

Building Cultural Competency in your Job Search

*A practical guide for international professionals
navigating recruitment and expectations in the
Danish job market*

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Introduction

Many international professionals in Denmark bring strong qualifications, experience, and perspectives that are in high demand. At the same time, Denmark is facing a structural shortage of skilled labor.

However, many individuals with international backgrounds still experience challenges when applying for jobs or trying to find roles that match their qualifications.

Research shows that international professionals in Denmark have lower employment rates and weaker attachment to the labor market compared to people of Danish origin.ⁱ Studies also show that applicants with non-Danish-sounding names often need to send significantly more applications to receive the same number of interview invitations.ⁱⁱ

At the same time, up to 60% of highly educated refugees in Europe work in jobs below their qualification level.ⁱⁱⁱ This points to a broader issue: **the challenge is not only accessing jobs, but accessing jobs where your skills are recognized and used.** If your applications do not lead to interviews, this is not unusual – and not necessarily a reflection of your competencies alone.

This guide focuses on how applications and interviews are interpreted in practice, and **how you can present your competencies** more clearly within a Danish context.

Who this guide is for

This guide is intended for **highly educated internationals** living in Denmark who are:

- searching for their first job in Denmark
- trying to move into a role that better matches their qualifications
- experiencing uncertainty or lack of feedback in recruitment processes

The project behind the guide

This guide builds on qualitative data and insights collected during 2025, including interviews and a mapping workshop with 12 highly educated international professionals living in Denmark,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as a mapping workshop with representatives from five Danish companies.

The guide also draws on insights and practical experience from previous initiatives led by Foreningen Lige Adgang, including career mentoring programs and collaborations with Danish workplaces, which have contributed to identifying key barriers and effective practices in recruitment and workplace inclusion.

The guide was developed as part of the project Successful Labor Market Integration of Highly Skilled Migrants by Foreningen Lige Adgang, supported by **Fonden Københavns Sprogcenter**.

How to use this guide

This guide combines insight into why barriers may occur in your job search and practical ways to navigate them. It introduces **cultural competency** as a tool to better understand how **expectations** are shaped – and **how to navigate them more effectively**.

This involves awareness of:

- how norms shape the interpretation of communication and behavior
- how to navigate differences in norms and present your competencies



Many international professionals encounter similar barriers when navigating the Danish job market:

Limited access to networks and informal entry points

Many positions are shared through informal networks, referrals, or internal recommendations. Candidates without established local connections often have less access to opportunities or visibility among employers.

Difficulty getting international experience recognized

When employers have limited familiarity with international education systems, roles, and organizations, it can be harder to assess the level, relevance, and transferability of your' experience.

Preference for local experience

Experience from a Danish context can be used as a proxy for familiarity with workplace norms and expectations, which may negatively influence how other types of experience are assessed.

Limited transparency and unwritten expectations

When expectations around how to structure applications, present competencies, and communicate motivation are not made explicit, it can be difficult to navigate. A lack of clarity about stages, expectations, and decision criteria can make it harder for candidates to understand and respond to what is being assessed.

High or inconsistent language requirements

High expectations for Danish proficiency, combined with limited opportunities to develop language skills in a professional context, may delay or limit your access to relevant roles. Language expectations are at times applied inconsistently or introduced in later stages of the process.

Career paths interpreted without context

Career gaps, transitions, or shorter employments linked to relocation or entering a new labor market can be difficult to contextualize in order to prevent negative interpretations.

Limited access to internships and student jobs

Internships and student jobs are a common pathway into the Danish labor market, but access is often limited to students or individuals affiliated with systems such as an A-kasse.

Bias in evaluation and early-stage filtering

Some candidates experience that nationality, background, name, or communication style influences how they are assessed. This may be reinforced when there is an emphasis on “culture fit” rather than “culture add”.

These barriers do not affect everyone in the same way. **Experiences may also differ** depending on how candidates are perceived in relation to, for example, ethnicity, gender, or migration background.

While these barriers are structural and difficult to change as an individual, developing awareness of the assumptions that shape the Danish job market can make it easier to recognize and, where possible, challenge them. Within this context, you can work to make **your competencies more visible** and easier to interpret – without reducing yourself or your experience.

Cultural norms

What is recognized as competence?

In Danish workplace contexts, **competence is often associated with:**

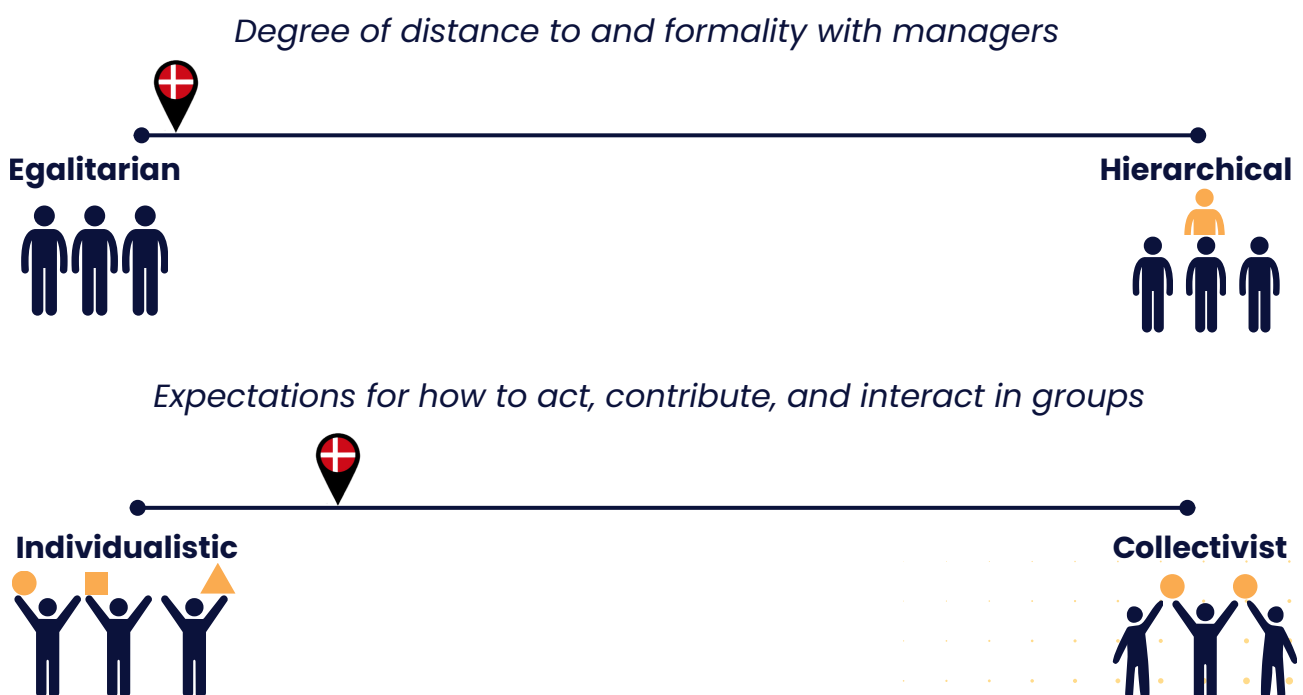
- taking initiative without being asked
- being able to work independently and valuing autonomy
- contributing clearly as an individual
- collaborating with a focus on shared tasks
- communicating confidently without appearing overly self-promoting

A practical lens: Cultural spectrums



Drawing on frameworks for **cultural mapping**, differences in values, beliefs, customs, and norms for behavior and communication across countries can be understood as positions along cultural spectrums.

The spectrum figures illustrate an **indicative placement of Denmark** based on visual interpretation of cultural mapping frameworks, including Signe Ørum's work.^v



What is valued and recognized in contribution and achievement



Understanding of and approach to risk and mistakes



How messages are communicated in interaction

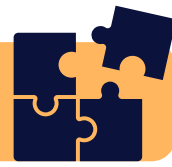


How relationships and trust are built in collaboration



While these norms are often perceived as neutral, Danish workplace contexts are, on many dimensions, **positioned relatively far toward one end**. At the same time, there is a widespread assumption that Danish workplaces are inherently egalitarian, fair, and inclusive – a notion referred to as **Nordic exceptionalism**. This can make it more difficult to identify how specific norms may advantage certain ways of working and communicating.

On the following page, some of these differences are illustrated through examples of **how cultural norms can shape expectations and interpretation** in practice.



A woman from India applies for a job. She focuses on her qualifications and ability to perform the tasks required. She does not explain why she is specifically interested in the company or the role, in this way demonstrating how she can contribute to and align with the organization's needs.

She does not emphasise her personal motivation for this specific role, as she – with experience from Indian work environments – finds it more appropriate to first establish credibility by demonstrating alignment and capability, and then build a working relationship over time.

When the hiring manager reads the application, it is assessed as generic or lacking motivation. In a Danish context, employers often expect candidates to express individual interest in the organization and clearly communicate why they personally want the role. This reflects a more individualistic and lower-hierarchy context, where candidates are expected to take an active role in shaping the interaction and expressing personal motivation.

A woman from Greece attends a job interview in Denmark shortly after starting a family. She does not mention her personal situation or ask about flexibility or work-life balance, as she is concerned this could negatively affect her chances of getting the job. Coming from a context that is relatively more competitive than most Danish workplace cultures, and where employment conditions are often less secure, she aims to present herself as fully committed and without potential constraints.

When the hiring manager meets her, she is perceived as somewhat reserved or difficult to read. In a Danish context, openness and authenticity are often expected in the interaction. This reflects a more egalitarian and direct communication style, where addressing topics openly is seen as a strength.

In Danish workplaces, there is often a combination of strong individual responsibility and a collaborative way of working, where sharing relevant aspects of one's situation can be part of creating a transparent interaction and building trust through openness and personal engagement.

Making sense of it

Not being invited to interviews is not only about whether you are qualified for the roles.

In many cases, employers and recruiters review a large number of applications in a limited amount of time. This means they rely on **quick signals and pattern recognition** to assess whether a candidate appears to match the role.

This assessment is often not based on formal qualifications alone. It is shaped by **interpretation, familiarity, and expectations** that are often not visible in the process.

In a Danish context, where equality and fairness are often understood as inherent, it can be difficult to identify how bias and unequal outcomes are produced in practice.

This does not mean that employers intend to exclude, but that **differences can be hard to recognize, question, and address.**

Writing applications

When **writing your CV and application**, consider:

- Framing competencies with Danish cultural awareness
- Make unfamiliar contexts easy to place and compare
- Anticipate “red flags” by explaining career gaps and transitions

1. Framing competencies with Danish cultural awareness

In many Danish workplaces, roles are not clearly defined. Tasks often shift over time, are negotiated informally, and depend on what you take initiative on. This is often seen as **flexibility and trust**, but it also means that employees are **expected to create structure themselves**.

Because of this, employers are often (implicitly) looking for:

- Can this person take initiative?
- Can they work independently?
- Can they create structure without detailed instructions?

An example:

Less aligned:

“Responsible for implementing assigned tasks in project X”

→ signals: clearly defined role, following instructions

More aligned:

“Took responsibility for shaping and coordinating project activities across teams and adjusting as priorities evolved”

→ signals: ownership, initiative, adaptability

In Denmark, management is often based on low hierarchy, coaching rather than directing, and expectation of independent problem-solving. Managers may not give detailed instructions, and often expect employees to **define and carry out their own tasks**. This means that responsibility is often understood as **self-management, initiative, and the ability to structure your own work**.

2. Making unfamiliar educational background easier to understand

Employers may not be familiar with your educational background. Without this context, it can be difficult to assess the level and relevance of your education.

While formal recognition or translation of degrees can support this, it does not necessarily provide insight into your curriculum or the methods you were trained in.

For key courses, **consider showcasing:**

- the subjects you studied and how they were applied
- the methods, theories, or analytical approaches you were trained in

This can **make your qualifications clearer and easier to assess** in a context where your educational background may not be familiar.

3. Anticipate “red flags” by explaining career gaps and transitions

International careers are often shaped by transitions, employment gaps, shorter employments, and shifts across sectors due to relocation and periods of adjustment.

If not contextualized, these can be read as red flags by employers.

An example:

Providing short explanations can reduce this risk:

“I Relocated to Denmark and focused on developing my skills in X while navigating the Danish labor market.”

This is not about justifying your path. It is about addressing potential uncertainty and **making your career journey easier to understand.**

Networking in Denmark

Networking in the Danish job market is often **informal and relationship-based**. It is less about immediate outcomes and more about gaining insight into how roles are filled, how competencies are understood, and how to navigate expectations in your field.

When networking, **focus on**:

1. Building reciprocal relationships

When contacting someone on LinkedIn or similar platforms, focus on learning rather than asking for a job.

An example:

"I am currently exploring opportunities within X in Denmark and would value hearing about your experience. If you have time for a short conversation, I would like to ask how you entered the field."

Networking is a way to:

- understand expectations in your field
- learn how roles are filled
- gain insight into how your profile is perceived

Networking can often feel inconclusive. A short conversation or a **coffee meeting** may not lead directly to anything, but it can still be valuable.

One way to make sense of this is to distinguish between different types of relationships:

- **Mentors:** people who share insights, advice, and help you understand the context
- **Sponsors:** people who actively recommend you to others

When reaching out, you are usually asking for **mentoring**, not sponsorship. Sponsorship typically requires a higher level of trust and familiarity, which develops over time. Expecting sponsorship too early can create hesitation or make interactions feel forced.

Consider how you can contribute to the relationship over time – **and build reciprocity.**

This can be small things, for example:

- sharing an article related to something you discussed
- forwarding a relevant job posting
- following up on a topic from your conversation or something you found useful

Attending job interviews

When preparing for interviews, **consider how to:**

- Ask for transparency
- Prepare concrete examples
- Balance confidence and modesty
- Be ready to discuss salary

1. Ask for transparency

Before the interview, it is okay to **ask for more information about the process.** Recruitment processes are not always fully explained, and expectations can remain implicit. This can make it harder to prepare, especially if you are not familiar with how interviews are typically structured in a Danish context.

Asking for clarification can **signal that you are engaged** and taking the process seriously.

If it's not clear from the job posting or the organization's website, you can ask about:

- who will be in the interview (e.g. roles or functions)
- how many interview stages there are
- whether there will be a case
- what themes or competencies will be discussed
- whether any questions or materials can be shared in advance

An example:

"I am looking forward to the interview. To prepare as well as possible, I wanted to ask if you could share who will be in the interview and whether you can share any topics or questions that will be covered in advance."

2. Prepare examples

As an international candidate you may be used to interviews focusing on technical skills rather than personal skills. Employers in Denmark, however, are often interested in understanding **how you solve problems, collaborate, take initiative, and handle challenges.**

Concrete examples matter because they make your experience easier to understand, clarify your contribution, and reduce the need for interpretation.

Prepare examples where you use a simple structure.

An example:

"Our team experienced delays due to unclear coordination. I suggested introducing weekly meetings and helped structure them. Within two months, communication improved and the project was delivered on time."

Situation

What was the context?

Action

What did you do?

Result

What happened?

3. Balancing confidence and modesty

In Danish job interviews, some expectations may not always be explicitly stated.

Employers and hiring staff will often expect you to communicate your strengths clearly – but if you do not also appear modest, it can come across as too self-promoting. It is **a fine line** that can be difficult to navigate if you are not familiar with these norms.

This reflects a particular balance, sometimes associated with *Janteloven*: **showing ownership and confidence while remaining modest and non-hierarchical**. This is a balance that can take time to understand and develop if you are not familiar with Danish norms in this area.

Sometimes the same answer can be understood differently depending on how it is presented.

For example:

- Speaking very generally may make it difficult to assess your contribution
- Being very modest may be interpreted as a lack of impact
- Focusing only on team results may make your individual role unclear – it is important to speak about your own contributions
- It is common to reflect on both successes and challenges

Before finishing an interview, consider:

- Have you given concrete examples of your experience? Do these examples show that you can take initiative, collaborate, and solve problems?
- Is your role and contribution clear?
- Have you asked relevant questions about the role or organization? This is also an important part of the interview, as it shows curiosity and initiative.

4. Be ready to discuss salary

Salary discussions are difficult if you are not familiar with the expectations. In Denmark salary negotiations are usually part of the recruitment process and candidates are often expected to share their expectations. It can be helpful to **research salary levels** in advance through professional unions, industry organizations or job advertisements.

What employers are often looking for

- That you have reflected on your value
- That your expectations are within a realistic range
- That you can communicate your expectations clearly

An example

“Based on my experience and the typical salary level in this field, I would expect a salary in the range of X–Y.”

Reflection

- Do you know the typical salary range for your field in Denmark?
- Where could you find information about typical salaries in your field in Denmark? (For example, through professional unions, colleagues, job advertisements or industry organizations)
- Is there someone in your professional network who could give insight into salary expectations in your field?

Final reflections

Navigating the Danish job market is not only about your **qualifications**, but also about how they are **interpreted and communicated in a new context**. Expectations around communication, collaboration, and initiative are shaped by norms that are often implicit and can vary across countries, workplaces, and individuals.

Cultural awareness can therefore be understood as **a practical skill**: the ability to recognize that there are different ways of demonstrating competence, and to target your communication, so that it is easier to interpret in each context. This does not mean changing who you are but rather making your experience and strengths more visible across contexts.

At the same time, it is important to note that misunderstandings do not arise from one side alone. Employers and job applicants may interpret the same behavior differently, based on their own expectations and experiences. What is seen as initiative, professionalism, or engagement in one context may be understood differently in another.

These differences are a normal part of navigating a new labor market. Over time, as you gain more insight into how expectations are shaped in Danish workplaces, it often becomes easier to adjust your approach and communicate your competencies more clearly.

We hope this guide has provided useful perspectives on how the Danish job market works in practice. The aim is not to present one “correct” way of acting, but to support you in **translating your competencies across contexts** and making informed choices about how you present yourself in applications, interviews, and professional interactions.

Endnotes

i: Udlændinge. og Integrationsministeriet (2024). International Migration – Denmark

ii: Kood, S. A. et. al. (2023) Oplevet diskrimination i Danmark. Institut for Menneskerettigheder.

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v: Meyer, E. (2014). The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business. PublicAffairs; Ørum, S. (2023). Did You Get the Point? Cultural Intelligence and Diversity in Global Collaboration. Samfundslitteratur.