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SWITZERLAND'S APPEAL ENDURES DESPITE A DIP

By Rainer Strack, Orsolya Kovacs-Ondrejko, Pierre Antebi, Daniel Kessler, Vaidyanathan Srikant, Rebekka Hänggi, and Mathias Steger

This article is part of the series [Decoding Global Talent 2018](#). The series is based on a survey of 366,000 people in 197 countries by The Boston Consulting Group, The Network, and (in Switzerland) JobCloud.

A **WORK-ABROAD** destination, Switzerland has much to offer. The country has a high standard of living and low unemployment, and it ranks first on several international indexes for innovation and competitiveness. Three of its cities—Zurich, Geneva, and Basel—rate among the top ten globally for quality of living. A large number of foreigners work in the country, many of them in high-caliber jobs at cutting-edge companies.

All of that could explain why Switzerland remains among the most popular places for foreigners to move to for work, even though it fell to eighth in popularity from fifth in 2014, according to a survey by BCG and The Network. (See Exhibit 1.)

Recent regulations that dictate who can come to the country to work might contribute to the perception that Switzerland is less wel-

coming than it used to be and thus might explain the dip. The country's high cost of living could be another contributing factor, as could the economy, which is healthy but small relative to some of Switzerland's European neighbors. Although the Swiss technology, finance, and biopharmaceutical industries are flourishing and creating opportunities in everything from cryptocurrency to data science, the country's economy is not yet considered to be as modern or dynamic as that of Silicon Valley or Berlin.

Popularity Drops After Shifting Immigration Policies

Even though foreigners represent a quarter of Switzerland's population of 8.4 million, recent government policies have made it more difficult for others who want to move to the country. The 2014 "Stop Mass Immigration" initiative that sought to impose stricter quotas on migrants coming from inside and outside the EU might have led to a negative impression of the country as a destination for foreigners. In 2017, net migration of EU citizens to the country was 31,000, a record low. A follow-up ini-

EXHIBIT 1

Switzerland at a Glance

Incoming talent

Rank as a destination for the global workforce

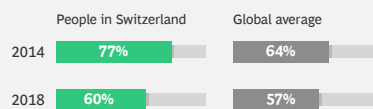


Respondents would move to Switzerland from (2018)

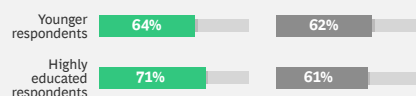
- 1 France
- 2 Bosnia and Herzegovina
- 3 Serbia
- 4 Italy
- 5 Tunisia
- 6 Luxembourg
- 7 Greece
- 8 Cameroon
- 9 Germany
- 10 Austria

Outbound mobility

Willingness to work abroad in 2014 and 2018



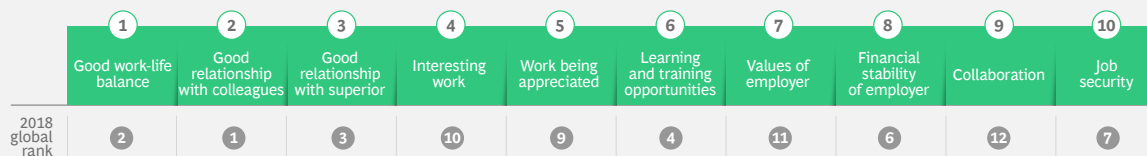
Willingness to work abroad among the in-demand workforce in 2018



The Swiss workforce would move to (2018)

- 1 US
- 2 Canada
- 3 Germany
- 4 Australia
- 5 UK
- 6 France
- 7 Spain
- 8 Sweden
- 9 Italy
- 10 Austria

Top ten work preferences for respondents in Switzerland



Source: 2018 BCG/The Network proprietary web survey and analysis.

Note: Young people are defined as younger than 30 years of age. Highly educated workers are defined as having a master's degree, a doctorate, or the equivalent.

tiative passed in 2018 requires employers to give preference to hiring unemployed people who have registered with the government for categories of jobs where the jobless rate is more than 8%. Such a policy could reinforce the misconception that the Swiss do not welcome foreigners.

The country's popularity declined for respondents in countries such as Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. It also declined for respondents in Western European countries such as Germany. Four years ago, Switzerland was the top work-abroad choice for Germans, but they now rank it second, behind the US. At the same time, citizens from Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia still rank Switzerland as a highly desirable place to move—but these nations have experienced improved economic situations and, perhaps as a result, significant decreases in mobility, which could contribute to the decrease in the number of people willing to move to Switzerland. Recent economic improvements in EU countries,

such as Spain, that have more welcoming immigration policies could also have made Switzerland relatively less attractive.

In addition, Switzerland's desirability as a work destination dropped slightly among highly educated respondents, defined as people with a master's, a doctorate, or another advanced degree. That group of participants in our survey ranked the country the sixth-most-attractive place to move to for a job, down from fourth in 2014. (See Exhibit 2.)

However, Switzerland remains a top destination for survey respondents from nearby countries such as France, Italy, and Luxembourg, all places with strong connections to the Swiss melting pot of languages and cultures. For respondents in the Schengen Area, in which passports aren't required to travel between countries, Switzerland ranks fourth in popularity for working abroad, after the US, the UK, and Germany, all of which are much larger economies. It could be a sign that Switzerland remains a favorite of respon-

dents from countries where visa issues are less of a problem.

Swiss cities—with their clean streets, efficient transportation systems, central location in the heart of Europe offering quick access to international destinations, and picturesque views of mountain peaks—exert an even bigger draw than larger metropolises in other countries. Both Zurich and Geneva have been included in previous rankings of the top 30 cities for people willing to relocate for work but now appear somewhat higher than they did in 2014. Zurich ranks 18, up from 20 in 2014, and Geneva ranks 22, up from 30 last time.

“I would prefer Geneva over New York, London, or Paris,” says Ana Maria Simionovici, 29, a Romanian computer scientist with a PhD from the University of Luxembourg.

More Swiss Residents Prefer to Stay Put

Switzerland’s strong economy, low unemployment rate, and high standard of living could explain why significantly fewer Swiss residents are interested in pursuing employment outside the country’s borders than was the case in 2014. Six in ten Swiss respondents say they would be willing to move abroad for a

job. While that number represents the majority of respondents and is slightly above the 57% global average, it is a significant decrease from 2014, when 77% of Swiss respondents said they would consider moving abroad for work.

“Fewer Swiss are willing to leave the country for work than in 2014.”

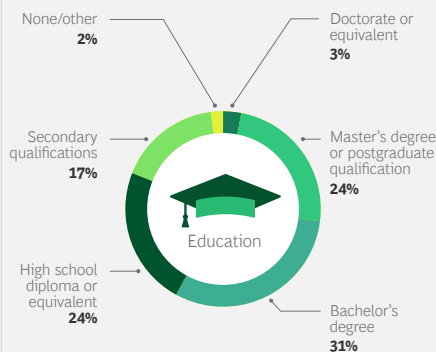
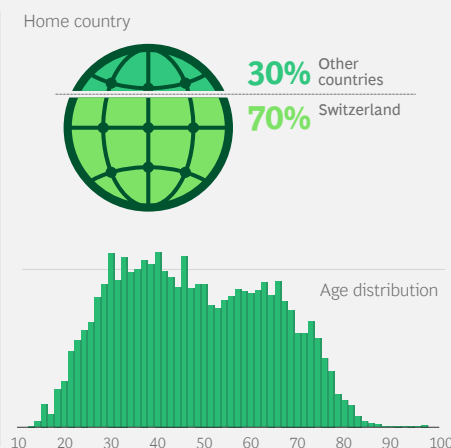
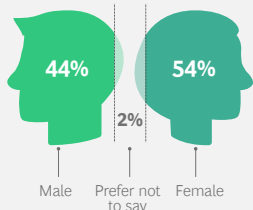
External factors could explain why fewer Swiss are willing to leave the country for work. For example, uncertainties about employment opportunities in the UK caused by the 2016 Brexit vote could be a reason why that country is less attractive to Swiss residents now than in the past. Immigration policies, terror attacks, and other instabilities could also make the Swiss less willing to move abroad for work.

Veronika Szabo, 37, moved to Zurich in 2005 after graduating from university. Now, as a working mom, she doesn’t want to move out of the area. Switzerland is stable, and Zurich is safe and comfortable. And it has become

EXHIBIT 2

Demographics of Survey Respondents in Switzerland

7,299
Workforce respondents



Source: 2018 BCG/The Network proprietary web survey and analysis.
Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

more cosmopolitan since she arrived, says Szabo.

“The standard of living here is very high,” she says. “I have gotten used to the lifestyle. I appreciate the efficiency, how things are done, and the quality. And if you’re traveling for leisure or business, Zurich offers global connections everywhere. Switzerland has a lot to offer.”

Strategies to Find and Retain People with In-Demand Skills

While Swiss residents’ willingness to work abroad declined overall in recent years, a substantial number are still interested, and that’s especially true for in-demand groups. Seventy-one percent of highly educated workers and 64% of survey respondents younger than age 30 would be willing to work abroad, which is higher than the global average. The relative willingness of in-demand groups to go abroad coupled with the difficulties that Swiss immigration policies may create for people interested in moving to the country for a job opportunity could make it difficult for organizations there to find and retain candidates with desired skills.

As in other countries with mature economies and low unemployment, Swiss companies should counter obstacles by offering a work environment with elements that people say they appreciate. For Swiss survey respondents, an equitable balance between work and life tops the list of desirable job factors, along with good relationships with managers and coworkers. According to our survey, they also value interesting work assignments and feeling appreciated for their efforts far more than the global average.

Policymakers and employers should also support measures that specifically help motivated top talent perform better at work, including women who might otherwise have to choose between caregiving and work. Such support could include providing child care, paid family leave, and more flexible work arrangements such as part-time hours, job shar-

ing, or working remotely. Any of those could benefit Switzerland, which scores poorly on a global “glass ceiling” index that measures working conditions for women. Improving that would make it more competitive with other countries where such benefits and considerations are already the norm.

Governments and organizations should not be satisfied with the country’s current standing, as the findings of our survey show how preferences can shift in a relatively short time. Beyond that, they must begin planning for a future when an aging population will lead more people to retire, shrinking the workforce. To counter that, they should consciously build a stronger countrywide employer brand by emphasizing Switzerland’s broader advantages, including its location, outdoor activities, transportation, and growing tech sector. Individual organizations must communicate about the specific benefits, perks, activities, and workplace policies they offer. In this way, they can show their employer brand in the best possible light—all the better to compete against larger economies for in-demand talent with highly desirable skills.

In addition, governments and policymakers should support regulations that welcome international talent, along with processes that make it easier for employers to hire and bring such talent into Switzerland. If that does not happen, both Swiss companies and international companies with offices in the country will increasingly look to build new capabilities in places where finding required talent is easier. That could hinder the country’s economic development.

“For the Swiss, an equitable work-life balance tops the list of desired job factors.”

For Further Contact

Rainer Strack

Senior Partner and Managing Director
BCG Düsseldorf
strack.rainer@bcg.com

Daniel Kessler

Partner and Managing Director
BCG Zurich
kessler.daniel@bcg.com

Mathias Steger

Content Manager
JobCloud
mathias.steger@jobcloud.ch

Orsolya Kovacs-Ondrejko

Project Leader
BCG Zurich
kovacs.orsolya@bcg.com

Srikant Vaidyanathan

Senior Partner and Managing Director
BCG Zurich
srikant.vaidyanathan@bcg.com

Pierre Antebi

Managing Director
The Network
pantebi@figarocms.fr

Rebekka Hänggi

*Content and Online Marketing
Manager*
JobCloud
rebekka.haenggi@jobcloud.ch

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