Talent Management: Insights into Recruitment in the SME Environment

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Abstract: Demographic change is a development that is increasingly presenting companies with challenges. The German brewing industry's workforce is largely made up of older, well qualified employees who are likely to leave the labor market in the coming years. The brewing industry is also facing falling sales figures. Most breweries can be classified as small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Against this backdrop, the question arises as to whether the German brewing industry is still attractive enough to gain enough young talent and how they are currently being recruited. To determine this, both future employees (target audience 1) and employer representatives (target audience 2) were interviewed. As comparable studies with numerical data were available for target audience 1, a quantitative research approach was pursued here. As this does not apply to target audience 2, a qualitative approach was pursued for this group. The aim of this article is to gain an insight into how recruitment is implemented in brewery industry and how this process could be improved. The methods of recruitment for future employees are still very traditional (job advertisements and network). No evidence of employers using headhunters or active search strategies could currently be found in this industry. Nevertheless, every brewery should continue to plan staff replacement with care, as the upcoming generational change could make it more difficult to recruit new employees.

Keywords: talent management; small and medium-sized enterprises (SME); recruitment; brewing industry

JEL Classification: J10; M12; M51

1. Introduction

The current framework conditions create a new situation at the labor market for graduates, employees and employers. One of the key factors in this context is the demographic change (Trost, 2012, p. 8). On the one hand, more and more older employees are leaving the labor market and, on the other, there are no longer enough young graduates available to replace these retirements. To counteract this development, the implementation of a talent management process (Chambers et al., 1998, p. 46) is recommended to *"attract, retain, develop, and motivate highly skilled employees and managers"* (Noe et al., 2022, p. 13).

All enterprises are affected by this development, regardless of their size. As small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) generally have fewer resources (Olbert-Bock et al., 2015, p. 1; North, 2016, p. 192), for this reason they must take a more efficient approach. However, this can only be achieved if the necessary basis for decision-making is available. Even though

Chambers et al. (1998) emphasize that companies must *"develop, develop, develop"* their employees, the personnel must be recruited as well (Chambers et al., 1998, p. 46). In general, the topic of talent management is dealt with particularly in the US/Anglo-Saxon and Chinese regions (Ewerlin, 2013, p. 8; Bostjancic et al., 2018, p. 2). Elsewhere, it is noted that talent management is well researched in many parts of the world, but that there is still a need for research in individual national industries (Amushila et al., 2021, p. 2). Jibril and Yeşiltaş (2022) note in their article that the literature focuses on the aspects *"acquiring, developing and retaining talent"* (Jibril & Yeşiltaş, 2022, p. 3). Savov et al. (2020) highlight in their article the difficulty of recruiting the talented staff that will add more value to the company (Savov et al., 2020, p. 6). It has also been found that the size of the company has an influence on the implementation of talent management (Savov et al., 2020, p. 1).

Maack et al. (2011) has found that the German brewing industry is nowadays facing economic challenges on the one hand and has an older workforce compared to the food industry on the other one (Maack et al., 2011, p. 7). This situation as described before, and the increasing effects of demographic change could tackle the German brewing industry with a personnel management challenge.

The above-described conditions create following research questions:

- Is the German brewing industry affected by a shortage of young professionals?
- How is recruitment implemented in small and medium-sized breweries?

To answer this research questions, the following aspects will be elaborated in the further analysis:

- What are SMEs? (1)
- Is the German brewing industry an attractive area to work in? (2)
- What is meant by recruitment and are there measures that are particularly related to the talent management process? (3)
- What is the view of potential employees? (4)
- What is the employer's perspective? (5)

Questions (1) to (3) were analyzed with the help of an exploratory review. As comparable studies were available, question (4) was analyzed by using a quantitative research approach. As this was not apply to question (5), a qualitative research approach was used. The aim of this article is to gain an insight into how recruitment is implemented in brewery industry and how this process could be improved.

2. Methodology

The methods – exploratory review, quantitative and qualitative research – used in this article are presented in detail below.

2.1. Exploratory Review

The purpose of the exploratory review is to determine what knowledge is available on a particular topic. It is important to concentrate on the respective research focus (Adams et al.,

2007, p. 56). *"The review should be seen as being informative to the researcher and providing him/her with clearer ideas on the common theories […]."* (Adams et al., 2007, p. 57)

Here, it is particularly important to determine how SMEs can be differentiated and how they are distributed in terms of volume according to size categories. To continue working on the topic, it is also necessary to determine what advantages the brewing industry could offer. Finally, it is necessary to work out how recruitment differs from the perspective of Human Resource management (HRM) and talent management.

2.2. Quantitative Research: Target Audience 1 – Employees

A quantitative research approach is characterized by standardized data collection, which is based on the approach of the natural sciences. Numerical data is required for this (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 28).

Comparable quantitative research results are available for target audience 1. A quantitative research approach was therefore developed. As this target audience must have a clearly defined background, a cluster sample was prepared at two geographically dispersed training institutions. A questionnaire was developed for data collection and made available to the participants digitally via the platform "soscisurvey.de". The data received was processed descriptively using Excel. The mode and the mean value were important parameters in the study.

2.3. Qualitative Research: Target Audience 2 – Employer Side

The qualitative research approach draws on non-numerical data. This approach is better suited to capturing the perspective of the research participants (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 28).

Target audience 2 consists of employer representatives from the SME environment. Comparable analyses were not available for this group. A qualitative research approach was therefore developed. The intention was to gain one interview partner for a microbrewery, one for a small brewery, and one for a medium-sized brewery. The snowball sample was used because the search for participants proved extremely difficult. Data was collected with the help of an interview guide. The interviews were then subjected to a qualitative content analysis. The MaxQDA computer program was used for this purpose. The necessary codes and subcodes were developed inductively and deductively.

3. Results

The results are presented in the order specified in chapter 2. Chapter 3.1 and 3.2 summarizes the theoretical background. The results of target group 1 (employees) are summarized in chapter 3.3 and the results of target group 2 in chapter 3.4.

3.1. Theoretical Background – SMEs and Background Brewing Industry

The threshold values for company sizes were defined by the EU in January 2005. The criteria are the number of employees and the turnover or balance sheet total. If a company has less than 250 employees and a maximum turnover of EUR 50 million or a maximum balance sheet total of EUR 43 million, then it is a SME. The employee thresholds are relevant

for further processing. According to these specifications, a microenterprise has a maximum of 9 employees, a small enterprise a maximum of 49 employees and a medium-sized enterprise 249 employees (IfM, 2024).

According to STATISTA (2024), there were a total of 3,435,478 companies in Germany in 2022. The distribution by size class can be seen in Table 1 (STATISTA, 2024).

Table 1. Distribution of German enterprises by size category (STATISTA, 2024)

Size	Number	Percentage
Micro	2,982,478	86.8%
Small	361,638	10.5%
Medium	74,398	2.2%
Large	17,045	0.5%
Total	*3,435,478*	*100%*

In 2022, there were 1,507 breweries in Germany. Based on the statistical data 1,355 breweries were SMEs with a maximum production of 50,000 hectoliters (hl) for one enterprise each year (DBB, 2024a). Overall, it can be stated that the brewing industry is facing a challenge. Two long-term trends can be observed – a decrease in beer consumption and an increase in the consumption of non-alcoholic beverages (Stracke et al., 2017, p.19). Annual consumption of beer per person was 91.8 liters in 2022. Compared with 2004, this number was still 116 liters (DBB, 2024b). In contrast to this development, the number of breweries increased from 1,359 to 1,507 enterprises between 2014 and 2022 (DBB, 2024c), whereby the growth is mainly driven by smaller breweries (DBB, 2024a). From an HR perspective, it is observed that the workforce has become older (see Table 2).

Table 2. Age distribution in the brewing industry, comparison 2007 and 2016 (Stracke et al., 2017, p. 98)

Year	Age under 25	Age 25–49	Age 50–64
2007	9%	63%	28%
2016	9%	51%	40%

Looking at the level of qualification, the following data emerges (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of qualification levels, comparison 2007 and 2016 (Stracke et al., 2017, p. 102)

Year	2007	2016
No professional qualification	13%	10%
recognized professional qualification	78%	76%
Academic professional qualification	7%	9%
not specified	2%	5%

In terms of remuneration, it can be stated that the average gross wage in the brewing industry was higher compared to the beverage industry. Brewers were able to earn an average per year of 3,500 EUR more in 2015 (Stracke et al., 2017, p. 148f).

Remarks: Both in the distribution of all enterprises in Germany and in the distribution of German breweries by size, a majority can be assigned to SMEs. It therefore makes sense to gain further insights specifically for this environment. Due to the high number of older employees, it could be difficult to replace them with suitable personnel in the future. Based on the level of qualifications identified, it can be concluded that the brewing industry is a

working environment with a high-level qualification requirement. Whether this is an advantage or disadvantage for the future cannot be assessed right now. The fact that the brewing industry has had the opportunity to pay higher wages is certainly an advantage if this can be maintained.

Based on the results so far, it can be assumed that recruiting staff can be a challenge for the brewing industry. It is therefore particularly important to determine how and when it is best to find young talent.

3.2. Theoretical Background – Talent Management and Recruitment

First it should be clarified what HR management and talent management are. HR management is the *"sum of all HR design fields and individual measures to support current and future corporate development (business development) and the associated change processes (organizational development)"* (Bartscher & Nissen, 2018). Talent management are *"internally and externally directed strategies, methods and measures with which a company ensures that the key positions critical to business success are filled with the right employees: goal-oriented action to discover, recruit, develop, promote, optimally place and retain talent in the company"* (Hattburg, 2018). What is the relationship between HR management and talent management? Noe et al. (2022) have created an overview in which functions and responsibilities are linked. In this overview, it is stated that talent management is responsible for supporting the defined strategy in the HR department. Recruitment is seen as an independent function (Noe et al., 2022, p. 7). At the same time, however, recruitment is part of the talent management process (Noe et al., 2022, p. 13). *"Like most 'young' concepts in science, there has been disagreement amongst academics as to what actually constitutes talent management"* (Carbery & Cross, 2019, p. 27). One question is whether every employee in a company a talent or only individual employees are. If all employees are seen as talent, this is referred to as an inclusive approach. Exclusive, if only selected ones are considered (Carbery & Cross, 2019, p. 27). Personnel can be recruited both inside and outside the company. There are various measures that can be used for external recruitment for this purpose. Corresponding measures are also proposed in the literature for talent management. For the sake of clarity, these have been summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Overview of personnel recruitment measures (Carbery & Cross, 2019, p.42 f; Noe et al., 2022, p. 149; Trost, 2012, p. 82 ff)

Carbery and Cross (HR)	Noe et al. (HR)	Trost (TM)
Recruitment Consultancies	Employee referral	Social Community Recruiting
Employee Referrals	Recruiters	Employee Referrals
Graduate Recruitment	Employment agency	Campus Recruiting
E-Recruitment	Campus recruiting	Talent Scouting
International Recruitment	E-Recruitment	Competitive Intelligence
		Guerilla Recruiting

Remarks: While HR management can be clearly assigned to an organizational unit, this is not readily possible for talent management. Kahl (2011) states that roles and responsibilities must be clarified in this context. In addition to the HR department, executives and top

management must also be involved (Kahl, 2011, p. 25). As SMEs generally have fewer hierarchical levels (Trost, 2014, p. 260), the need for coordination is likely to be lower. As the loss of one employee in a 5-man company is likely to have a major impact, SMEs should adopt a more inclusive approach.

The upcoming study must determine what is expected of future employees and what their aims are. These results must be checked by the employee side for their feasibility and whether this is already implemented or not. As inclusive talent management is the more suitable approach for SMEs in particular, all employees should be considered and challenged and promoted according to the needs of the company and their respective skills. Due to the lower hierarchies in SMEs and the similar perceptions that can therefore be assumed between owners and employed managers, no further differentiation is considered necessary here either.

3.3. Results Target Audience 1 – Employees

A total of 95 male (78) and female (17) students participated in the study in fall 2022. The data collection was carried out at two German training institutions. Due to the orientation, one training institution stipulated that a vocational qualification was required. The participants in survey were between 18 and 39 years old, with an average age of 24.89 years. Around 73% of participants have a higher education entrance qualification or an entrance qualification for universities of applied sciences, and 6% already have a university degree. Prior exposure to the brewing industry through personal connections is distributed as follows (see Table 5).

Table 5. Summary of the family background on the brewing industry

Family background brewing industry	Number
none	79
Family hobby	2
Family part time job	1
Family full time job	7
owner brewery	6

The questions on vocational orientation were only asked of those participants for whom this was a mandatory requirement for admission to the respective training institution. The following table shows the age at which the participants began their career orientation and when they decided to join the brewing industry (see Table 6).

Table 6. Age range of professional orientation and decision-making

Start of professional orientation														
Number	4	4	9	4	7	2	9	1	1	1	1	3	1	
Age	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	23	25	26	28	31	
Decision for the brewing industry														
Number	1	5	2	6	9	7	2	3	1	2	2	1	1	2	2
Age	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	25	26	28	29	32

Based on the survey data the following recruiting methods are common: 54.35% of participants became aware of their future employer through a job advertisement and 43.48% through friends and family. Professional intermediaries did not play a role in this context.

All participants were again asked about the channels through which they obtained information about their future. They were also asked which channels were rated as particularly useful (see Table 7).

Table 7. Overview of used and useful information channels

Channel	Number used	Number useful	Channel	Number used	Number useful
Printed Media	13	6	School Event	27	9
Employment agency	7	4	Teacher	15	13
Career Fair	20	11	Internet	81	52
Internship	51	42	Friends	52	38
Social Media	25	10	Parents	42	22

The survey participants could work in different industries due to the degrees they are aiming for. When asked about their preferences, the following overview emerges (see Table 8).

Table 8. Overview of industries and preferences

Industry	Number	Industry	Number	Industry	Number
Brewing	79	Biotechnology	11	Systems Engineering	25
Beverage	58	Environmental	8	Public Employer	13
Food	18				

According to the questions about the preferred enterprises size and preferred place of work, the following results emerges (see Table 9).

Table 9. Overview of preferred company sizes and work locations

Company size	Number	Work location	Number
Micro	4	Home region	60
Small	41	Germany	35
Medium	34	inside EU	30
Large	16	outside EU	21

Participants were also asked about their career aims they were pursuing and how often they expected to change employer during their working life. The results are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10. Overview of career aims and expected number of employers

Professional aim	Number	Number of employers	Number
takeover brewery	3	up to 3	33
independent entrepreneur	18	up to 6	46
employed manager	48	up to 9	11
skilled worker	8	10 and more	2

Finally, the surveyed participants were asked to make comments about their expectations. For this information it was used a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 stands for "strong acceptance". The following table shows the five fields of research with the corresponding mean values and the most important individual expectations in each case (see Table 11).

Table 11. Summary of the expectations expressed

Expectations	Work Live Balance	Development	Financial Aspects	Working Environment	Employer Brand
Mean value	3.8	4.3	3.7	3.9	2.8
Important aspects	Work must be fun	Further training, Feedback, Appreciation of performance	Good basic salary	work is not only a job, Teamwork, familiar working atmosphere	Positive employer image

Remarks: Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that the brewing industry is an attractive working environment despite of mentioned problems. 87.6% of the survey participants decided to work for this brewing industry without having experienced a family background beforehand. The same proportion of survey participants can assume working in the brewing industry after graduation, especially in an SME environment. 63.2% could also prefer working in their home region. Around 54% stated that they had found their employer through a job advertisement and around 43% through family and friends. It seems that the respondents tend to be connected to their home region. The preferred information channels (internet, internship, friends, and parents) could also be described as down-to-earth. Many of them want to work in the SME sector. There are many SMEs on the labor market. The fight for talent could be less intense due to the respective closeness. The expectations expressed are generally realistic. From the companies' point of view, these are positive results for recruitment.

However, it becomes more difficult if no candidates are available or sufficiently qualified. Then it could be a challenge to find alternatives. Another problem could be the professional aims. 50.5% of surveyed participants want to become an employed manager. However, SMEs in particular only have a few hierarchical levels. The advantage for enterprises could be that they can select from several applicants/candidates for these vacancies. A challenge for recruitment could arise if the frequency of change of employer is as expected by the participants.

Before any further steps can be taken, the results of the investigation must be evaluated by the employer side in terms of their feasibility.

3.4. Results Target Audience 2 – Employer Side

One owner for a microbrewery A (1 employee) and one for a small brewery B (20 employees) took part in the interview on the employer side. For a medium-sized brewery C (70 employees), an employed manager participated. The sample was not about fulfilling abstract-methodological requirements, but about concrete-content statements (Flick, 2019, p. 163). The evaluation of the interviews revealed the following situation:

Only C has its own HR department. What they all have in common is that their HR work is of an administrative nature. Most employees are over 30 years old and come from the surrounding area. Only B also employs unskilled workers. The employees are usually working at the breweries for many years. Recruitment is carried out with the help of job advertisements and via the respective network. Active search strategies (see Table 4) are currently not used. However, unsolicited applications from employees are also common. Only C offers internship opportunities. Further training in connection with the respective task is obligatory. Only C enables cross-disciplinary training. From the employer's point of view, the employees' objectives and expectations are in most cases achievable. The preferred career aim as employed manager is seen as problematic, as these positions are limited due to the existing structures.

Remarks: Since, according to the assessment made here, most of the aims and expectations are realistic. It can be assumed that breweries are generally attractive employers. Otherwise, they would not receive any initiative applications. Further training is an important expectation set by the employees. It should be examined whether job-oriented further training will continue to be sufficient in the future. The regional focus of the employees was also confirmed by the employers. However, if one compares the comments on the length of service of active employees with the expectations of the study participants with regard to presumed changes of employer, a discrepancy emerges.

From a recruitment perspective, information about the possible increased willingness of future employees to change employers is essential. The labor market and training qualifications give study participants the opportunity to change employers. Therefore, recruitment and selection should be carried out carefully to avoid unnecessary changes. The employers surveyed tend to play a passive role in the recruitment process. The use of active search strategies would be an option if recruitment becomes more difficult on the timeline. To avoid direct conflicts with other breweries, campus recruiting should be used first.

4. Discussion

The McDonald Ausbildungsstudie is a good basis for comparing the obtained results. In summary, it can be said that the results in both studies are similar. This is exemplified by the results on expectations and the information channels used (see Table 12).

Table 12. Comparison of McDonald's Ausbildungsstudie 2019 (Köcher et al., 2019, p. 60 f and p. 82) with our study

Expectations		Channels	
McDonalds	current research	McDonalds	current research
1	Work must be fun	(1) Parents	(1) Internet
4	familiar working atmosphere	(2) Friends	(2) Friends
5	work is not only a job	(3) Internet	(3) Internship
7	Appreciation of performance	(4) Internship	(4) Parents
9	Further training		
15	Good basic salary		
23	Teamwork		
33	Positive employer image		
not specified	Feedback		

The most important expectations from the current study can be seen in Table 12. The expectations listed here are all particularly important for the study participants. The same expectations were also identified in the Ausbildungsstudie. However, the results differ in terms of value. It is therefore very important for both samples that the work is fun. However, the employer image is not as decisive as in the current study. One reason for the difference could be that the age structures are different. In the training study, 58% of the participants were students or trainees (Köcher et al., 2019, p. 106). In the current research, the participants were all young adults, some of whom had already been in employment. This could also be the reason why a good wage is more important in the current study. The most frequent channels for vocational orientation are similar in both studies. It is also understandable that the use of the internet is more important in the current research. Most respondents do not have parents who are working in the brewing industry. It therefore makes sense to use a different source for orientation. Fuchs (2020) found in her study that more than half of the participants expect to change employer between 6 and 10 times (Fuchs, 2020, p. 23). In the current study, the willingness to switch is less pronounced. 59 participants stressed only 4 to 6 employer changes.

To classify the employers, one comparative study was found which made statements on the respective institutionalization of HR management in the companies. Richter (2019) found that medium-sized companies have a human resources department (Richter, 2019, p. 26).

The value of this study is limited by the fact that only a limited number of persons participated on this survey. As the differences found are comprehensible, the findings obtained here form a good basis for drawing conclusions for personnel recruitment in the brewing industry.

5. Conclusions

Based on the findings obtained here, it can be stated for the surveyed breweries that recruiting staff is not yet a problem. It is interesting to note that employers are still successful with a rather passive and traditional approach to recruiting staff. Active search strategies are not currently being pursued. This would therefore be a starting point if recruitment becomes more difficult. Two of the three breweries are not currently training staff but are hiring professional personnel. Whether this is sustainable in the long term should be carefully monitored. If the framework is changing, the restructuring of recruiting must be changed very fast. As a big number of old employees will be leaving the labor market in the next few years, and it is currently unclear whether recruitment will be able to compensate these retirements, technical alternatives should also be prepared. A downsizing strategy could also be introduced, or employees could be made co-owners if it is foreseeable that the vacant positions cannot be replaced by new hires.

Conflict of interest: none.

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