
JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN BRUSSELS

SOME IDEAS ON A STRATEGY FOR YOUNG GRADUATES FROM THE DANUBE REGION

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INTRODUCTION

Brussels is regarded as one of the most important European capitals in political terms. The colourful shape of European politics, such as the process of European integration, the administration of projects (co-funded by the European Commission), the activities of the European civil society on the European decision-making level, active European citizenship and many more issues are, to a certain extent related to the Belgian capital. More than 100,000 people are supposed to be working in the 'EU-environment' of Brussels. This includes the EU institutions themselves as well as organisations related to the EU. What kind of jobs exist in the specific framework of the political landscape? How should one apply for a job in Brussels, especially while living abroad or not coming from an EU member state? How to build up a job strategy, especially as a young graduate from the Danube region? The following essay will provide information as 'food for thought' on job opportunities in Brussels, especially for young graduates from the Danube region. The essay can be seen as a starting point for the further development of an individual job seeking strategy. In the annex several internet sites will be introduced which can help potential candidates applying for vacancies in EU-Brussels.

This essay will mainly focus on practical information and less on the academic analysis of European integration. However, it might be useful to bring both aspects together—scientific research as well as (the analysis of) job opportunities in Brussels, where academic experience will finally be initiated by graduates in European or international relations, for example. Young researchers from the Danube region are part of the 'European project'. The content of this essay is based on several years of work experience the author gained in EU Brussels—including experience in job applications.

Brussels—what kind of a job market?

It is estimated that about 100,000 people work for the European Union in Brussels. The job market seems to be very dynamic. What kind of jobs are there? What kind of special fields are relevant in the EU environment? By breaking down the positions that are potentially available, we can end up with several clusters.

They mainly include posts as civil servants in the EU institutions, in the field of diplomacy in the permanent representations to the EU, assistant positions to the Members of the European Parliament, jobs as policy officers or advisors in European associations and federations, NGOs, researchers in think tanks, consultants working in consultancies, office managers/administrative assistants, project managers, and so on.

Here are some examples

EU officials

Many people are interested in working in the European public administration. Civil servants work in the EU institutions and committees in Brussels (European Commission, European Parliament, the Council as well as the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee). In order to become an EU official, one has to pass a competition in order to get on the reserve list and finally to apply for a permanent post in the EU. (The EU institutions also employ a certain number staff with non-permanent contracts) The European Personnel Selection Office is responsible for the competitions and all questions regarding the employment policy of the EU institutions. The competitions vary in their prerequisites, (e.g. language skills) and some competitions are open only for certain nationalities.

Diplomats

Each EU member state has a permanent representation delegated to the EU. Other countries have a mission to the EU. The diplomatic field is more relevant for officials who are already working for their foreign ministry and have been deployed to Brussels. In general the diplomatic field can be of high interest for young graduates with an international background.

Assistants to a Member of the European Parliament

Each Member of the European Parliament (currently 732 MEPs) generally employs at least one assistant. The assistant manages and organises the political activities

and busy schedule of the MEP. Young graduates often start their working career as assistant to a deputy. Sometimes the assistant does not have the same nationality as the MEP or is not politically active in a party. Some assistants have a traineeship at the MEP's office prior to their work as an assistant.

Lobbyists

Lobbying activities have increased in the last couple of years. Lobbying at EU institutions, mainly the European Parliament, has become an increasingly important political activity in Brussels. European federations and associations are being established, which may vary in size, budget, activity, and influence, but offer an interesting job market for (international) graduates. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as representatives of the civil society are also active on the European level and are looking for (campaign) personnel and policy officers. Their activity covers human rights, the environment, consumer protection, youth activities etc.

Researchers

Several think tanks and political foundations have been established in Brussels and might offer research opportunities, in topics like the Western Balkans, the geostrategic aspects of energy supply or climate change.

Consultants

Consultancies are mainly responsible for managing EU projects. Experience in European project management (e.g. project cycle management) and field experience in a specific sector with a combination of foreign languages might be of interest for the consultancies.

Members of regional representations

Regional offices have increased their presence in Brussels. There are around 250 regional offices in Brussels—representing European regions. Their activities are mainly related to the Committee of the Regions, the Directorate General of Regional Policy of the Commission as well as fund-related matters.

Internships

A lot of students and graduates gain first-hand job experience through internships (internships, traineeships or 'stage' in French).

An internship can lead to a work contract. On the other hand, many job advertisements contain the requirement of a 'stage' in an EU institution. The European Commission offers several hundred traineeships for a five-month-period each, starting in October or March. The application procedures are well-explained on the Commission's website. Other EU institutions also offer training experience to a lesser extent. Many other organisations, which have been mentioned before, have interns and volunteers.

'Concours'—sharing personal experiences gained during an EU competition

'Between July 2002 and April 2004 I took part in an EU competition for administrators in the field of environment (the previous administrative level—A8). The Concours required a degree in an environment-related field with no specific work experience. EPSO received around 5000 applications for 60 posts (and 80 people on the reserve list).

During the same time EPSO published several other competitions for civil servants (e.g. in the field of fisheries, agriculture as well as sustainable development).

It is useful to check the EPSO website on a regular basis.

We—a group of five people with different backgrounds, languages and work experience in the EU environment—decided to study together for the competitions.

N.B. Why did I choose to prepare in a study group? It can be difficult to study for a concours—especially in terms of motivation, the high number of competitors, the challenge of studying while working and having other commitments. Therefore we decided to form an informal study group in order to prepare ourselves as efficiently as possible – without being too isolated during the time of preparation.

The exams of my competition comprised a pre-selection test, a written exam and finally an oral exam. I chose German and English as my main languages. In the study group, we mainly used English and French. My pre-selection test contained multiple-choice questions in numerical and verbal reasoning, EU related questions, and my special field, the environment.

What kind of study material did I use? There are many books available for the numerical and verbal reasoning. One main source for the EU related questions was the '250 mcq on Europe and European policy', published by a union (SFE) and available in several languages. Other main sources included the treaties of the Union as well as the internet sites of 'Europa'. For the special field, I mainly used the internet sites of

the Commission (DG Environment) and thoroughly studied EU environmental policy in the last couple of years.

It was useful to attend conferences related to environmental policy as well as study reports of environmental NGOs on EU policy.

After passing the pre-selection test, I sent my application with all the relevant documentation to EPSO. The next step was the written exam. In our preparation for this exam we mainly dealt with EU documents. We wrote summaries, briefing notes, notes, short reports, press releases, and speaking notes in the required languages in order to become familiar with EU documents. We wrote tests at home in order to become familiar with the time pressure of the exam. Some fellow candidates took part in preparatory trainings as well.

After passing the written exam, I took the final exam consisting of an oral test. (Several months passed by between the different steps.)

In order to be thoroughly prepared for the oral exam, I took part in a coaching seminar, which was organised by the German Foreign Office.

The oral exam took part in the EPSO building in Brussels. The jury consisted of several civil servants from different units and nationalities as well as representatives of EPSO. I took my exam in my main language; in the end of the oral exam my second chosen language was used. Interpreters translated into different languages.

It is useful to try how to work and deal with headsets.

The oral exam took around 45 minutes.

The first 80 candidates with the highest scores achieved were put on the reserve list. Candidates on the reserve list will apply for vacant posts in the EU institutions.

Conclusion: some thoughts on a job-seeking strategy

In order to find the ‘right’ job-seeking strategy, applicants need to deal with questions regarding the best approach.

It can be useful to use manuals of business strategy for developing a job strategy. Marketing theories have a cognitive psychological background and can be transferred into supporting tools for building up the framework of a job strategy. Management strategies are relevant to finding a market niche for products/services. As a progressive approach—looking at a job strategy as a service—this knowledge can be transferred.

Some of the following questions will support the candidate and summarise the most important aspects of this essay:

Where do I want to be in the short-term (one year), mid-term (three to five years), and long-term (more than five years) regarding my working career?

Does it make sense to continue my studies after finishing my graduate programme? This leads to another question: is it possible for me to e.g. apply for the College of Europe, which is regarded as an excellent preparation for a European career? Is it possible/feasible to do evening classes/part-time degree?

Do I want to live abroad? If living abroad: what does it mean for my career, which I could have started in my home country? What does it mean for my personal life? Did I check the regulations concerning work and residence permit? What kind of regulations are there to observe?

What languages do I speak? Level of foreign language skills? Do I need to learn additional languages in order to become more competitive, e.g. French or German?

My CV/profile: what are my comparative advantages? How can I attract attention to my comparative advantages?

Regarding the applications: How many applications have I sent? Should I send some more CVs? Should I stop for a while and wait for responses? Where have I sent my CV? Have I found my own market niche, which is suitable for me? Which organisation might be interested in my profile? Did I spend enough time preparing my application documents?

Concerning internships: If I do an internship, can I afford to pay the living expenses if the internship is not remunerated or just partly remunerated? Is it possible to get financial support from a foundation in my home country or a foreign foundation, which supports candidates from e.g. the Danube region in gaining European experiences? If I enter the so-called blue book of successful applications for a training in the European Commission, who is going to promote my application?

Is it possible to get in touch with a mentor/or an organisation committed to support my application/my future career? How could I find one?

Have I collected all relevant information available on the job/traineeship/EU competition/specific degree/scholarship for a training/from the organisation I applied for?

Concerning an EU competition: If I decide to take part in a competition, will I have enough time to prepare for the exams? If I enter the reserve list, who will support my application?

The idea of initiating young people in job opportunities—as an important step after finishing higher education and entering the job market—is challenging. The phenomenon of globalisation has an impact on the job market in many ways. People are willing to move for work, training experience is getting more international, competition for jobs has increased. European integration continuously opens up new job opportunities since the European project needs to be managed and as a result, new job opportunities arise for young graduates from the Danube region as well.

REFERENCES

Internet sites for further job seeking in Brussels.

The following internet sites provide information concerning job search on the European level. All internet links were downloaded on October 6, 2006.

www.europa.eu.int

The official site of the EU provides links to all EU institutions. The European Personnel Office (EPSO) deals with employment matters and recruitment procedures (see next site).

www.europa.eu.int/epso/index_en.htm

The internet site of the European Personnel Selection Office provides information on career opportunities in the European institutions. It explains the application process as well as regulations on competitions, non-permanent posts and staff engaged under contracts.

http://europa.eu.int/epso/career_en.htm

EPSO provides a leaflet called 'careers at the EU institutions'.

http://ec.europa.eu/civil_society/coneccs/index_en.htm

CONECSS is the database for Consultation, the European Commission and Civil Society. The directory of non-profit organisations provides information of non-profit organisations at European level. This database is an excellent source of contact addresses of NGOs and civil organisations. It is also useful in searching for organisations to whom unsolicited applications can be sent.

www.europeanvoice.com

The European Voice is a weekly newspaper and provides in-depth information on current EU issues with job ads in the EU environment. The European Voice might be a helpful newspaper source in preparing for the concours.

<http://www.xpats.com> ('The Bulletin Job Ads')

'The Bulletin' is an English magazine for the expatriate community in Brussels and provides job ads for international personnel in Brussels.

www.euractiv.com

EurActiv is an internet service with news on Europe in several languages. A link with EU jobs has been established. See: <http://jobs.euractiv.com/>, www.libeurop.be/home.php

This is the internet site of the European bookshop, which was founded in late 1960's and provides books specialised in European Union domains. The bookshop is also the sales agent of the Office for the Official Publications of the European Communities.

<http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/htm/index.htm>

This internet site offers the template for a European CV, a commonly used format for the Curriculum Vitae.

OTHER SOURCES

1. Foreign ministries

Several foreign ministries provide special preparation courses for EU competitions (e.g. Germany, Spain, UK). It might be useful to get in touch with one's own foreign ministry. Civil servants of the EU member states are sent to work in the EU institution (mainly European Commission) as national experts. It could be useful to check with the specific ministry.

2. '250 MCQ on Europe and European Policy', Union of the European Civil Servants.