

*Photo text:*

HUNTING FOR SOLUTIONS. Hasse Karlsson, MD of the export foundation ITM Worldwide, knows what difficulties smaller companies have in finding the right staff. PHOTO: JESPER FRISK

# Smaller companies in a tight spot

## Radical measures suggested to deal with the shortage of competent staff

**Despite a high level of unemployment, many small companies find it hard to recruit the right staff.**

**Anna-Stina Nordmark Nilsson, MD of the Swedish Federation of Business Owners (SFE), calls for training in fields with staff shortages and better matching between the unemployed and vacancies.**

**Hasse Karlsson of ITM Worldwide believes that there is need for resettlement allowances to motivate more graduates to work for small companies out in the country.**

More than half of all small companies find it hard or very hard to find the right employees. No less than 13 percent of them have even been forced to turn down orders due to staff shortages according to a survey carried out by the SFE.

"It's worrying that companies cannot find staff when so many are without work", says Anna-Stina Nordmark Nilsson.

### **"We must understand the need"**

She thinks there's a need for better matching between the unemployed and vacancies and that training in areas of shortage must be resumed.

"And if some industries cannot manage to grow, their employees must seek jobs elsewhere."

"We have to listen to local and regional companies in order to understand their needs and not merely believe they are no different from large companies. But it's much harder to sit down and listen to many small companies than one big one", says Anna-Stina Nordmark Nilsson.

### **"A problem throughout the country"**

Hasse Karlsson, MD and founder of ITM Worldwide Foundation, has worked for 15 years with export sales training courses designed to bridge the gap between new graduates and the real jobs in small and mid-sized companies. During this period he has seen how tough it is for smaller businesses to find the right staff.

"We've seen the same problems all over Sweden. It is hard to attract highly qualified people. Smaller companies don't have a well-known name, no-one is familiar with their brand and they are found in more remote places, so that recruits must relocate."

And it's not only a problem in Sweden. He cites a new EU report that shows how smaller companies throughout Europe are not finding it easy to recruit key people in management and export.

### **Need for government action**

Hasse Karlsson believes there is a need for government action to motivate more graduates to move to smaller towns and work in smaller companies.

"The government needs to act if we are to get the volume, as it won't happen on its own."

But he also thinks that smaller companies must copy the large ones to attract highly qualified people.

"For instance, many large companies currently use a good trainee concept. It only needs to be copied."

Last week, DI Jobb reported about the trainee programme aimed at grooming the managers of tomorrow recently started by the Handheld Group in Lidköping.

ITM Worldwide has worked together with Handheld on the programme and Hasse Karlsson believes that more small companies must increase their visibility and highlight what they can offer highly qualified people.

"They can point out the available opportunities, and the best argument is that you can work closely with the company management and can enjoy a fast-track career in a small business."

“But many prejudices still exist, such as that small companies do not pay as well, that they are wary of graduates and need more practical types or that they offer limited opportunities for personal development. And that’s a real challenge. They have to offer an executive training of the same calibre as large companies.”

### **“Easy for entrepreneurs”**

That’s why ITM Worldwide and the International Business School in Jönköping are preparing to offer an MBA course that is adapted to the needs of small exporters.

Anders Parment, a strategy consultant, research scientist at Stockholm University and co-author of the book “Sustainable employer branding”, also thinks that smaller companies can project their image and attract graduates.

“Present the advantages of working in a small organisation, show what career paths and personal development options are available. For example, it’s easier to be an entrepreneur in a small organisation, and young people want to be entrepreneurs”, he says.

### **Meet students**

It is important to reach out to students, and a website is not sufficient for that. Anders Parment suggests guest lectures and offers of extra jobs or degree projects.

“Not so many companies offer degree projects. A contract can also be signed with someone a year before his or her finals. Students have lower self-confidence when there’s still a year to go and no one has a job, than when there’s only a month to go and 80 percent have jobs.”