilled migrants, providing them with relevant information on administrative procedures and services for their employees.
3. The service offer by the expat centers ranges from information and consulting on all aspects relevant to the foreign newcomers, business networking and social events to the official administrative services. Both in Amsterdam and Hamburg, expat centers work in a close cooperation with Immigration and Labour Authorities providing services of registration and issuing of work and residence permits for the expat community and tax ruling application only in Amsterdam. Among the four centers, Amsterdam provides the most complete and innovative range of services to the highly skilled expat community. All four centers are committed to offering a high quality, personalised and friendly assistance to the expats in order to help them with a one-stop-shop service scheme to deal with all initial administrative burden and to making nice and enjoyable their life and work experience in a new city.
4. Three of four surveyed expat centers (Amsterdam, Vienna and Brno) have developed a close cooperation with private companies providers of services relevant to the expat community from banking and legal consulting to healthcare, education, relocation and housing. The basis for collaboration between the expat centers and private companies is established through Sponsorship Agreements. In exchange for a monthly fee companies gain access to the expat community in order

to present their services, organise seminars and work-shops on specific topics or participate in network activities and social events.

5. Highly skilled migrants are a high value target for city branding and marketing strategies because of their role as potential brand ambassadors of the place among their personal and professional networks, on one hand, and as relevant contributors to the economic growth and innovation of the place, on the other hand. On account of the “double value” contribution of the highly skilled migrants to the place, they should be specifically addressed in marketing and branding strategies developed by cities looking to enhance their competitive advantage and innovation leadership within the global urban market. The in-depth analysis of four European expat centers shows that Expat centers play an extremely meaningful role in engaging highly skilled migrants in the best city experience and thus contributing to their positive first-hand knowledge of the location. Expat centers’ profile and status within the expat community, as well as their broad range of tailor-made services for the expats make them a relevant strategic tool for the city branding and marketing activities focused on attraction and retention of highly-skilled migrants.

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