German companies remain reluctant to pro-actively recruit foreign workers. The logic of the former recruitment ban continues to be too strong: Since the 1970s, skilled immigration has at best been allowed, but never actively solicited. However, that is precisely what is needed today, as the example of the nursing-care industry in Germany makes clear.

Even when companies suffer from a shortage of skilled workers, they struggle with pro-actively obtaining workers from abroad. This is the conclusion of a Bertelsmann Stiftung study focusing on the nursing-care industry as an example. Hardly any other industry has such great difficulties in finding
qualified staff. Fully 61 percent of nursing-care facilities have job vacancies, with an average of 4.3 unfilled places per firm. However, according to a survey of businesses in the sector, only one-sixth of all nursing-care operations have recruited skilled workers from abroad.

In carrying out the representative study, the Centre for European Economic Research (ZEW) surveyed nearly 600 employers. Three out of four of the nursing-care establishments with job vacancies described the search for suitable skilled employees as difficult. However, recruitment from abroad took last place in a list of strategies used by the care industry to address this worker shortage, with only 16 percent of companies having pursued this option. The companies were more likely to headhunt members of their competitors’ staffs (20 percent) or try to reduce the illness-related absence rate (83 percent).

Abb. 10: Fachkräftemangel in Pflegeberufen, Dezember 2014

Germany’s nursing-care industry suffers from a shortage of skilled workers.

Markus Diekmann

Too complex, too expensive, too many legal hurdles
Despite the persistent staff shortage, 59 percent of nursing establishments that lack international-recruiting experience say it is also not seen as an option in the future. Justifying this position, they say the process is too complex, too expensive, and entails too many legal hurdles. Among surveyed companies with recruitment experience, 83 percent have already run into bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining skilled workers abroad, while 67 percent have encountered problems with recognition of qualifications. Sixty percent have had difficulties related to immigration permits for third-country nationals.

For these reasons, companies want a reduction of regulatory barriers (67 percent), better language- and integration-course offerings (87 percent), and more means of obtaining information about applicants (73 percent). Small and medium-sized enterprises in particular need support. The study shows that bigger companies with more professional human-resources departments tend to seek employees from abroad more often. Outpatient care services in particular show little activity in this area, with only one-tenth having engaged in recruiting efforts abroad in the last three years. By contrast, 20 percent of inpatient nursing facilities and residential nursing homes have actively sought to recruit internationally.

“Looking at the nursing-care sector, it is clear how far Germany is from a pro-active and labor-market-oriented immigration policy.”

Jörg Dräger, member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Executive Board

In the last three years, the country in which German nursing-care companies have most often sought workers is Spain. A total of 61 percent of all companies with international-recruitment experience have been active there. This is followed by Poland (19 percent) and Croatia (19 and 16 percent). For the few companies that have also engaged in recruitment efforts outside the European Union, activities are split mainly between Eastern European countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Russia, China or the Philippines.

High rate of satisfaction with skilled workers recruited abroad

A majority of nursing-care companies that have hired employees from abroad report positive experiences. Within this group, 60 percent of companies say they are satisfied or very satisfied with their foreign nursing staff. Companies rate the work dedication of employees who have been recruited abroad particularly positively. Forty-eight percent of businesses assess this dedication as being higher than that of their German employees. However, human-
resources managers rate migrants’ practical experience significantly more poorly. Fifty-three percent of companies say this is lower than is the case for their other employees.

"Given the demographic development, with greater nursing-care needs and a decreased supply of labor, the pro-active recruitment of skilled workers from abroad is indispensable."

Jörg Dräger, member of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Executive Board

However, more immigration of skilled workers would not relieve the nursing-care industry of having to improve its pay, typical workload and image. Successful international-recruiting efforts would also be helped by better information for companies, a nationally standardized process for recognizing nurses' professional qualifications, and more transparent immigration regulations. More efficient job-search platforms and a certification process for recruitment agencies are also needed in order to give interested employers a greater sense of security.

The complete study can be found here (only in German):
Internationale Fachkräfteerkrutierung in der deutschen Pflegebranche

Further information
Lengthy asylum procedures make it more difficult for refugees in Germany to find work

- read more

The labor market will need more immigration from EU countries in the future

- read more