



Employing The Right One

This is another feature about employing and retaining the right person in transport and logistics. Today we talk with an expert who has a wide horizon on the global labour market in logistics, Andreas R. Obermeyer from Basel, CH. Andreas is a first class consultant and works with la crème of logistics in Europe. Born and grown in Basel, he completed his apprenticeship in freight forwarding after his “Matura”, i.e. the college certificate valid in Switzerland. After positions in Schenker and Danzas, world famous in those years, Andreas started to work in consulting in 1997, since 2001 in HR executive search and personnel consultancy ([AOC - Andreas Obermeyer Consulting](#)). Andreas is a sociable, easy-going conversant and said of his private life: “I have been in a stable childless relationship for 17 years, accompanied by our French Barbet "Kofi". My hobbies include wine, food/cooking, football and music, mainly blues and rock.” Both Andreas and I seem to have strong appreciation for music, so an analogy is possible: a parallel that may highlight similarities and differences in employment and life style, now and a few decades ago, as we read later on.

The extraordinary rock band *Talking Heads* published their “More songs about Buildings and Food” in 1978, an album with a clear societal approach that was departing from the younger generation’s supposed musical consumption. We were young and enterprising, impatient to open all doors. Others called us baby-boomers, because there were many of us, just after the war. Competition to the top was not something you heard of, it was in your own classroom or in your enterprise. In 1978 we were all there, ready to slice the world into edible portions. We had started to work almost as redemption, as if we could do it only once in a lifetime. In 1978 I left my former employer and started my own company, full of hopes. But something was seriously going to change everyone’s life when Thatcher and Reagan turned the tables in their respective countries, with ripples spreading all over the world.

I understand why millennials allegedly do not seem to like us much today: we did not like the older guy either: there is always something to regret in the legacy a generation leaves behind. The Talking Heads showed a rather critical approach to their country’s society, and it could be surprising now. Eleven years after 1967’s Summer of Love, More Songs about Buildings and Food almost sounded as a sacrilege. In four years, in 1982 the Talking Heads would play in Switzerland at Montreux. Is there an analogy with today’s younger generation – those called millennials by those who are older – or perhaps is it the opposite? Let us find out with Andreas R. Obermeyer.

FT: Andreas, I am happy you have accepted this interview. Let me thank you for

your immaculate professional work in logistics. I have a series of questions for your many years' experience in selecting top managers in Switzerland and internationally. Many employers complain that they are unable to secure (or retain) the right staff in their organisations. Perhaps not the same everywhere, in many countries it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure the right person (s) on the job. Have you registered this problem in your business and what is your approach to maximise the opportunities?

AO: A shortage of young talent is fundamentally a problem within the western world. With demographic changes, the last baby-boomers will leave the workforce in the next five years and significantly fewer young people will enter the employment market. In addition, the training period for young people takes considerably longer today and they enter work later in life. Consequently, we also have corresponding effects in the pensions, but this is a different topic . . .

On the one hand, it is also noticeable that the cost pressure leads to process optimisation in the supply chain and within the organisations; conversely, it could lead to outsourcing into countries where labour costs are lower. A recent example: a European customer told me that he could not find skilled workers in the USA in sufficient numbers. He now simply has a customer service centre in Mexico and has reduced his labour costs by two thirds compared to the USA. With such developments, employees are increasingly losing their loyalty to their companies and since the industry traditionally shows demanding tasks, whilst offering average salaries and few fringe benefits, we perceive a migration to other industry and trade.

FT: Andreas, you recently declared that “people meet, talk, exchange ideas, motivate each other, give each other advice, and establish contacts with third parties”, i.e. what a top manager is required to do in his or her job, over and above the technical skill required for the job itself. In which proportions the technical and social elements play a role in today's selection process?

AO: I think this is and has always been an important component in advancing one's career. Many young people would like to take their first career step in their mid to late twenties, if they have not done so already, but many elements are missing, including mentorship or coaching. This is exactly where it becomes difficult for the employee, unless he or she is a high flyer. Logically, a young employee is not invited to the top CEO summits in the industry. In my view networking also means maintaining a lifelong approach to learning and maintaining contacts with fellow students from the training and education period, as well as including contacts with customers and suppliers outside of business hours in one's agenda.

People who appear to be in gear also receive recommendations, i.e. perhaps Ms. So-and-so has been approached for a given position, but she is currently not interested; she might recommend another colleague from her lifelong learning acquaintances to the head-hunter, as a specialist in the required domain. Once the candidate has been “discovered”, it is crucial to understand which is the appropriate task. Of course, in a specialist role what matters is the level of in-depth specialist knowledge. On the other hand, in a leadership position or in purchase and/or sales, social aspects automatically play a more important role.



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FT: In 2024 we are looking at a different job market, compared to the market we contemplated years ago, when we first met. You managed to successfully position your company in this day and age. Can you explain how your approach has changed and which activities increased the most at the expense of others? You surely have a direct link to those who are in a position to decide in many enterprises and associations: can you describe how their requirements evolved over the years and in which way this makes your job easier, or perhaps more difficult, today?

AO: The visionary/spontaneous company managers who looked at a few candidates' dossiers and then customised functions for them definitely belong to the past; today there are clear function descriptions and checklists regarding what candidates have to provide for the required profile. In turn, these tasks and competences are clearly defined, at least on paper. As a result, some companies – especially SMEs at least – miss out on looking at candidates who have an unorthodox profile or who worked previously outside of the industry, but there are also decision-makers who cling to the old ideas of how employees worked in the 70s, 80s or 90s and are unwilling to accept the market realities of 2024, e.g. CVs with more frequent job changes, children in a second or third phase of life, etc. What is definitely making the market more difficult is the fact that a large number of managers and specialists are retiring, whilst most companies are now looking for the 35/50 year-old who cracked a top job, and this is surely not the same in terms of numbers. In some cases, this also means that the recruitment process takes significantly longer. As a result, companies need to take succession plans in hand much earlier, either through internal development programmes or external recruitment.

FT: How was your environment impacted by the pandemic? Do you see permanent changes have taken place that we shall have to be concerned about in future, or do you see that in a while everything went back to “normal”?

AO: Most companies in German-speaking Europe were on a reduced time schedule and therefore limited in selection. Where there were additional requirements it was difficult, as people do not necessarily want to change in uncertain times. The immediate hiring trend after the restrictions were lifted was toward higher salaries, as margins were clearly higher during this phase, but there was also an increase in those leaving the industry. This salary policy is currently being corrected, but as in other sectors the desire/demand to work from home immediately prevails: in the pandemic, it was the saviour, the reason directly used by companies when recruiting, now the companies are tightening the reins again and strongly reducing this option. The pandemic has given a boost to digitalisation and opened the eyes of SMEs in particular to the fact that it is high time we tackled digitalisation as a game changer.

FT: You stated that “today, digital networks seem to be indispensable means of promoting one's own career. The reach of these networks is gigantic. Unfortunately, the efficiency of contact exchanges is decreasing. There are too many posts and the flood of information is impossible to control.” At the end of the day, do you consider social media as a crucial factor in the selection of a job, or does it merely play a background role?

AO: It is true that the flood of information pouring in is unmanageable. Even on professional platforms such as LinkedIn, you could spend the whole day reading things that are interesting or posts inconsistent with a business platform, too. Even more, other social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp or TikTok are now just as suitable for business. From the candidate's point of view, they simply need a presence on such a platform for visibility. It is too late to set up a profile and add “opentowork”, if you need/want to look for a job. As a newcomer, you do not have a network yet and it takes a while until you have the first 500 contacts and, by the way . . . every participant in the platform is open to work. As a company, you cannot avoid presenting yourself, as you have the chance to communicate exciting stuff and have a much greater leverage into the world: who is going to look at your website if nobody knows you?





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FT: This is a question I cannot avoid as things stand today. Everybody seems to be concerned with AI and its consequences on employment. Do you see a change kicking in? If not yet, do you expect much will change in the next – say – five years? Can this mitigate the shortage or skilled personnel in our environment?

AO: AI will bring about a change in the search for candidates in the same way that professional networks such as LinkedIn or XING did years ago and continue to drive change today. Initially used by recruitment consultants as a pool of candidates, the platforms have now become standard tools in companies' HR departments. Today, we see that professional networks are increasingly developing into job portals, where algorithms are used to match job advertisements with suitable candidates, something similar to dating agencies. Young people have no problem being contacted via such tools and are open to this kind of approach. It is just as accepted at specialist and middle management level. Top executives and older employees still appreciate being approached directly, but here too a change is taking place. So I assume that the search approach will change in the near future, but the potential/number of employees will not become better/bigger just because of improved search options, but simply more transparent.



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FT: You stated that “conscious networking is central to personal branding and career planning. When a job comes up, everyone probably thinks most of the people they know well. Therefore, not every vacancy is advertised.” This is humanly understandable, but do you think this behaviour leads always to the right decision? In my experience best performers are often persons whom I had simply never met before, but scored high on my selection criteria. How would you balance these two aspects for optimal choices?

AO: Interesting question, with two perspectives . . . What is the benefit for a company looking for employees and what is the effect for a person looking for a new job/company? For the entrepreneur, I agree with you that the most obvious solution is not always the best solution, because I may have already made compromises so that the employee can fulfil the role well. However, I sometimes realise that companies often do not know who their own employees are. Because there is no comprehensive view of all employees, the focus remains local or national, whereas at a different location, the perfect employee ends up leaving the company because he or she does not get any other opportunities. It would be essential that employees’ career paths are spelt out in order to strengthen their loyalty. In order for me to get to know my own employees, they also have to present themselves one way or another, i.e. also networking internally, as ultimately employees are your benchmark when they look outwards. If we look at the issue from the hunter’s perspective, it may help if he or she already knows the decision-makers, possibly some background information or key persons in the company where he or she would like to apply, not just to obtain a favourable decision, but to understand whether these people fit with his or her way of thinking and business ethics/philosophy.

FT: If you had to give a young professional advice regarding his or her career, which would be the first three elements that you would urge them to consider with great attention?

AO: Stay open and curious and, above all, stay on the ball with regard to your personal skills. The days when you could perhaps attend the odd seminar after your 40 years on the job are definitely over. No excuse for lack of time, you have to keep training regularly and stay fit for the labour market, otherwise you will be out of the picture sooner or later.

FT: Has Mr. Andreas Obermeyer an unfulfilled wish? Would you be happy to share it with us?

AO: I would like to accompany the industry for a few more years and help to successfully replace the baby boomer generation, to which I also belong.

This was a profound reflection on today's job market, how it compares to its image in our memory. Admittedly both Andreas and I can be inserted in the boomers' category. Trying to reflect on these similarities and differences in work choices, maybe we can find an echo in the musical background of those years. The Big Country is the song which ends "More Songs about Buildings and Food", corrosively looking at the USA, figuratively and physically from above. In the lyrics there is an obsessive iteration: I wouldn't live there if you paid me to. How much have things changed since 1978, considering how many would die to live there now? "I guess it's healthy - I guess the air is clean - I guess those people - Have fun with their neighbours and friends - Look at that kitchen - And all of that food - Look at them eat it - I guess it tastes real good." In spite of 1978's ironic verses, millions today would live there, even if you did not pay them.

I never worked in the USA, but I did live and work abroad, also in Switzerland. Not a big country, but a country of many excellences, in particular in logistics, the confederation includes Basel, where Andreas comes from. An iconic place in logistics history, Basel is the only place listed as a seaport, yet about one thousand miles away from the ocean.

Andreas R. Obermeyer was actually the head-hunter in charge of my recruitment when I moved to FIATA and we met in Munich at one of the largest global logistics meetings to complete the selection process. We both changed a lot since then, and occasionally we catch up, meeting at the Propeller Club in Basel, where I am still a proud member. At one point Andreas said: "A shortage of young talent is fundamentally a problem within the western world. Due to demographic changes, the last baby-boomers will leave the workforce in the next five years and significantly fewer young people will enter the employment market." This tells us that this is a really crucial point: we need to be very careful in selecting and retaining our staff, lest we were unable to function as an industry in future, but how?

Looking outside in the street I see people who are carrying an increasing amount of uncertainties, you often get the impression that they are almost on the verge of burning down the house. Why is it so difficult for them to find a decent accommodation in our society and some end up wasting many years in the wrong job with no satisfaction? This happens despite the efforts deployed by many employers, associations and consultants, such as Andreas Obermeyer. At the same time, I constantly meet younger individuals of exceptional talent: it is so difficult for me to understand why companies declare that they have trouble finding talented employees, and even more so to retain them, when they are ubiquitous. Perhaps we need to work in order to make transport and logistics a more attractive environment. Again this is a recurring theme, we have heard it so many times before . . .

Young, talented people seem to genuinely desire a place where it's healthy, the air clean, and they can have fun with their neighbours. It is the same as we wanted back then: we thought we could get it by working like crazy and to some extent we did. The young seem to want more time to spend outside of their working hours and all this seems legitimate. We read articles where best employers are scored against a set of rigorous criteria, some of them unimaginable years ago. On the other hand, we also hear that employers become more and more demanding, that selections are ruthless and in many countries the salaries are not good. Everywhere seems to exist a spiralling trend to push consequences to extremes, which seem to have become a way of self-promotion. This all seems to drive us in the wrong direction and one senses that it cannot continue for long.

Perhaps we need to take a break and think about it all. At this point, a wise and distinguished lady whose personality seemed to have been created by Lewis Carroll and was one of my best teachers, would have said: "All right then, now let us all calm down! Let us restart from scratch: a bit of patience and a cup of tea." Against my

will, I am leaving you with more questions than answers: same as it ever was, but once in a lifetime we can ask ourselves: “how did I get here”? Maybe the essence of it all is history repeating?

Marco L. Sorgetti