

# Perspectives for blue collar jobs

How to make blue collar jobs more  
attractive in the Ems Dollart Region

**share** your talent. **move** the world.

## Initiator

Ems Dollart Region (EDR)

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# Zusammenfassung

Viele Betriebe in der Region Ostfriesland und Emsland beklagen einen Mangel an gewerblichen Mitarbeitern, sowohl bei Facharbeitern mit Erfahrung als auch bei Auszubildenden. Trotz einer Vielzahl an bereits umgesetzten Initiativen zum Gegensteuern dieses Trends wird die Verfügbarkeit der gewerblichen Mitarbeiter immer schwieriger, die Zeit bis zur Besetzung einer vakanten Stelle immer länger. An genau dieser Stelle setzt der vorliegende Bericht an und geht der Frage nach, wie gewerbliche Stellen in der Region attraktiver gestaltet werden können. Dazu wurden 47 semi-strukturierte Interviews mit niederländischen und deutschen Vertretern des gewerblichen Bereichs geführt. Dabei wurde explizit zwischen Arbeitgebern und Arbeitnehmern unterschieden, um den verschiedenen Perspektiven Rechnung zu tragen. Der Fokus seitens Arbeitnehmer lag auf jüngeren Personen, um insbesondere die Gründe einer scheinbar weniger attraktiv erscheinenden handwerklichen Ausbildung zu untersuchen.

Die Ergebnisse für Arbeitnehmer zeigen eine grundsätzliche Zufriedenheit mit ihrer Arbeit, sowohl in Bezug auf Inhalt als auch Umfeld. Der Grund für die Aufnahme einer handwerklichen Ausbildung geht zum einen auf Interesse seit der Kindheit zurück, zum anderen durch die Prägung des Elternhauses (ein Elternteil ebenfalls mit entsprechender Ausbildung). Die Wahl für das Ausbildungsunternehmen fällt in den meisten Fällen aufgrund von räumlicher Nähe zum Wohnort sowie der Reputation des Unternehmens. Enttäuscht zeigen sich jüngere Arbeitnehmer von der fehlenden gesellschaftlichen Wertschätzung ihres Berufs. Nach Möglichkeit sollte hier bereits in der Schule die Alternative für gewerbliche Berufe besser kommuniziert werden. Bezahlung und Arbeitsstunden werden als gut angesehen, die Verkürzung einer Woche auf vier Tage mit jeweils zehn Stunden trifft hingegen häufig auf Ablehnung. Als wichtigstes Element im Bereich der Unternehmenskultur werden gemeinsame Aktivitäten genannt, u. a. gemeinsames Frühstück oder das bekannte „Feierabendbier“. Sprachliche Barrieren mit ausländischen Kollegen sind nicht vorhanden.

Arbeitgeber stimmen in vielerlei Hinsicht mit den Einschätzungen ihrer Mitarbeiter überein, z. B. in Bezug auf die Wahrnehmung des Handwerks in der Gesellschaft oder die Wichtigkeit eines familiär geprägten Umfelds. Arbeitgeber nutzen eine Vielzahl von Möglichkeiten, um auf sich als Unternehmen aufmerksam zu machen. Dennoch klagen die Unternehmen wegen der geringen Verfügbarkeit an Mitarbeitern darüber, fast jede Person einstellen zu müssen. Eine noch zielgruppenspezifischere Ansprache sowie vermehrte Aktivitäten in den sozialen Medien werden hier als mögliche Lösung erachtet. Die persönliche Ansprache und „Mundpropaganda“ stellen nach wie vor den wichtigsten Ansatz dar. Jedoch scheuen viele Arbeitgeber die Kooperation mit anderen Unternehmen bezüglich Personalgewinnung, da die Konkurrenz groß und Vertrauen nur bedingt vorhanden scheint.

Folgende Empfehlungen können abgeleitet werden:

- Verstärkung der individuellen Wertschätzung, z. B. durch Weihnachtsgeld, gemeinsame Mahlzeiten oder Aktivitäten innerhalb der Arbeitszeit, Übernahme von Fortbildungskosten
- Verbesserung der Wahrnehmung, z. B. durch Schulprogramme, Praktika und Aufzeigen von Karriere-möglichkeiten
- Eröffnung von Flexibilität, z. B. bei Arbeitszeiten, unbezahltem Urlaub und Vergütung

Das Projekt Perspectives for blue collar jobs wird vom deutsch-niederländischen INTERREG Programm unterstützt und ist Teil im Dachprojekt Arbeitsmarkt Nord der Ems-Dollart-Region (EDR). Kontakte zu deutschen Unternehmen wurden durch das Netzwerk der Ems-Achse e.V. ermöglicht. Kontakte mit niederländischen Unternehmen wurden durch den Professur Lebensumfeld im Wandel ermöglicht.

# Samenvatting

Veel bedrijven in de regio Eems-Dollard Regio (EDR) klagen over een gebrek aan industriële werknemers (arbeiders, blauwe boorden of te wel 'blue collar workers'), zowel geschoolde werknemers met ervaring als stagiaires. Ondanks een groot aantal reeds uitgevoerde initiatieven om deze trend tegen te gaan, wordt de beschikbaarheid van industriële werknemers steeds moeilijker en wordt de tijd die nodig is om een vacature in te vullen steeds langer. Dit is precies waar dit rapport over gaat. Het gaat in op de vraag hoe industriële banen in de regio aantrekkelijker kunnen worden gemaakt. Hiertoe zijn 47 semi-gestructureerde interviews gehouden met Nederlandse en Duitse vertegenwoordigers van de industriële sector. Er werd een expliciet onderscheid gemaakt tussen werkgevers en werknemers om rekening te houden met de verschillende perspectieven. De focus van de werknemers was gericht op jongeren, met name om te onderzoeken in hoeverre blue collar jobs aantrekkelijk zijn.

De resultaten voor de medewerkers tonen een basistevredenheid over hun werk, zowel qua inhoud als qua omgeving. De reden voor het volgen van een ambachtelijke opleiding is enerzijds terug te voeren op interesse sinds de kinderjaren en anderzijds op het karakter van het ouderlijk huis (één ouder heeft ook deze opleiding). In de meeste gevallen is de keuze voor het opleidingsbedrijf gebaseerd op de nabijheid van de woonplaats en de reputatie van het bedrijf. Jongere werknemers zijn teleurgesteld over het gebrek aan sociale waardering voor hun beroep. Waar mogelijk moet het alternatief voor industriële beroepen al op school beter worden gecommuniceerd. Loon en werkuren worden als goed gezien, maar de verkorting van een week tot vier dagen met elk tien uur wordt vaak afgekeurd. Het belangrijkste element op het gebied van de bedrijfscultuur zijn de gezamenlijke activiteiten. Er zijn geen taalbarrières met buitenlandse collega's.

Werkgevers zijn het in veel opzichten eens met de beoordelingen van hun werknemers, bijvoorbeeld met betrekking tot de perceptie van het ambacht in de samenleving of het belang van een gezinsgerichte omgeving. Werkgevers gebruiken verschillende manieren om de aandacht te vestigen op zichzelf als bedrijf. Desalniettemin klagen bedrijven, vanwege de beperkte beschikbaarheid van werknemers, dat ze bijna iedereen die wil in dienst moeten nemen. Een nog meer doelgroepgerichte aanpak en meer activiteiten in de sociale media worden als een mogelijke oplossing beschouwd. Persoonlijk contact en 'mond-tot-mondreclame' zijn nog steeds de belangrijkste aanpak. Veel werkgevers schrikken echter terug voor samenwerking met andere bedrijven op het gebied van de werving van personeel, omdat de concurrentie hevig lijkt te zijn en het vertrouwen beperkt is. De volgende aanbevelingen kunnen worden afgeleid:

- Versterking van de individuele waardering, bijvoorbeeld door middel van kerstbonussen, gezamenlijke maaltijden of activiteiten tijdens de werkuren, bijscholingskosten voor de werkgever.
- Verbetering van de perceptie, bijvoorbeeld door middel van schoolprogramma's, stages en carrièremogelijkheden.
- Flexibiliteit, bijvoorbeeld in werktijden, onbetaald verlof en beloning.

Het project Perspectieven voor blue collar jobs wordt ondersteund door het Duits-Nederlandse INTER-REG-programma en maakt deel uit van het overkoepelende project Arbeidsmarkt Noord van de Eems-Dollar-Regio (EDR). Contacten met Duitse bedrijven werden mogelijk gemaakt via het netwerk van de Ems-Achse e.V. Contacten met Nederlandse bedrijven werden mogelijk gemaakt via het Lectoraat Leefomgeving in Transitie.



# Introduction

Many Western European societies are facing a common problem in terms of more and more high school students being enrolled in university programs, resulting in fewer lower skilled graduates beginning an apprenticeship. On the first sight, this academization seems advantageous as a higher part of a country's population gets access to higher secondary education. However, the economic power of Western European countries is deeply rooted in small and medium sized companies, especially in craft firms. Many of these companies report to have declined orders due to a shortage of workers. In other words, they would like to generate more output, but are limited by the number of employees. This limitation is – among other effects – a result of the inability of craft firms to attract middle and high school graduates for their apprenticeships. Companies along the Ems river, in both Germany and the Netherlands, have confirmed this observation.

Blue collar jobs are essential for the companies of the Ems Dollart Region (EDR) as many of them are based in manufacturing and production, craft, and repairs. The kind of job performed by a blue collar worker is always directly related to the company's value chain; it is immediately linked to the product. In contrast, white collar workers perform administrative work, being only mediately linked to the product. There is no question that companies need both type of workers in order to succeed. However, when in dialogue with the companies from the Ems Dollart Region, the shortage in blue collar workers sticks out, whereas the supply of white collar workers is adequate. But why is that? Is it because white collar jobs are on average better paid than blue collar jobs? It is because technology in our daily life has changed the perception of younger people away from 'dirty hands'? Or is it because society does not adequately respect the performance of blue collar workers anymore? Or, is it because SMEs find it particularly difficult to position themselves attractively on the labor market. without jobs executing matters such as recruitment on a regular basis?

Hence, the aim of this research is to gain cross-border insight into how blue collar functions in SME's can be made more attractive for young people (<35 years) in EDR in order to provide insights the region can learn from and from each other and strengthen each other's positions. In sum, the report at hand will investigate potential reasons as well as suggestions for the question:

How can we make blue collar jobs more attractive in the Ems Dollart Region (EDR)?



# EDR

The EDR is a northern European border region along the Dutch-German border and was established in 1977. Since its inception, EDR has grown into a Dutch-German meeting center where cross-border meetings and activities are organized and numerous cross-border projects are launched. The focal points of the EDR are the promotion of the cross-border, regional economy and culture (EDR, 2020).

The research was created in response to a question from the EDR that is busy setting up a network in which small and medium-sized companies within the EDR can enter into a sustainable cooperation relationship. The Dutch and German regions can strengthen each other and learn from each other as much as possible. This research will lead to the next building block that will make the region more attractive. This builds on the study 'Startup perspectives' by Bakker, Blaga and Wolf (2019).

## The Dutch Situation

The Dutch labor market has been visualized based on demographic and economic factors. In the Netherlands, just like other western countries, the population is aging and young people often move away from the north towards the west of the Netherlands (Laan, 2019). A shortage of personnel in the northern regions lies ahead in the near future.

### Demographic factors

The focus was placed on the northern provinces, namely Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen with information obtained from CBS (2019) and UWV (2019). In 2019, the Netherlands had 17,282,163 inhabitants, the number of men being 8,581,086 and the number of women 8,701,077, of which the average age is 42 years. The Northern population growth is even lower than the average percentage for the Netherlands as a whole (Figure 1). When the focus is placed on the Northern Netherlands, it shows that the numbers are similar to the rest of the Netherlands in terms of proportions. Figure 2 indicates that of the northern provinces Friesland has the most inhabitants. In addition, this is also the only province in the Northern Netherlands with more men than women. The other two provinces show the same trend as in the rest of the country, with more women living in the province.

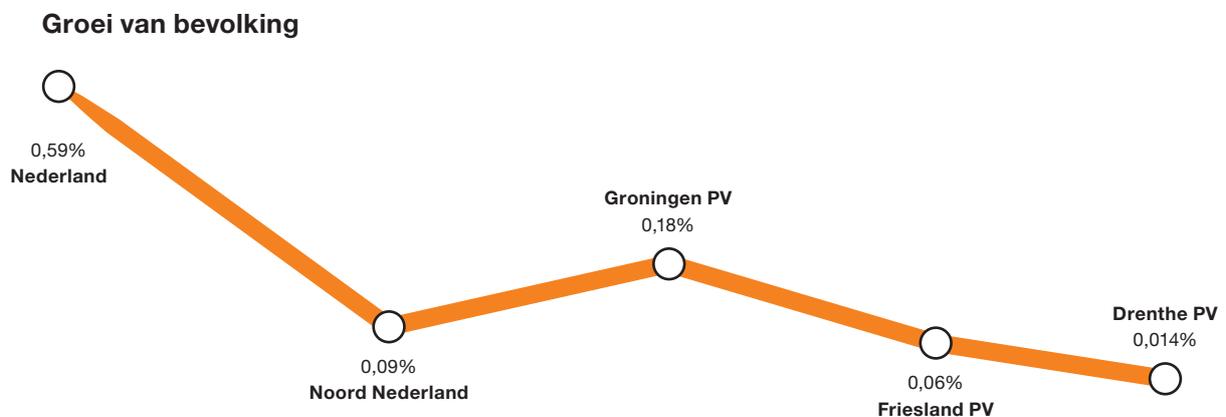


Figure 1. Population growth in the Netherlands in one year

## Bevolkingsaantallen

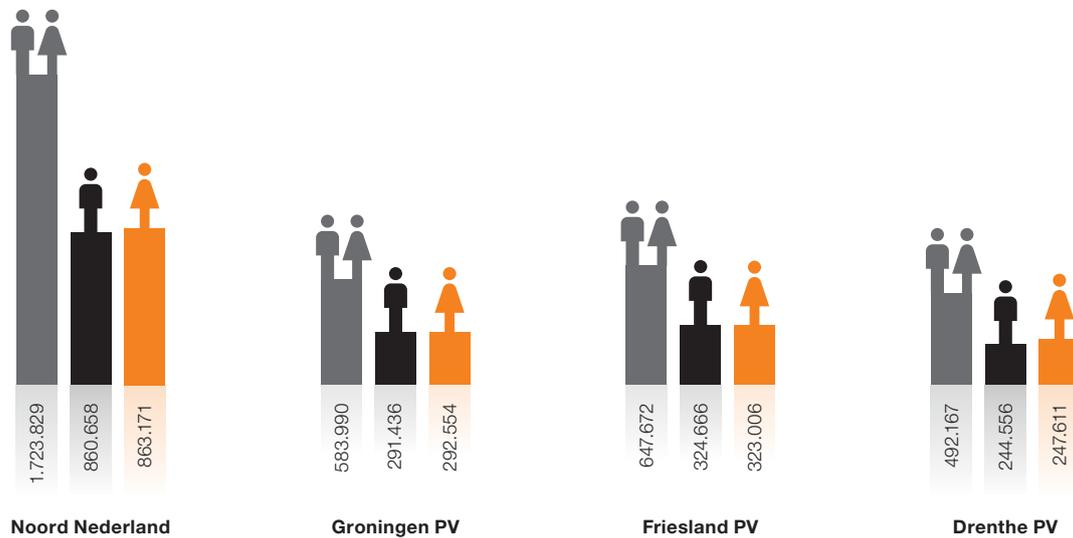


Figure 2. The number of inhabitants of the northern provinces in the Netherlands

Hence growth in the Northern Netherlands lags behind the national growth, although Groningen still shows a considerable growth. However, the growth in Drenthe is only 0.01%, with only 67 inhabitants added in a whole year. This low growth in population in the north of the country will reduce the workforce in the future and will therefore threaten all businesses in the region. In addition, compared to the rest of the Netherlands the northern provinces show fewer young people on average than the national average. With fewer young people living in the northern provinces it is more challenging for companies in the EDR to recruit young people.

### *Economic factors*

This slowed population growth results in labor shortages that are increasingly tangible within production companies with blue collar functions. For example, construction companies experience staff shortages due to an increasing demand for new homes (Nu, 2019). This ensures that these companies cannot continue to grow and that the housing market in the Netherlands cannot meet the demand of house hunters. Research has shown that of 45% of SMEs with ambitions to grow, perceive attracting well-qualified personnel as a major concern (Rijksoverheid, 2019). This means that it is difficult for nearly half of small and medium-sized companies that want to grow to find good staff. As a result, companies cannot grow at the pace they would like and this can hinder the continuity of the organization.

The UWV report shows the sectors with the greatest growth in demand for personnel. The four largest growing sectors of 2020 are shown in Figure 3. This graph shows that the construction industry continues to grow and that opportunities can therefore be gained here. Other sectors are: business services, information and communication and the care and welfare sector.

### Groei in aantal banen

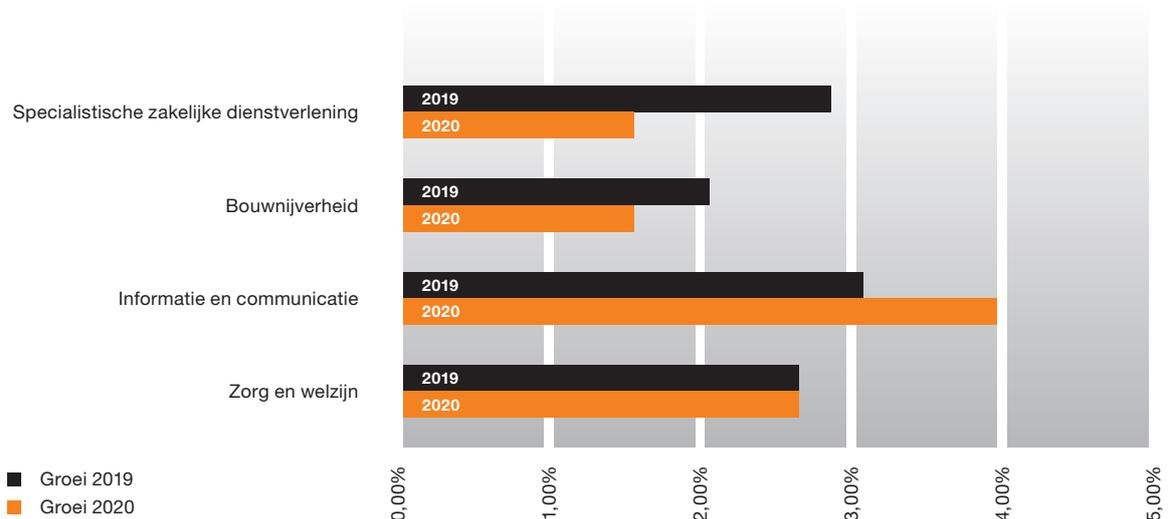


Figure 3. The four fastest growing sectors in the Netherlands

Unemployment in the region was also examined, which can be seen in figure XX. Unemployment in the fourth quarter of 2019 averaged 3.3% in the Netherlands. Looking at the northern provinces, Drenthe has below average unemployment of 2.5%. Unemployment in Groningen is highest in the Netherlands with almost 5%. Because unemployment in Groningen is higher than in the rest of the country, this creates opportunities in the region as more people are unemployed.

### Werkloosheid 4e kwartaal 2019

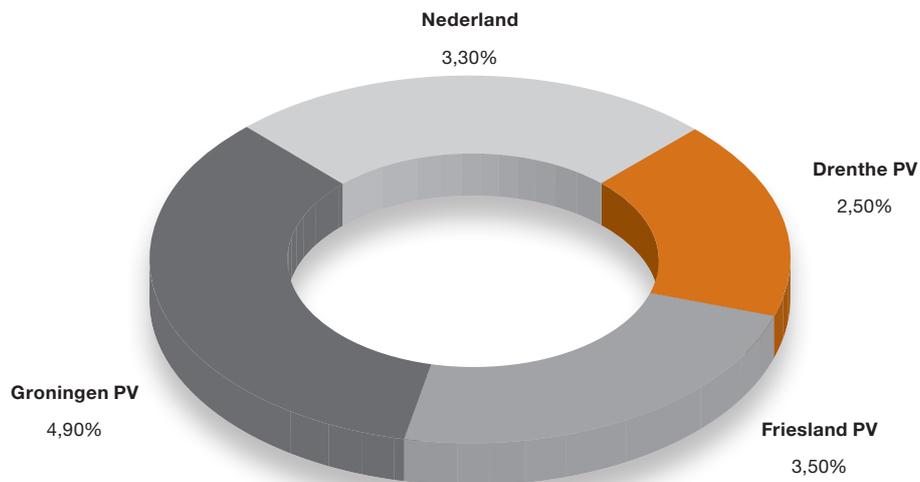


Figure 4. Unemployment in the Netherlands classified by province

Also Figure 5 reflect this same trend: it shows that the number of vacancies in small and medium-sized enterprises has grown substantially in the past five years.

### Openstaande vacatures

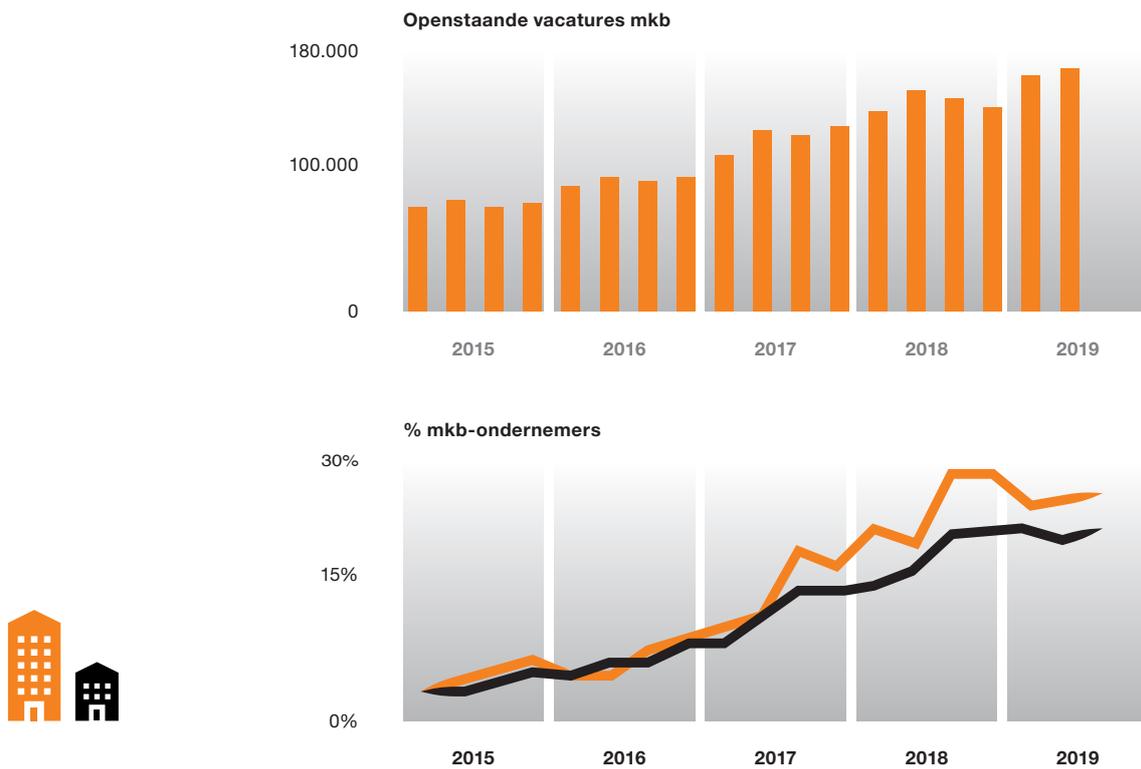


Figure 5. The growth in the number of unfilled vacancies within small and medium-sized enterprises over the past five years. Here, the light blue line depicts small and the dark blue line depicts large enterprises

Figure 6 shows these personnel shortages per sector. The number of companies with a staff shortage continues to grow compared to a previous quarter in sectors such as; construction industry, industry and transport and storage.

### Bedrijven met een tekort aan persoon per sector

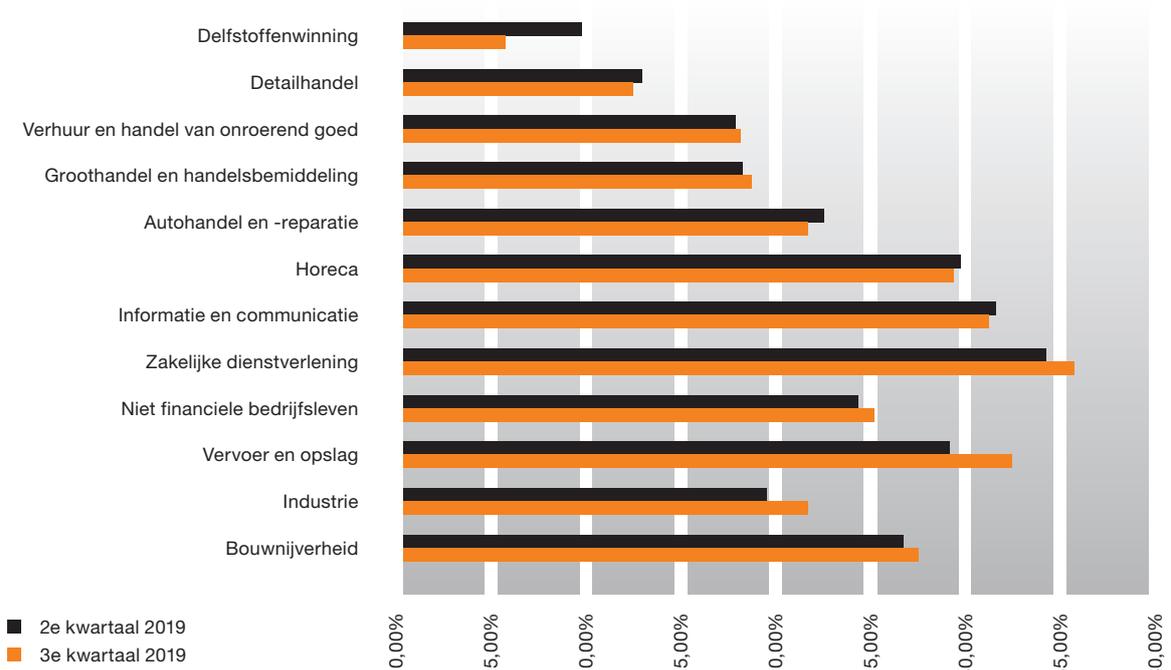


Figure 6. The number of companies with a staff shortage per sector

## The German Situation

Germany is facing a trend towards academization, meaning a growing number of young people choose an academic education instead of the traditional apprenticeship or vocational training respectively ('Ausbildung'). As a result, there are fewer apprentices for blue collar jobs. Fewer apprentices on the other hand result in fewer blue collar workers. When investigating these trends, it becomes evident that the number of German persons beginning to study in Germany have grown by over a third in the last 15 years, from roughly 280,000 starting in 2006 to about 380,000 starting in 2018.

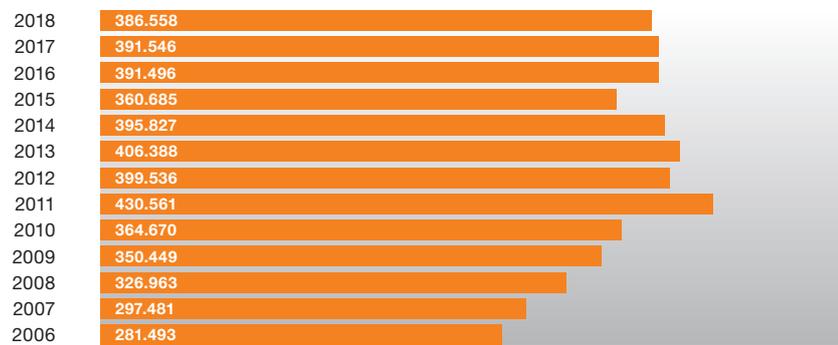


Figure 7. Germans starting academic studies in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019)

The number of new apprentices in blue collar jobs has declined by 11% from 2009 to 2019. In the same period, completed training in blue collar jobs (usually after three years) has fallen by 27%. This means that not only less people start an apprenticeship in a blue collar job, it also indicates a disproportional rate of terminating the apprenticeship before completion.

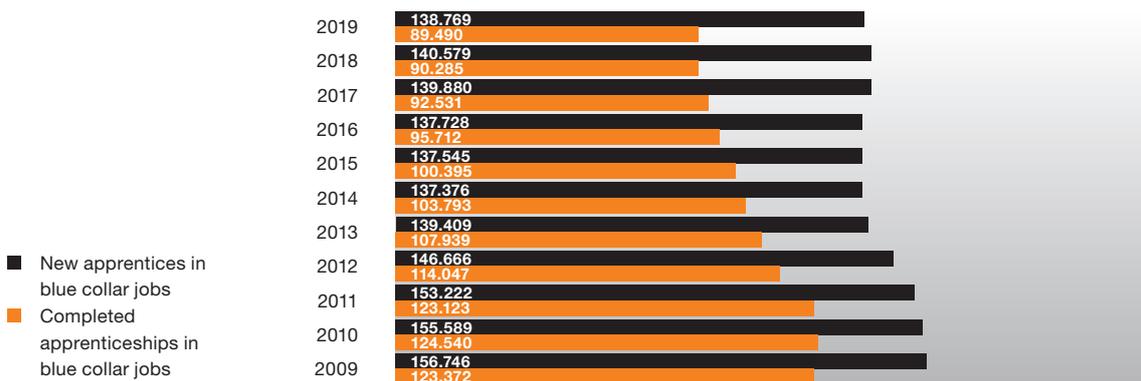
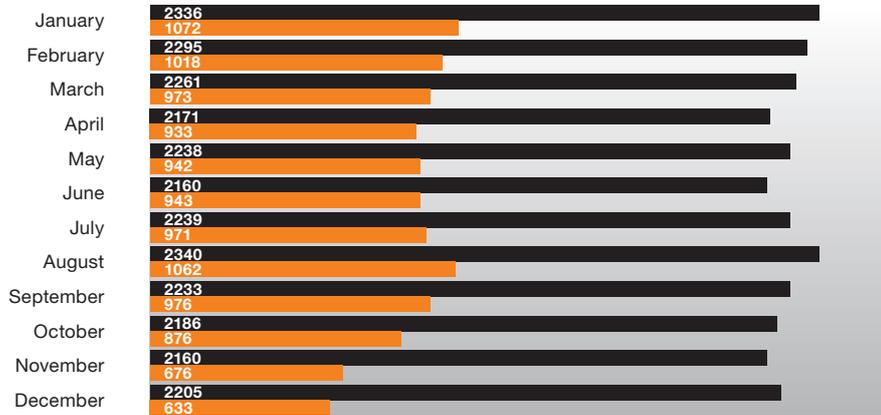


Figure 8. New apprentices and completed apprenticeships in Germany (Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks, 2019)

The regions in scope on the German side are all counties within the state of Lower Saxony sharing the border with the Netherlands. The counties are Aurich, Emden, Leer, Emsland and Grafschaft Bentheim. They reflect the German average on unemployment rates for urban regions (Emden), rural regions (Emsland and Grafschaft Bentheim) as well as their combination (Aurich and Leer).

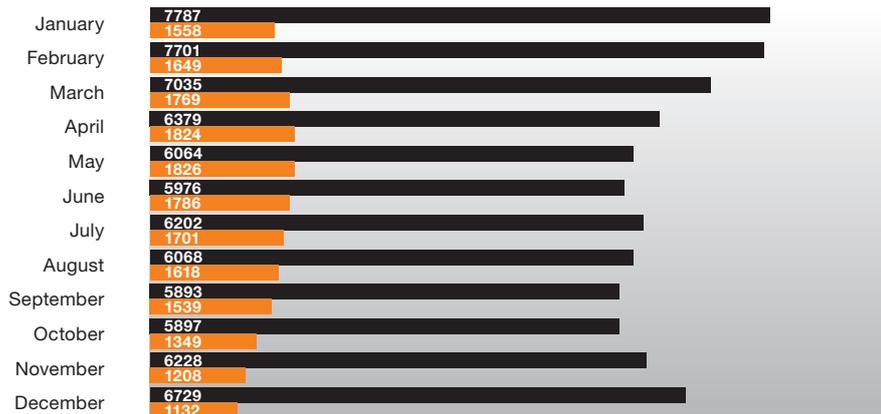
### District Emden



#### Unemployment rate 2019

January	8,5%
February	8,4%
March	8,2%
April	7,9%
May	8,2%
June	7,9%
July	8,2%
August	8,5%
September	8,2%
October	8,0%
November	7,9%
December	8,0%

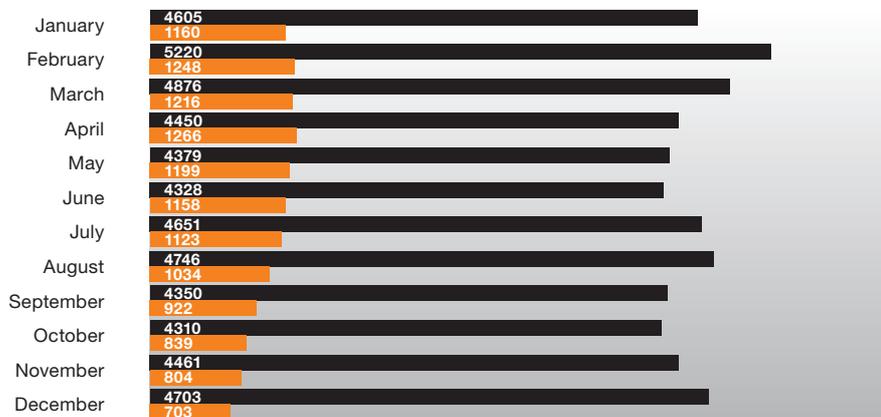
### District Aurich



#### Unemployment rate 2019

January	7,6%
February	7,5%
March	6,9%
April	6,3%
May	5,9%
June	5,8%
July	6,0%
August	5,9%
September	5,7%
October	5,7%
November	6,0%
December	6,5%

### District Leer

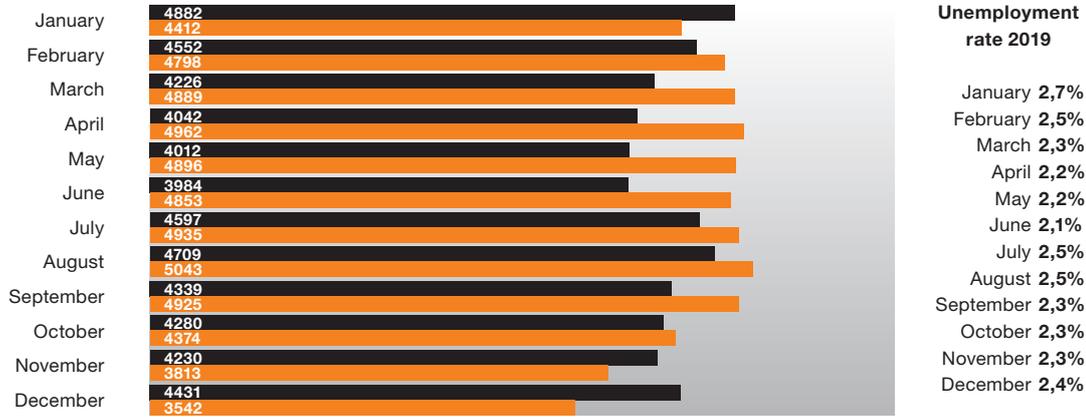


#### Unemployment rate 2019

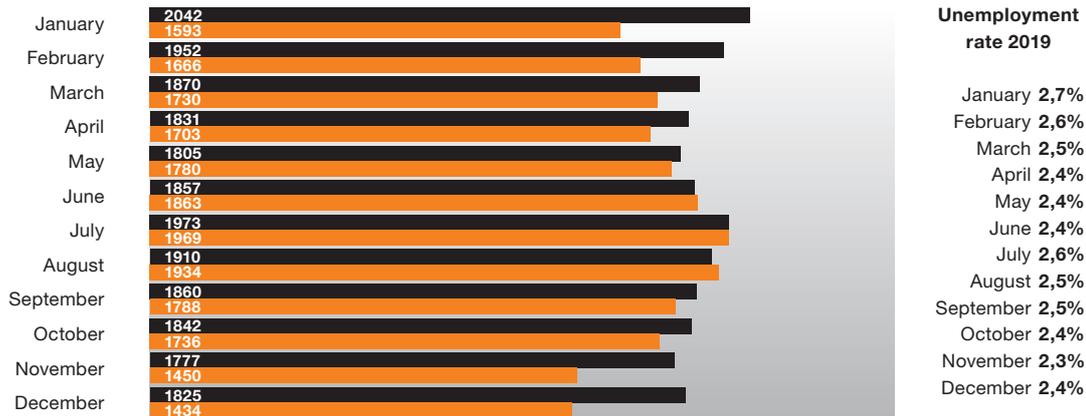
January	5,9%
February	5,9%
March	5,5%
April	5,1%
May	4,9%
June	4,9%
July	5,2%
August	5,3%
September	4,9%
October	4,8%
November	5,0%
December	5,3%

■ Unemployed ■ Vacancies

### District Emsland



### District Grafschaft Bentheim



■ Unemployed    ■ Vacancies

Figure 9. Unemployment and vacancies in 2019 in focus districts (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2020)

This unemployment can be seen as an opportunity and it can also be compared with unemployment in Groningen. Finally, the working population of the border area was mapped. In Lower Saxony, 64% of the inhabitants are between 15 and 64 years old. Lower Saxony is under gray pressure as the percentage of over-65s is higher than the number of young people. Namely 21% elderly and 15% young people (Rijksoverheid, 2019). Before we turn to the methods and results, we first give a comprised insight into the factors contributing to attractive work.

# Factors contributing to organizational attractiveness for young blue collar workers

## Four Factors

In general, there are a number of factors that contribute to the attractiveness of a job or organization. Firstly, **Job content** set forth as ‘...been known for decades that characteristics related to job content, such as autonomy and variety, lead to more job satisfaction and motivation and subsequently to better performance’ (Corporaal, 2012, p. 63). Secondly, **Terms of employment** which is described as employment conditions with a distinction between primary and secondary employment conditions. The primary remuneration is regarded as salary. “Salary mainly serves as a means of comparison: it is not about the absolute, but about the relative value of the salary compared to other jobs, for example” (Corporaal, 2012, p. 65). In addition secondary terms of employment include components of the membership reward such as performance payment, overtime payment or a cafeteria scheme (Langedijk, 2001). Thirdly, **Working relations** also determines the attractiveness of a job. “Social contact with colleagues and managers can enhance job characteristics” (Corporaal, 2012, p. 63). Social contact also gives employees the opportunity to request advice, feedback and help from colleagues. And lastly, **Working environment** plays a role in the attractiveness of an organization. Employees can suffer from psychological stress due to a high workload. Physical load also plays a role in just like environmental factors such as odor, noise or weather circumstances. In this study these four components function as the basis of our search for knowledge on attractiveness of blue collar jobs for youngsters.

## Employer brand

With an extra study we explored which factors contribute to an attractive employer brand, because the attractiveness of an employer is key to recruit new staff. Marketing an image as an employer is also known as employer branding. “Employer branding is promoting - both inside and outside the company - a clear picture of what makes a company different and attractive as an employer” (Lievens, 2016, p. 147). Employer branding consists of three pillars that are important to properly shape the employer brand. Firstly, **Message** (content). Communication is used to deliver a message. “Through communication, the sender wants to influence the receiver’s knowledge, skills, opinions, behavioral intentions or emotions” (Steehouder, 2011, p. 26). One goal is motivation whereby the sender not only wants to convince the recipient but also wants to encourage action. Within the application process the organizations want to motivate potential candidates to apply for the vacant position. The aim is to encourage the recipient to apply. Secondly **Image** (value proposition). When communicating the message, it is necessary for organizations to have a positive and recognizable brand image. Hearing or seeing a brand evokes associations among consumers forming the brand image. This can involve positive and negative associations. Moreover, these associations can be instrumental or psychosocial. Instrumental associations are about the presence of certain product properties. An interpretation can be made to the labor market, which concerns the brand image of the employer. The consumer is an applicant who has associations with an employer. And thirdly, **channel** (how to communicate). Once an organization has developed a recruitment message, the organization must choose the channels, sources or media through which the message can reach potential applicants. Good knowledge of the target group is important because the recruitment channel must be tailored to the characteristic media and behavior of the target group when looking for a job (Lievens, 2015). An organization can choose to publish a vacancy in two ways. It can use formal and informal channels of which the informal channels generally outperform formal channels.

## Objective and Conceptual model

As stated earlier the objective of this project is:

*Optimizing the attractiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises with blue collar jobs within the EDR, by identifying which and how factors contribute positively to the attractiveness, so that these companies can recruit young people more effectively in the future. In this way, the regional partners can learn from each other and strengthen each other's positions.*

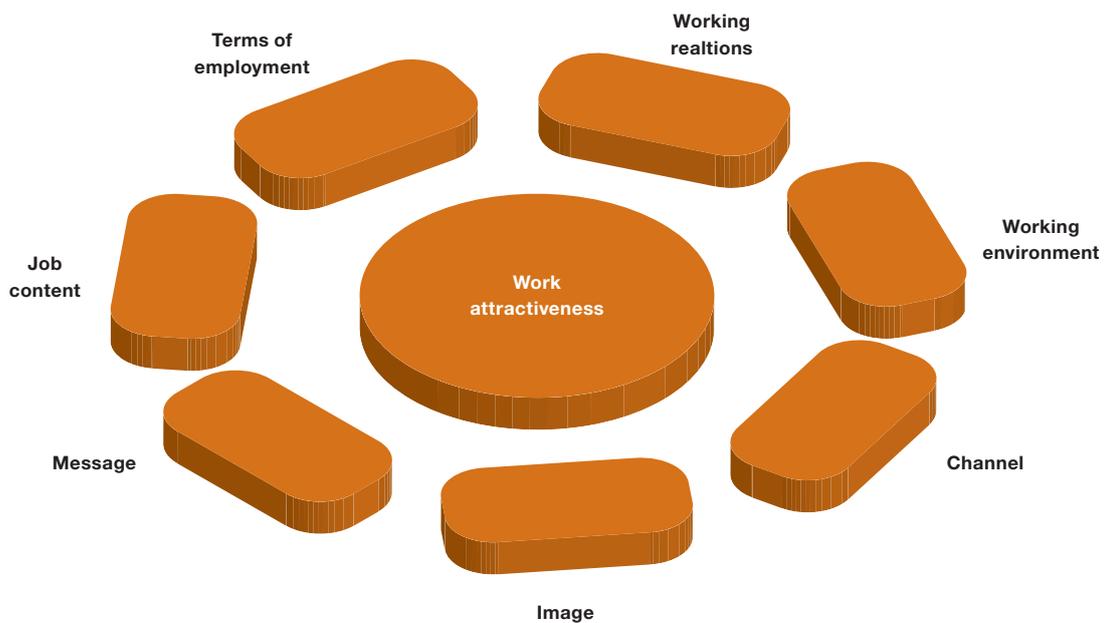
The conceptual model shows seven factors contributing to the attractiveness of an employer among young blue collar employees. In order to address the aim properly we focused on answering the following questions:

What contributes to the employer's attractiveness of an organization in terms of:

1. Job content
2. Terms of employment
3. Working relations
4. Working environment

With an extra research we have focused on the employer branding part and addressed the employer branding in terms of:

5. Message
6. Image
7. Channel



# Method

## Participants and Procedure

In Phase 0 (May 2019-July 2019) we recruited and selected students from Hochschule Emden/Leer and Hanze Hogeschool Groningen. In addition, we prepared general matters such as finances and planning. In Phase 1 (September 2019-February 2020) we developed and prepared the interview format in two languages, conducted a pilot study, and contacted SMEs in both sides of the border between Germany and the Netherlands. In that same period we started collecting data conducting a total of 47 interviews, 27 of these were held in Germany and 20 in the Netherlands. Target groups consisted of young (<25 years) blue collar workers and apprentices as well as their managers in SME in EDR. This approach allowed us to discover potential differences in the perception of the practices offered by the specific company. The information was gathered from the respondents by means of semi structured interviews in advance on the basis of various topics. The data was analyzed on the basis of these same topics and elaborated qualitatively, resulting in a mono method. This main study has been conducted between October 2019 and May 2020. In Phase 2 (March 2020-July 2020) we analyzed the data of the interviews. Unfortunately, it was in this period the whole world faced the corona crisis and we therefore had to put considerable effort in continuing the process of the research.

Fortunately, we collected the main data already by then, and we started an interesting extra study on the attractive factors before the stage of work: the stage of internships for school students. The new student on this topic needed considerable perseverance attracting respondents. He succeeded. So, the stage of reporting data extended and the moment of organizing a joint symposium for SMEs in EDR was also postponed in accordance with EDR from June to a late point in 2020. Just like exposure through handing out flyers/brochures and sharing these through channels such as Chambers of Commerce.

## Measures

To collect our data we used an interview format with the following items, based on the Dutch 4 A's like Arbeidsinhoud (Job content), Arbeidsvoorwaarden (Terms of employment), Arbeidsrelaties (Working relations), and Arbeidsomgeving (Working environment; Van Hootegem et al., 2008). With **Job content** we posed questions like: What is being done about Job Content to make blue collar work attractive? They might have given answers on individual work tasks, activities, responsibilities etc. We probed after each answer to ensure we had all the relevant data. As regards **Terms of employment** we asked for instance: What is being done from the collective labor agreement in terms of making blue collar work attractive? What is being done about terms of employment of making blue collar work attractive? Then we delved into the topic of **Working relations** with questions like what is being done about relationships, communication, consultation to make blue collar work attractive? Lastly, we asked for the situation around the topic **Working environment** with questions like rules for employers and employees regarding health, safety, well-being etc. Last question was on general comments or additional information that the respondent(s) wanted to give on these topics. Companies that were involved were:

### *German Companies*

- Alwin Otten (electrical engineering, climate technology)
- Schmidt Kunststoffverarbeitung (polymer processing)
- B.u.S. Metallverarbeitung (metal working)
- Kleinhaus (road construction, landscaping)
- Dahlhaus Möbelfertigung (furniture manufacturing)
- cwTec (machine engineering)
- SH Holz- und Modulbau (modular construction)
- Lima Elektrotechnik (electrical engineering)
- Elektro Radtke (electrical engineering)
- Graftschafter Autozentrale (car sales and repair)

### *Dutch Companies*

- OWC: Oldambster Wegenbouw Combinatie (road construction)
- Verbi-Dak: Kwaliteitsdakwerk (roofing)
- Van der Flier-groep: grondverzet, grondzuigen, waterwerken etc (civil engineering like vacuuming)
- Slagerij Hofman: winkel en worstenmakerij (butchery and sausage making)

The extra study focused on blue collar jobs in the construction sector due to considerable labor shortages and many SMEs. Due to corona crisis this part of the study has been executed in the Netherlands online with school students. They could be reached with great difficulty. Eventually it turned out to be successful by including respondents through the learning company SSPB. At SSPB, a total of 135 young people are under contract, all of whom are following carpenter's educational program. These are BBL (work and school) programs in which the students work four days a week and receive practical support at SSPB one day a week. A total of 8 digital interviews were conducted from April-May 2020.

# Results

## Results along Work Clusters

The following results are clustered along the four dimensions of the interview. Furthermore, the results will reflect the answers of both *managers* (of blue collar workers) and (blue collar) *employees* themselves.

### Job Content

*Managers* report that they provide a high degree of decision autonomy to their workers, therefore allowing for higher responsibility and freedom. As one manager said: *“If we have to work overtime, everybody is ready for that. That is the pillar for us as an employer to measure how satisfied they are.”* Another manager stated this as follows: *“The employees in the production form a team and within this team they ensure that the tasks are completed.”* The respondent does not care much about who performs which tasks and how. One manager indicated that there are good career opportunities but only a little need for that: *“... you start at the bottom and you can always climb up towards a new level if you wish. That is how you can develop.”* From their point of view, it is important to offer interns and apprentices real insights in order to attract them for the job, instead of letting them do dirty work. However, they sense the society’s perception of blue collar jobs as negative and have identified prejudices about their type of work. *“Some people think you are just in the mud and shit, but you are not. You just install a new and clean sewer. The sewer pipes are very clean.”*

Blue collar *employees* enjoy the variety of tasks given by their work. There is a lot of choice and employees can switch tasks within the team. This also ensures that employees can focus on jobs that better suit their personality. Most apprentices always had a passion about craft and were interested in generating something with their own hands since childhood. Additionally, many of them grew up in a family-run craft business, therefore receiving all the input over many years. In addition, the employees indicated they are satisfied with training opportunities at the workplace. Time is available for that and well supported: *“I think that is well arranged. How they do that is just perfect.”* Employees point at the lost education programs craft schools; they no longer exist. This is accompanied with the loss of the mentor-apprentice learning dyad foreseeing replacement problems of the elderly.

### Terms of Employment

*Managers* report that a large portion of the terms of employment is pre-defined by collective labor agreements, such as working time and salaries, leaving not very much “open” space. They report a trend towards flexibility, away from shift work. One manager stated that the working hours are fixed, but that shifting is possible: *“The most important thing is that the work is finished at the end of the week, I don’t care how this happens.”*. And: *“If the boys want to be free, they get free.”* Training and development usually do not exist on a regular basis; instead employees have to specifically ask for it but rarely do so. *“If it comes from themselves, we certainly encourage that and we take it up immediately.”* Permanent contracts provided to employees are standard after finalizing their required trainings; probation times are not used. A regularly used recruitment tool is through an employment agency or benefits agency. The most effective measure for recruitment is word-of-mouth recommendation. A cooperation in this field with other craft businesses is rather rejected due to high competition for apprentices among the firms. Furthermore, government regulations prevent the hiring of migrants although they often are skilled workers.

Most workers do not state that salary is the most important issue: *"I'd rather go to work with a nice atmosphere and get less money than get more money and the atmosphere is not good."* However, physically demanding work should also include the right salary. Overall they are satisfied with the salary as most of them do not have own families yet. Although lower salaries are common in EDR (compared to the west of the Netherlands), employees are satisfied with their salary. Pension schemes are not so attractive, probably due to age. Almost all respondents indicate that they are satisfied with the working hours. Generally speaking, they prefer "regular" weeks with 8 hours Monday through Friday instead of "short" weeks with 10 hours per day, 4 days a week.

## Working relations

Managers stress the importance of team fit of potential employees. Since people are working together closely, the atmosphere among them is of high relevance. Thus, the criterion is among the most important ones during the recruitment process. Regular team outings are also attractive: *"Things like we regularly have fun outings with the staff. We are always together on Friday. While enjoying a drink and a piece of sausage and so on. And for the construction industry holiday, we organize a large barbecue party and just before Christmas we go to a bowling center to eat and drink. I think the overall picture makes it very attractive, I must say."* Flat hierarchies foster open informal exchange between management and workers, in which respect for the other is shown and everyone is treated as equal. Communication occurs informally, without performance appraisals: *"I don't know anyone who likes that and why would you sit down at a time every year to talk about it? If something is going on, I will start the conversation at that moment."*

Employees underline the relevance of working atmosphere as well; in fact, there is full agreement concerning this aspect. A positive working atmosphere leads to mutual support and appreciation among the workers. give the atmosphere very important to find. That is why all respondents agree that this atmosphere is very good and open. *"It is a flat organization, where everyone helps everyone and assists when necessary. The most important thing is actually the working atmosphere. A good working atmosphere ensures good work. And the working atmosphere is really great here."* With a quarterly meeting four times a year in which they get informed of everything and the opportunity putting ideas in the suggestion box the respondents are satisfied. Furthermore, hierarchy is not an issue, usually everyone is showing effort to get the job done. Blue collar workers appreciate social gatherings at work, e.g. joint breakfasts with the whole company or a "friday afternoon beer". These events really foster relationships among employees as well as towards managers. Language barriers are not perceived as a problem.

## Working environment

Bad weather is the biggest disappointment for *managers as well as workers*, although both groups are aware of their missing influence on it. The temperature is also important: *“In three months we will move to a new building where the working environment is pleasant. Provisions are also important in working conditions. It is important that the temperature is good to work.”* They also agree that gym or sports offers are not useful because the work requires a high degree of physical involvement. Furthermore, safety is the most important aspect considering working conditions, as stated by one *manager*: *“We are constantly working on safety.”* As a basis, employees should have a VCA (Safety Certificate Contractor). Another manager stated that the collective labour agreement is leading in this regard. Another issue is the increasing retirement age which is stressed by one manager by leaving the responsibility to the employee to keep up and report when work becomes too heavy physically. The manager then arranges an extra man. Another manager stated that *“working conditions have improved highly compared to 20-30 years ago. So if you take enough rest, use the aids, pay attention to your body and you comply to the rules that are set. Then you can maintain the profession very well until the end of your pension. That wasn't like that before.”*

*Employees* state that work is more fun when they operate in advantageous locations, e.g., sheltered from bad weather or with helpful facilities nearby. Again, most of the working conditions cannot be influenced by the managers though like the (bad) weather conditions. There are few ‘good’ days at work, and preparation is a necessity for such a day. Employees want their managers to enforce safety regulations more consistently though, they sense a lack of awareness and levity respectively. When it comes to choosing an employer, good reputation and short commuting distance are the most important factors for young blue collar workers. One employee indicated that safety and adapted tools are very important, as well as health. The respondent is concerned about the latter point in this field: *“Gosh, how do I say that... There are a lot of vapors that come from things and you do not know what is in them. At least I don't. And I didn't care that much before but now I have a child and I am interested in all of that. And then I think it is important that they know what is in it. And whether that is harmful.”*

## Various results

Many respondents indicated they grew up in the professional field. *“When I was little, I always went with my father and I just thought it was beautiful. That's how I rolled into it.”* Employees chose the sector because they are familiar with it through family or friends. Generally speaking respondents consciously chose to work and live in the area of EDR. *“I grew up here and I just don't want to leave here.”* In addition, many friends and family members either work in the same kind of jobs or at least in practice-oriented jobs. Another factor regularly emerged is the respondents perceiving their work as “beautiful”. There is a sense of pride. As regards the recruitment strategy managers of SMEs mainly recruit through their own network. There are collaborations with the municipality where the goal is to get people with a distance to the labor market to work.

## **Consensus and Differences between Managers and Workers**

### *Consensus*

Managers and workers agree that joint activities motivate the whole team. One example are joint breakfasts every 1<sup>st</sup> Friday of the month. Also, the relationships among the workers as well as between management and workers are familiar; there is mutual support without hierarchical barriers. Typically, this leads to a perception of a good working atmosphere – people like to go to work. On the other side, managers and workers agree on the growing importance of flexibility, especially concerning working hours, letting work better fit into someone's life. This could also result in an improved perception of craft in general – both agree that society does not respect their work sufficiently.

### *Differences*

Concerning working days, managers assume that their employees prefer longer days and one day per week off. However, the regular working week with five days per week, but shorter days is preferred. Workers want to have some time every day for family and leisure. Another aspect concerns communication: Whereas managers tend to rate communication and relations with workers very well, employees mostly feel that these fields are adequate, but are in need of improvement. Lastly, managers stated that safety is a top priority for the companies. However, many workers expressed their concern about safety, wishing for a more consistent implementation of safety measures.

## **Consensus and Differences between the Netherlands and Germany**

Generally speaking, the results of Dutch and German companies are pretty similar. When taking a detailed look into the data though, it is possible to identify differences of small dimension. Firstly, Dutch workers seem more satisfied with their jobs as well as their working conditions in general. They criticize less about their managers and report more passion about their jobs. Secondly, German respondents underline rather 'hard' facts like payment, working hours, training measures. The Dutch response behavior is rather characterized by 'soft' facts, such as involvement, collegiality and working atmosphere.

## **Extra study on school students**

From this aforementioned main study we learned that we could broaden our scope by including a new target group; a group that had not yet entered the labor market but was about to do so as blue collar workers in the EDR. An extra study focused on this last topic encompassing the school students who are about to enter the labor market on the blue collar levels in the EDR. A total of eight respondents consisted of school students between 18-32 years, half of them attending level 2 and half of them level 3 carpenter's training.

## **Job content**

All school students have indicated that they consider autonomy in work important and expect that in their future jobs, specifically in SMEs rather than in bigger companies. In addition, they indicated job variety as very important. It is exactly all-round construction that is required and leads to improved skills and attractiveness on the labor market. Opinions on career opportunities were somewhat more divided. Six respondents have indicated that they consider career opportunities important, but not in terms of vertical job advancement but rather within the work itself. They are not looking forward extra responsibility that comes with career within the organization. Working with their hands is appealing.

## **Terms of employment**

All respondents have indicated that they consider wages to be important, and all respondents agreed that they do not want to work for too little money because the work is physically difficult. However, no respondent has indicated that they prefer wages over working atmosphere. In terms of secondary conditions three out of eight school students stated that a company van is attractive, just like obtaining a trailer driving license. All of them regard good terms on situation around children and aging, but only one school student on part-time work as important. Generally they were quite averse to performance-related payment in the sector. Although perhaps interesting personally they expected that the quality of the work could suffer from this. A preference was expressed with a bonus on top of the hourly wages for good performance. Compliments are highly valued but insufficiently expressed with too much emphasis on errors having in a demotivating effect.

## **Working relations**

All respondents regard social contact with colleagues as important. This makes the work attractive and keeps the atmosphere in it. A good communication example is to ask how things are at home or talk in slang. All respondents have indicated that they value personal contact with their boss or manager. Not in an exaggerated way, but it with fun, which ultimately motivates some respondents to continue to go to work in a positive way. All respondents have indicated that they value the opportunity to ask for help or advice. All respondents have also indicated that they do not yet know everything and therefore consider it necessary that there is an opportunity to request help. Learning new skills has often been mentioned as an important point for respondents and the opportunity within a company to do this is perceived as important. The reason for this is that techniques are constantly innovating and that the respondents are still on apprentice, so they do not yet know all the activities.

## **Working environment**

Work pressure seems not to be an issue though they face sometimes deadlines. Likewise right after the start of a job it can be stressful to prove yourself. The respondents all agreed that the work is physically demanding like a lot of walking, lifting or lugging. Some are too tired for sport and questioned the feasibility of performing the work at a higher age. One should always indicate own limits and not lift it beyond your control. Outdated or improper tools also make the work more physically demanding and less attractive. Six respondents indicated that the weather is an impediment to work. However, all respondents have indicated that these circumstances do not affect their choice for the sector, it is part of it and can certainly be a plus. Two respondents also indicated that they see the travel time that sometimes comes at work as a hindrance.

## Various results

In a similar vein blue collar respondents of the main study, these school students chose for this profession influenced by family members carrying out the profession. All but one person wanted to continue to live in the region. This particular respondent explained he did not think the mentality of the people in the north suited him; he preferred to work in a more diverse company. As regards the four main factors the results were as follows.

In addition the three main factors contributing to the **employer brand** were elaborated.

## Message

All respondents indicate that they do not value the vacancy text itself (like spelling mistakes). The work performed by a company and to what extent this suits the respondent is decisive. One respondent notices he is always at the bottom of the list added with another comment that many years of work experience is required. This has deterrent effect. Two respondents valued the fact that companies invest in young people like paying for the training or arranging tools so that even a school student has its own tools.

## Image

Company's image among its employees is important. This is considered as a kind of mutual appreciation. *"Good employee management is important for the employer, but also for the employee because they still want to be appreciated."* But most important is the company's image among its customers: the customer is king. Good customer relations, thinking along with the customer and a neat appearance of the company were mentioned. Half of them stated the relation with the wider society as well. The others do attach much value to sustainable construction and the use of ecological materials.

## Channels

Respondents indicated that they would search for construction companies in the region via the internet or the personal environment and then seek personal contact with the company by means of a telephone call or face-to-face contact. This is followed up by a straight-away (open) application to a company. One respondent indicated that they would rather use the employment agency as they could provide more security and convenience. Overall, they use informal channels as a source of obtaining information to determine the suitability of the work and company. However, two respondents indicated that they did not actually use this, of which one respondent had a bad experience with the use of informal channels.

# Conclusions and Implications

Our study allows us to draw various conclusions concerning the main question of this study. This is “What can improve the attractiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises with blue collar functions in the EDR among young people?” In short, the main focus areas are outlined as follows:

## Job content

- variety (*all*)
- autonomy (*all*)
- career opportunities in terms of versatility (*all*)
- passion about the work itself (*blue collar workers*)
- training options (*blue collar workers*) / creating a learning culture by investing in young people (*school students*)
- support school students with advice and available aids (*school students*)
- negative image (*managers*)

## Terms of employment

- flexibility in working hours (*managers & blue collar workers*)
- wages not being deciding factor (maybe in group performance bonus) (*all*)
- flexibility in contracts or recruitment options such as recruiting migrants (*managers*)
- to a lesser extent improving work-life balance by offering parental leave or arrangement for older ages, and working part-time (flexibility) (*school students*)
- attractive company van (*school students*)
- option to get trailer driving license (*school students*)
- compliments (*school students*)

## Working relations

- open culture with flat hierarchies (*all*)
- collegiality / working atmosphere (*all*)
- team outings and social contact (*all*)
- personal click with the manager (*school students*)
- getting help and advice / mutual support (*blue collar workers & schools students*)

## Working environment

- safety (*managers & blue collar workers*)
- weather conditions (*all*)
- health with increasing age: how to fulfill duties at higher age (*all*)
- little mental strain (*school students*)
- physically demanding is not an issue (*school students*) but goes at the expense of sport & gym (*managers*)
- except for sufficient aids (*school students*)
- travel time (is sometimes long) (*school students*)

**Message:** no value to the message in a vacancy text but more investment in training or tools.

**Image:** is exposed by properness, projects and particularly colleagues and customers. To a lesser extent to society as a whole.

**Channels:** informal circle and to a lesser extent employment agency .

In general, the results of the managers closely match the results of the employees. We therefore do not identify a relevant gap between the managers' intentions and the employees' perceptions. It seems that managers in SMEs are closely involved in the work processes and lines of communication are short.

## Prioritization

A reasonable approach from the authors' perspective is to prioritize measures based on the identified factors. Hence, to start with these factors will have the greatest impact on the attractiveness of the blue collar jobs in EDR for youngsters. We suggest the following order:

### 1. Job content

Variety in projects and a neat appearance contribute to a better image. Companies can do this advertising online, but also through open days or school visits.

### 2. Working relations

Companies post short videos of work or short stories of employees on their website or channel of choice, young people can taste the atmosphere within the company before they have started there. This will result in a warmer feeling in the organization, making young people more attracted to the company.

### 3. Image

Focusing on a learning culture internally in order to give youngsters the opportunity to become a fully-fledged all-round blue collar worker and expose externally will be decisive in attracting a company to young people.

## Implications

The results show that respondents are very satisfied with job content, terms of employment, working relations as well as working environment. We have therefore chosen to focus our advice on preserving and strengthening the positive aspects and how they can be applied more firmly.

## Strengthen

Increase fringe benefits like Christmas packages, work outings, friendly and positive working climate, room for group processes, conflicts and successes. A stronger team culture makes a team work more effective. A stronger team culture also creates more solidarity, openness, cohesion and security, so that people can and dare to participate more in group performance.

Communicating additional benefits turned out to be important by displaying it in the vacancies that the organizations put out.

Organizations can also take advantage of group pay. This is a double-edged sword as employees are rewarded for their individual and group performance resulting in motivation and increased output.

## Explore

Not only do we advise to maintain and strengthen the positive aspects, but a follow-up investigation is also part of the advice. We advise to do research in which more attention is paid to the living environment of EDR. This study showed the high level of satisfaction amongst young blue collar workers in EDR in the factors we investigated. It is therefore important to gauge whether the negative assumptions about the EDR are correct. In this way, a clear picture can be sketched of the perception of living in the EDR. A number of students of (applied) psychology or sociology research can possibly conduct research into the perception of living in the EDR. Perhaps this research shows that in the future the EDR should focus more on making life in the region more attractive than on increasing the attractiveness of work.

## Broaden

Finally, we would like to advise broadening the target group as we already did with the extra study on school students with a blue collar career ahead. In addition, unemployed and people with a distance to the labor market might be of interest. In the municipality of Oldambt 5.4% of the labor force is unemployed. That is one of the highest percentages in the province (De Staat van Groningen, 2018). We advise the EDR to start a close collaboration with benefit agencies in the relevant municipalities.

In addition, the EDR could help fund training in regions with large shortages in certain sectors, to attract additional people and to encourage them to carry out these professions.



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