

Study of migrants after Brexit: 'If you don't want me, I don't want you either'

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Credit: Pexels

Brexit may have made it a lot harder for British companies to retain highly skilled migrants. Many migrants feel they need to distance

themselves from the United Kingdom, even as others indicated not being affected at all, according to a new study published in the *Academy of Management Discoveries*. With a growing populist backlash against migration in a number of countries around the world, from Brexit to Trump's rhetoric in the United States, the study provides valuable insight for companies with a high number of migrants among staff.

The study looked at self-initiated expatriates (SIEs), Europeans who came to the United Kingdom of their own choice, and not for a specific job. The authors of the paper found that the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union affected this group in a profound way. "The practical, legal aspects of Brexit are pretty clear. But with this study, we get a first view of how Brexit has shifted how these migrants perceive their British identity," says Tina Miedtank, assistant professor Strategic Human Resource Management at Radboud University and one of the authors of the publication.

Personal affront

The reactions differed quite a bit: some were heartbroken, others considered leaving, while there were also those who felt unaffected. "In our study, we found that there were two key elements that determined how European SIEs felt," explains Miedtank. "The group that identified with the U.K. prior to Brexit saw the vote as an identity threat. They had strongly [negative reactions](#), with many leaving the U.K. literally or figuratively depending on their perceived mobility. Those identifying less with the U.K. had milder reactions, and largely planned to stay put."

"For this first group, the response was often very emotional and personal. 'If you don't want me, I don't want you back. I don't need you,' was a feeling some of them described. Prior to Brexit, this group felt like they were part of British society; afterwards, they felt appalled at the thought of being treated like a foreigner. For some, it became extremely

personal: one interviewee mentioned that they felt compelled to cheer for any football team that opposes England, just to push back."

Feeling included

For those that identified less with the U.K., Brexit was easier to swallow. Miedtank says, "They also expressed concern of what it meant for themselves and the country in a practical and financial sense but didn't take it personally."

According to the researchers, the study shows the importance of how employers handle societal and political backlash against [migrant workers](#). "Employees want to feel supported by their employer. That doesn't just mean practical support and updates for those affected directly, but also a clear message to everyone in the company. Make sure that non-[migrant workers](#) also understand the debate going on, so that SIEs don't feel left out or like they have to carry the burden themselves. Companies are a part of society too, and they have a responsibility to make sure employees feel included if they want to retain talented workers."

More information: Claudia Jonczyk Sédès et al, Suddenly I Felt Like a Migrant: Identity and Mobility Threats Facing European Self-Initiated Expatriates in the United Kingdom under Brexit, *Academy of Management Discoveries* (2022). [DOI: 10.5465/amd.2020.0162](https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2020.0162)

Provided by Radboud University

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