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GERMANY'S EFFORTS TO INTEGRATE MIGRANTS INTO ITS WORKFORCE FALTER

Job openings and internships go unfilled because of language deficiencies, government bottlenecks

By Friedrich Geiger
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BERLIN—As the flow of asylum seekers entering Germany started to break historic records late last year, Continental AG moved to tap some of the newcomers for its workforce.

The world-ranking tire-maker launched a new internship program designed for 50 migrant workers. Yet one year after Continental began advertising it, only 30 of the positions have been filled.

The country's job centers weren't providing enough suitable candidates and the refugees' qualifications were often unclear, Ariane Reinhart, Continental's executive board member for human relations, told reporters recently. "It is a huge effort," she said.

Continental isn't alone. Following calls by the German government to hire asylum seekers – something it believes is key to the successful integration of the new arrivals – German companies big and small have answered, scouting refugee shelters and job centers for potential workers.

The result is sobering. The number of regularly employed immigrants from the countries responsible for the bulk of the latest migrant wave was a mere 25,000 higher in June than a year earlier. During the same period, 736,591 people had arrived from these countries.

The government is hardly faring better: Federal agencies have hired five refugees as employees and 12 as trainees since the beginning of last year, the interior ministry told lawmakers last month.

This is despite the fact that there are few native Germans available to fill the highest number of job vacancies in a decade, and shortages of skilled workers are putting upward pressure on wages.

Frustrated with the glacial pace of the effort, Chancellor Angela Merkel invited the 121 companies behind a jobs-for-refugees initiative called "Us together" to discuss their progress and difficulties on Wednesday.

More than 80 business leaders attended the three-hour meeting, and among those questioned by Ms. Merkel were top executives at Deutsche Bank AG and Lufthansa AG.

"It is our common target to integrate more and more refugees into the labor market," Ms. Merkel said before the gathering. "If we succeed, it will be a benefit for all."

Failure to integrate the newcomers into Germany's economy, the largest in Europe, could seal Ms. Merkel's political fate. The chancellor's popularity has waned, and her party lost badly in recent regional elections as more Germans began to doubt the wisdom of opening the country's doors, which has brought well over a million migrants into the country in the past 18 months. Ms. Merkel has until the general election next year to change their minds.

Companies blame the difficulty in placing migrants in jobs on shortcomings in speaking German and lack of relevant skills. They also say administrative and legal bottlenecks have forced many eager migrants to wait for their asylum requests to be processed.

"There was an open exchange about existing projects and discussion on how to create synergies," said a spokeswoman for "Us together" after the meeting with Ms. Merkel.

Deutsche Post AG offered internships for 1,000 refugees last year but so far filled only 235 positions. A spokeswoman said the postal services company relies on employment agencies for help in finding interns. It employs 102 refugees, it said, many of them former interns.

Deutsche Lufthansa AG, the airline, said it had yet to hire any refugees, citing security reasons. Background checks on refugees aren't "always easily doable against the backdrop of the often adventurous circumstances in the former home countries or during their flight," a spokesman said.

The Confederation of German Employers' Associations said the country should broaden its German language and professional training for migrants and lower legal hurdles for their employment. Adult refugees should be sent back to school, it said.

So far, only refugees whose asylum applications have been accepted are required to attend language classes. The regulation should also be extended to migrants whose prospects of receiving asylum are good, the confederation urged. Migrants also need more help to find a course, it said.

Lack of education and professional experience, along with deficiencies in speaking German and the young age of many migrants, are huge stumbling blocks. Three-out-of-five refugees looking for jobs are only qualified to fill entry-level positions, according to the Federal Labor Agency. Only 14% could work as specialists and 3% as experts, it said.

Most migrants lack the skills a sophisticated economy demands. German employers are mainly interested in skilled staff: Only 19% of all vacancies are for workers without adequate professional experience and education. Some 65% require midlevel qualification and 16% a university degree.

But the thicket of German labor laws is an obstacle, too. In some regions employers with vacancies are required to search for a German applicant before being allowed to hire a migrant. Asylum seekers can work for temporary employment agencies after only a 15-month waiting period.

Many companies are also unwilling to invest in training workers whose long-term residency prospects are uncertain.

There are isolated bright spots, however. Out of about 9,000 refugees applying for vocational training this summer, almost 6,000 were accepted.

Internships typically last several weeks and are unpaid. While the numbers remain small, some companies said they were pleased. At sportswear giant Adidas AG, 15 refugees have completed internships as part of a two-year integration program, and another 15 are set to enroll by the end of the year.

“We’d be delighted if our interns decided after their two-year integration courses to do a traineeship at our company,” said Adidas spokeswoman Katja Schreiber.