

They like to live and work here, despite high taxes

By Robert Cellini

A study of expatriates showed that employees who come from abroad like the country's working conditions, but not the high taxes

FOREIGN workers who come to Denmark on short-term assignments are generally satisfied with the country, though they do have a few sticking points.

Those were the conclusions of an Oxford Research / Copenhagen Post study, 'The Expat Study 2006', released Monday, undertaken to determine Denmark's attractiveness as a place to live and work for highly-skilled and university-educated foreigners.

The study, made public at a press conference held at the Danish Society of Engineers headquarters in Copenhagen, used three primary elements for its findings: responses from 401 educated foreign workers through a box-check questionnaire; interviews with 14 private businesses and four public institutions, including hospitals and universities; and a benchmarking of Denmark's life quality and working conditions compared to seven other EU countries, as measured by several reliable international statistics



Copenhagen Capacity's O Rolf Larsen makes a point while presenting the Oxford Research/Copenhagen Post Expat Study to the press last week

sources.

The study was a follow-up to an earlier one taken in 1998, and the press conference was used as a forum to discuss what Denmark can do better to lure highly qualified workers here from the rest of the world. Experts and business leaders agreed that this was a necessity for Denmark to compete economically on the global plane.

To that end, Denmark's mar-

ketability as a place to work scored high in several of the study's categories.

The most important factor to those interviewed for choosing a place to live was safety, as 92 percent listed this as their principal concern. A full 97 percent of those responding said that conditions here were 'good' or 'very good' for personal safety.

Other categories listed as most important for the foreign

workers surveyed were 'opportunities for professional development', where 70 percent believed Denmark was 'good' or 'very good', and 'general quality of life', where 85 percent of respondents answered positively.

One factor less important in employees' eyes was language barriers, although Denmark was rated as 'good or very good' by 91 percent of those responding, primarily due to Danes' general-

ly excellent command of English.

The country's public transport system also received high marks from respondents, as 83 percent believed it was 'good' or 'very good'.

The fact that Danes can speak English quite well did not, unfortunately, translate into making them easier to get to know, the study showed.

Those surveyed believe Denmark needs to improve in its cultural barriers, especially in being 'open and inviting' people. This factor was important to 73 percent of the respondents, but only a mere 33 percent were positive about their experiences here in that regard.

Indian-born Ishan Gupta, an employee with biotech company ViroGates, said that while he has friends that are Danish and gets along fine with them, he is keenly aware of the difficulties in feeling fully accepted.

'I like Denmark very much, but I have lived in many other countries, and I have to say that Danes can be very closed.'

Another minus for the foreigners, including Gupta, was Denmark's high taxes. Though the country does have some tax relief for highly-skilled workers, according to the study it is evidently not enough - an understandable gripe considering that the respondents will never receive many of the benefits Danes get from their taxes.

While many survey respondents did not list a low income tax as being important in their decision to take a job abroad, the Danish tax system had obviously left its mark on them, as only 9 percent remarked positively on the issue.

'The taxes here are - whew! I mean, coming from Singapore where they were like 10 percent and then to here - they're really high,' said Gupta.

Lars Pallesen, rector at Denmark's Technical University, does not believe high taxes are a significant barrier to luring quality labour.

'If we lowered taxes from 60 to 50 percent, then Danes would think it was a big tax cut, but if you came from America, you'd still think the tax was ridiculously high.'

Copenhagen Capacity, which assists foreign companies in setting up in Copenhagen, presented the idea of creating a uniform 'welcome pack' for businesses to present to foreign workers, helping to show the country as a friendly, open and profitable place to work.

The organisation's managing director, Rolf Larssen, said Denmark has to be more active in getting its message out to the rest of the world.

'We have to market our strengths - that it's possible to have an exciting job and have a family and thrive here. You can have both.'