

Top employers for global business undergrads

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A new generation of college grads around the world wants international work that will take them abroad. For many, that means U.S.-based multinationals.

In the global war for talent, the likely winners are U.S.-based global companies that offer border-crossing career opportunities and appeal to the wanderlust of a new generation. That's the upshot of a massive new survey of undergraduate students who—in remarkable numbers—identified U.S. companies as their favorites.

Stockholm-based research firm Universum, in its first-ever Global Index of Attractiveness, surveyed 120,000 undergraduate business and engineering students in 11 of the world's biggest economies. The top 10 lists for both engineering and business students were dominated by such US-based powerhouses as Google (GOOG), Goldman Sachs (GS), and Procter & Gamble (PG), while the next 40 employers on each list included companies headquartered in Switzerland, Britain, and Germany.

Why are U.S. companies so popular? "Many of the truly global companies are American," says Universum CEO Michal Kalinowski. "There are a lot of companies in other countries that have a global reach but are still perceived as having a national culture, [such as] L'Oréal and Siemens (SI), whereas many American companies are perceived as truly international."

That said, results by country show that business students still have some loyalty to employers headquartered closer to home. Students in all but two markets, India and the United Kingdom, placed a local company at the top of their list. German business undergrads picked Stuttgart-based Porsche, for instance, while French students chose luxury goods company LVMH, based in Paris, and Canadian students actually chose their government as their No. 1 employer. This is partially due to the rough economic climate of the last year, says Kalinowski of the "home-grown multinationals" these students tend to favor. Says Kalinowski: "There is a perception among students that if you work in one of the affiliate countries, you will be more easily sacrificed."

Hot pick: big four accounting firms

One of the biggest surprises was how well the Big Four accounting firms did. Despite their distinctly unsexy images, all landed in the top 10 for business undergrads, with PricewaterhouseCoopers in the No. 2 spot behind Google, whose cult following among the global youth culture easily propelled it to No. 1. As a group, the Big Four handily beat out such buzz-worthy rivals as the consulting giants Bain & Co. and Boston Consulting Group, which are catnip for business students.

The Big Four's success is no accident. The industry has been positioning itself as a destination for global-trotting young talent. In the U.S., PwC has begun offering global opportunities to interns through an international exchange program with PwC's U.K. firm. No. 10 Deloitte, meanwhile, invites students from various countries for a three-day conference in Athens, where they tackle a complex business problem and get to know other accounting majors from across the globe.

Creating global opportunities is an important tool in attracting and retaining top entry-level talent for companies in any industry, however, particularly in one such as investment banking, in which many employees work in markets and on exchanges all over the world—interacting with numerous global clients.

Yale grad Christine Chin, 24, accepted an offer from No. 7 J.P. Morgan (JPM) after interning at its international markets desk in 2006. One reason she jumped at the offer was the eight-week global training program that would kick off her full-time experience. Held in London, the program not only trained her for her new job as a program analyst, but also helped acclimate her to the company and introduce her to peers from all over the world. Chin bonded with other attendees and forged valuable working relationships around the world. "The world is so much smaller than it used to be," she says. "You're constantly working with these people [worldwide] to get business done."

Student: "we look at big, big names"

The New York-based Chin, who would like to work abroad at some point in her J.P. Morgan career, also launched a network called "Junior Women in Markets," modeled largely on a similar program started in the company's London office. Chin is hardly alone in her desire to spend some time abroad—and in finding opportunities to do so an extremely important factor in choosing an employer.

Recently, 45 students converged on New York and shared feedback on what they look for in an ideal employer. The students were participants in GLOBE, an undergraduate business program that brings together top students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Kenan-Flagler Business School (Kenan-Flagler Undergraduate Business Profile), the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Copenhagen Business School, who travel and live together for 18 months and visit five different countries, including the U.S. and China. To a person, they wanted future employers to provide a chance for them to live and work abroad. "I think for the most part we look at big, big names. Bigger companies tend to have operations throughout the globe and more opportunities," said one student, a point echoed by numerous peers from the three countries.

Especially popular to these students was the ranking's No. 1 company, Google, for its success in the search business and its culture of innovation. "The culture is unique and amazing," said one student, who had a friend who worked at Google.

Smaller companies without a global brand might still have a chance with these worldly young talents. Many cited the importance of meaningful work as a reason for choosing an employer. "If you look at a smaller company and you can have a very impactful role. You might have to explain to somebody where you work, but you might have better potential," says one GLOBE participant. So image isn't everything. But it's definitely something when it comes to attracting the global talent of tomorrow.

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