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Talent Attraction in Small and Medium Sized Towns

A Practical guide for urban policymakers and practitioners

C4TALENT Micro Learning Series | Course 2 – Takeaway Guide

https://urbact.eu/networks/c4talent

This guide is part of the Final Network Product of the C4TALENT URBACT Action Planning Network, co-financed by the European Union's URBACT Programme.

It provides a concise, practical introduction to talent attraction and retention strategies for small and medium-sized European towns — helping cities respond to brain drain by creating more appealing, opportunity-rich environments for people to stay, return, or relocate.

The content draws heavily on the C4TALENT Masterclass on Place Branding, delivered in 2024 by URBACT ad-hoc expert **Marcus Andersson (**Co-founder and CEO of "***Future Place Leadership")***.

CREDITS

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In many **small and medium-sized** cities, the challenge isn't just about growing the population – it's about attracting and keeping the right people to keep communities, services, and businesses alive. **Talent attraction is no longer a "nice to have". It's a necessity.**
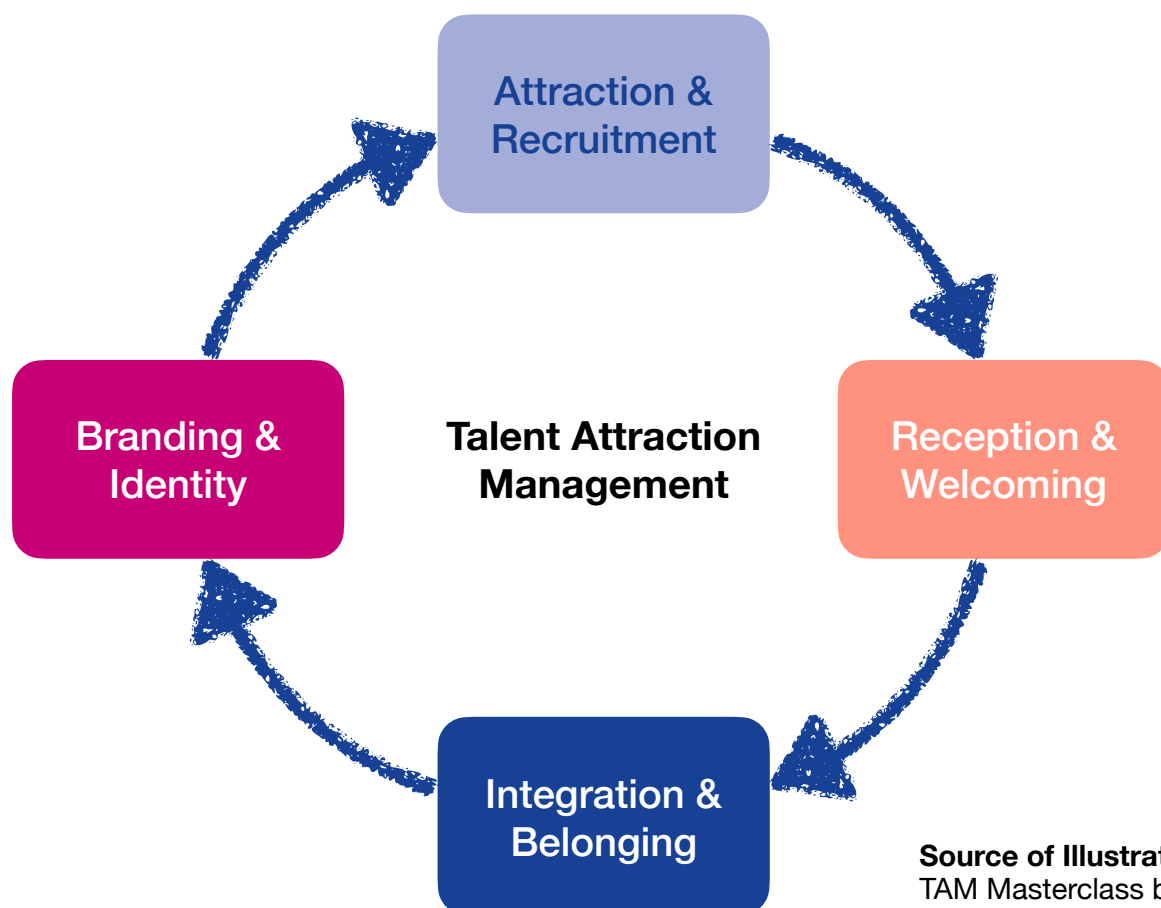
Shrinking demographics, youth outmigration, skills shortages and changing lifestyle expectations have made people – not companies – the scarcest resource. **Cities that do not actively manage their attractiveness risk falling behind**.

But **this doesn't mean launching a marketing campaign or a shiny slogan**. It means understanding the full journey a person takes before moving to your city – and shaping that journey through better systems, services, and storytelling.

This guide introduces a proven, practical framework known as **Talent Attraction Management (TAM)**. It reflects the structure and insights from Marcus Andersson's masterclass, adapted to the local realities of small and mid-sized towns.

> *Talent attraction is not just about fixing a shortage. It's about staying relevant in a competitive landscape.*

Attraction & Recruitment

Reception & Welcoming

Talent Attraction Management

Branding & Identity

Integration & Belonging

Source of Illustration: TAM Masterclass by Marcus Andersson

Talent Attraction Management is not a one-off project or marketing effort. It's a **coordinated, long-term approach** to making your city a more attractive and accessible place for people to live, work, and stay. T**AM is built on four key pillars**:

➡ Branding & Identity,

➡ Attraction & Recruitment,

➡ Reception & Welcoming,

➡ Integration & Belonging

These pillars are held together by cross-cutting activities like leadership, stakeholder coordination, and data-driven improvement.

Each city needs to adapt the TAM logic to its own context. What works for a capital region won't suit a small rural town. But the underlying idea is the same: **talent doesn't arrive by accident – it arrives where the path is visible, credible, and inviting.**

Think of talent attraction as a system – not a series of disconnected activities.

Framework Conditions and Local Enablers

TAM cannot succeed in a vacuum. It requires a set of enabling conditions that shape what's possible both locally and beyond.

Framework conditions - strategic / national policy level

✓ Economic growth
✓ Policies on immigration, talent visa schemes
✓ Taxation regulations
✓ General political climate
✓ Employment regulations and rights
✓ Conditions of entrepreneurship
✓ National branding campaigns to boost visibility

Local / regional enablers

✓ Availability and quality of jobs matching people's skills
✓ Availability & affordability of housing
✓ Quality urban design & infrastructure
✓ Quality of public services (healthcare, education)
✓ Entrepreneurial ecosystems
✓ Overall quality of life

The local level matters most when it comes to **credibility**. A well-written campaign means little if the reality doesn't match. **Cities that offer real quality of life – not just the image of it – will always have an edge**.

# 3. The Four Pillars of Talent Attraction

Branding & Identity

In the context of talent attraction, **place branding is not about slogans – it's about clarity**. Talented individuals need to understand **what your city offers and whether it aligns with their** professional **goals,** personal **values,** and desired **lifestyle.**

Cities can start by defining their **value proposition.** Is your city a great place for young families? A hub for sustainability professionals? A creative, affordable alternative to bigger cities? **The story must be authentic and reinforced by visuals, voices, and experiences.**

Branding becomes even more powerful when employers adopt and reinforce the city's identity in their own outreach. That's where co-branding comes in.

Tool highlight: Employer co-branding toolkit

This toolkit helps employers integrate the city's story into their job postings and recruitment channels. It includes ready-made taglines, city profiles, high-quality photos, and testimonials – enabling joint storytelling that reaches further. (See Annex 1 for more details.)
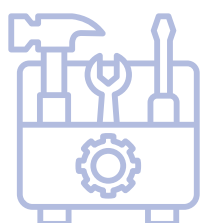
Attraction & Recruitment
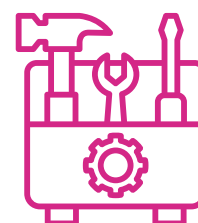
Attraction means **reaching the right people at the right time with a message that resonates.** It requires segmentation, storytelling, and smart outreach – not generic promotion.

Digital campaigns play a key role here. Thanks to platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Google, cities can now precisely target specific groups – such as former residents, young professionals, or remote workers – based on interests, skills, and location. **The best campaigns follow a funnel structure**: they first promote the place, then guide users toward a sector or lifestyle, then introduce employers, and finally highlight specific job opportunities.

These campaigns are **cost-effective, measurable, and flexible**. Cities can link them to landing pages or talent portals where users can apply, sign up for updates, or join talent pools – even if they don't find the perfect job immediately. Some cities **co-create campaigns with employers, sharing costs and extending reach**.

Tool highlight: Talent Journey Mapping Canvas

This tool allows cities and stakeholders to visualise the stages that talent go through – from awareness to arrival to integration. It helps identify emotional triggers and friction points, improving targeting and support. (See Annex 2 for more details.)

# 3. The Four Pillars of Talent Attraction

Reception & Welcoming

Moving is never just a transaction – it's a leap. **The first few days and weeks in a new city shape how people feel about their decision**. That's why reception matters.

Cities that provide a warm, structured welcome – with clear information, accessible services, and personal touches – **stand out.** One-stop-shops that combine **registration, housing support, schooling advice, and health insurance guidance** help reduce stress and make things easier. Cities can also offer w**elcome events, orientation tours, or coffee meetups** to help newcomers connect.

Co-working spaces, for instance, are not just workplaces – they're **hubs for community-building** and informal support. Likewise, **mentor programmes or buddy systems** can connect newcomers with locals who help them navigate everyday life.

Tool highlight:Welcome Package Starter Checklist

This practical tool helps cities design onboarding kits that include everything from transport maps and school info to cultural tips and welcome notes – all in one place. (See Annex 3 for more details.)

Integration & Belonging
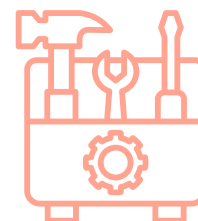
Attracting people is only half the battle – **making them stay is the true challenge**. And that hinges on belonging.

People who feel connected – socially, professionally, emotionally – are **more likely to invest in the city, build a life, and stay for the long term.** Cities can support this by promoting **social and professional networks, creating opportunities for cultural exchange, and supporting the whole family** – not just the worker.

Spouse programmes, language learning, dual career support, and **family activities** all contribute to a feeling of inclusion. **Co-creating events with newcomers** where participants - locals and newcomers - can connect based on shared interests, can also **shift the tone from "host and guest" to "we build this together."**

Belonging is built through relationships, not registrations.

4. Managing the Talent Ecosystem

Talent attraction is a cross-cutting issue. No single department can do it alone. That's why cities need a coordinated ecosystem **that brings together diverse actors**: employers, educators, housing providers, cultural organisations, civil society, and more.

The **city's role is to convene, coordinate, and enable**. Sometimes this means setting up a dedicated taskforce or integrating TAM into existing local groups (e.g. business councils, education boards). In other cases, it might involve identifying champions within different institutions and helping them work together.

The best coordination **doesn't rely on formal power, but on shared purpose**. A business incubator might host meetups; a housing agency could simplify rentals for newcomers; a local university may provide orientation for international students and their families.

Cities should map who is doing what – and where the gaps are. The Talent Journey Canvas helps here too, showing who supports which phase of the newcomer's journey.

Even with limited staff, cities can create impact by building partnerships and distributing responsibility. It's not about centralisation – it's about orchestration.

5. Trends in Talent Attraction

Talent attraction happens in a moving landscape. **Demographic, social and technological trends** are constantly reshaping how and why people move.

Remote work has decoupled jobs from geography, allowing people to live where they feel best – not where they must. This **opens new opportunities for smaller cities.** But it also raises the bar for what people expect: q**uality of life, purpose, connectivity, and community.**

People increasingly seek meaning, sustainability, and identity in their surroundings. They want **places that reflect their values, not just offer employment.** Meanwhile, **competition is growing** not just globally, but between neighbouring regions. Scarcity of skills is pushing cities to think strategically – and act creatively.

Digitalisation enables smarter outreach, personalised communication, and better data tracking. Campaigns can now be tested, adjusted, and improved continuously.

Remote Work

"Place First"

Growing competition

Digitalisation

6. From Insight to Action

You may think you are not ready for this - or you have more important challenges to address. However, **if you don't start to act now, you will inevitably slowly fall behind.** Remember: every city can start somewhere. What matters is choosing a **point of entry that fits your context**.

Pick a target group you want to focus on – like students, tech workers, or returnees – and use the *Talent Journey Mapping Canvas (Annex 1)* to map and understand their path. Then use the Welcome Checklist to ensure the basics are in place. Next, you may want to align with employers using the *Co-branding Toolkit (see Annex 1 for more details)* to speak with one voice.

Start small: even a simple landing page, a welcome event, a campaign can be a major step forward and go a long way. **Measure results and gather feedback**. Share what works. Improve.

Use data wisely – not just to report, but to refine your efforts. Small iterations build momentum.

7. Final Thoughts

Talent Attraction Management is not a fancy buzzword or yet another trend - it is a **framework for cities to stay relevant humane and future-ready**. To succeed in attracting and retaining talent, you need to keep a few things in mind:

Engage employers as partners, not passengers.

Collaborate with neighbours – regional "coopetition" is smarter than acting in isolation.

Engage talent with empathy and authenticity.

Use data, go digital to extend reach and sharpen targeting.

Use **creative, out-of-the box and even humour-based campaigns** to break through the noise.

Show leadership through coordination, not control.

A guide to help cities and local employers work together to promote the city as an attractive place to live AND work.

What is it for?

This toolkit **helps municipalities support local employers in communicating a shared, compelling story about the place**. Co-branding ensures that job ads, company websites, and recruitment campaigns are aligned with the city's value proposition, reflect the quality of life, and identity.

What is needed?

Below we present the most important content elements of of an employer co-branding toolkit.
Consider this a list - a menu of possible content elements - you can consult when designing your own city's toolkit. By all means **adapt it to your local circumstances**.
You can only develop a co-branding toolkit if your city already has a **clear brand strategy** - including authentic **brand values**, as well as k**ey elements to articulate the brand** (brand language, visual identity).

How to use it?

- **STEP1:** Identify key employers who are actively hiring or engaging with external talent. These could be multinational companies, local SMEs, even startups - the important thing is that they have a clear need for new talent.

- **STEP2:** Invite them to present the concept of the toolkit, ask for feedback, co-create the structure of the toolkit.

- **STEP3:** Offer templates, facts, and assets (see next page for specific ideas) that employers can embed in job listings, career pages, and presentations. Support the use of the toolkit.

- **STEP4:** Encourage employers to provide regular feedback on what materials are useful and what's missing.

- **STEP5:** Update and curate the content over time.

- (As a potential next stage, ask the companies to provide similar assets the municipality can use in its own promotion).

A guide to help cities and local employers work together to promote the city as an attractive place to live AND work.

Place Narrative Elements

- City tagline or slogan (if applicable)
- 1–2 sentence city profile (location, size, identity)
- Key selling points (e.g. quality of life, cost of living, education, nature, connectivity)
- Local pride points (awards, rankings, unique features)

Visual Assets to Share

- High-quality photos of the city, public spaces, lifestyle
- Short videos or testimonials from residents or entrepreneurs
- Map of city and region (with transport links)
- City logo or identity elements (if permitted)
- Icons, banners, or visuals for use in job ads

Practical Content for Talent Outreach

- Welcome or relocation guide
- Information on housing, schools, healthcare
- Contact info for relocation support or city services
- Calendar of cultural or networking events
- FAQs about moving to the city

Collaboration Tips
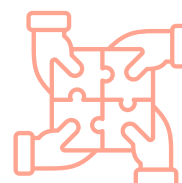
- Invite HR managers to co-design and / or test materials
- Provide a shared drive with all assets easily accessible
- Organize briefings or workshops on talent attraction
- Feature employer testimonials in city campaigns
- Ask employers to link to the city's welcome page from their job ads

A practical tool to help cities visualise and improve the experience of incoming talent

What is it for?

This canvas helps you **map the full journey of talent** as they consider, move to, and integrate into your city. It supports cities in **identifying pain points, missing services, and opportunities** for improvement across the Talent Attraction Management (TAM) cycle.

What is needed?

Time: 60-90 minutes
Participants:
- Group of 6-8 stakeholders (make sure to include someone from the target group, if possible).
- A facilitator

Materials:
- Blank version of the Mapping Canvas (either large print, or drawn on one or more flipchart paper)
- Sticky notes
- Pens / markers to write on the stickies

How to use it?

- **STEP1:** Choose a target group (e.g. returnees, digital nomads, teachers, tech workers).
- **STEP2:** Organize a small group workshop with relevant stakeholders (ULG members, employers, city departments, preferably also representative/s of target group). (Prior to the workshop, prepare the blank canvas; use either large (A1 or A2) printout, or drawn on a flipchart paper).
- **STEP3:** Use the canvas to map the journey across four stages: (Awareness, Decision, Arrival, Integration).
- **STEP4:** For each stage, identify and discuss:
  ✓ What are the key touchpoints?
  ✓ What works well?
  ✓ What are the gaps or barriers?
- **STEP5:** For each stage, ideate for possible improvement actions.
- STEP6: Choose 2-3 improvement actions / stage for short-term implementation.

A tool to help cities design a practical, welcoming onboarding experience for new residents and workers

What is it for?

A good welcome package helps newcomers feel informed, supported, and appreciated from the very moment they arrive. In addition, it also helps them to navigate in a new environment - saving time and a lot of efforts.
This **checklist helps cities put together a mix of essential info**, soft touchpoints, and useful materials.

How to use it?

- Use this checklist as a design tool for creating your city's welcome package.

- You can set up a workshop with the internal team working with different aspects of talent attraction, and use this checklist to jointly design the concept and structure of the welcome package.

- Review what's already available and identify what could be added or improved.

- Customize it for different groups: international workers, returnees, students, entrepreneurs, etc.

- Decide on the delivery method — printed folder, digital PDF, web portal, app, or a mix.

- Don't forget to test with the target group!

Main categories

Orientation & practical info

Administration & logistics

Daily life & Community

Soft elements & personal touch

Welcome Package Starter Checklist

A tool to help cities design a practical, welcoming onboarding experience for new residents and workers

Item	To be included?	Notes - customisation needed	Delivery method (printed, digital, web portal, app, etc.)
1. Orientation & Practical info			
1.1 Welcome message from mayor or city representative			
1.2 City map (physical or digital)			
1.3 Overview of neighbourhoods and transport options			
1.4 Emergency numbers and healthcare info			
1.5 Key contacts (e.g. housing office, schools, relocation support)			
… add rows as necessary			
2. Administration & Logistics			
2.1 Registration procedures and required documents			
2.2 Opening a bank account			
2.3 Health insurance and social security info			
2.4 Driver's license / vehicle registration info			
2.5 Useful local apps and platforms			
… add rows as necessary			

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Welcome Package Starter Checklist

A tool to help cities design a practical, welcoming onboarding experience for new residents and workers

Item	To be included?	Notes - customisation needed	Delivery method (printed, digital, web portal, app, etc.)
3. Daily Life & Community			
3.1 Overview of schools, childcare, and education options			
3.2 Language classes and cultural orientation			
3.3 Community centers, sports clubs, libraries			
3.4 Volunteer and civic engagement opportunities			
3.5 Local traditions, public holidays, and cultural do's & don'ts			
… add rows as necessary			
4. Soft Elements and Personal Touch			
4.1 Discounts or free tickets to local events or attractions			
4.2 City-branded welcome gift / merchandise			
4.3 Invitation to a newcomers' event / breakfast / coffee morning			
4.4 Contact info of a local volunteer ambassador / support person			
4.5 Message from a local resident or peer			
… add rows as necessary			

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