



Expatriate Teacher Recruitment in a Language Teaching Organisation in China

Ross Thorburn explores some of the factors involved in recruiting staff to work in China.

Introduction

This article will investigate teacher recruitment in the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) industry in China. It will review literature on the subject, consider survey responses from 1220 teachers who either accepted or rejected offers of a job at a language teaching organisation (LTO) in China and will attempt to explain the results and consider the implications for language teaching institutions.

Recruitment & Retention

Gone are the days when employees worked for one company their entire lives. Last year LinkedIn measured the global average for employee tenure to be four years (Batty, Bowley, Cruz & Gager 2015), with workers in the USA aged between 24 and 35 typically switching jobs once every three years (*Employee Tenure in 2014*). For language teachers in China turnover is even higher. A recent investigation found that only 32% of expatriate teachers stayed with the same organisation for longer than one year (Thorburn 2016a).

Replacing workers incurs significant costs, often around 20% of workers' annual salaries, and these costs increase for positions which require higher levels of education and specialised training (Boushey & Glynn 2012). With high educational standards being necessary to obtain a visa in several countries (China, Indonesia, etc.), specialised training often required (e.g. Cambridge CELTA and Trinity CertTESOL) and the complexity of recruiting staff from overseas, it seems likely that the cost of replacing teachers working abroad will be significantly higher than the cost of replacing domestic workers on similar salaries in other industries.

Sources for the number of expatriate teachers recruited to work in China vary. International TEFL Academy stated in 2012 that 1,000 expatriate teachers were recruited to China every month that year (*How large is the job market for English teachers abroad? 2012*).

Swanson (2013) puts the number of foreign teachers and experts recruited each year to work in mainland China at 100,000, thirty per cent of whom are employed in the education industry (*The World through Expat Eyes 2015*). Adkins (2015) estimates that 'There are over 50,000 English language schools in China and over 90% [of which] are private institutions'. These developments, along with the steady improvement in American economy starting in 2009 (*Recent U.S. Economic Growth 2012*) point towards increasing competition of teacher recruitment in the ELT market in China.

While much is written about teacher training and development in journals such as this, relatively little is written on the subject of teacher recruitment. However, as Paul Russell, who helped design Google's first structured Talent Management process says, 'Development can help great people be even better - but if I had a dollar to spend, I'd spend 70 cents getting the right person in the door'. To get great people working for you, you have to make working for you great. But what counts as 'great'?

An analysis of six recent reports (*Global Recruiting Trends 2015; Global Recruiting Trends 2016; 2015 Talent Trends 2015; What Workers Want in 2012 2012; The Global Talent Index Report: The Outlook to 2015 2015; Hays UK Salary & Recruiting Trends 2016 2016*) detailing the most important factors for recruitment cited by both employers and employees (*Table 1*) gives an indication.

Factor	Frequency
Salary	6 of 6 reports
Employee development	4 of 6 reports
Work-life balance	4 of 6 reports
Career advancement	4 of 6 reports
Challenging work	4 of 6 reports

Table 1: Most important factors for recruitment

Aim

This research set out to discover the main drivers for and challenges to Language Teaching Organizations (LTOs) in China in recruiting teachers by analyzing the reasons teachers cited for accepting or declining job offers. These drivers and challenges will be compared with factors from other industries in *Table 1*, as well as factors which have been identified as important in teacher motivation. The reasons for similarities and differences as well as the implications of the results will subsequently be discussed.

Method

Sampling and Procedures

Between October 2014 and June 2016, 971 completed survey responses were received from teachers who had accepted jobs in an LTO in China. Between April 2015 and June 2016, 249 further completed survey responses were received, this time from teachers who declined job offers from the same organisation.

Teachers selected the 'primary reason' for making their decision to either accept or decline a job offer from a multiple choice list of thirteen options. Open-ended responses were also collected using a space for 'additional comments'. Secondary factors important in their decision making process were also chosen by teachers from the same multiple choice list. Teachers who declined a job offer were also asked where they worked now. Respondents were also asked with which group of self-indicated expats (SIEs) they most closely identified with (McDonnell, Scullion, Vaiman, & Haslberger 2013). Answers from respondents who did not choose a category but instead commented 'other' were categorized based on their comments where possible.

Data Analysis

For ease of analysis and comparison the factors used in this survey were adapted from those used by Herzberg (1987) as this theory is still considered to be valid more than 50 years after it was originally proposed (Jones & Lloyd 2005). These factors were also similar to those used by Thorburn (2016b) to analyze teacher turnover and renewal in China. This allowed reasons given by teachers for accepting or declining job offers to be compared with the reasons cited by teachers for renewing their contracts or resigning from their positions.

From the results it is possible to suggest those factors most important in attracting teachers to ESL positions as well as identify the biggest challenges faced in teacher recruitment in China.

Results

In this study the most commonly cited reasons teachers chose for declining a job were (in order of importance):

- Salary

- The Recruiter
- Location
- Work-Life Balance

The most frequently cited reasons for teachers accepting a job were (in order of importance):

- Growth, Training & Development
- Location
- Career opportunities
- Interest in teaching

These are shown in *Figure 1*.

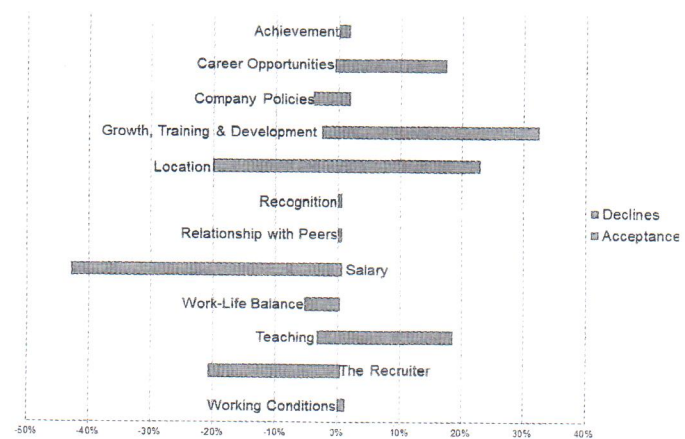


Figure 1: Reasons teachers cited for accepting or declining a job offer (declines, n=249; acceptances, n= 971)

The majority of teachers who declined a job were either still working in their previous job or still in their home country (*Figure 2*).

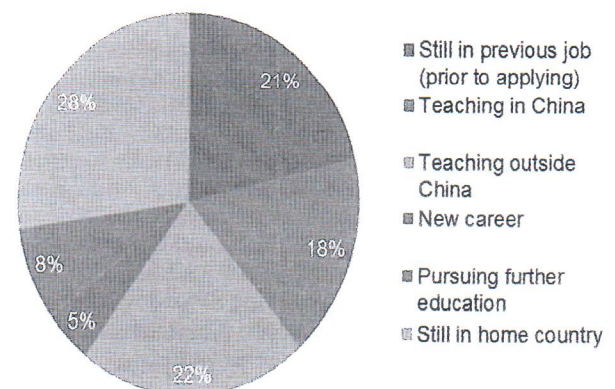


Figure 2: Where are they now? (n=177)

Discussion and Implications

Salary

Salary was the single biggest challenge to expatriate teacher recruitment in this study, it being the most commonly chosen primary factor identified by teachers as the reason for declining a job offer. In other industries salary is also the most common reason applicants accept jobs as well as being the most frequently stated obstacle to hiring by businesses (Table 1). 45% of companies cite salary as one of their biggest hiring challenges (Batty, Bowley, Cruz & Gager 2015). In this research respondents commented on the need for salary to cover university debts. This should not come as a surprise - median student debt upon graduating in the US is \$60,000 (Szeltner & Zukin 2011), more than double the annual salary of the position the teachers surveyed here applied for.

As well as university debt, teachers also commented that they did not want to accept a lower salary than they received in their current place of work. This implies that when setting salaries LTOs should consider the global market for teachers, especially in those countries the LTO is aiming to recruit from. Almost half of the teachers in this study who declined a job offer were still working in the same job that they had when they first applied and fewer than one in five went on to work for a competitor (Figure 2).

Teacher comments:

'For me it's a question of being able to meet Western financial commitments whilst continuing to save too.'

'In America we make decent money as educators so it has to be worthwhile relocating.'

Other research has found salary to be relatively unimportant in expatriate teacher retention (Thorburn 2016b), which contrasts with the findings here. It is possible that teachers who are primarily motivated by salary do not join LTOs (such as the one in this study) and therefore are not inclined to renew their contracts or leave due to this factor. Furthermore, while motivational aspects of pay are well-documented there is almost no published research which supports a correlation between level of pay and job satisfaction (Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw & Rich 2010). This may explain why prospective employees may be encouraged to accept or decline a job based on salary, but much less likely to renew their contract for the same reason.

Location

Outside the TEFL industry, location has been identified as a challenge to recruitment, being one of the top factors for employees to take into account when considering a job offer (Batty, Gager & Sittig 2015). In this study location was both a challenge and a driver for recruitment and was therefore the most frequently cited

factor by respondents. Previous studies in the TEFL industry have identified the importance of location to teachers (Hockley, 2006; Thorburn, 2016b). Here, 95% of those surveyed who accepted a job in China were based outside of the country at the time, thus necessitating a change of location for the applicants.

As a driver for recruitment many teachers commented on the excitement of moving to a new location, one of the main reasons SIEs move abroad (McDonnell, Scullion, Vaiman, & Haslberger 2013). More than half of teachers surveyed here categorised themselves as 'exploring SIEs'. Many SIEs are young people in their early career phase and move abroad to look for a new adventure with social and recreational motives (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry 1997).

As a challenge to recruitment, teachers commented on (a lack of) choice of city, health issues and adaptation. China was recently ranked as one of the most difficult countries in the world for expats to settle into (*The World Through Expat Eyes* 2015). While there is little that LTOs can do to affect health issues for their teachers, recruiters and hiring managers may need to do more to address this issue in interviews with prospective employees. Giving teachers some choice in their work location, as well as arranging accommodation for them, should also help to increase acceptance rates.

Teacher comments:

'I would prefer to have the option to choose rather than just be offered one location.'

'I was concerned about the effects that China's issues with pollution may have on my health.'

The Recruiter

One in five teachers who declined a job offer did so because of their relationship with their recruiter (with whom candidates communicate through Skype and email). Other studies have shown that applicants prefer to speak to managers in preference to recruiters. 53% of prospective employees want to speak to their prospective manager on interview day (compared with only 8% who prefer to speak to a recruiter) (Batty, Gager & Sittig 2015).

In this study applicants' comments focused on two issues: being given short deadlines which they did not feel comfortable with and being unhappy with their recruiter's communication style. The need for transparency in dealing with complicated visa regulations and policies was also a feature of comments made by teachers, who often attributed these policies to their recruiter or the LTO.

Teacher comments:

'I would have liked to have been given more time to think things through. Moving to China is a big step, and I was given just one weekend to make a decision, which I thought was unreasonable'.

'I felt as though my experience and qualifications were of no interest to her [my recruiter] or the company'.

Such comments highlight the importance of a positive interview experience for potential candidates. Other research found that 83% of interviewees say that a negative interview experience can cause them to alter their opinion about a role or company they used to like while 87% indicated that a positive interview experience can change their mind about a role or company they once had reservations about (Batty, Gager & Sittig 2015).

Trainers in LTOs mostly have several years of teaching and management experience, hold professional qualifications (e.g. Cambridge DELTA, Trinity DipTESOL) and have undergone hundreds of hours of professional development in the field of ESL before becoming full-time teacher trainers. Giving recruiters to opportunities for training and holding them to equivalent standards in terms relevant professional qualifications and management experience should result in better experiences for applicants. LTOs should also consider giving applicants access to their future manager during the interview process, as research has shown managers are most important in determining whether candidates have a positive interview experience or not (Batty, Gager & Sittig, 2015).

Growth, Training & Development

This factor was the single biggest draw for teachers to the LTO in this study – one third of teachers cited this as their primary reason for accepting a job offer. Employees crave training because they recognise they need it to survive and prosper in a world where increasing numbers possess the skills to compete in a knowledge economy (Kalman, Narayan, Oehler, Schuler & Walker 2015: 13). Training and development is the most common benefit that companies offer to attract and retain management/specialised workers (Kalman, Narayan, Oehler, Schuler & Walker 2015). The teachers in this study were similar to workers in other industries in their desire for professional and personal growth.

Teacher comment:

'[The company has a] good training certification program and growth for career opportunities within [the] organization'.

Learning and development was recently cited as the third biggest human capital challenge facing human resource departments, with a tripling between 2013 and 2105 of the number of companies rating learning and development as very important (Eighteen, Haimes, Stemple & Vyver 2015). LTOs must prioritise investment in development opportunities as these are important both for retaining teachers (Thorburn 2016b) and attracting new teachers.

Career opportunities

Career opportunities is one of the most important factors applicants consider when making a decision about a new job (Table 1). LinkedIn found a 'strong career path' to be the second most important factor in recruitment behind "excellent compensation and benefits" (Abbot, Batty & Bevegni 2015). Another study found that 45% of Generation Y workers (born between 1980 and 1994) indicate that a prestigious career is either 'essential' or 'very important' for them. The same study found that over half of respondents felt that 'rapid promotion' was 'very important' or 'essential' for them (Szeltner & Zukin 2011). This is in contrast with previous studies in the TEFL industry, where Hockley stated, 'Most teachers I have talked to have no great interest in becoming managers' (Hockley 2006: 3).

Here, career opportunities were the fourth most common reason teachers accepted a position with the LTO in question. Almost one third of teachers surveyed identified themselves as 'career-focused SIEs', the second most common category behind exploring SIEs (McDonnell, Scullion, Vaiman & Haslberger 2013).

Teacher comments:

'I have been very impressed [with] and am optimistic about the opportunities that will be available with [this company]'.

'[The company] opens the door to adventures and careers in various places around the world'.

'There are many possibilities to enhance your resumé, become a senior teacher and DOS and do well in an overseas teaching position'.

Teaching

A 2011 survey of 431 current junior, senior or graduate students and 807 generation Y workers found that 72% of college students and 59% of generation Y respondents agreed that 'having a job where I can make an impact on causes or issues that are important to me' is either 'very important' or 'essential' (Szeltner & Zukin, 2011). Helping the world to communicate through teaching English as a foreign language seems like an appropriate



profession for those interested in helping society. The promise of teaching was the primary reason given by one in six teachers for joining the organization.

'Companies sense that modern-day employees are increasingly looking for variety and challenge' (Kalman, Narayan, Oehler, Schuler & Walker 2015: 13). With this in mind, it would seem important for LTOs to effectively communicate through their marketing to prospective teachers that variety, challenge and purpose are inherent in teaching.

Teacher Comments:

'[I] love to help spread literacy and education'.

'[I am] excited to start working in China and start this new teaching journey!'

Work-life Balance

Szeltner & Zukin (2011) found that 'Finding a comfortable balance between work-life and non-work-life is now a societal, consensual value'. In this regard 'There is substantial agreement among workers, regardless of generation'. The same report also found that almost three-quarters of university graduates would be willing to sacrifice 15 per cent of their salary in order to have a better balance between work and other areas of life and that almost half of the other workers surveyed would do the same (Szeltner & Zukin 2011). This is supported by LinkedIn, who found that work-life balance was the third most important factor in attracting talent, cited by 29% of respondents and the most frequently identified factor by British staff for accepting a new position (Batty, Gager & Sittig 2015). In this study, 9% of respondents selected this factor as their primary reason for declining a job. Teacher comments focused on hours, workload and time-off.

Teacher comments:

'[I would have liked the] opportunity to take a trip home mid-contract. A calendar year is quite a big commitment, and [a] long time to go without seeing friends and family'.

'I would prefer a Monday to Friday, day-time position (compared to the 12pm - 8pm Wednesday to Sunday schedule at [this company]'

With this in mind LTOs should consider allocating more annual leave for teachers to allow them time to travel and explore (the reason more than half of the SIEs chose to move abroad). While unsociable working hours may be a necessary evil of the TEFL industry, this factor is a considerable barrier to recruitment.

Conclusions

While American author Henry David Thoreau's adage, 'Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it', may be true in some contexts, men and women need to be offered sufficient salary to lure them away from their current jobs as well as to pay off their university debts. This research reinforces the finding that 'compensation matters most when making a final job decision' (Batty, Gager & Sittig 2015: 5). Love of the job is still important, however. The third most commonly cited reason for accepting a job was the attraction of teaching.

The importance of the relationship between recruiter and their hires seemed to be more important in this research than elsewhere (Table 1). This may be due to the level of trust required to make the difficult and sometimes stressful transition to another country (Mezias & Scandura 2005). Given the results here it is hard to overstate the importance of hiring and training the best recruitment staff. As the author and social scientist Leo Rosten says, 'First-rate people hire first-rate people; second-rate people hire third-rate people'.

Location also proved to be more important to potential employees than research outside of the TEFL industry would indicate. As with other research on Generation Y employees' professional growth, training, development and career advancement were all of great importance. In other industries, 'Companies often use the training they offer as a carrot to entice prospective new employees' (Kalman, Narayan, Oehler, Schuler & Walker 2015: 13). LTOs need to coherently articulate their professional development and growth opportunities to prospective employees. As English educationalist Sir Ken Robinson says, 'There is no school in the world that is better than its teachers'. If you want your school to be better, recruit better teachers.

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- Ross Thorburn** has been involved in English language teaching, training and management since 2006. He currently manages a team of trainers, who deliver Trinity CertTESOL and DipTESOL courses to hundreds of teachers in China every year. Ross also runs his own podcast and blog at www.TEFLtraininginstitute.com
Email: ross.thorburn@yahoo.com