

Research

ONBOARD DENMARK

December
2023

LANGUAGE
BARRIERS
in Danish workplaces

**CULTURAL
DIFFERENCES**
in the workplace

CHALLENGES
OF SOCIALISING
IN DENMARK

**REASONS FOR
HIRING**

*high-skilled
international
professionals*



Special Edition

WELCOME

TO PROJECT ONBOARD DENMARK

Editor's note

The need for, and number of, high-skilled professionals who are being recruited from outside Denmark is steadily growing. As the number but also the diversity of international colleagues being recruited rises - start-ups, medium-sized enterprises and the large multi-nationals have to keep pace with how best to onboard and retain them.

Companies are recruiting employees who have not lived or worked in Denmark before, but should also be making the most of the international graduates and high-skilled international professionals already living here.

Project Onboard Denmark was born out of the need and challenges that have arisen across Danish companies as they recruit internationals to: meet their talent gaps, fulfil their aspirations for market expansion, and with the knowledge that greater diversity is likely to stimulate innovation.

Our research has been the foundation for the project - leading to the collaborative development of a series of digital tools that companies can use to facilitate the onboarding of international employees, review and consider how culture shapes the workplace, and work towards building empathic and collaborative teams across difference.

I hope you learn something new by reading our research magazine.//



Professor Claire Maxwell



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ABOUT

PROJECT ONBOARD DENMARK

To aid Denmark's continued economic growth and innovation potential, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Denmark are internationalising in various ways. One key way to do this, is to recruit professionals with specific skills sets, knowledge and experiences from abroad.

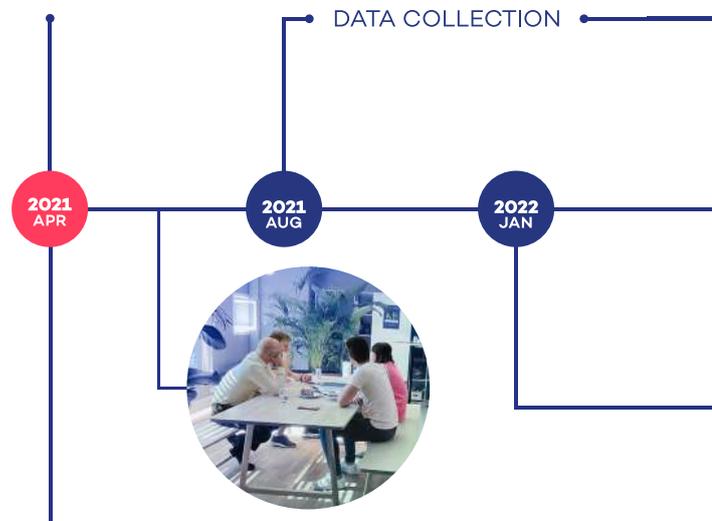
This is often needed as SMEs:

i) cannot find the necessary talent in Denmark, **ii)** and because expanding into new markets requires specific cultural and linguistic knowledge, as well as previous work experience in these places.

The aim of Project Onboard Denmark is to create new knowledge and innovate tools and workshops to support Danish SMEs in recruiting, onboarding, and retaining high-skilled international professionals. //

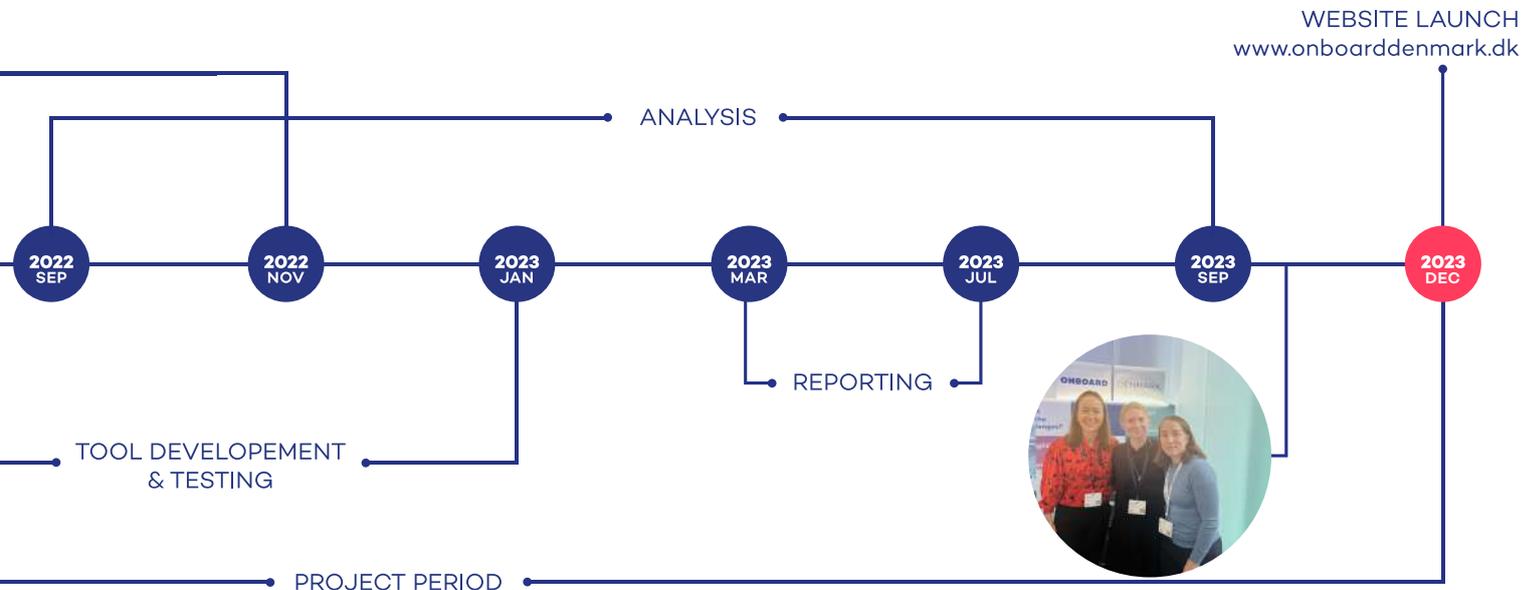


FUNDING





Danish Culture Game - First Testing Company Januar.



METHODOLOGY

The analysis and tools are based on interviews with high-skilled international professionals (HSPs) and international graduates - examining their experiences of living and working in Denmark.

Additionally, interviews and questionnaires were completed with companies exploring the reasons for and against hiring HSPs, as well as their experiences of attracting, onboarding, and retaining them. Register data collected by Statistics Denmark provide new insights into the backgrounds of the international HSPs working in Denmark and the companies that employ them.

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS

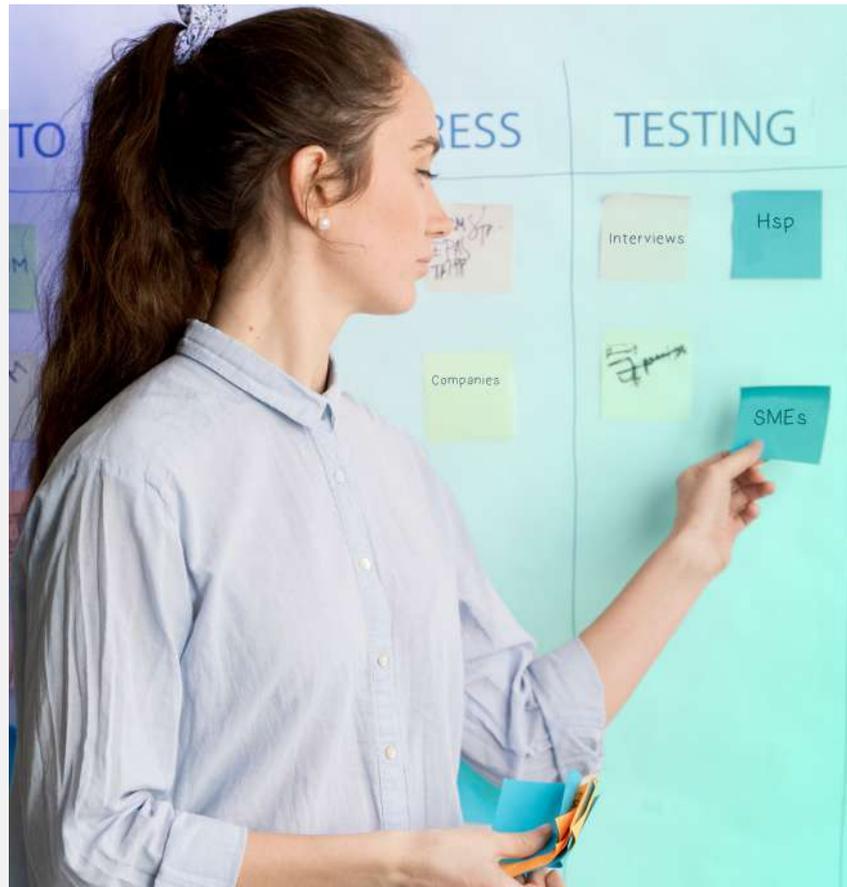


COMPANIES

The majority of the companies were medium-sized (50-249 employees) - 18, and small companies - 14.

Additionally, we interviewed eight micro (1-9 employees) and seven large (250+ employees) companies.

The companies were primarily located in the capital region - 26, in central Denmark - 11, and North Denmark - 6.

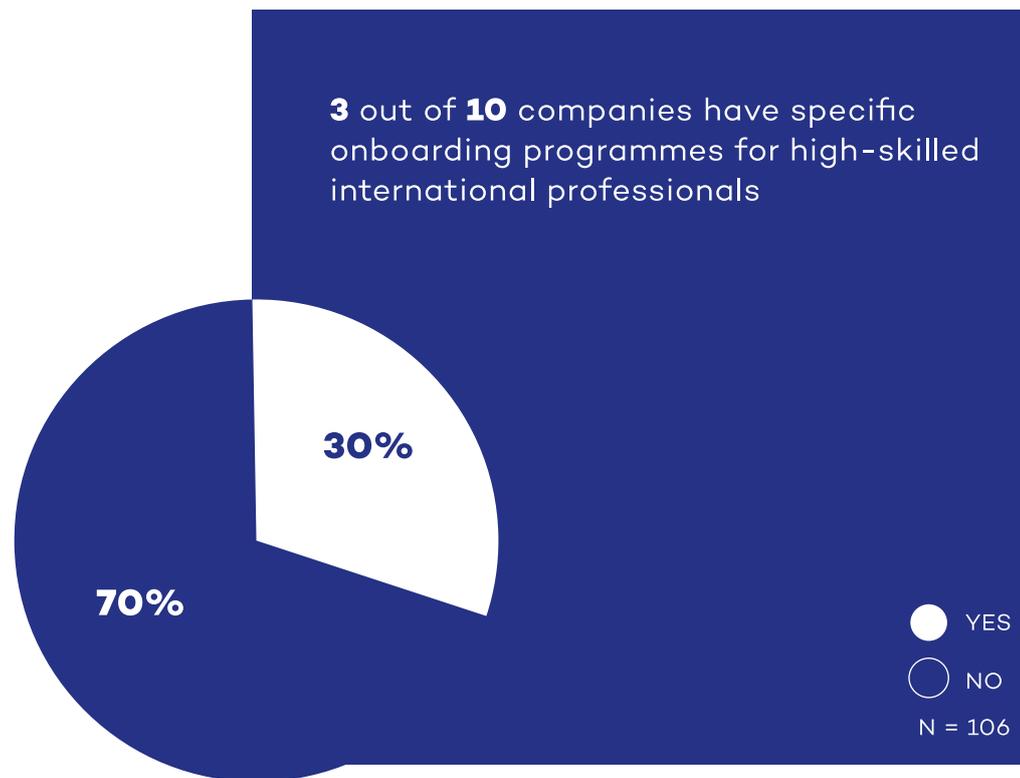


HIGH-SKILLED PROFESSIONALS

At the time of the interviews, 25 of the high-skilled professionals were living in Denmark. All employees held a bachelor's degree or higher. Thirteen of them were from the EU/EEA, while the other 13 were from outside the EU, and many of them had prior international experience studying or working in various countries.

The majority of the participants (18) lived in Copenhagen, one in Roskilde, and five in Jutland. Most of them worked in the private sector, primarily in pharma (8), IT (7), and tech (6). //

KEY TAKEAWAYS



1. ONBOARDING INTERNATIONALS IN DANISH COMPANIES

After talking to both companies and high-skilled international professionals working in Danish SMEs and larger multinational corporations, our research revealed the somewhat surprising fact that even in the largest and most internationalised Danish companies, making international employees feel at home can be challenging both within the company and in Denmark.

This led us to understand that, no matter how excellent an onboarding programme may be, there are challenges that cannot be addressed through onboarding alone. It is imperative to incorporate the company's culture, the existing employees – both Danes and internationals – as well as the surrounding society.

2. LANGUAGE AS THE KEY TO SOCIAL INTEGRATION

One of the most significant challenges for high-skilled internationals is making Danish friends outside of work and participating in informal conversations and workplace events with Danish colleagues. This struggle is perceived as partly due to a lack of Danish language skills. Establishing guidelines for when and where to speak English or Danish at the workplace is a crucial step in overcoming this challenge.



3. FLEXIBILITY, TRUST, AND A FLAT HIERARCHY...

These are aspects that high-skilled international professionals appreciate the most about Danish work culture. They value the autonomy in managing their tasks and work hours, along with the opportunity to express their opinions to their managers. However, for international leaders, this can pose challenges as they have to navigate a workplace where hierarchy exists – but how this functions is more implicit. In particular, high-skilled international professionals with children perceive

Denmark as a family-friendly country due to its good work-life balance.

4. LEADERSHIP'S ROLE

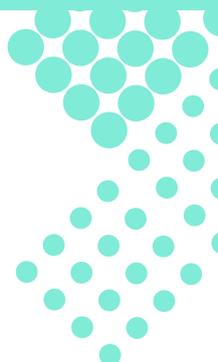
Recruiting international employees into an organisation has implications for social dynamics, language, communication, among other things. These factors affect all employees, including both Danes and internationals. It is essential for management to acknowledge and proactively engage in discussions about the differences present in the workplace and how to effectively address them. //

WHY DO HIGH-SKILLED INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONALS CHOOSE DENMARK FOR WORK?

Over the last couple of years, Denmark has made extensive efforts to attract workers from abroad (high-skilled professionals and skilled labour). Denmark ranks as the 11th most attractive country for high-skilled international professionals among the OECD countries (OECD, 2023). But why do they choose Denmark?

The Expat Study 2020 found that 61% of international employees, particularly those from outside the Nordic countries, identified a good work-life balance as the key factor influencing their decision to take-up a job in Denmark. The second and third most important reasons were linked to professional development, including improving one's career prospects and having an interesting job (Oxford Research 2020).

A literature review conducted by Rambøll in 2017 found that internationals were more likely to be drawn to cities and countries with a favourable economic climate, including low unemployment rates and attractive tax and salary systems. Additionally, people were willing to relocate to places where they have personal connections or an established social network. The level of innovation in a country, measured by the number of published scientific articles and GDP spent on research, was also a significant factor, particularly for high-skilled internationals. Not surprisingly, immigration laws and policy play a crucial role in determining who can enter and stay in the country, and a lengthy and inflexible process was found to deter the recruitment and retention of international employees. The literature review also re-emphasised the importance of good future career prospects, possibilities for a healthy work-life balance, access to top-quality healthcare and education systems, including international schools and institutions.



1. WORK-LIFE BALANCE

A good work-life balance was a crucial factor for almost all respondents in their decision to choose to work in Denmark. Especially interviewees with children highlighted Denmark as a family-friendly country due to the flexibility to work from home, plan their own working hours, and the possibility of picking up their kids before the official end of the working day. One interviewee explained:

“

I CAN DO MY JOB AT ANY TIME, I CAN LOG IN AT SEVEN O'CLOCK AT NIGHT AND DO A COUPLE OF EXTRA THINGS. I CAN DROP MY KIDS OFF AT SCHOOL, PICK THEM UP, AND GIVEN MY LEVEL, NO ONE'S QUESTIONING WHERE I'M AT AND WHY I'M DOING THAT. SO, I REALLY APPRECIATE THAT. IT'S A SUPER BIG POSITIVE.”

- HIGH-SKILLED PROFESSIONAL,
CANADA



2.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Others had studied for higher education degrees or PhDs in Denmark and had already established social networks, making it a natural choice for them to move back or stay in Denmark, even if they had originally planned to move elsewhere after graduation. Some had previously worked remotely for Danish companies and had established connections that were instrumental in their decision to move to Denmark permanently.



So basically, we were considering a couple of countries: Denmark, Sweden - not Norway, because it's hard to get visas up there - Switzerland, because I was working there for a little bit, and Germany. Denmark was first on the list because I have some friends here since I have worked for Danish companies for so long."

- High-skilled professional, Poland

3.

CAREER PROSPECTS

For most internationals, we interviewed, the career opportunities made available by taking the job had been a major factor in their decision to relocate to Denmark. Some came because they or their partners had landed their dream job, had been headhunted, or had been relocated to Denmark within their current company. For others, the special 'researcher' tax scheme was also a draw, as it made a significant difference in their take-home pay.



The special tax for me actually made a difference. For instance, moving to the UK or Switzerland, we will be paying more than 60% of my salary, just for kindergarten... So, putting everything into perspective, I think the whole system is actually prepared for family life."

- High-skilled professional, Croatia

4. A STRONG WELFARE STATE

Additionally, some respondents mentioned that Denmark offered a high quality of life, citing the country's well-organised systems of transport, health care, and so forth, its high level of digitisation, and the biking culture as key attractions of living in Denmark.

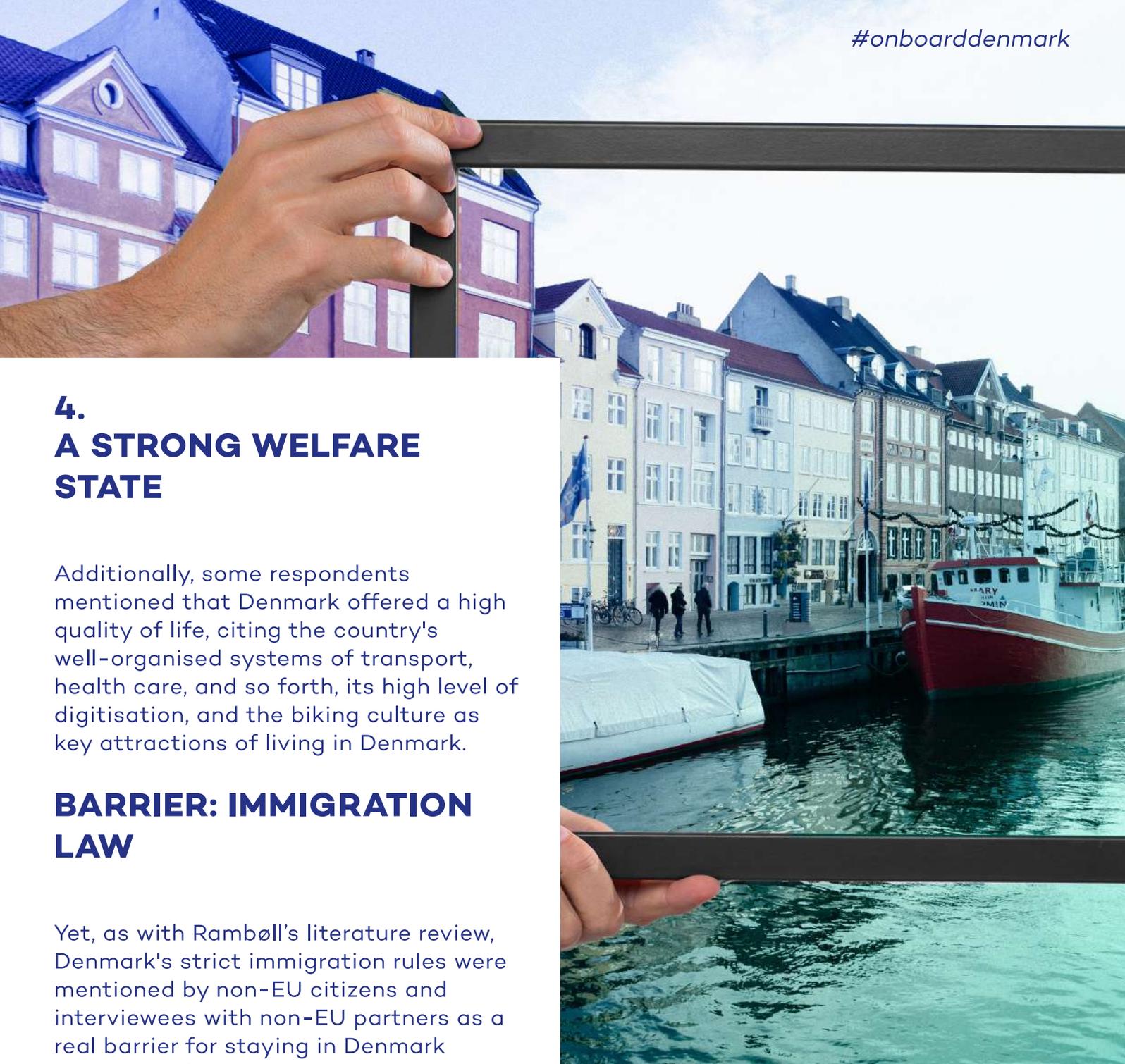
BARRIER: IMMIGRATION LAW

Yet, as with Rambøll's literature review, Denmark's strict immigration rules were mentioned by non-EU citizens and interviewees with non-EU partners as a real barrier for staying in Denmark long-term if their work and residence permits were not extended.//



Maybe moving at some point to Malmö is a possibility. And this is less because we both love Copenhagen city centre, but this is more for my partner's side, not being an EU national that it's very difficult to get visa access..."

- High-skilled professional, Swedish/British



REASONS FOR HIRING HIGH-SKILLED INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

- Benefits and challenges

Skills shortages

In both our survey and interviews with SMEs, the main reason for hiring international employees was identified as labour shortages within Denmark. Companies explained that they were unable to recruit enough Danes with the necessary skills, expertise, and personal qualities to meet their needs. This was particularly true when companies were seeking highly specialised skills such as programming or to take-up senior management roles. As expressed by one robotics company.

Companies found that recruiting from abroad increased the talent pool of potential employees, making it easier to find the most qualified candidates for their job openings.



OUR CHALLENGES ARE
WHEN WE NEED VERY
SENIOR OR VERY
SPECIALISED PEOPLE
BECAUSE HERE WE
ACTUALLY HAD TO GO
SEARCH FOR THEM
WORLDWIDE.”

-ROBOTICS COMPANY

Market expansion



I THINK THE GOAL OF ANY BUSINESS IS TO SCALE-UP AND NOT JUST DO BUSINESS WITHIN DENMARK, AND IN ORDER TO SCALE-UP A BUSINESS, YOU REALLY NEED TO BE INTERNATIONAL. YOU CANNOT JUST STICK WITH ONE LANGUAGE BECAUSE DENMARK IS A VERY TINY COUNTRY.”

- IT COMPANY

Another central reason for looking to hire international employees was where a company was doing business in, or planning to expand into, new international markets. In such cases, it was seen as necessary to have knowledge of the local language, culture, and/or market. A few interviewees noted that Denmark is a relatively small country and expanding into new markets was essential for the survival and growth of their business.

One company pointed out:

“Technology companies like us need to sell our technologies to a broader audience. So, we need people to find out about our technology and where there are more people, we need to go and sell there. To go and sell there we need to understand the products there, the people there, the culture there.”

- Robotics company

Therefore, some companies strategically hired international employees who spoke the language and/or had cultural understanding and country-specific market knowledge.

Unexpected benefits of hiring international employees

For many companies hiring international employees was not intentional initially, but emerged out of the necessity to recruit people with the right skills set. However, once they started to recruit international employees, companies came to understand the benefits of having more culturally diverse teams and becoming more international felt like a natural development.

Commitment to the job



HAVING A HIGHLY DIVERSE TEAM BRINGS A LOT OF BENEFITS. NOW IT'S ALMOST A SUCCESS CRITERION FOR US: CAN WE FIND A FOREIGNER INSTEAD OF A DANE? WE WOULD ACTUALLY PREFER THAT."

- TECH COMPANY

Companies agreed that international employees have a strong work ethic, mentioned both during interviews and our survey (reported by 17% of participants). Having a growth mind-set and being willing to take risks and work longer hours were considered crucial for those working in an SME environment, particularly during the start-up phase. Some SMEs reported that they found international employees to be more adaptable in their approach to work and unafraid of uncertainty. One reason for this was identified as international employees feeling more pressure to perform well in their job and achieve results, as they had relocated to Denmark for employment or wished to stay long term.

"For them, this is their bread and butter, so they always strive to produce the best possible outcome. I believe that this is very important for SMEs because they are very fast-paced and result-driven, and to achieve that, they need colleagues who share the same mindset – they believe in fast-moving."

- IT company

This, for some companies, set international employees apart from Danish ones and was the reason for hiring them over Danes in the end.



“

SO WE ALWAYS END UP HAVING FIVE MOST DESIRABLE CANDIDATES, SOME OF THEM ARE DANES, BUT THEN WE END UP WITH THE INTERNATIONAL BECAUSE THE DANES... THEY KNOW IT'S A START-UP BUT THEN THEY STILL WANT STABILITY, WHICH IS SOMETHING WE CAN'T OFFER AS OF NOW. I MEAN, WE ARE IN AN EARLY STAGE, WE ARE A HIGH-RISK COMPANY BASICALLY.”

- BIOTECH COMPANY

Enhancing company work culture



IN ALL THE PLACES WHERE I HAVE WORKED, I HAVE ONLY SEEN HOW MUCH DIVERSITY CONTRIBUTES TO DECISION-MAKING BY BRINGING DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS TO THE TABLE. IT ALSO CREATES A FUN WORK ENVIRONMENT BECAUSE IT IS EXCITING TO HAVE COLLEAGUES WITH DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS THAN ONESELF.”

- BIOTECH COMPANY

Many companies observed that having a multi-cultural team required the development and negotiation of a new work culture. Cultural assumptions can no longer be taken for granted in shaping workplace culture, which companies found fostered a more open dialogue. According to a life science company, "The good thing about having a really diverse team is that it forces you to communicate because we don't have a dominant culture." Companies also reported that having an international working environment improved teamwork, as diversity required different cultural values - those that encouraged acceptance, humility, and helpfulness in the workplace.

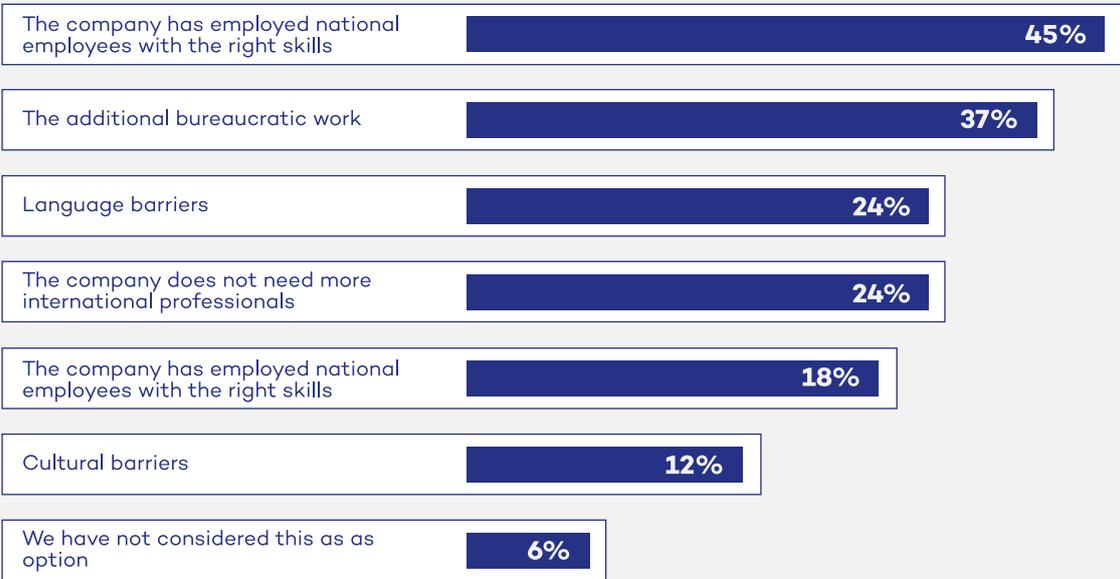
Innovation and new perspectives

Companies also noted that cultural diversity had a positive influence on team performance. International employees brought more varied perspectives, expertise, and experience into teams, resulting in a wider range of problem-solving approaches being suggested, increased creativity, and more innovation.



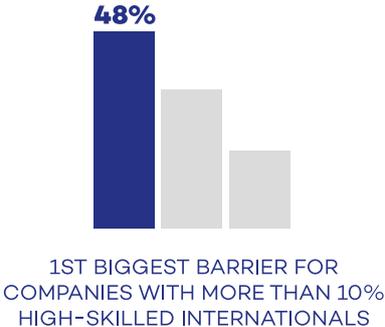
Barriers to hiring international employees

BUREAUCRATIC HURDLES, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, AND LANGUAGE ARE THE THREE BIGGEST BARRIERS TO HIRING HIGH-SKILLED INTERNATIONALS IN DANISH COMPANIES



N = 51 companies with either 0% or between 1-10% high-skilled internationals. The numbers do not sum to 100% because it was possible to select more than one option.

BUREAUCRATIC HURDLES



N = 91 companies with over 10% high-skilled internationals. The numbers do not sum to 100% because it was possible to select more than one option.

Fifty one companies who completed our survey either did not have international employees at the time or had only between 1-10% of their workforce who were international. For them, the perceived barriers to recruiting (more) international employees was first – that they could recruit talent locally to meet their needs. However, second – they identified the administrative and legal challenges associated with hiring international employees (especially those from outside the EU) as their greatest barrier.

Bureaucratic hurdles were also seen as the greatest challenge for hiring international workers by those companies with a higher proportion of internationals already – emphasising this continues to be a key barrier for Denmark. The more specific hurdles included: the cost of relocating someone to Denmark, delays in setting up bank accounts and obtaining CPR numbers, the time in applying for, and receiving, work and residence permits, and meeting the minimum salary requirements set by the government to facilitate the granting of a work permit. All these challenges were seen as particularly problematic for smaller companies that often lack a dedicated HR department or the financial resources to meet the minimum salary requirements for non-EU citizens.

However, companies who had signed up for the fast-track agreement with the government said they experienced these issues to a lesser extent.

Interestingly, companies with limited (less than 10%) or no international

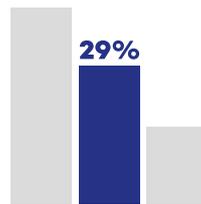
employees perceived bureaucratic hurdles as less challenging (37%) compared to companies with a higher proportion of international employees (48%). This suggests that the time and cost of dealing with this additional bureaucratic work becomes more pronounced when companies start yet more hiring international employees. This may potentially impact companies' willingness to continue hiring from abroad in the future. For instance, one company stated that they became more reluctant to hire international employees after employing a non-EU employee, given the process had been so lengthy and exhausting for both the employee and the company.



IT IS REALLY A BIG JOB TO BRING PEOPLE IN WHO ARE NOT FROM WITHIN THE EU. THERE ARE REALLY, REALLY MANY WHO APPLY TO US, FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, AND I REALLY WANT TO BRING THEM ALL IN. BUT BUREAUCRATICALLY, IT SIMPLY IS NOT POSSIBLE. THERE REALLY HAS TO BE SOMETHING REALLY SPECIAL FOR ME TO BOTHER TO TAKE ON THE TASK”

- TECH COMPANY

LANGUAGE



2ND BIGGEST BARRIER FOR COMPANIES WITH MORE THAN 10% HIGH-SKILLED INTERNATIONALS

N = 91 companies with over 10% high-skilled internationals. The numbers do not sum to 100% because it was possible to select more than one option.

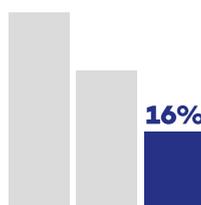
In some cases, the additional bureaucratic requirements of hiring internationals led companies to expect international talent to possess higher levels of qualifications, skills or experiences - when compared to a local applicant. However, some companies explained that hiring more international employees led them to seek entry into the government's fast track agreement and gain the necessary knowledge to further streamline the process for hiring international workers.



FOR US NOW IT HAS BECOME SECOND NATURE, BECAUSE WE KNOW EVERYTHING, AND WE HAVE A SETUP WITH THE DANISH GOVERNMENT THIS FAST TRACK DEAL AND THINGS BECOME EASIER AFTER A WHILE."

- TECH COMPANY

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES



3ND BIGGEST BARRIER FOR COMPANIES WITH MORE THAN 10% HIGH-SKILLED INTERNATIONALS

N = 91 companies with over 10% high-skilled internationals. The numbers do not sum to 100% because it was possible to select more than one option.

LIFE OUTSIDE OF WORK

Most internationals do not have a strong or large social and professional network, especially when they first move to Denmark. Meanwhile, Danes have a social circle and professional connections to draw on to further their careers.

Companies are aware of these challenges – and sometimes feel very responsible, and worried about, how to ensure new international colleagues are supported outside their working hours. In some cases, companies seek to organise company events, so as to increase the opportunities for internationals to at least form social, but also potentially professional links with others.



“

IF YOU HAVE TO ONBOARD A RELOCATER, THIS PERSON DOESN'T HAVE A NETWORK OR ANYTHING IN DENMARK BESIDES THE COMPANY. WE HELP A LOT WITH TRYING TO CREATE A NETWORK AND FINDING NICE PLACES TO GO AND THINGS TO DO TO INTEGRATE PEOPLE A LITTLE BIT”

- IT COMPANY



The needs of partners and children who might relocate with a new international employee are also taken into consideration by some companies.

Many of the small and medium-sized companies we interviewed had a relocation process set up. Some paid for relocation services to help manage the process, while others relied on the support of the local municipalities – who, in many cases, provide information on housing, networking events, and services to help accompanying partners find work. But the challenges of ensuring new international colleagues could settle and thrive following their move to Denmark was often raised during our interviews with companies – as it was understood to be difficult to find networks and build a social life outside of work. //



FOR PEOPLE WHO BRING THEIR FAMILIES, WE TRY TO MAKE SURE THAT THEIR SPOUSE AND KIDS ARE SET UP PROPERLY. IT IS NEVER THE SAME FOR ANYONE. FOR SOME, IT IS VERY MUCH ABOUT FINDING A JOB FOR THEIR SPOUSE, FOR OTHERS, IT IS MORE ABOUT GETTING GOOD SCHOOLS FOR THEIR KIDS.”

- TECH COMPANY

OUR PARTNERS



FUNDED BY



HIRING IN DENMARK, RELOCATING, OR HIRING REMOTELY

-
Reflections from companies



Decisions about hiring the right person



WHEN WE SELECT PEOPLE: YOU HAVE TO BE TECHNICAL ENOUGH TO BE ABLE TO GRASP AND LEARN IT, BUT ALSO HAVE THE RIGHT KIND OF MOTIVATION TO BE A TEAM PLAYER AND TO FIT IN THE TEAM.”

- TECH COMPANY

Hiring internationals to work remotely

The companies we interviewed all agreed that selecting the best candidate for the job was the most critical factor determining who should be recruited to an open position. The ideal employee was not merely the candidate with the right professional skills but also someone with the necessary personal qualities such as a willingness to learn, being a team player, and showing kindness to others.

Many companies mentioned a preference for hiring internationals who were already living in Denmark. This was primarily because such candidates were assumed to have already settled in the country, developed a life outside of work and a social circle, and become familiar with the workplace cultures found in Denmark.

If finding suitable candidates among internationals in Denmark proved challenging, companies generally leaned towards recruiting people with EU citizenship. This choice was influenced by the strict administrative and financial regulations applicable to non-EU citizens if they had to apply for a work visa for them, as well as the perceived potential cultural differences that might pose challenges for their integration into the company.

When companies were searching for candidates with unique skills, such as developers and programmers, they would often go the extra mile if they found the right person. This might mean being open to accepting someone who wanted to work remotely.

Other companies stated that they preferred to recruit international employees to work remotely, especially if the work only required a laptop and could be done anytime, anywhere.

“ We don’t relate to or think about where people are located, we just want the right people and we give them the flexibility because we don’t have the (fixed) working hours ... As long as you have a good internet connection and a PC from us, we don’t care and that has given us an opportunity to recruit from yeah across the globe basically.”

- IT Company

Some companies also saw remote hiring as less risky since it did not involve relocating international employees and their families, taking on the responsibility of integrating them into the company and society, and potentially having to repatriate them if the employee proved to be a poor fit. Additionally, remote work arrangements were sometimes necessary to facilitate working in relevant local time zones and to serve clients locally.

Just like with the process of relocating, hiring remotely came with its own set of challenges. It demanded of a company an understanding of the local culture, skills, education levels, and labour laws, as well as the ability to motivate and socially integrate employees from a distance. One company explained that while outsourcing to India might be cheaper in the initial years, the disparities in local norms made it less favourable in the long run for their company’s growth and relations between colleagues. This company also discovered that the skill level of a senior programmer in India was comparable to that of a junior programmer in Denmark, leading to frustration among Danish employees. Another company faced difficulties when trying to provide their employees in the US with more paid vacation days. //

“

WE GRANTED FIVE VACATION DAYS TO OUR EMPLOYEES IN JUNE, AND TO ENSURE PARITY BETWEEN OUR DANISH AND AMERICAN COUNTERPARTS, WE EXTENDED THE SAME BENEFIT TO OUR EMPLOYEES IN THE USA. THEY WERE UTTERLY ASTONISHED SINCE FIVE EXTRA VACATION DAYS THERE ARE EXTRAORDINARY, CONSTITUTING HALF OF THEIR YEARLY ENTITLEMENT. HOWEVER, ONE MUST ALSO CONSIDER THE LOCAL LEGISLATION, WHICH PROHIBITS THE UNRESTRICTED PROVISION OF SUCH BENEFITS.”

- TECH COMPANY



CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WORKPLACE

—
Managing flat hierarchies and more direct forms of communication

Managing cultural differences in the workplace was identified by the companies in our research as the second largest challenge of hiring high-skilled international employees.

Ask questions and admit mistakes

One of the central cultural differences identified centred around the ways in which hierarchical relations played out. During interviews, several companies mentioned the challenge of integrating international employees into their relatively flat organisational culture, especially when working with individuals from countries more used to quite strongly-enforced hierarchical structures, such as Eastern and Southern Europe, Asia, and the US. Sometimes these international employees were seen as less forthcoming as Danes about their thoughts, feelings, their willingness to ask questions, and confidence to admit when they did not know or understand something, or even if they had made a mistake or not managed to meet an expected work deliverable. Such struggles were understood by companies to be linked to individuals' fear of losing face or that making a mistake might lead to being fired. Meanwhile, Danish companies spoke about valuing honesty and viewed it as a way to facilitate continual learning and improving.

Some companies noted that international employees could be hesitant about asking managers clarifying questions - because they felt they should not disturb them or feared it would highlight their incompetence. Company respondents felt such hesitations could lead to misunderstandings and missed deadlines.



THERE ARE SOME CULTURES THAT ARE JUST PLEASERS, SO THEY SAY YES, YES, YES, AND THEN THEY GO AND DO SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.”

- IT COMPANY

“They (international employees) may not always feel entirely comfortable with our direct communication style in Denmark regarding leadership. Even though some of the interns I have today are sitting in an open space, I can tell that some of them, particularly the new ones, are very cautious about interrupting or interfering. They might think to themselves, looks like he's busy, but I can't interrupt him.”

- Tech company

Some Danish managers explained how aspects of Danish workplace culture - such as interrupting, joking, and sharing ideas among all layers in an organisation - were critical to creating a more dynamic teamwork environment, which facilitated the generation of new ideas and insights.

However, the differing experiences and expectations of the way hierarchical relations should be managed among internationals could also lead to misunderstandings around the use of humour and willingness to contribute to knowledge sharing.



THE WAY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS SHOW RESPECT FOR BOSSES OR LEADERS DIFFERS SIGNIFICANTLY FROM THE TWO DANES IN TEAM. ... THEY OCCASIONALLY INTERRUPT WITH LIGHT-HEARTED JOKES, WHICH IS GREAT. ENGLISH IS OUR DAILY OFFICE LANGUAGE, SO WHEN THEY JEST ABOUT (MY CO-FOUNDER) AND ME, WE BURST INTO LAUGHTER BECAUSE WE UNDERSTAND IT. ... OUR FRENCH OR GREEK COLLEAGUES MAY SIT THERE, PONDERING, "HOW CAN THEY SAY THAT?"

- TECH COMPANY

A couple of companies have taken active steps to address these issues. Some ensure they talk directly with their international employees, reassuring them that there are no stupid questions. In other companies, management leads by example in meetings by sharing the mistakes they have made in the past to promote a culture that it is accepting of failure and what one can learn from it. Some have also provided cross-cultural training seeking to raise awareness of differences in decision-making and working practice among their employees from different cultural backgrounds.

While companies in our research were concerned about how non-Danes would adapt to their organisational cultures, the high-skilled international professionals we interviewed perceived the non-hierarchical relationship between management and employees that is so central to 'Danish' workplace culture as a positive.



WHEN I SUGGEST AN IDEA, MY MANAGER DOESN'T DISMISS IT OUTRIGHT WITH A "YEAH, BUT YOU NEED TO DO A, B". EVEN IF MY MANAGER OVERRULES ME OR SOMEONE HIGHER UP IN THE CHAIN DOES, I CAN STILL ARGUE FOR MY WAY OF THINKING, FROM MY POINT OF VIEW. IT'S A MANAGERIAL DECISION RATHER THAN A SPECIALIST DECISION. THIS IS NOT POSSIBLE IN MEDITERRANEAN CULTURE. SO I WOULD SAY THAT THIS IS BY FAR THE BEST THING HERE."

- HIGH-SKILLED PROFESSIONAL,
CROATIA

Being an international manager in Denmark

For some internationals, employed as managers in Denmark, the low power distance between management and employees often conflicted with their previous experiences, where more hierarchical manager-employee relationships had been a dominant feature. For instance, a manager who had worked abroad for over two decades and was originally from the Netherlands noted that, in a Danish context, her ego was not served as well as compared, for instance, to the UK, where she experienced a greater level of deference towards her due to her position.

She expressed ambivalence towards the direct and flat leadership style where Danish colleagues challenge management decisions. While she appreciated questions from Danish colleagues, she found that lines were sometimes blurred when she had made a final decision, yet a less senior Danish colleague would feel entitled to take up the discussion again the next day.

"I believe it brings clarity, you know, when the senior person in the room makes a decision, and you just have to accept it. It's acceptable, as long as the person has shown that they've asked questions, listened to feedback, and made a decision. You might not always like the outcome, but that's just a part of corporate life."

- High-skilled professional, the Netherlands



DIRECT or impolite?

Danish communication style is often characterised by its directness. While this approach is refreshing and viewed as honest by some internationals, others may perceive it as less constructive and potentially rude. The perception of this communication style tends to be influenced by factors such as cultural background, personal preferences, and past experiences.

“

IN MY FIRST WEEK, I WAS PRETTY SURE I WAS GOING TO FINISH WORKING THERE BECAUSE MY BOSS CHALLENGED ME ABOUT SOMETHING IN FRONT OF EVERYONE ELSE. AND I JUST THOUGHT, 'THAT'S JUST NOT OKAY.' IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM, COME AND TELL ME AFTERWARDS.

- HIGH-SKILLED PROFESSIONAL, UK

The impact of such forms of direct communication continued to affect her, she explained, causing her heart rate to increase whenever she received an email from her boss, fearing it might contain negative feedback. Another informant, also from the UK, reported that his experience of workplace communication had been very different. He was more accustomed to polite and indirect methods of communication. He acknowledged the benefits of directness in the workplace to avoid mistakes, but still found it challenging to embrace. Meanwhile an interviewee from Japan was "shocked" to receive direct negative feedback on her work and, at the time of her interview, appeared to still seem very unsettled by it.

Furthermore, the absence of a Danish word for 'please,' combined with the straight forwardness of communication – no matter what hierarchical position someone held – sometimes resulted in some international employees perceiving requests as orders. They had previously been accustomed to more polite phrasing when requests for work to be done had been made, including the use of 'thank you' and 'please.'

In summary, cultural differences did seem to shape companies' and international employees' experiences of work. More specifically, working in a flatter hierarchical structure and an expectation of direct communication between all members of the company were often valued by internationals but might also be experienced as surprising, unsettling or upsetting. //





WE@TRÆFPUNKT

The Træfpunkt HR Messen, which took place on October 4 and 5, 2023, saw the participation of a few thousand HR professionals. We, Project Onboard Denmark, set up a booth at the fair to connect with HR professionals and discuss our project.

HR Træfpunkt 2023

One of our project partners, Signe Biering, who is a leadership coach, delivered a talk during the HR Messe titled "succeeding with your international employees – without alienating the Danes."

Signe Biering delved into the early beginnings of Project Onboard Denmark, which she initiated with Professor Claire Maxwell.

Signe shared several best practices she has gathered from her work as an international coach and advisor to companies, as well as from the interviews conducted within Project Onboard Denmark. The top-performing companies shared common characteristics:

- 1.** They tailor their onboarding and retention – to the internationals and to the individual.
- 2.** They speak openly about their culture. They know what is Danish and what is particular to their organisation.
- 3.** They train leaders in diversity/inclusion and the conflicts that may arise.
- 4.** They use 'tools': they use facilitation in key meetings, reverse mentoring, buddy-systems, group coaching. And tools from onboarddenmark.dk.
- 5.** They share knowledge about best practice with other companies – and seek to create a Danish eco system of internationals.//





FLEXIBILITY AND TRUST

-

What they mean
and why they
are valued

Flexibility (in terms of work schedules) and trust (between managers and their team members) were considered uniquely Danish by the internationals we interviewed. Flexibility enabled internationals to better balance their professional and personal lives – to start work later if it suited them better, to pick up children early from kindergarten or school without facing any questioning, and to take longer holidays. Furthermore, working from home had become more prevalent in Danish workplaces after the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing employees to tailor their work arrangements according to their preferences and needs.



There is nobody ever checking on my hours. It is assumed that I worked the hours issued... and if you work more hours than you should, then you can always take that time off at another point... which is awesome.”

- High-skilled professional, Spain

Interviewees emphasised the limited monitoring and control in Danish workplaces, where employees enjoyed the freedom to take breaks, go for walks, or run errands without constant supervision. They felt they had the autonomy to manage their own work hours, with minimal checks on their time. This lack of strict monitoring reflected the trust they felt had been placed in employees to responsibly manage their tasks.

Despite the presence of an online time tracking system, its purpose was not felt as being to monitor employees, but instead as a way to ensure employees maintained a healthy work-life balance through allowing them to take time off if they have worked more than the required weekly hours.

This kind of flexibility in working arrangements was often mentioned as standing in stark contrast to their previous experiences in other countries, where working long hours and over-time were common. It was noted that the difference in Danish work culture lies in not valuing physical presence and the number of hours worked as the measure of performance. Instead, the focus was on what was delivered. //

PARTNERS



Professor Claire Maxwell, from the Department of Sociology at the University of Copenhagen, is an expert on the international mobility of professionals and their families.

Claire has led Project Onboard Denmark, been responsible for conducting, analysing, and reporting on research findings, as well as assisting in the development and implementation of digital tools. Claire managed the team at KU and the broader cross-sector partnership underpinning the project.



Signe Biering is a lawyer and a former diplomat who has served in China, India, and Israel. She draws upon her diplomatic, organisational and cultural background and experiences in her current role as an executive coach for both international and Danish leaders. Signe is also a keynote speaker and facilitates workshops on Danish and other cultures.

As part of Project Onboard Denmark, Signe has conducted interviews with companies and has played a key role in developing and testing tools focused on Danish work culture.

TALENTED

Dr. Poornima Luthra is an Associate Professor at the Copenhagen Business School and an award-winning educator recognised for her work in the field of diversity and inclusion. She is also the author of the books "Diversifying Diversity" and "The Art of Active Allyship."

Poornima's contributions to Project Onboard Denmark include conducting interviews with companies, developing tools related to onboarding, diversity, inclusion, and cultural understanding, and facilitating workshops with companies to test these tools.

PARTNERS



Dansk Industri

Dansk Industri's Global Talent and Mobility Team supports Danish companies to attract and retain international employees by working with HR and leadership teams – running networking and information-sharing events as well as developing online tools to assist companies in their international operations.

For Project Onboard Denmark they have provided access to companies for data collection, suggestions for strategic directions to consider during the project's development and hosted our Steering Group meetings.

COPENHAGEN CAPACITY

Copenhagen Capacity attracts international companies, investment, and professional talent to ensure continuous, sustainable growth in Denmark and in the Greater Copenhagen Region.

For Project Onboard Denmark, Copenhagen Capacity has been assisting in recruiting companies for data collection, taking responsibility for setting up the website, digitising the tools, and implementing them on the website.



Until February 2023, Business Region Aarhus supported local companies in attracting, onboarding, and retaining international talent in Aarhus and nearby cities. They also provided information and networking opportunities for internationals. These activities are now managed by Erhverv Aarhus.

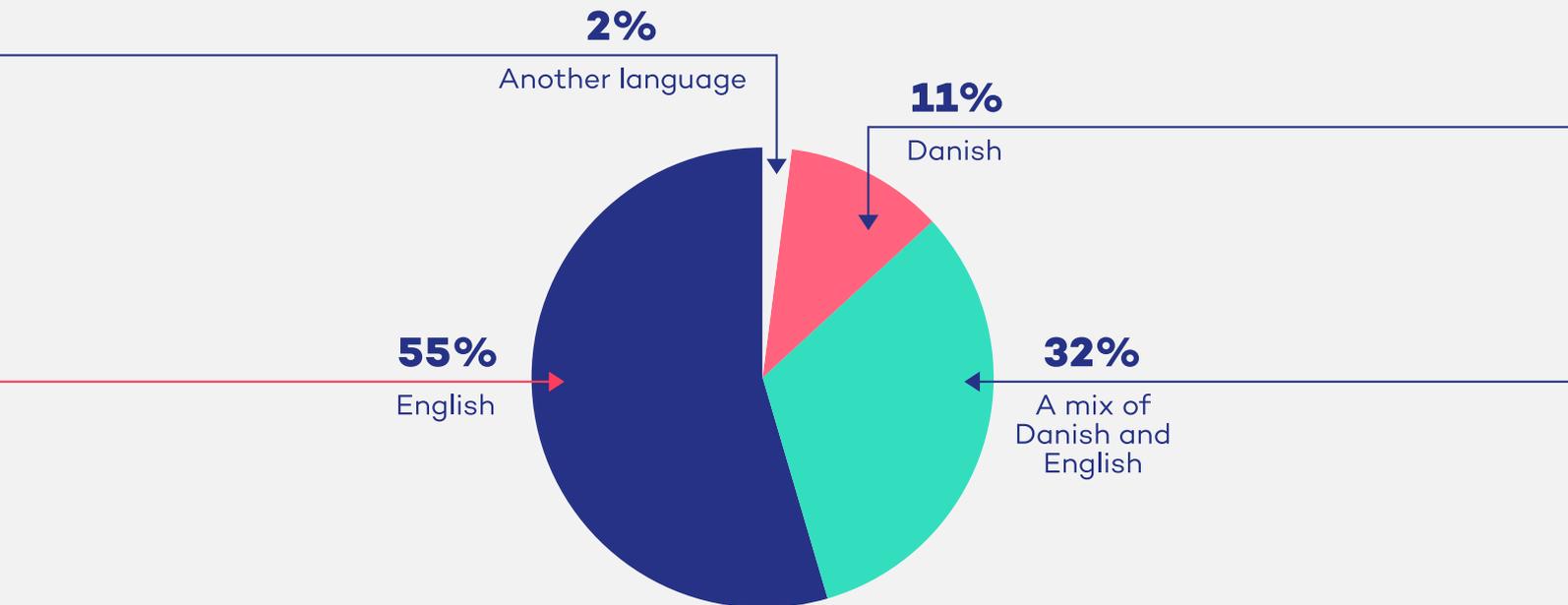
Business Region Aarhus recruited companies for the data collection and conducted workshops on international hiring, cross-cultural collaboration, and networking in Denmark.



The University of Copenhagen serves as the project lead.//

LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN DANISH WORKPLACES

An increasing number of companies in Denmark have adopted English as their corporate language over the last few years. Some do this in order to accommodate the growing number of international professionals they are recruiting, while others have made this move as part of a strategy to globalise, engage in a wider, international market, because they are owned by non-Danish partners, or have subsidiaries abroad. Our survey also confirms this trend, with over half of the companies (n=73) that responded using English as their corporate language, and one third (n=43) employing a mix of Danish and English.

CORPORATE LANGUAGE

While some companies we interviewed believed that English language proficiency was not a concern for their employees as most would have received at least part of their education taught in English at Danish universities, many other companies identified language barriers as a key issue in their workplaces. This research note explores some of the dilemmas that arise around the use of language in the workplace as more companies adopt English as their corporate language and/or have to operate in at least two languages due to hiring (more) international employees.

Working in Danish puts internationals' professional identity at stake

The ability to express oneself clearly and professionally is a vital skill, that communicates professional identity, and that builds trusts, respect and credibility in workplace collaborations.

However, this can be challenged in situations where individuals are required to work in a language that is not one they are fluent or educated in. This dilemma was raised during our research with both Danish companies and by international professionals.

Among the 26 high-skilled international professionals we interviewed, only one individual worked solely in Danish, as it was required by their public sector workplace. Even those international professionals who were in the process of learning Danish or considered themselves fluent in the language, expressed worries about not being able to perform their duties as professionally as they would like, if they had to work in Danish. They recognised that using Danish as a non-native speaker might hinder their ability to effectively express themselves and could potentially undermine their professional identity. As a result, many international professionals relied on English to maintain their professionalism and ensure effective communication in the workplace.

Copenhagen and larger global companies attracted international professionals because English was the corporate language, so they were not required to undertake their duties in Danish. One high-skilled international professional, born and raised in Denmark but having lived most of her

life in the UK, was contemplating a move to a larger multinational company in Denmark. She explained

“I don't feel as comfortable in Danish as I do in English because my whole working life has been in English. So I think I sound cleverer and more professional in English.”

- High-skilled professional, UK

Another international left her previous workplace in Jutland because the companies' expectations around their working language changed, requiring her to use Danish. However, even though she worked to find creative ways to deal with this challenge and actively sought out opportunities to mainly work in English, she ultimately changed jobs and relocated to Copenhagen, as the challenge around language became too much.

“I just don't want to work in Danish because I would like to feel competent”

- High-skilled professional, Hungary

Some companies in Jutland also emphasised the necessity for Danish language skills:

“Danish is not a requirement for us. We mix languages a lot, especially in our department, but also throughout the company. However, it is undoubtedly a significant advantage for newcomers to be proficient in Danish, as we are located in North Jutland, where many things are in Danish. This includes messages from management and paperwork for opening bank accounts. It's all in Danish.”

- IT company

Switching from English to Danish when it becomes too technical

Similar to many international employees expressing resistance to working in Danish, some Danes also shared a similar sentiment regarding working in English. It appeared that for some, communicating in English was perceived as a challenge to

collaboration and drawing on all your professional competencies, particularly when dealing with complex and technical work tasks.

One international who was leading organisational transformation in a large Danish company explained:

“So there's a real resistance from some of the different business areas to the fact that the programme pushes out information in English only, ... we recently had a briefing session for the different leaders. ... But there were, I think, only two people out of 60-70 who were non-Danish speakers, and therefore everything was in English. And that was a real issue ... we had lots of feedback saying, ‘that's not fair. We don't understand that sophisticated IT language in English’.”

- Large Danish company



Similarly, as explained by an HR leader for a large international company:

“I think the biggest issue we have right now is that Danes tend to speak Danish, especially if we are dealing with really complex projects and problems.”

- Engineering company

A native English speaker also noticed that, despite Danes generally having a high level of English proficiency, she had to adapt her language when communicating with Danish colleagues due to their limited familiarity with the more advanced English she was accustomed to, having previously worked in the UK.

Thus, language challenges not only appeared to limit effective collaboration, communication, and a sense of inclusion among

international employees but to also constrain the expression and sharing of diverse perspectives and ideas across the team – both for Danes and non-Danes.

Negotiating language

Various dilemmas arose around language. A key dilemma was in teams or during meetings where only one or two colleagues were non-Danes.

“I feel a bit conflicted because when we switch to English in meetings and so on, as there are some English-speaking individuals, we also lose some understanding among the others (Danes). So, you might have 10 people in that meeting struggling to express themselves because it's the language understood by the 11th person.”

- Architecture company

Many companies discussed needing to negotiate what to do in different circumstances - when language became a barrier to workplace collaboration and inclusion.

One particular company, they started to tackle the language issue head-on once they reached the threshold of 10 international hires, indicating a turning point for switching the corporate language.

A second central dilemma identified by companies and international professionals was language use in informal spaces. Many instances were recounted when internationals felt awkward or even excluded because Danes chose to continue in Danish when they would join them in the kitchen, at lunch, during social events, at the start of a meeting.

Some expressed gratitude that even after several years their colleagues would still switch to English when they were present, indicating that there seems to be a "safe period" where it is not expected for internationals to know Danish. However, as time progresses, expectations may change, and internationals may be expected to either work in Danish or, at least, be able to follow and contribute to casual conversations in Danish. This is indirectly conveyed in the following quote by an international employee:

“They asked if there are some non-Danish people present ... and they started the meeting in English. And then after 10 minutes, it changed to Danish so I was the only one (international) who could follow. But I had colleagues from

Israel. I have colleagues from other countries, from Brazil. I remember they were actually very new to Denmark. So nobody can expect them to understand that language (Danish).”

- High-skilled professional, Iran

Internationals had varying experiences and view about Danes speaking Danish during ‘down-time’ and informally at work. While some found it exclusionary since the company language was English, others coped with the situation by recognising it as "normal" to want to speak in one's mother tongue, especially when they were “off duty”. Some even preferred that Danes spoke in Danish, as they were trying to learn the language, and found that Danes readily switched to English if asked.

In work situations, however, internationals mentioned that it felt like a form of exclusion when meetings would continue in Danish. International colleagues felt resentful when it was their responsibility to remind people to switch to English, or when someone would point out that they were the only reason the meeting language was English. One international noted:

“Ideally, I would just have people switch by themselves or say, ‘hey, let's switch to English’ and not point towards me that I'm the reason they have to switch.”

- High-skilled professional, Germany



ON FRIDAY WE HAVE BREAKFAST IN THE OFFICE, AND THEY SPEAK DANISH, EVEN WHEN I AM THERE THEY JUST SPEAK DANISH. THEY SWITCH TO ENGLISH IF I ASK THEM TO SWITCH TO ENGLISH. BUT I PREFER THAT BECAUSE THEN I WILL BE PUSHED TO LEARN DANISH.”

- HIGH-SKILLED PROFESSIONAL, PERU



Best practices

To address these various challenges and dilemmas around language, companies implemented various solutions. Some adopted a strategy of mixing Danish and international employees in teams. This approach aimed to encourage Danes, who might feel hesitant about speaking English, to overcome any personal insecurities around language skills. By doing so, they would discover that nobody has perfect English. Additionally, some companies provided language lessons primarily in Danish for international employees, while one company also offered English language sessions to support all employees in enhancing their language competencies and confidence (as few have English as their first language).

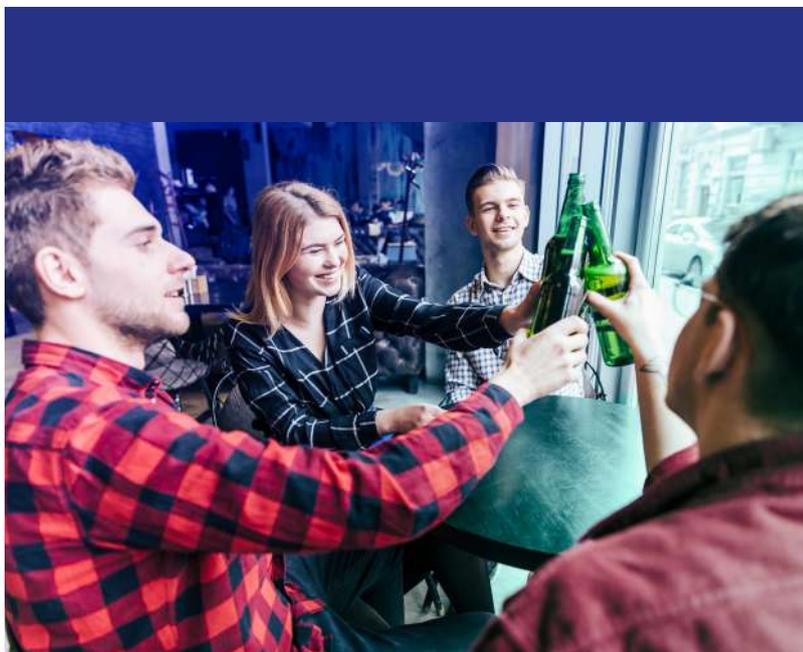
In meetings, some companies allowed Danes to present in Danish while using English slides, while others organised separate meetings in Danish and English. Written communication, like newsletters, was produced in both languages to accommodate the needs of all employees. One company utilised an auto-translator from Danish to English and provided friendly reminders to write in English during the transition phase of their corporate language from Danish to English.

The overriding sense from discussions with companies and international professionals around the issue of language, was that it needed to be discussed and solutions to challenges actively negotiated, implemented and reviewed – if this issue was to be resolved to some extent.//





BUT WHY IS IT SO CHALLENGING FOR INTERNATIONALS TO BECOME FRIENDS WITH DANES?



CHALLENGES OF SOCIALISING IN DENMARK

The annual Expat Insider Survey compares various places in the world based on respondents' evaluations of their lives abroad. The majority **66%** of expats living in Denmark find it hard to make local friends, compared to **36%** globally, and one third reported being unhappy with their social life in Denmark (Expat Insider 2023).

Another survey carried out by Oxford Research in 2020 specifically explored expats' experiences of living and working in Denmark and found similar results, with **43%** of respondents finding it difficult to make friends in Denmark.

The findings suggest that it is indeed challenging for internationals to make friends in Denmark.

But why is it so challenging for internationals to become friends with Danes?



2 out of 3 expats find
it hard to make Danish
friends

Source: Expat Insider 2023



THE EXPAT BUBBLE

The internationals explained the challenges in befriending Danes, when so many already had well-established social circles, comprised of friends and family. This meant Danes had limited motivation and time to seek out and develop new friendships. Conversely, internationals, lacking a social network in a foreign country, have a greater need for new friends and were more open to socialising. Consequently, many described their social circles as consisting of other internationals or Danes married to non-Danes.

The people I meet will be parents at my children's school. That's an international school and they're all used to being the newbie so within, you know, a week of being a new mum, "uh, let's go for a coffee or let's go for a drink.' Whereas my experience is that Danes won't do that necessarily take that initiative."

- HIGH-SKILLED PROFESSIONAL, UK



Internationals also found it easier to communicate and form deeper connections with other internationals, as they can relate to the experience of starting a new life in a foreign country. They believed that the lack of engagement with Danes outside work stemmed from a lack of awareness, time, and interest in making new friends.

For some, the challenge of making Danish friends was disheartening:

“I only hang out with Japanese people. So sometimes I feel a bit sad because I came from Japan to live in Copenhagen. And at work, it's international. But then my private life is surrounded by only Japanese. I don't think I have any Danish friends.”

- High-skilled professional, Japan



**Don't
plan it,
just go
for it**

Not being able to make local friends could impact on internationals' decision about how long to remain in Denmark. This is supported by the Expat Study (2020), which indicated that internationals who did not socialise with Danes were more likely to leave Denmark earlier than they had initially intended.

The lack of social interaction with colleagues outside of work was experienced as less of an issue for some, as they did not expect their Danish colleagues to initiate social invitations. This expectation was based on information they had gathered online and heard from others. Therefore, when it happened, it did not come as a big surprise to them.

Some internationals also explained that they didn't put much effort into making friends with Danes because they had been told that it was difficult to do so. This lack of effort seemed to confirm their belief, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Internationals in our research mentioned Ireland and the UK, a number of Southern European and South American countries as more open in terms of locals' willingness towards meeting new people, than they had experienced in Denmark. In these countries, it was perceived as customary to go out with colleagues for drinks or dinner after work without prior planning. One interviewee noted;

“Being spontaneous; now it's Friday. Let's go grab a beer. We agreed on it like 10 minutes ago. With Danes, let's open the calendar...”

- High-skilled professional, Croatia

This lack of spontaneity can make it challenging for internationals to form informal bonds with their Danish colleagues outside of work.

The lack of spontaneity in Denmark was seen as related to the strong separation between work and private life that dominated, as one interviewee explained, "I think people have to go and pick up their kids, so work is separate. There is less socialising after work, which is quite a big thing in the UK." Another international explained that her colleagues were friendly at work but never took the next step required to move from colleagues to potentially - friends. This made her feel lonely and isolated after working hours because her colleagues would go home to their families and friends.

Additionally, socialising in Danish workplaces often occurred on specific days, such as "Thursday bar" or "Friday bar," which tended to revolve around alcohol. This did not suit everyone's interests, especially those who did not drink alcohol.

Danish in informal settings

Almost 70% of internationals living in Denmark say they find it easy to live here without speaking the Danish, just as many report that they do not require Danish language skills for their jobs (InterNations 2022). However, our research found that even when English is the corporate language and although most Danes have a high proficiency in English, not having

some Danish language skills can lead to internationals feeling excluded from social situations both inside and outside the workplace.

This finding is echoed in the Expat Study by Oxford Research (2020), which revealed that 9 out of 10 internationals believe that speaking Danish to some extent is necessary for a good social life in Denmark. The high-skilled internationals we interviewed also mentioned that socialising with Danes outside of work was a greater challenge when you didn't know the language.

Ironically, when some internationals tried to practice their language skills in their daily lives, they found it difficult as Danes would immediately switch to English upon hearing their non-Danish accents, which could be quite frustrating and demoralising. One international, who was fluent in Swedish, said:

“I thought at the beginning, rather than speaking English, because I also feel guilty for always speaking a different language, I should speak something that's closer to Danish but it was such a shock to me that it didn't work at all. ... I even sometimes got told by people 'actually can we speak in English?’”

- High-skilled professional, Swedish/British

If internationals are not encouraged to practice their Danish, this can potentially hinder their opportunities for socialising and befriending Danes.

Although English was the corporate language in many companies, internationals regularly experienced that their Danish colleagues would switch to Danish during informal conversations over lunch, coffee breaks, and even at some celebration events – where the proceedings themselves might be in Danish.

“There have been interactions where there's a bit of awkwardness that I would not experience when I was in my home country. And that is more in the social interactions. Corporate events, celebration events.”

- High-skilled professional, Canada

Some internationals described a feeling of awkwardness when they were deciding whether to, or wanted to try to join in a conversation that was being conducted in Danish. Their lack of Danish proficiency might hinder them joining in, or the lack of awareness or willingness of their Danish colleagues to switch to English when they realised a non-Danish speaker was in the same space as them – made these usually non-formal situations, but in some cases also more formal circumstances frustrating or even upsetting, leading to a feeling of exclusion.

"If, you know, six people are eating together and four of them are speaking Danish and the other two can't, it also is sort of an excluding behaviour," one high-skilled professional from Iceland explained. Internationals felt they were more attuned to this challenge, so even if they spoke and/or understand Danish, they reported they would switch immediately to English if a non-Danish speaking person joined.

"I might be sat with 15 people, and I'm the only one who notices an English person has joined I will immediately switch to English because I don't want them to feel excluded. Everybody else will finish the conversation first about what it is we're talking about now."

- High-skilled professional, Danish/British

Our findings suggest that even though Danes are able to speak English and use it for the most part when working, they feel more comfortable communicating in Danish in informal situations both inside and outside of the workplace.

While this is completely understandable, this has very real consequences for how socially integrated internationals can become both in their workplaces, but critically too, in Danish society more broadly.

How to make Danish friends

A couple of internationals interviewed had successfully made Danish friends, while others hoped that their existing relationships with Danes would turn into friendships over time. They believed that meeting and befriending Danes could be achieved by enrolling their children in Danish schools and participating in various social activities both at work and outside of work, such as sports clubs.

Another approach was to be proactive and initiate contact with Danes directly and with purpose. However, speaking Danish fluently was considered the most crucial factor in facilitating the formation of friendships with Danes, as, understandably, it is their preferred language in informal situations. //

A photograph of three young people walking away from the camera on a city street. On the left, a young man with a blue visor and a black backpack. In the center, a young woman with long dark hair and a black shoulder bag. On the right, a young man in a red and blue plaid shirt with a large black backpack. The background is a blurred city street with buildings and a blue sky.

REASONS FOR STUDYING IN DENMARK AND THE STRUGGLE FOR WORK

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Experiences from recent
international graduates



International students who graduate from Danish universities can contribute significantly to the Danish economy. For instance, a study found that those graduating between 2007 and 2011 contributed, on average, 2 million DKK to the Danish economy over a period of 13 years (Damvad 2022:3). Yet, a high percentage of international graduates leave Denmark soon after graduation.

Thirty two percent of those graduating from a University College in 2015 had left Denmark within three months, increasing to 40% after one year and 49% after two years. The corresponding figures for those graduating from Danish universities are 40%, 47%, and 53%, respectively (Uddannelses- og Forskningsministeriet 2020).

This is a problem for Denmark – given the value international graduates bring to the economy and in meeting the country’s labour shortages. We researched a little more closely first, why international students come to Denmark in the first place and second, the reasons for staying or leaving after graduation.

We conducted interviews with 25 recently graduated international students who had completed a master's degree at a Danish university. Our study revealed that a lack of access to professional networks and that a low level of proficiency in the Danish language are significant barriers for international graduates to find employment after graduation.

THE STRUGGLE OF FINDING A JOB

The experience of finding relevant job experience while still studying varied. Some were successful in securing work that required that to apply their knowledge and skills, but many did not. Consequently, the latter group had to settle for unskilled jobs such as cleaning or unpaid internships.

Once participants had graduated, they often prioritised looking for work in companies where English was the corporate language and that appeared to have a more diverse workforce. Consequently, the majority of our interviewees tended to seek opportunities in larger companies and concentrate their job search in the Copenhagen area.

Many graduates from Danish universities report a fierce competition for jobs and an expectation from employers that they have extensive work experience. However, for international graduates, the challenges of finding work are even greater due to their often limited Danish language skills as well as having few professional and social networks they can draw on.

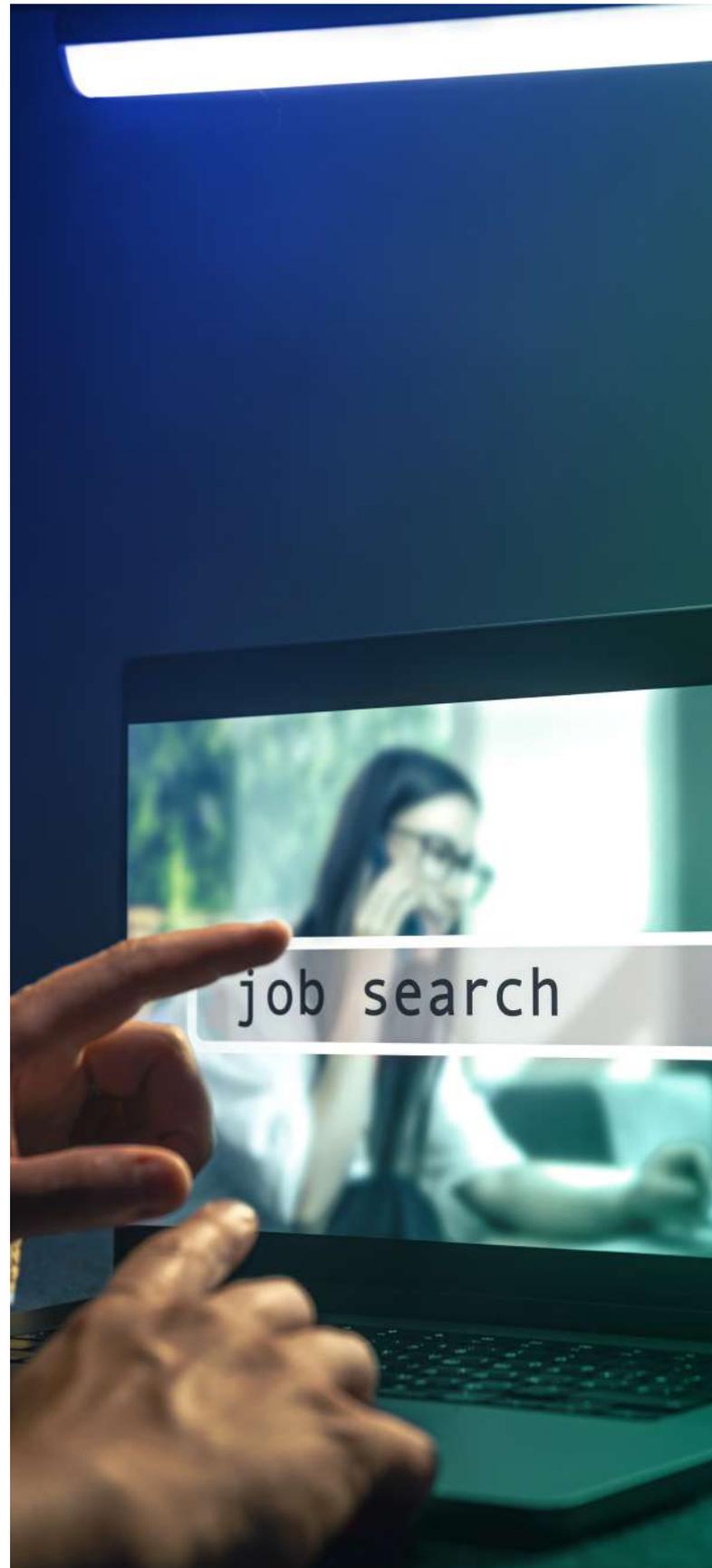


GETTING A JOB IN DENMARK WASN'T EASY AT ALL. AFTER UNIVERSITY, I REALISED HOW NETWORK-BASED DENMARK IS. IT IS JUST LIKE IN ANY OTHER COUNTRY, RIGHT? YOU HAVE TO KNOW THE RIGHT PEOPLE, BUT I WASN'T AWARE THAT IT WOULD BE LIKE THAT IN DENMARK. I DIDN'T HAVE A PROFESSIONAL NETWORK. AND THEN ALSO THE LANGUAGE. ONLY AFTER I FINISHED MY STUDIES, I REALISED THAT THE LANGUAGE WOULD BE A BIG ADVANTAGE TO FIND A JOB."

- INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE,
GERMANY

International graduates emphasised the critical importance of a network when seeking a job in Denmark. Finding full-time employment proved easier for those who had held a 'student-relevant job' during their studies or who were recommended by their PhD supervisors to an employer. This is supported by a 2022 report from The Confederation of Danish Industry, which surveyed 138 member organisations and that those international students who had held part-time jobs while studying were more likely to secure employment quickly after graduation than those who had not worked alongside their studies. Additionally, the likelihood of securing a job increased exponentially with the number of hours worked per week in a 'student-relevant job'.

Other methods of finding employment reported by our research participants included recruitment through LinkedIn or assistance from a hiring agency. Additionally, some of the international graduates we interviewed joined initiatives such as the Young Professionals in Denmark (YPD) and the Greater Copenhagen Career Programme (GCCP) to expand their professional network and meet potential employers. However, Danish job centres and A-kasse were not viewed as helpful, and international graduates expressed their desire for more assistance from universities when applying for jobs.//



TOOLS FOR ONBOARDING AND RETAINING

high-skilled internationals

Based on three years of research (for more information about the project and data collection, please see page 06), we have developed eight digital tools that are designed to empower companies in onboarding and retaining high-skilled international professionals in a Danish context. The tools consist of workshops and advice for companies that are thinking of or have already hired high-skilled internationals. They cover areas such as language, 360 onboarding audit, writing a diversity and inclusion strategy, and how to manage cultural differences in a team.

How to access and use the tools

All the tools are available on our website, **onboarddenmark.dk**.

The tools are free of charge and self-service, meaning that they can be used without the need for an external facilitator. However, you also have the option to hire one of the female founders of Onboard Denmark to run the workshops.

Developed and tested with companies

The tools have been developed based on the challenges and needs identified by companies in Denmark. Subsequently, the tools were tested with several companies and internationals interested in trying them. Finally, the tools were fine-tuned and made available in a digital format.

1.

360 Onboarding audit

Target group: HR professionals and others responsible for onboarding

Responsible: Dr. Poornima Luthra & Signe Biering

The 360 Onboarding Audit facilitates a comprehensive review of your company's onboarding process. You will map your company's existing onboarding procedures and gain inspiration for potential improvements. The tool also provides a set of reflective questions for deeper analysis, as well as a questionnaire intended for current or prospective high-skilled international employees to provide feedback on their onboarding experience at your company.

2.

Cultivating empathy

Target group: All employees, including Danes and internationals

Responsible: Dr. Poornima Luthra

The Cultivating Empathy tool provides employees to challenge and reflect upon their assumptions about how people different from themselves experience the workplace. Designed as a workshop and facilitated by a colleague from HR, this tool requires employees to engage in role-playing when responding to the prompts from the facilitator. The debrief guiding encourages deep reflection while allows employees to cultivate empathy for others, including internationals.



THE “COMPANY DNA” WORKSHOP, GAVE US THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE AN EXPERIENCED EXTERNAL FACILITATOR TO GUIDE THE DISCUSSION. IT HELPED US TALK ABOUT NEW TOPICS AND GAVE PARTICIPANTS A SAFE SPACE FOR SHARING THEIR THOUGHTS. THE DISCUSSIONS RESULTED IN A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT TAKEAWAYS THAT WE HAD NOT ANTICIPATED.”

- STINE HALMIND, HEAD OF PEOPLE AND CULTURE, JANUAR

3. Cultural thumbprint

Target group: Danish and international employees
Responsible: Dr. Poornima Luthra

Each one of us has a cultural thumbprint that reflects our nationality, ethnic background, places we have lived and work, influences from close family members, etc. In this tool, employees are asked to reflect on how they communicate, provide feedback, lead others, as well as their motivators amongst other aspects within a workplace context. The outcome of this reflection is a visual of their cultural thumbprint which can be used for self-reflection as well as a team building activity to enhance positive team collaboration and dynamics.

4. D&I strategy

Target group: HR professionals
Responsible: Dr. Poornima Luthra

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) have become a core aspect of most organisation's HR priorities. Yet, for many organisations, defining a D&I strategy is seen as being challenging and elusive. In this tool, through a step-by-step guided approach and workshop format, the organisation is able to develop their own D&I strategy that reflects and aligns with the organisation's values and priorities. By the end of the workshop using this tool, the HR team will have a set of actions to be done in the short, medium and long term that would enable the company to implement its D&I strategy.

5. Social and professional networking plan

Target group: High-skilled internationals
Responsible: Dr. Poornima Luthra & Signe Biering Nielsen

Whether you are looking for a job, aiming to advance in your career, or looking to make new friends in Denmark, our social and professional networking plan will assist you in defining your networking goals and how to attain them. The plan includes elements such as why you want to network, potential barriers to networking, how to overcome them, and the next steps to begin networking. The plan can serve as an individual tool, but it can also be shared with team leaders or mentors as a more concrete action plan.

6. Danish culture game

Target group: Danish and international employees
Responsible: Signe Biering Nielsen

Our Culture Game is designed for both Danes and international participants to engage in discussions about the six key elements of Danish culture that we have identified in our research. The game includes a combination of factual statements about Denmark, as well as fictional scenarios that could occur within a Danish context. The aim of the game is to engage both Danes and internationals in identifying how they experience these Danish traits and their views on them, while having some fun in doing so and getting to know each other a little better.

7. Language tool

Target groups: Executive team HR and internationals

Responsible: Signe Biering Nielsen & Claire Maxwell

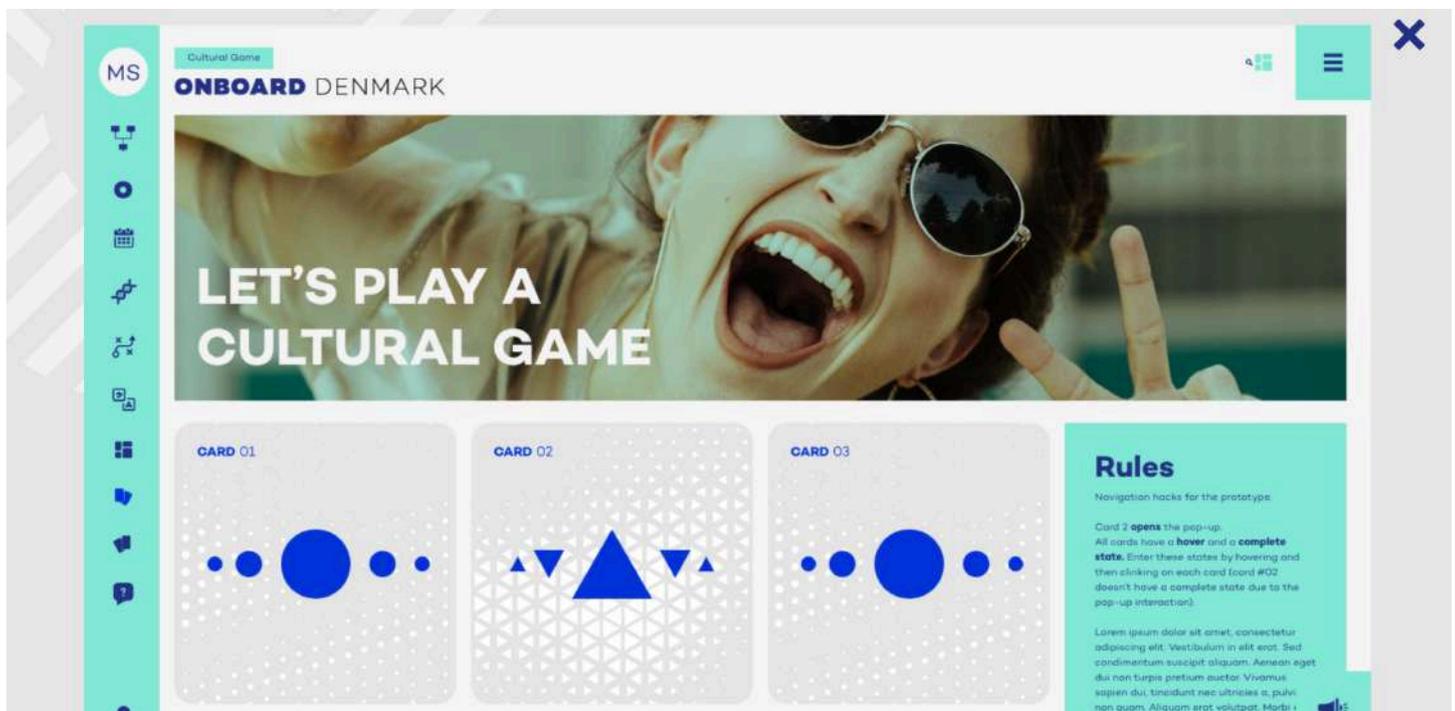
The language tool aims to raise awareness around the tricky issues many companies experience around having Danish or English as your company language. How do colleagues – both Danes and internationals – perceive a change of company language? How might it impact their sense of belonging and ability to contribute professionally? These are some of the questions that you are urged to discuss in your company, at all levels, to ensure that decisions regarding language are sound and reflect your company's culture and mix of employees.

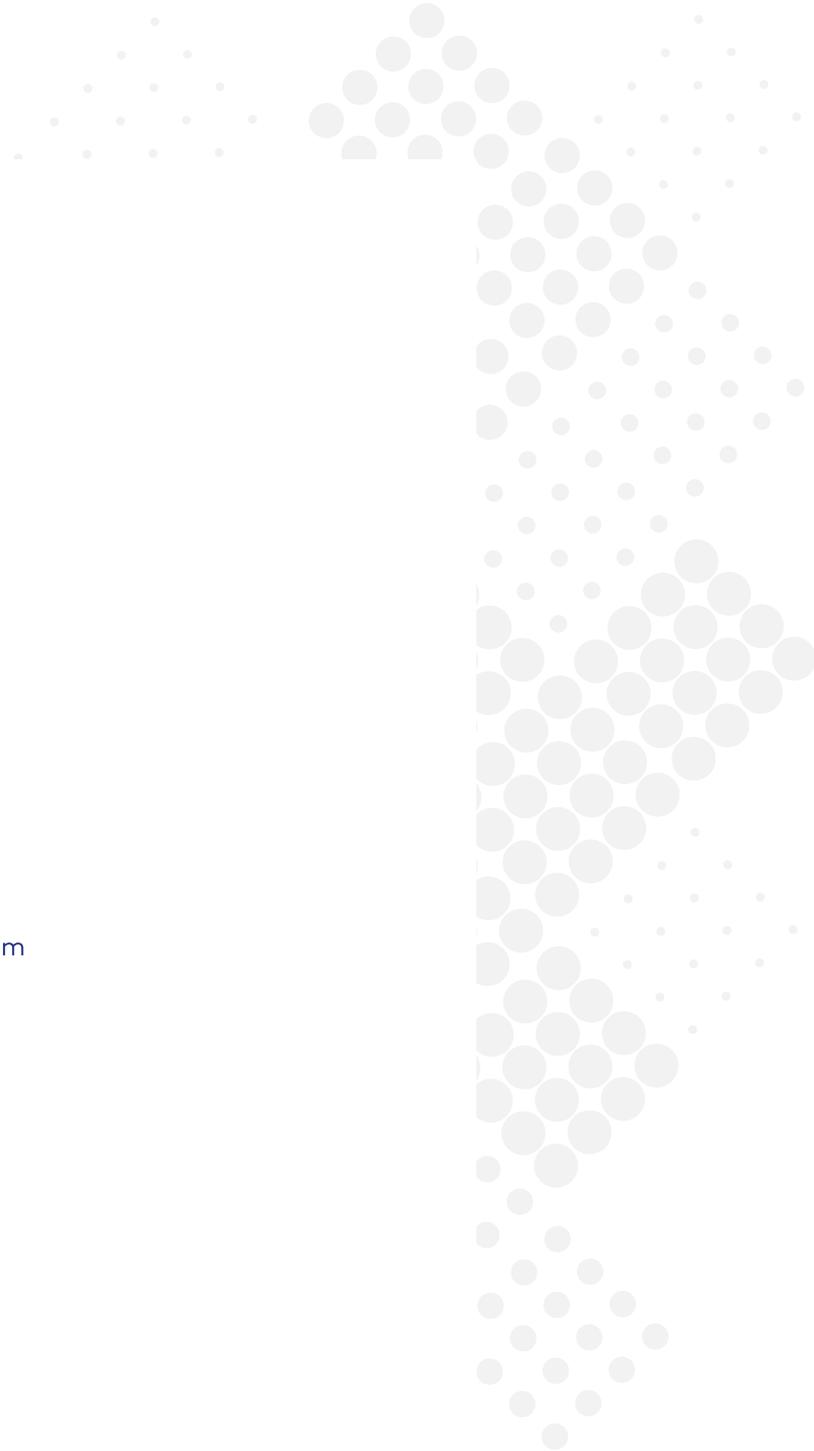
8. Company DNA

Target groups: Executive team HR and employees

Responsible: Signe Biering Nielsen

This tool enables a company to clearly articulate the key elements that make up their company culture – so they can share it with newcomers. This is important particularly for international hires, so they can come to understand how things work at their new company. The tool consists of a comprehensive workshop guide that enables leadership or HR to facilitate a workshop. At the end of the workshop – you will have a collection of key elements that constitute your company culture, as well as identifying possible issues the company might want to consider further when seeking to clearly communicate their culture.//





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