

Catching Chinese Fish - Interview with a Chinese Headhunter

China is no longer the cheap factory place for Europe. Research and Innovation are on the top agenda of many companies and they are having a hard time in finding and keeping the right talents. Wang Pei (PW), founder of Oasis Executive Search in Shanghai has twenty years experience in the Chinese talent trading business. Sabine Zhang (SZ) talked with her about how to catch Chinese talent in a fast moving economy, where people feel, that they are missing out on their career if they stay more than three years in the same position.

SZ: Can we first talk briefly about your company?

PW: I set up Oasis Consulting in 1997, together with Lesly Wang. We started with relocation consulting to foreigners, but very soon realized that foreign companies were looking for local talent to reduce high expat expenses. We realized that this would be a new market and were one of the first private Chinese companies in Shanghai to get a license for talent trading. We have been 18 years in the market. Today we focus on the automotive industry, FMCG, luxury goods and retail as well as manufacturing, chemical and pharmaceutical.

SZ: What are the main requests of foreign companies looking for Chinese employees?

PW: Nowadays foreign companies have localized on middle management level and above. Some foreign companies employ even Chinese top managers, at the beginning these were often overseas Chinese, but now they are more and more local talents. The main requests are usually language skills, experience in the field, strong technical background and also leadership skills.

SZ: Why leadership skills are important?

PW: Foreign companies hire local middle managers mainly for leadership, because it is very difficult to lead a Chinese team, unless you know the language and the culture.

SZ: How would you describe a good leader in a middle management position?

PW: Chinese people respect leaders that are good role models and act like one of them. Face problems together and are very team oriented.

SZ: Our image of Chinese organisations is rather hierarchical?

PW: Of course, you are right, there are still very hierarchical leaders that just give orders, but they risk, that whole teams leave the company and move to another company. Since foreign companies operate in China, people get exposed to different company cultures and leadership styles and this had an influence on Chinese leadership culture. 20 years ago almost all companies were state owned.

SZ: Do you still see a big difference between private Chinese companies and foreign companies in China?

PW: Yes. Many private Chinese companies started as a family business, so at the beginning mainly relatives worked there and they had a strong relationship focus. As they are growing they have to hire people from outside the family and this usually brings conflicts. Important positions are still held by family members.

SZ: We also hear that Chinese talent is moving very fast. In your opinion what are the most important factors to retain a good employee?

PW: I think, the main reason for people to move fast is, there are still many opportunities. Foreign companies have realized this problem and ask as to find talent with a stable record of at least five years in the same company. For us it is important to find out what people really want. If I see, that somebody just wants to take a job as a step to somewhere else, I would not recommend him or her. Many of our clients have now internal systems, where employees can move to other cross-functional positions, which is very well appreciated.

SZ: So money is not the most important motivation?

PW: Not any more. Especially for middle managers and above a 10% increase in salary might not mean anything, but the chance to develop and learn something else gets more important. For example: if you earn 1 million RMB, your quality of life will not increase much, if I give you 1,1 or 1,2 millions. They don't appreciate money anymore, but they really look at their career development.

SZ: In that sense career development means to move to different functions and not necessarily to move upwards?

PW: Yes, exactly. Cross-functional career development is very important because vertical career development is limited. If you have gone through different functions, one day you could probably get a position at the top.

SZ: What would be an average salary of a Chinese manager in a European company in China?

PW: Some functions have a higher income, like marketing and sales and lately also R&D directors. According to our database statistics a sales or marketing director could earn about 700.000 RMB (gross income), which is roughly 100.000 EUR. And this is definitely the bottom line. If you are more senior, you could easily make 1 million RMB gross income, that makes about 700.000 net income.

SZ: You are currently in Europe to develop new opportunities for your own company. What are your ideas and your vision for Oasis Consulting?

PW: We have grown our company very steadily over the past 18 years and we have long-term customer relationship with European clients. Due to market changes we want to grow and internationalize our business. We have seen some Chinese managers moving to international positions in Europe and more and more Chinese investment in European companies, so we see a lot of opportunities to grow with our clients.



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