

Application strategies in Germany - facts and figures for foreigners

Applying for a job in Germany

With its wide range of job opportunities, Germany has become increasingly popular with international qualified professionals from all over the world pursuing a career in Germany. To maximize your chances of success in securing the position you are interested in, we recommend first of all acquainting yourself with the German application process.

A typical job application in Germany consists of a motivational cover letter, a matter-of-fact curriculum vitae (CV), a portrait-style professional photo, and credentials such as copies of diplomas or training certificates. Unless applying for a “creative job”, German job applications are rather conservative, factual and businesslike in writing tone and style.

Cover letter

This is a one-page formal letter expressing your motivation: why are you interested in this job? And why are you the right person for this position? The cover letter is the first chance any applicant has to impress a potential employer and persuade them to let them enter the next round. In Germany, the cover letter is typically customized for each position you seek.

Refer to the profile of qualifications as listed in the job description and relate your skills to the competencies required in the job. Point out how your particular abilities and expert knowledge match the company’s demands.

If the job advert asks you to submit your salary expectations, this information should be included in the cover letter as well. Research what the salary range is in your industry.

The letter should be addressed to the contact person named in the advert, and include a subject line stating the position you are applying for. It should be closed with a polite salutation and your signature. Indicate your availability for further questions and/or interviews and inform the employer about the earliest possible date when you could start the job.

CV

Compared to countries where a CV may well contain career objective statements or list one’s personal qualities and strengths, the standard German CV is laid out as a factsheet. Its contents are divided into different sections with a separate heading each, such as “Personal Details”, “Professional Experience”, or “Education and Training”.

The data underneath each heading is organized in a two-columned table: on the left-hand side, you enter the exact dates or timeframes for the activities that you list on the right-hand side. It will be of advantage to adhere to this layout, as German employers will find it easier to process any documents and gain the information they are looking for if they find everything where expected.

A German CV is usually limited to a maximum of two pages. Professionals who have accumulated many years of work history, or who are expected to present a highly detailed CV, such as medical doctors specifying their practical experience, may require three pages. As employers tend to scan information rather than read, short sentences and bullet points are preferable and increase your chance of the recruiter taking in significant points at a glance.

“Personal Details” should contain your name and address, telephone number, email address, and date and place of birth. Nationality and marital status are often included as well.

Under “Professional Experience”, list your previous jobs in reverse chronological order, starting with the most recent one. Use keywords to precisely describe the most significant tasks and responsibilities connected with these jobs: this offers potential employers a much better insight into your skills and experience than when simply reading the job title of the positions you have held. It is not necessary to mention each single side job but focus on the relevant ones while at the same time ensuring that your work history is gap-free. Where applicable, parental leave times can be included as well.

The “Education and Training” section summarizes your educational background, starting with the most recent education or training you have received.

Here, you can list academic results such as degrees and diplomas that you have completed. If in doubt whether the reader will understand the academic terms and abbreviations you use, give full titles instead.

Under this heading, you would also specify any occupational qualifications such as apprenticeships or other work and professional training you have completed.

You can create a section of “Volunteer Work” to mention any relevant volunteering you have done. Here, you can state any memberships of groups or organizations as well.

A German CV typically contains a “Skills” section specifying your computer and language skills. For computer skills, refer to the names of programs you have experience with, such as in word processing, spreadsheet applications, or databases.

Under language skills, list all languages and the level of proficiency you have achieved: fluent, advanced, intermediate, or beginner. Depending on the job requirements, it may be of advantage to distinguish between written and verbal skills. Estimate language skills realistically in case they are tested during the interview.

Where applicable, the CV can include a “Publications” section containing any publications you have contributed to.

It is common practice in Germany to date and sign your CV at the bottom of the last page.

Photo

Even though employers may not explicitly demand a photo in their job adverts, it is standard practice in Germany to include one with your application.

Any professional photo studio will know exactly what employers expect once you have informed them about the kind of job you are applying for. They will support you in selecting the right format and background for the photo, and can offer advice on the suitable outfit for the photo session.

The photo can either be attached to the top right-hand corner of your CV or can be placed on a separate cover sheet, this way creating a dedicated title page for your application documents. In addition to your photo, this title page should give your name and contact details and indicate what position you are applying for.

Credentials

In Germany, it is common practice to support each item that is mentioned in your CV by credentials. Examples of academic credentials include your secondary school or college

diploma, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, PhD or Doctorate degree. Occupational credentials include apprenticeships, trade certificates, professional licenses, or proof of any relevant training courses or further education programs you have completed. Send copies of these credentials only, not originals, as documents will not always be returned.

When employees in Germany leave their job, they receive a job reference certificate from their employer. This certificate details their tasks and responsibilities and indicates how satisfied the employer was with their performance. Copies of these certificates or comparable references from previous employers would be included with the application as well.

German or English

Unless you have excellent German language skills, foreign applicants are usually recommended to send their job application in English.

Postal or online application

Check the job listing for specific instructions about the preferred method of application. When sending out documents by post, these should go into a dedicated job application folder that can be purchased at any office supply store.

For online applications, exactly follow the instructions as outlined in the job posting: which email address should the application be sent to? Which documents are required? Will attachments be accepted, or should information be pasted into the email body instead? Name any attachments clearly.

Applicants are recommended to use a professional-sounding email address that can easily be connected with their person.

Larger organizations often have their own application portal in place where applicants will be able to upload their personal documents and fill in any details directly online.

Job interview

Once the next step in the application process has been reached and you have been invited for an interview, try and reserve some time to prepare for this. German employers will expect any applicants to have researched their company beforehand and to be familiar with the basic details. Even though not all companies offer a fully translated English version of their website, you will be able to gain a first impression of the employer in question. Further online research can provide additional information about the company in English.

Apart from punctuality and a conservative outfit, a lot of importance is placed on shaking hands in Germany. Upon entering the room, greet everyone present with a brief but firm handshake.

When addressing people, it is standard practice to use the polite form of Mr./ Ms. + title + last name. This can differ for some international businesses where people may be on a first-name basis right from the start. See how they introduce themselves and follow their example.

As a foreigner, be prepared to speak about your reasons for coming to Germany: what has brought you here? How long are you planning to stay? What is your impression of the country / Berlin / German culture?

In this context, potential employers are likely to inquire about an applicant's language skills and their general willingness to learn German. If you have not enrolled in any class just yet, inform yourself about institutes offering courses or private tuition. As a lot of companies offer their

employees to take part in further education programs, ask your potential employer about any existing in-house opportunities.

Be ready to give a brief presentation of your person and a summary of your work history, and to answer any questions regarding your CV in detail.

Other 'standard' interview topics may include your experience, special skills, strengths and weaknesses, motivation, and how you can contribute to the company.

Employers will usually ask the applicant if there is anything they would like to know. It is therefore advisable to prepare a number of relevant questions in advance.

Be prepared for more than one interview round with people from different departments and hierarchy levels.

Depending on the business field, some employers like to inquire about an applicant's desired salary during the first interview already. Research beforehand what the typical salary range in your industry is and what types of benefits can be expected.

Locating job openings

Germany's largest online job portal is the Federal Employment Agency's "jobboerse.arbeitsagentur.de". Vacancies can also be located through the European Employment Services network at "europa.eu.int/eures". Other well-known portals include "stepstone.de", "indeed.de", "monster.de", "jobware.de" and "jobscout24.de".

For some of the search engines, the site language can be changed to English, but you may find that the majority of the job postings themselves are in German. Try and enter the term 'English' into the search field to generate a list of results containing all English job offers.

In addition to that, a variety of smaller portals exists such as "jobsinberlin.eu" or the job section of "toytowngermany.com" - an English-language community website.

Regional newspapers "Der Tagesspiegel" or "Berliner Zeitung" contain their own job sections, with national papers such as "Die Zeit" and "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" listing vacancies for the entire country. The job sections of these papers can be browsed online as well.

If you have any specific company or organization in mind that you would like to work with, check their website for information about current job openings. You can submit an unsolicited job application as well: introduce yourself; specify why you would like to work with them, and what are your preferred work areas and location.

Networking

One of the leading business networks in German-speaking countries is "XING". This is a platform where professionals from all kinds of industries can establish contacts, offer or search for jobs, find cooperation partners for projects, etc. Members can upload their personal profiles, join a variety of different groups, and take part in local networking events.

The "LinkedIn" platform is increasingly used in Germany as well for presenting one's profile and looking for business contacts.

The use of social media networks allows for an active job search, and at the same time offers the chance of you being 'found' through social recruitment by a potential employer.