So Few Great French Places To Work

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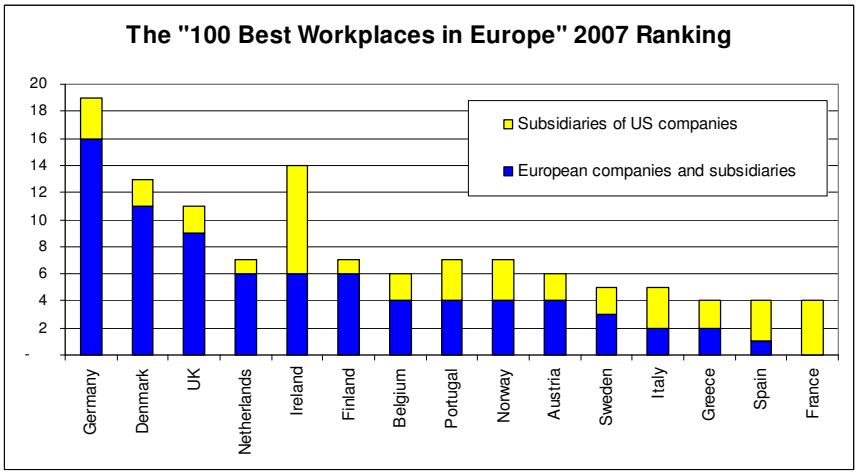
The recent presidential elections have provided a chance to scrutinise the ranking of France in Europe and internationally. But there is one rank-list which could have been more commented on (despite its publication by *Le Figaro* and *L'Express* newspapers in March), whereas it was given an entire supplement to itself in the *Financial Times* and has reference status internationally. I am referring to the annual survey carried out by the engagingly-named Great Place To Work Institute, an international consultancy.

France comes off disastrously in this ranking, last of all participating European countries with only four companies in the top 100 (actually a top 119, as some groups appear several times with different national subsidiaries). Per unit of GDP, Denmark has 60 times more companies in the ranking than us, Germany has almost four times more, Britain three times more, Spain twice as many. To complete the picture, the only French companies in the top 119 are the French subsidiaries of Bain, Morgan Stanley, PepsiCo, and WL Gore (of Gore-Tex fame). In the additional ranking of companies in France, next come American Express, General Electric CFS, Ferrero (an Italian chocolate-maker), Microsoft, Federal Express, Mc Donald's and SC Johnson. In short, of the best places to work in France the top 11 are of foreign origin, of which 10 are American (Leroy Merlin, a French do-it-yourself retailer, is twelfth).

Any biases in the study are not sufficient to explain this total humiliation. The ranking has existed since 2002 and is well known to HR departments, so there is little chance that a company likely to score well would choose not to participate. Even if this were the case, it is hard to see why only France would be affected, as its large companies are highly internationalised. True, French workers have been labelled 'top whingers in the world' in a recent study by FDS, a consultancy. But Sweden and Britain, who come close to France in the whingers' league, perform quite well in the Great Place to Work ranking, so the whinging factor cannot be the sole explanation.

So, let's face it: great workplaces are fewer in France than elsewhere. There are many possible causes, including a hierarchical management model inherited from the *ancien régime* and Bonapartism, corporate paternalism, confrontational unions, rigidities created by the planned economy and nationalizations of the post-war period, and a long legacy of family and state corporatism. But while the exact cause may elude analysis, it is more important to step up awareness of the problem itself. Contrary to received wisdom, France's weaknesses are not all directly linked to a dysfunctional state. Outside the public sector, industrial relations are putting it at a disadvantage in the global competition for talent. As the ranking shows, this weakness is partly offset by US companies that use their comparative advantage in creating better workplace environment. But even the high level of US investment in France cannot by itself guarantee lasting growth.

The crisis of the work ethic in France, a staple of the recent election campaign, is in reality a qualitative and collective one, as much as it is quantitative and individual. Therefore, freeing overtime from tax (as President Sarkozy has pledged to do) will not be sufficient to undo that crisis, any more than reducing working time could suffice to reduce unemployment. Public policy should do more to create a favourable environment, but ultimately it is corporate leaders and executives who hold the key. It is high time for them to find how better management could make their companies great to work in.



Source: Great Place To Work ® Institute Europe

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