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DeepTech recruiting in Switzerland

Unlocking top global talent in
“the real Mountain View”

About the whitepaper

Seasoned DeepTech recruiters, talent experts, and Swiss Government officials from the Canton of Zurich, Google Cloud, Rockstar Recruiting, and DFINITY co-hosted a virtual roundtable for tech leaders interested in accessing European DeepTech talent. The panel covered the critical questions and guiding principles necessary to successfully navigate the European talent market, as well as insider tips for optimizing recruitment strategies to ensure a successful expansion into the European tech landscape.

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This whitepaper will deep-dive into the availability of talent in Europe, how to recruit for Web3 and AI, pitfalls to avoid when recruiting in Europe, lessons learned growing tech teams in Switzerland, and labor law considerations for hiring.

Speaker Overview



Léonard Collon
EMEA Executive Recruiter,
Google Cloud



Brandon Cohen
Director of Talent,
DFINITY Foundation



Klaus Fuchs
Co-Founder,
Rockstar Recruiting



Matthias Inauen
Director New Business
Units, Canton of Zurich

Why Switzerland for DeepTech talent?

The global war for talent is at an all-time high and getting the right people at the right time with the right organizational fit for your company can feel like solving a Rubik's Cube.

Luckily, Switzerland has been called a recruiting tool in and of itself, given its top technical talent from leading universities, the international talent pool, very attractive employment contracts, and, of course, the inspiring backdrop of the Alps, aka “the real Mountain View”.

Key features of the talent landscape in Switzerland



A high quality of life attracts and retains top talent

- Switzerland continues to be the #1 most attractive country for talent globally, according to INSEAD
- Reliable and efficient public infrastructure supports business and the workforce



A business-friendly environment

- A liberal & pragmatic approach to economy with moderate corporate and individual taxation are part of Switzerland's business-friendly model and drive the success of the economy



Top Universities are magnets for innovation

- ETH Zurich is the strongest university outside of the U.S. and U.K., and retained 11th place in the World University Ranking 2024
- Companies that settle near ETH reap the benefits of technical talent availability and research collaborations with the university
- With gold standard education divided between a vocational system & university track, young Swiss are very well trained and benefit from a flexible education system



Linguistic and cultural diversity makes English the lingua franca

- Almost all of the Swiss population is multilingual due to the four official national languages Switzerland. This has resulted in English becoming the language of business
- 39% of the resident population of Switzerland are immigrants, forming a strong ex-pat community within Switzerland

Common sense Swiss employment law: Highly flexible & employer-friendly

Switzerland has very liberal and employer-friendly employment laws compared to other European jurisdictions, with the general concept being a common-sense approach and a high degree of flexibility.

Key Features

1. No employment at-will but short minimum notice periods (one month)
2. No mandatory severance payments
3. "Freedom to terminate" is a signature feature of Swiss labor law
4. Salaries are high, but so are normal working hours of >42 hours per week

Hiring foreign nationals: Permit-less access to the European talent market

1. There is no work permit required when hiring European Union (EU) and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Nationals in Switzerland
2. Citizens of all other countries (non-EU/EFTA nationals), must have a work contract from an employer and the company must apply for a work permit
 - Employers must show that they have made efforts to find an EU/EFTA citizen, or any foreign national already permitted to work in Switzerland

All cantons (states) will hand out work permits to highly qualified individuals with a specific skill set, or to support projects where a large number of jobs are being created.

Applying for a non-EU/EFTA work permit as an employer

1. Document your recruitment efforts in the EU/EFTA on industry-specific and local job platforms, and job postings at the regional public employment agency RAV and EURES
2. Apply online for a work permit from the canton. The application must be submitted by the employer. The application includes:
 - The interest of the Swiss economy as a whole (specific reason for the application, business plan, balance sheet and profit/loss account)
 - The prevalence of domestic employees (job postings at RAV/EURES, job advertisements, a list of applicants with detailed information (nationality, education/qualification, date of job application, and the reason for rejection)
 - Salary and employment conditions (employment contract dated and signed by both parties)
 - Personal requirements (educational certificates and references, CV, copy of passport)

The process until issuance of work permits usually takes 4–6 weeks.

In roles with a documented shortage of skilled labor such as ML/AI, it can be assumed that the domestic supply of talent has been exhausted and proof of attempts to hire within Switzerland and Europe are not required in order to obtain a work permit for non-EU/EFTA employees.



Léonard Collon
Google Cloud



“From the Google perspective, we are here in Zurich with the largest research center outside of Mountain View in the US. It's been possible that Google has grown so much here thanks to the fact that the authorities are very pragmatic in the way they conceived the system. If you compare the time you need to get a visa or working permit in Ireland, for instance, or in Denmark, for example, when we speak about candidates that are coming outside of the European Union nationalities, it's much easier here in Switzerland because we don't have to wait 6 to 12 months. There is a kind of ease and pragmatic approach to business that is very helpful for small and large companies.”



“From the Cantonal side, we are happy to help find the right schools and to assist with the individual living situation of the first employees who are relocating. Usually, we start with kids if they are involved, and then the family setup, and then the office setup comes later. Because if you want to make a sustainable company setup, then it makes sense to ensure that the first key members feel comfortable and have a convenient transition.”



Matthias Inauen
Canton of Zurich

Local government will also assist with soft factors like helping to find housing for employees coming from abroad and placing their children in local schools.

Hiring in Greater Zurich: Ecosystem players and talent costs

Global DeepTech pioneers access tech talent

The globally recognized technical university ETH Zurich is one of the cornerstones of the DeepTech & AI ecosystem in Zurich. Companies like Apple, Google, Huawei, IBM, Magic Leap, Merantix, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, Oracle, Sony, and Disney Research Studios, all chose to settle in the Greater Zurich Area in order to access the talent available from universities like ETH Zurich and University of Zurich, and to collaborate with university labs on cutting-edge research.

Salaries for ML/AI Engineers in Zurich

1. The average salary for Machine Learning Engineers in Switzerland is 124,200 CHF per year, while the median annual salary is 125,000 CHF
2. Swiss ML/AI talents are available for 17% less on average than in the San Francisco Bay area (\$190,081)



“Crypto Valley”: A Web3 innovative hub

Crypto Valley is the name coined for the forward-thinking region that spans from Greater Zurich to Liechtenstein. From its favorable tax laws, legal stability, and a penchant for experimentation, the global crypto community has found a home in the region. Switzerland has a natural cultural alignment with many Web3 principles like decentralization, direct democracy, and an innovative and discreet banking and finance tradition. Swiss regulators pioneered the modern legal frameworks of Web3 organizations by sitting down with companies to overcome legal roadblocks. With over 1,100 prominent blockchain projects including Ethereum and DFINITY based in the Crypto Valley, Greater Zurich is a true hub for Web3 talent.

Salaries in Crypto Valley

1. The average Blockchain Developer salary is 126,500 CHF per year, while the median annual salary is 125,000 CHF.
2. Swiss Blockchain tech talents are available for 26% less on average than in the San Francisco Bay area (\$190,795)

Salary sources

- rockstar.jobs & swissdevjobs.ch
- hired.com

DeepTech recruitment: Best practices

Compared to “traditional” ICT positions (e.g. SAP, Java EE, etc.), modern DeepTech recruitment requires different strategies for employers and candidates to meet successfully.

To be successful in deep tech recruitment, being present in the community is key.

Rockstar Recruiting, with roots as a University of Zurich spin-off, leverages its close connections within the Greater Zurich DeepTech ecosystem and nearly a decade of tech recruiting experience to deliver a highly personalized service. Pioneering a new model of community-focused recruiting that major international tech firms have already recognized as a valuable conduit into Switzerland's elite technical talent pool, Rockstar Recruiting emphasizes the need for companies to get out and meet their future talent. They keep an [updated calendar of events on their website](#) where companies can connect with the local ecosystem in Zurich.

Hiring deep tech talents

	Costs	Speed	Talent	
Founders hiring themselves	✗	✗	✓	Huge opportunity costs if founders spend their time recruiting and fundraising
HR/Talent acquisition	✗	✓	⌚	Legacy tech stacks/employer branding often does not appeal to deep tech talents
Job boards¹	✓	✗	⌚	Lots of irrelevant applications and unsuccessful processes
Tech recruiting agency²	⌚	✓	✓	Costs involved (but only occur if placement and trial period is successful)

- ✗ not ideal
- ⌚ mediocre
- ✓ best strategy

Companies are successful in winning candidates in DeepTech when they offer:

- ✓ A modern tech stack
- ✓ Learning opportunities
- ✓ A strong network within the community
- ✓ Alliances with stakeholders
- ✓ Above-market compensation
- ✓ A great employer brand
- ✓ An impact, e.g. sustainability
- ✓ Hybrid office/home office

Source

¹ e.g. jobs.ch, indeed.com, swissdevjobs.ch

² e.g. Rockstar Recruiting AG (rockstar.jobs)

Building employer brand awareness: Lessons learned growing tech teams in Switzerland

Companies can build employer brand awareness among candidates effectively by engaging with the local ecosystem through meetups, conferences, and events, as well as forming alliances with associations on the ground. Ambitious companies who make the first move to engage with candidates will see the most success.



Klaus Fuchs

Rockstar Recruiting

“The market is very physical. Find your community whether it is with meetups, conferences, etc., and build-up from there. That is the grassroots approach.”

Brandon Cohen

DFINITY

“If you take your vision, funding, and team and you put those things together and can articulate this when talking to a specific person about the “why”, you get missionaries as opposed to mercenaries. Especially when getting your feet set up here, it's about tapping into the local people and also the right people. I find that if you can be personalized, people are willing to talk with you.”

Leonard Collon

Google Cloud

“In general, it's very well received when you approach candidates, to initiate conversation and share a little bit more about your project. We are in a country where everyone will be very polite and very kind to you. I know it's not always the case, but here everyone is kind of used to being approached, used to having an initial conversation, and this is something you can always do.”



Nuances of the Swiss executive recruitment market: Profiles you may encounter

1. Individual contributors or experts

are very senior employees who don't directly manage others

2. Technical leaders (Technical Director, CTO, etc.)

often have additional responsibilities such as leading technical teams and driving digital and/or technical transformation, or take a leading role in recruitment efforts and are highly visible to the technical outside world

3. Non-technical leaders

work in a technical environment or leading technical teams, usually in companies that are either very large or not yet completely mature

4. Non-executive Directors & board members

act as 'special advisors' to the decision makers of a company

5. C-level executives

expand their remit with new areas such as ESG, DEI, or the digital transformation or cloudification of the company

Recruiting at the executive level: Factors to keep in mind

1. Candidate-driven market

Executive Recruitment is a candidate-driven market with a finite pool of very qualified candidates (e.g. with specific technologies like Blockchain, Web3, LLM or Generative AI skills)

2. Cultural nuances

Factoring in the cultural and linguistic nuances of the Swiss market when selecting a candidate can play an important role in Switzerland, especially for customer-facing roles in areas where the market remains conservative

3. Building value beyond compensation

Building a strong employee value proposition beyond the compensation package is key to attracting and retaining senior talents

4. Setting expectations

Executive candidates expect transparency and setting expectations, flexibility, personal and organizational development, perspective, and a smart approach on compensation with a creative package

5. Duration of recruiting process

Recruiting at the executive level can take a few months, depending on the desired technologies and expertise

6. Quality of life attracts talent

The quality of life in Switzerland means that many top candidates either already live in Switzerland or are interested in relocating to Switzerland

Get in touch!

greaterzuricharea.com

info@greaterzuricharea.com



Greater Zurich Area Ltd (GZA) is the reliable Swiss business concierge for companies looking to grow internationally.

We help you create a convincing business case for setting up a strategic location in Switzerland. Moreover, we guide you through the business and technology ecosystems and network you with the relevant companies, universities and research institutes, investors and incubators, authorities, and service providers.

GZA is the official investment promotion agency of 9 cantons (states) in German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland. The public-private partnership is supported by 30+ partners from business and science. #215AA8

