



Headhunter recruits 18,000 Haitian farmers

Jan-Ruud de Ruiter trained as a horticulturist, but was unable to secure a job in this field. He subsequently became a successful headhunter, but let go of his career when his wife was expatriated to Congo-Brazzaville and then to Haiti. In both these locations, he drew on his agricultural knowledge to find employment. TEXT KAREN GLERUM

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Jan-Ruud: "After I graduated in 1993, the executive search firm Spencer Stuart put me forward as a candidate for a vacancy they had in their portfolio. I didn't get the job, but Spencer Stuart asked me if I wanted to work for them as a headhunter. So that's what I did."

Taking turns

In 2006, Jan-Ruud took a new step in his career and became a partner at Financial Assets Executive Search, setting up a new unit exclusively focused on jobs in the financial sector. Soon afterwards, his wife, José Matthijsse, was also offered a new job, working abroad for Heineken. But the couple decided to stay put in the Netherlands. Jan-Ruud: "I had just started working at Financial Assets, and couldn't really leave." Four years later, José was asked again to take a position abroad, and this time she decided to accept the offer. Her husband fully supported her decision: "As far as our career choices were concerned, up until now we had been flipping coins, as it were, and this time it was José's turn."

The choice to go abroad was – in his words – "simple". Nevertheless, the consequences were substantial. Jan-Ruud quit his job and sold his shares in Financial Assets. "It felt like the right thing to do, and I haven't had any regrets. The company had to move on and I didn't see how I could contribute to it as a 'silent' partner abroad," he says.

In Congo-Brazzaville, the family headed for Pointe-Noire, where Jan-Ruud took on the job of caring for the children and running the household. "The first four months were great," he recalls. "But, around Christmas time, I felt that I needed to do something again. I crave intellectual stimulation. It also helps me to be a nicer dad!"

Several roles

Expatriate partners usually struggle to find work in Congo-Brazzaville. However, due to his networking skills, Jan-Ruud secured no less than four different roles for himself. He acted as a consultant for a port authority and a logistics company, worked as a freelance headhunter, and helped write business cases for agricultural companies. "Well, are you a headhunter or not? – one thing leads to another!" he says.

NOW



Headhunter's tip

Jan-Ruud has this advice for job-seeking expat partners: "Focus primarily on your skills and passions rather than on the knowledge that you have. Your skills are applicable wherever you are, while your knowledge is usually related to a particular market or industry."

In 2012, the family arrived in Haiti, where José became Managing Director of the brewery BRANA. Jan-Ruud helped his family to settle in, while looking around to see what opportunities there were to work. "It led to a wonderful job," he says with pride.

Jan-Ruud is now in charge of a large-scale agricultural project sponsored by the brewery as part of its corporate social responsibility (CSR) policy. "Because of my background in horticultural engineering I was asked to find out what raw materials the brewery was sourcing locally and what else it could source in Haiti itself."

Trust

Local sourcing turned out to be virtually non-existent. As a result, the brewery decided that, from 2017 onwards, at least 20 per cent of its raw materials should come from Haiti. The use of sorghum, instead of malt imported from Europe, is an important part of this plan. Jan-Ruud: "We are currently in the initial phase of a project involving 18,000 farmers. My work consists mainly of round table meetings – actually, more like 'mango tree' meetings – with groups of farmers who are interested in the project, to explain to them what it entails. It is important to gain their trust."

Sustainable collaboration

He describes his role as a 'linking pin' between the brewery and his employer Papyrus, a consultancy firm that specialises in these types of projects. "Our aim is for farmers to increase their crop yield per hectare and improve quality through better drying and cleaning. Our pricing system is based on quality, and we remain as faithful as possible to the business idea of developing sustainable collaboration with the brewery."

Talking with the farmers and interpreting their problems is a special challenge for Jan-Ruud. "It's just a beautiful project, in which CSR and business overlap," he says. "What I enjoy most about my job is recruiting and assessing partners, writing plans, and compiling budgets and grant applications. You need people for this, so it involves networking, which is closely related to my work as a headhunter."

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Looking at his career so far, Jan-Ruud concludes: "The circle is complete now. I am drawing on my education and using my organisational skills. I'm learning a lot about management, which will be useful in my ambition to become an organisational consultant, a job that I would be able to do anywhere."