



# Exit Interviews

Why do international tech  
professionals leave Denmark?

# Digital Hub Denmark

In collaboration with

## About the project

The **Exit Interviews** project runs under the lead of Digital Hub Denmark together with a strong coalition of partners: the City of Copenhagen, The Danish Society of Engineers (IDA), Copenhagen Capacity, the Danish Chamber of Commerce, the Confederation of Danish Industry, the City of Aarhus, Erhverv Aarhus, and Tech Hub Aarhus. HBS Economics acts as research partner, shaping the study's methodological framework and validating its insights.



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# Executive summary



Denmark faces increasing pressure to strengthen its digital workforce. Despite its strong digital ecosystem and reputation for quality of life, the country is becoming less successful at attracting and retaining international digital talent - risking a competitive disadvantage in the global race for digital skills.

To address this challenge, this report explores why international tech professionals leave - and what might have made them stay. Based on 26 in-depth interviews and a national survey with Danish companies, the findings reveal the everyday friction points that shape retention - from navigating complex systems to finding belonging in Danish workplaces and communities.

## What we learned

Each decision to leave reflects a mix of personal experience and structural friction. While every story is unique, clear patterns emerged across the interviews. To make sense of these patterns, three archetypes were developed to reflect the most common departure dynamics:

**01** **Professionally stuck:** Left due to limited career growth, unclear advancement paths, or a mismatch between expectations and reality in Danish workplaces.

**02** **Socially & culturally disconnected:** Left due to a prolonged sense of not belonging - in or outside of work - despite persistent efforts to integrate.

**03** **Bureaucratically burned:** Left after encountering inflexible public systems, visa insecurities, or lack of guidance in navigating complex regulations.

Each archetype is supported by real stories, quotes, and reflections - revealing the often invisible frictions that shape the experience of international professionals in Denmark.

## What drives departure:

- **Career opportunity is the key driver:** Most left due to limited growth, unclear advancement, or barriers to re-entering the job market. Social and cultural exclusion can intensify the decision to leave. But for most, the tipping point lies in unmet professional expectations.
- **Mismatch of expectations is common:** Public branding often paints an overly simplistic picture of Danish work culture and integration, leading to confusion or disappointment.
- **Re-entry into the labour market is difficult:** For talents who lose a job or take a break, finding a new role in the Danish job market is often harder than their original entry despite having experience and networks.
- **Support systems are fragmented:** Many talents are unaware of available help, while organisations (both public and private) often lack tailored offerings for this highly skilled group.
- **Companies play a bigger role than they realise:** The workplace is often the primary source of social connection. But too few employers take active responsibility beyond onboarding.
- **The cost of departure is high:** When skilled international professionals leave, Denmark loses not just talent but also diversity, innovation capacity, and the return on earlier investments.



## What can be done

The report includes 10 recommendations, grouped by stakeholder: the public sector, companies, and the talents themselves. Each is based on lived experience and aims to reduce the friction points that lead to departure.

### Public sector recommendations:

- Ensure stability and transparency in immigration rules and support structures.
- Support entry and re-entry into the Danish job market.
- Promote dual-career support for spouses and partners.
- Create clearer and more realistic communication about career opportunities in Denmark.
- Reduce friction and uncertainty in public systems.

### Company recommendations:

- Strengthen onboarding, mentoring, and inclusion support for international employees.
- Support social integration and cross-cultural understanding.
- Offer more structured guidance around bureaucratic and practical matters.

### Talent recommendations:

- Seek clarity on job expectations and development opportunities.
- Engage actively with Danish culture and communication norms.
- Navigate public systems with curiosity and confidence.

## How the study was conducted

The study uses a qualitative, anthropologically inspired method, allowing for open-ended and reflective interviews. Participants were selected based on their professional background in tech, their previous residence in Denmark, and their subsequent decision to leave the country. Thematic coding and pattern recognition techniques were used to identify recurring drivers, pain points, and missed opportunities.

# Who should read this report

This report is written with several audiences in mind each of whom plays a role in whether international professionals succeed in Denmark or decide to leave.

## Public institutions – politicians, ministries, and municipalities

We hope decision-makers in government and local authorities will read this report with fresh eyes. The stories collected here demonstrate how current bureaucratic structures, however well-intentioned, can create unnecessary hurdles for skilled international professionals. For those navigating Denmark's visa rules, public systems, or municipal services, even small frictions can accumulate into decisive reasons to leave. Understanding these lived experiences is crucial if Denmark wishes to align its policies with its ambition to be a leading digital nation.

## Business organisations and industry associations

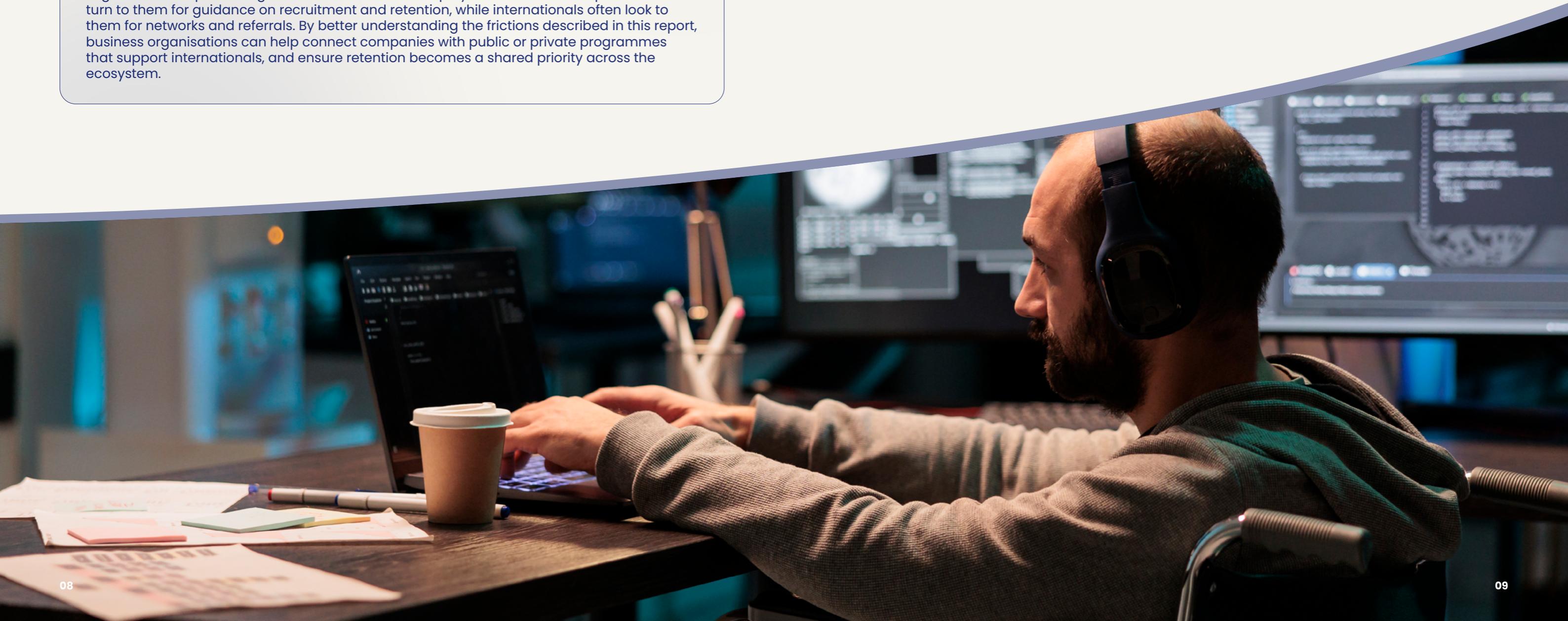
Organisations representing Danish business interests play a crucial role. Companies often turn to them for guidance on recruitment and retention, while internationals often look to them for networks and referrals. By better understanding the frictions described in this report, business organisations can help connect companies with public or private programmes that support internationals, and ensure retention becomes a shared priority across the ecosystem.

## Danish companies – micro, small, medium and large

For many internationals, the company is their first and often most crucial point of contact in Denmark. Workplaces are not just professional environments, but gateways to belonging and stability. This report highlights the challenges that talents face when career development stalls, when social connections fail to take hold, or when bureaucratic obstacles become overwhelming. We hope Danish companies will use these insights to strengthen onboarding, mentoring, and integration efforts and to recognise the bigger role they can play in keeping talent.

## International talents – past, present, and future

Finally, this report is also for international professionals themselves. Reading the experiences of others may help validate their own struggles, provide tools to navigate Danish systems more confidently, and set more realistic expectations for life and work in Denmark. For those considering a move, it offers an honest picture of what lies ahead. For those already here, it shows they are not alone and that there are both public and private actors working to improve conditions for global talent.



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# 01 Introduction & scope



**Digital Hub Denmark focuses on attracting and retaining international talent, as the lack of specialised skills within STEM fields - particularly in IT - continues to be a critical barrier to growth and innovation in Danish companies.**

According to the Danish Society of Engineers (IDA), Denmark faces a projected shortage

of up to 20,400 engineers and science graduates by 2040. Meanwhile, the Danish IT Industry Association (2024) identifies the shortage of IT competencies as the most significant growth barrier for companies. As demand rises in step with technological progress - and as IT education capacity has been reduced in recent years - international recruitment and retention are more vital than ever.

New figures from the 2025 mapping by Digital Hub Denmark and HBS Economics show that there are now **219,000 digital talents** in Denmark. This includes **104,000 digital specialists** and **115,000 digital integrators**, representing a 16% increase in digital talent since 2022. However, this growth masks underlying challenges in maintaining a strong inflow of qualified professionals from abroad.

In 2024, the net inflow of digital talents into Denmark fell to just over 100 individuals - the lowest level in a decade apart from the COVID-19 year. While more than 2,000 digital talents moved to Denmark in 2024, around 1,900 left, reflecting a rising outflow trend since 2021. Critically, 79% of incoming digital professionals are foreign nationals, while Danish nationals are increasingly leaving the country - resulting in a net inflow of 340 foreign digital talents but a net outflow of 230 Danish professionals.

These figures signal a growing reliance on international professionals to sustain Denmark's digital capabilities - and a rising risk of talent loss if conditions are not improved.

Without access to global talent, Danish companies will face increasing difficulties recruiting specialists, hindering innovation and international competitiveness. Diverse perspectives and skill sets - many of which are brought in by foreign professionals - are essential to driving digital development.

However, attracting talent is not enough. Retaining international professionals remains one of the most urgent - and overlooked - challenges. When highly skilled individuals leave, companies lose critical know-how, and Denmark loses out on long-term potential. Moreover, the global competition for digital talent is intensifying. Countries that offer more inclusive environments, better professional development, and stronger support structures will have the upper hand.

To respond effectively, we need to understand why people are leaving - not just that they are leaving. While existing data highlights the scale of the challenge, it reveals little about the everyday experiences, cultural barriers, or systemic issues that influence decisions to move on. A more human-centred perspective is needed.



## Purpose of Exit Interviews

The Exit Interviews project explores the underlying factors that drive international tech professionals to leave Denmark. Where existing data outlines the scope of the challenge, this study brings in a qualitative lens by examining lived experiences and structural conditions that may hinder long-term retention. In other words, it seeks to understand not just how many leave - but why they do, and what might have made them stay.

Based on in-depth interviews with 26 individuals who have previously lived and worked in Denmark, the study identifies a number of recurring issues. These include limited opportunities for career progression,

administrative and bureaucratic difficulties, and challenges related to social and cultural integration. Together, these factors shape whether highly skilled professionals see a future in Denmark - or seek opportunity elsewhere.

Unlike broader expat surveys that often highlight what attracts international professionals to Denmark - such as work-life balance, safety, or strong institutions - this study focuses exclusively on those who ultimately decided to leave. The goal is to provide a more nuanced picture by examining friction points that risk driving talent away.

# Definition of Digital Talent

To effectively assess and plan for Denmark's digital workforce, it is crucial to define what constitutes digital talent. This report adopts a dual definition developed in collaboration with Digital Hub Denmark and HBS Economics, originally rooted in the 2020 "Digital Dogme" framework.

Digital talent is understood as comprising two core categories:

## 01 Digital specialists

These are highly specialised professionals whose job functions are centered around digital competencies. They typically engage in tasks such as:

- Software development and IT systems design
- IT infrastructure management and operations
- Systems integration and cybersecurity
- Strategic IT leadership within organisations

Profiles included:

IT Manager   IT Developer   IT Administrator   IT Supporter

These roles are identified using detailed job function classifications in Statistics Denmark's register data.

## 02 Digital integrators

Digital integrators represent hybrid roles that merge domain-specific knowledge with advanced use of digital tools and methods. These professionals drive innovation by embedding digital technologies into product development, business models, and organisational processes. Their work often involves:

- Implementing digital business strategies
- Using advanced digital tools in engineering, design, and analytics
- Generating and interpreting digital content for decision-making

Profiles included:

Digital Business Developer   Digital Engineer   Digital Designer   Digital Analyst  
Digital Industrial Technician

Because these hybrid roles are less directly categorised in national registers, they are identified using a combination of job postings (via HBS Jobintel) and register data.

## Exclusions

The analysis explicitly excludes digital generalists like professionals with only basic digital skills used in generic tools (e.g., office software). The focus is on talents who actively develop or integrate digital solutions.



## 02 Why tech talents are leaving Denmark

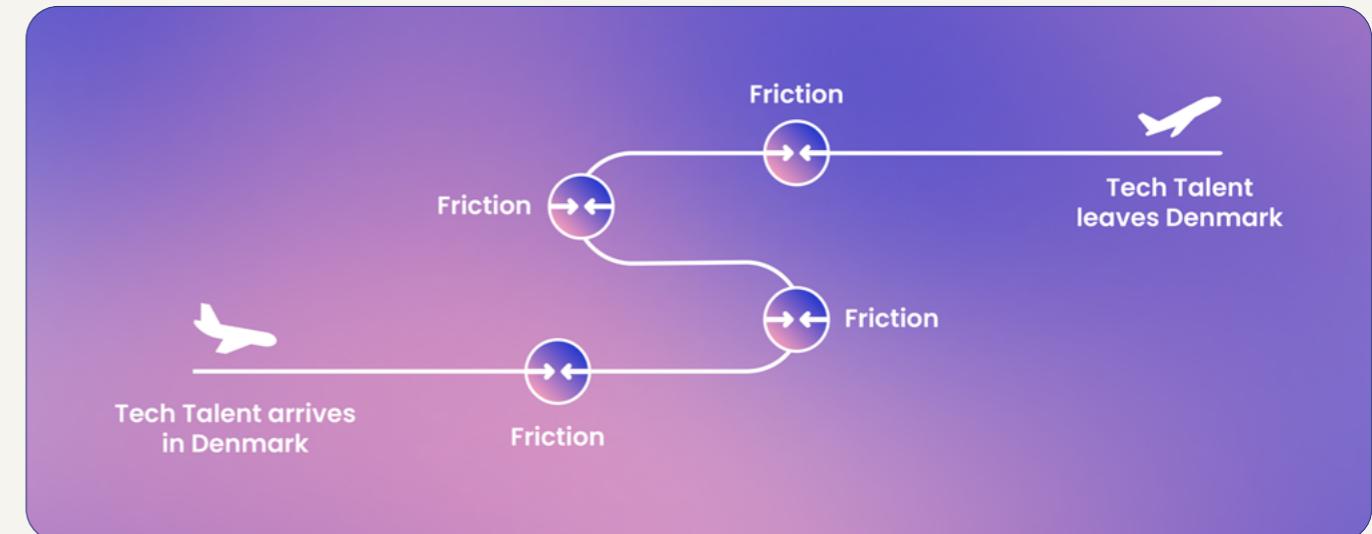


Based on 26 in-depth interviews with former international tech professionals and a company survey with 43 Danish employers, we uncover recurring patterns in the experiences that lead to departure

*Important to note: the data reflects a specific group – tech professionals who chose to leave Denmark. As such, their experiences may differ from those who remain, or who find long-term success and satisfaction in Denmark. These limitations are addressed further in the methodology section.*

### From friction to exit

Departures are rarely caused by a single factor. Most often, the decision to leave is shaped by an accumulation of **frictions**: negative experiences or structural barriers that, over time, wear down a talent's sense of opportunity, belonging, or stability in Denmark.



#### Friction definition

A **friction** can be defined as any recurring experience that reduces a talent's sense of inclusion, career possibility, or quality of life in Denmark. Frictions are not always immediately deal-breaking, but when left unaddressed, they compound and erode the individual's overall attachment to staying. For example, a friction might be a repeated experience of being excluded from key decisions at work, a partner unable to find employment, or persistent confusion in navigating housing and bureaucracy.



#### Exit definition

In contrast, an **exit** refers to the actual decision to leave the country, at which accumulated frictions tip the balance, and the costs of staying outweigh the benefits. Exits are often catalysed by a triggering event (e.g. job loss, visa expiry, family decision), but the real drivers usually lie in the build-up of unresolved tensions over time.

It is important to acknowledge that what constitutes a friction for one person may be experienced as a full exit-driver by another. One interviewee may view bureaucratic complexity as an annoying but manageable reality; another may find it incompatible with their family life or mental health. This underscores the subjective, yet patterned, nature of the exit journey.

## Example

An international tech professional takes Danish language classes, attends workplace socials, and volunteers in the local startup scene – yet still struggles to form meaningful friendships with Danes. Over time, the repeated feeling of being “on the outside looking in” becomes more than just a social inconvenience. It begins to affect their mental wellbeing, sense of belonging, and long-term plans.

When they are eventually offered a job in a more internationally minded company abroad, the decision to leave feels surprisingly easy. The opportunity doesn't just offer better career prospects – it also offers an escape from years of quiet cultural isolation. While the job offer is the final trigger, it is the long-term build-up of frictions that makes staying in Denmark feel like the less sustainable option.

## Three key exit archetypes

Recognising these cumulative patterns, we identified **three dominant exit archetypes**, which reflect the most common and consequential themes across the dataset:

01

**Professionally stuck**  
talents who felt they could not grow, advance, or navigate the Danish job market – or who were let go and faced difficulties re-entering employment.

02

**Socially & culturally disconnected**  
talents who struggled to build meaningful relationships, feel included, or bridge cultural differences.

03

**Bureaucratically burned**  
talents who left Denmark due to overwhelming bureaucratic barriers, whether by necessity or choice.



## 01 Archetype 1: **Professionally stuck**

Career development is a key reason why international tech professionals relocate. But when growth stalls – due to unclear career paths, lack of recognition, or structural barriers – it can lead to frustration, disengagement, and eventually departure.

In this study, nearly half of participants were categorised as *professionally stuck* – meaning professional stagnation played a central role in their decision to leave Denmark.

### Interviewees identified as archetype 1

Interviewees	Gender	Age range
12 of 26	6 female / 6 male	28-53
Citizenship	Tech profile	Experience abroad
9 EU / 3 non-EU	5 digital specialists / 7 digital integrators	8/12 had lived in another country before
Nationalities		
Brazilian, South African, Bulgarian, Latvian, Dutch (also Australian citizen), Polish, Australian (also Croatian citizen), Italian, Sudanese (also Danish citizen), Canadian (also Danish citizen), American, Hungarian		
Destination country		
<b>Brazil, South Africa, Bulgaria, Latvia, Germany, UK, Australia, Italy, Spain, Canada, USA, Switzerland</b>		

\*8 of the 12 interviewees returned to their home countries. These are shown in bold.

The *professionally stuck* archetype describes individuals who experienced limited opportunities for career growth, stability, or mobility. Several interviewees arrived in Denmark with strong qualifications but found the job market difficult to access, unclear, or slow to respond.

Initial entry into the job market was often challenging – and for those who lost a job, re-entering proved even more difficult. Without local networks or connections, some struggled to secure new roles despite relevant experience. Others described being stuck in roles with little influence and no clear path forward.

For non-EU citizens, visa conditions created added pressure. Because residency was tied to employment, job mobility was limited. In some cases, this led interviewees to accept lower pay or roles they were unsatisfied with in order to maintain their legal status.

In dual-career households, the partner's employment situation also shaped decisions to leave. Some interviewees had partners who were unable to find qualified work in Denmark, which created financial strain and made long-term settlement more difficult.

## Case example: Global expectations, local barriers

Interviewee 9, Poland, 33

A 33-year-old tech professional from Poland exemplifies the professionally stuck archetype. She moved to Copenhagen in 2017 after being recruited from San Francisco for what was presented as a global role at a prominent Nordic organisation. Attracted by the functional appeal of the Danish welfare model and the promise of international work, she arrived optimistic and well-qualified.

Initially excited by her role, she soon realised that "global" in Denmark did not align with her expectations. Her department consisted almost entirely of Danish colleagues who had spent their entire careers in the same company, and she felt excluded from meaningful collaboration and strategic work.

“

*"What global meant in San Francisco was nothing like what global meant in Denmark."*

As her career progressed, she began to feel professionally stuck. Opportunities for growth within her organisation became limited, prompting her to explore other roles in Denmark. However, despite years of experience and international credentials, she encountered significant barriers when job hunting. Feedback from employers often implied that she didn't fit the expected profile of Danish business culture.

“

*"I was literally told they were looking for someone more rooted in the Danish corporate ecosystem. That just meant: you're not Danish enough."*

She also felt socially and professionally isolated. The workplace lacked structured integration efforts, and informal support was minimal. Colleagues often questioned her language skills, making her feel singled out despite working in an English-speaking environment. While she appreciated the country's safety, benefits, and work-life balance, she found the career opportunities narrow and the corporate landscape inward-looking.

After several attempts to relocate, she eventually left Denmark with her husband and newborn when a job opportunity arose abroad. She remains critical of what she describes as Denmark's "fake marketing" of global career opportunities and would not recommend the country to young professionals with international ambitions.

“

*"Don't move to Denmark if you have global career aspirations. Do move if your family's well-being is your number one priority."*



## Professional departure factors

Five recurring themes emerged from interviews with international tech professionals who felt professionally stuck in Denmark:



Job market entry & re-entry



Spousal & partner employment



Growth & expectations mismatch



Underlying issues



Career opportunities abroad



### Job market entry & re-entry

For some international tech professionals, the Danish job market feels difficult to break into – and even harder to re-enter after a break or job loss. These challenges show up both among recent graduates trying to land their first job and among experienced professionals navigating layoffs or transitions. In both cases, a lack of local networks, limited feedback from employers, and systemic barriers make the process frustrating and opaque.

Several describe sending out countless applications without results or explanation. This creates uncertainty and makes it hard to adjust or improve. Some say that even with international experience and strong credentials, they felt like outsiders in a system that didn't seem open to newcomers.

“

*"Do you want the international talent or not? I'm not actually clear. Sometimes the rhetoric is very much like they don't really want the international aspect of Denmark."*

– Interviewee 16

Others share how the public narrative around Denmark needing international tech talent doesn't

match their lived experience. The message seems to be: Denmark wants global professionals – but not too different, and not without the "right" Danish profile.

In a few cases, people didn't actively choose to leave Denmark – they lost a job due to company restructuring and couldn't find a way back in. Without stepping stones or fallback options, they had no choice but to move on.

“

*"The only reason I left Denmark was there was a merger between two companies and there was a round of layoffs. I didn't choose to leave. I was laid off. I couldn't find work."*

– Interviewee 4

These experiences suggest that even highly skilled professionals can struggle to find stable footing in Denmark's job market – especially when something disrupts their original path. Without more transparent hiring processes or accessible support systems, some end up leaving not because they want to – but because they don't see a way to stay.



## Spousal & partner employment

For some international tech professionals, the decision to leave Denmark wasn't only about their own job – it was shaped by whether their partner could find one too. Several interviewees reflected on the difficulty their spouses faced in joining the labour market, especially in fields outside tech. While they themselves may have found a good role, their partner's ongoing unemployment created stress, imbalance, and eventually, a need to move on.

Finding work as a foreign partner was particularly difficult in sectors where Danish language skills were essential. Even with strong qualifications and experience, some partners couldn't get past the first hurdle: finding positions to apply for in the first place. Without access to the job market, some partners began to feel discouraged or stuck – and this weighed heavily on couples who had relocated to Denmark with shared hopes.



*"I think one of the most relevant factors was that my wife wasn't able to find a job in Denmark. [...] I was taking care of my career because I was having a great experience in a great company but she didn't. So we decided to leave."*

– Interviewee 1

For others, the challenges were tied to specialisation. Partners with niche academic or research profiles struggled to find matching roles in Denmark's relatively small labour market. In some cases, initial relocation plans didn't fully consider both careers. Over time, the reality of limited prospects became harder to ignore.



*"I think for internationals, it's especially hard. But in general, if you are very specialised, you may not find the type of position in this many openings for your type of work. That's also a disadvantage when you do a PhD, because you become quite specialised in something. That's pretty much the case for my wife."*

– Interviewee 19



## Growth & expectations mismatch

Some international tech professionals entered the Danish job market with the expectation of steady growth, dynamic opportunities, and long-term prospects. But several described a mismatch between what they hoped for and what they actually found. Instead of structured career paths or expanding roles, they encountered flat hierarchies, limited progression, and unclear development plans.

In some cases, people described staying in the same role for years with no roadmap for advancement. Others found that professional growth was closely tied to speaking Danish, making it difficult to progress no matter how well they performed. These barriers left some feeling stuck – not because they lacked skills or ambition, but because the system didn't seem to offer the next step.



*"Even if you perform well, there's no plan for your growth unless you speak Danish."*

– Interviewee 10

Some also describe a gap between the international image promoted by employers and the internal experience once on the job. Companies present themselves as globally minded and inclusive, but struggle to deliver on those promises. What's written in job ads or onboarding materials doesn't always match everyday dynamics.

For others, the mismatch has to do with scale. Denmark's tech market is seen as relatively small, making it harder to find new challenges or move into adjacent fields.



*"When we see the space of opportunities, Denmark is still quite small. [...] I would say it's mostly because of the sparseness of opportunities."*

– Interviewee 19

Over time, this mismatch between growth expectations and actual options led some to explore opportunities elsewhere – in markets where career progression felt more structured, accessible, or aligned with their ambitions.





## Underlying issues

Some international tech professionals in Denmark point to deeper structural dynamics in the workplace that shape their decision to leave. These issues aren't always visible at first, but they become more apparent over time – especially when trying to integrate and grow professionally.

A key challenge is the sense that "Danishness" matters more than performance or experience in professional settings. While colleagues are often friendly, some feel that real influence, leadership opportunities, or trust are reserved for those who fit local expectations – including language, networks, and unwritten cultural norms.



*"Would there have been a seat at the table for me as a non-Danish person to reach leadership? Not sure."*

– Interviewee 11

Flat hierarchies and open work cultures are appreciated in principle, but in practice, some experience them as hard to navigate or difficult to challenge. A few say they are expected to adapt to the Danish way of working – while local colleagues see little reason to adjust.



*"Danes are so used to being the majority that they don't really understand how it is to work with people who think and work differently. They believe their way is the right way."*

– Interviewee 21



*"I love Denmark, but it's hard when people act like they don't need to learn anything new – like their way is already perfect."*

– Interviewee 18

Workplace communication – even in English-speaking environments – often still revolves around Danish. Informal conversations, decision-making, and leadership dynamics can exclude those who aren't fluent, even if unintentionally. Over time, this creates a sense of limitation and invisibility.

For these individuals, it isn't one specific barrier – but a combination of subtle dynamics in the professional setting that makes it difficult to grow, lead, or fully belong.



## Career opportunities abroad

For some international tech professionals, the decision to leave Denmark isn't only about what's missing locally – it's also about what's available elsewhere. Talents are pulled by clear career paths, faster growth prospects, and more competitive salaries in other countries.

Several describe how job offers from abroad provide not only better pay but also a stronger sense of momentum. Roles in larger markets often come with clearer advancement, better recognition, or simply more energy around innovation. Compared to this,

Denmark's smaller tech ecosystem sometimes feels limited in scope or speed.

And in some cases, when interviewees receive a strong offer from their home country, it simply feels like a no-brainer – offering familiarity, networks, and career progression that's hard to match.

In this context, Denmark risks losing highly skilled professionals not only because of push factors, but because competing markets offer clearer, faster, or more rewarding paths forward.

## What companies say about career barriers

### Survey results from 43 Danish companies

Only **20.5%** of companies cite lack of career growth as a main reason international employees leave – well below personal reasons (61.5%) and social or cultural integration challenges (56.4% and 41%).

This contrasts with interview findings, where **over half** of participants explicitly mentioned career-related barriers – including stalled growth, limited progression, or difficulty re-entering the job market – as key to their decision to leave.

Companies are divided on whether they offer sufficient growth opportunities: **48.8%** say they do; **51.2%** say they do not.

Only **38.5%** identify clear career progression as a key retention factor, and just **25.6%** offer mentorship or career development programmes tailored to international staff.

Systemic barriers raised by talents – such as language requirements for advancement or reliance on local networks – are largely absent from company responses.

These results suggest a potential mismatch between what international employees experience and what companies perceive. While many employers are committed to retaining global talent, few appear to view career stagnation as a core risk. Strengthening development structures and improving expectation alignment could help close this gap.

02

## Archetype 2: Socially & culturally disconnected

Feeling a sense of belonging is a basic human need. When people feel excluded or like they don't fit in, it can affect their mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being.

For international tech professionals, settling in a new country isn't just about paperwork or finding housing - it's also about building friendships, feeling welcome, and being part of everyday life. When those things are missing, it can lead to loneliness, frustration, and eventually the decision to leave. In this study, around one in four interviewees said that social or cultural disconnection was a key reason for leaving Denmark.

### Interviewees identified as archetype 2

Interviewees	Gender	Age range
6 of 26	1 female / 5 male	27-35
Citizenship	Tech profile	Experience abroad
4 EU / 2 non-EU	3 digital specialists / 3 digital integrators	5/6 had lived in another country before
Nationalities		
Italian-Swedish, Turkish, Italian, Belgian, Egyptian, Bulgarian		
Destination country		
Estonia, Turkey, Italy, Belgium, Egypt, Austria		

\*4 of the 6 interviewees returned to their home countries. These are shown in bold.

This archetype includes tech talents who faced difficulties forming social bonds, accessing informal networks, or developing a strong sense of belonging. While not always visible from the outside, social and cultural frictions became decisive over time.

Some interviewees described the experience of social integration as one of constant effort met with limited return. Despite some of them being fluent in Danish or long-term residents, they struggled to build deep, meaningful relationships, often with locals or colleagues. Several referred to a perceived divide between Danish and international social spheres, with internationals welcomed professionally, but rarely included personally.

This disconnect often extended to the workplace. Unspoken cultural codes, indirect feedback styles, and informal hiring networks made some feel excluded from influence or career advancement. Over time, the emotional toll of feeling peripheral-tolerated but not accepted created a sense of rootlessness.

Interviewees also cited unmet expectations as a recurring theme. Many had arrived in Denmark with the hope of not only good work but also a strong community. When that community never fully materialised, the sense of disappointment became part of the exit narrative.

## Case example: Like a bubble of oil in water

Interviewee 6, Italian, 32

An example of someone in the social and cultural disconnection category is a 32-year-old professional from Italy. He moved to Copenhagen in 2017 to join his Estonian partner, who had been accepted into a study programme in the capital city.

With a freshly earned master's degree, he arrived optimistic and eager to integrate. He volunteered for a Danish tech conference and, after eight months without income, was finally offered a full-time job, which he held for the next five years.

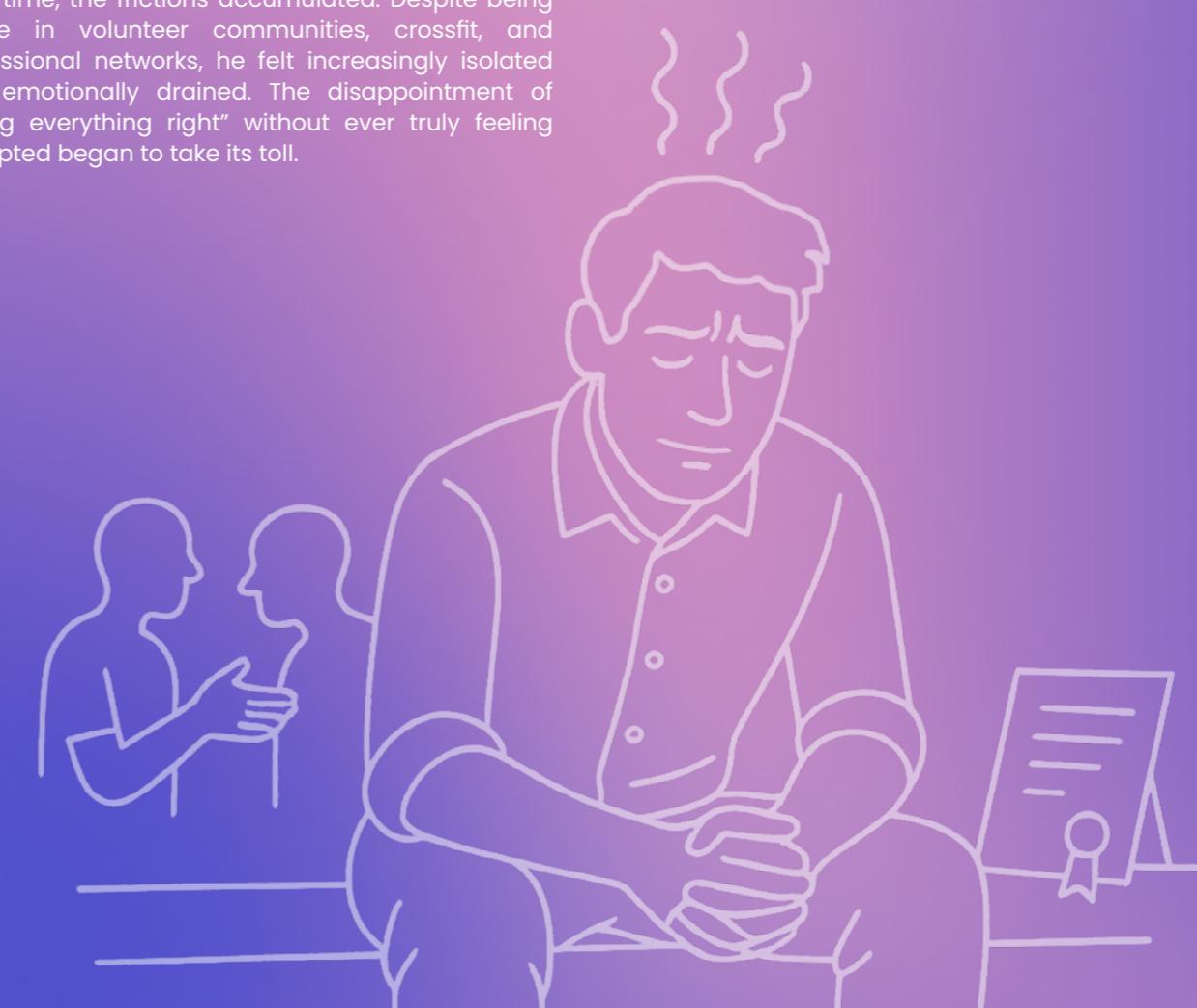
Although his career gradually advanced, and he took Danish language classes at his own expense, his social integration efforts were met with limited success. Most of his friends were other internationals, and his repeated attempts to form Danish friendships - even with fluent Danish - rarely resulted in deeper connections.

“

*“It was really the small things that made you feel like a bubble of oil in water.”*

“

*“I still fantasise about coming back. But I wouldn't try to be Danish again. That was part of what broke me.”*



# Social and cultural departure factors

Six recurring themes emerged from interviews with international tech professionals who felt socially or culturally disconnected in Denmark:



Challenges in social connection



Experiences of not belonging



Unspoken cultural norms



Language as an integration hurdle



Mismatch of expectations



Social & cultural appeal elsewhere



## Experiences of not belonging

Even with jobs, routines, and local activities, some international tech professionals in this study don't feel fully at home in Denmark. They try to integrate by learning Danish, joining communities, and contributing at work - but still feel that something is missing.

Some describe not feeling truly accepted. Instead, they feel they must constantly prove they belong. This creates pressure to act or think like Danes, even when it doesn't feel natural. Over time, this self-adjustment becomes tiring and leads to a sense of emotional distance.

One interviewee says they never feel "fully two feet in." Others describe reaching a limit - unable to move beyond surface-level comfort or truly feel at ease. This slow, quiet feeling of not belonging builds up over time. For some, it becomes a key reason for leaving - not because Denmark is bad, but because they hope to feel more accepted somewhere else.



*"I didn't feel fully two feet in, I always kind of felt like I was just a little bit on the outside and I wasn't able to be fully sort of two feet in, if that makes sense?"*

- Interviewee 11



*"It was really the small things that made you feel like a bubble of oil in water."*

- Interviewee 6



## Challenges in social connection

According to some of the international tech professionals in this study, building meaningful social ties in Denmark is not a matter of effort - but of access. Social life is often described as closed, planned in advance, or difficult to "break into." Danish friendship circles tend to be formed early in life and rarely reopened. As one interviewee puts it, "Danish society is polite but closed."

While some internationals find warm and welcoming experiences in volunteer settings or among other newcomers, others struggle to build relationships beyond the expat bubble. Even those who speak fluent Danish or take part in local clubs find it difficult to establish deeper bonds. The gap between surface interaction and genuine connection leads some to question their own worth.



*"With a very basic level of interaction with Danes, I started questioning myself. 'Am I boring now? Am I saying something that is not right? Is it something with my English?' Perhaps they were more fluent, or felt I wasn't easy enough to talk to for a deeper conversation. That's when I started going internally, questioning myself..."*

- Interviewee 26

Some describe years of effort - attending events, reaching out, learning Danish - without reciprocal engagement. This lack of progress, despite persistence, creates feelings of rejection and emotional fatigue.

Some also point to Denmark's cultural emphasis on privacy and routine, which can unintentionally exclude newcomers. Spontaneous invitations are rare. Socialising is often structured and scheduled, which makes it harder for those without pre-existing networks to take part.

While not everyone experiences this, and some build close friendships over time, the repeated experience of being on the outside - especially when combined with professional stress or cultural disconnect - leaves some feeling invisible.





## Unspoken cultural norms

For some international tech professionals, navigating Danish culture is less about misunderstanding explicit rules – and more about struggling with the rules that aren't spoken at all. A common experience is the sense that "fitting in" requires decoding an unwritten cultural script: understanding subtle humor, reading between the lines, adapting to implicit norms in the workplace, and adjusting to the social preference for planning and privacy.



*"To be able to fall into the Danish culture or the society's norms, you need to know what they are first. And this is not something that can be taught. It's something that's felt."*

- Interviewee 21

One recurring friction is Denmark's heavy planning culture – where social life is scheduled weeks in advance, leaving little room for spontaneity. Newcomers who are used to informal meetups or open invitations often find this isolating. Even when friendships exist, the structure can make it hard to feel emotionally close.

In workplaces, hierarchies often appear flat but are experienced as hidden and difficult to navigate. Without a shared cultural background, tech professionals may struggle to influence decisions or understand internal dynamics. Efforts to challenge or question established norms are sometimes perceived as disruptive rather than constructive.

Some also describe subtle but persistent pressure to conform – to live in a particular way, to parent like Danes, or to mirror a shared lifestyle centered on structure and routine. For those with different cultural identities or family configurations, this creates a quiet sense of misfit.



*"There's limits to how Danish I want to be."*

- Interviewee 3

In social settings, humor and emotional cues are hard to decode without shared cultural roots. Jokes or comments often rely on irony or local references, making it unclear whether something is meant to be funny, serious, or sarcastic. Without this context, some feel unsure how to respond – and worry about being misunderstood or left out of the group. Over time, this creates a sense of emotional distance, even in everyday conversations.



*"You're always an outsider if you don't drink schnapps or know Kim Larsen songs."*

- Interviewee 21



## Language as an integration hurdle

Language shapes how included or excluded international tech professionals feel in Denmark. While English is widely used in tech environments, it does not automatically provide full access to social life, public systems, or long-term integration.

One example is how not speaking Danish becomes a barrier – at social gatherings, in meetings, or when reading emails from the kommune or school. One person explains that they feel like an outsider, even when everyone speaks English, because they can't follow jokes or casual chats that rely on shared cultural references.



*"If you don't speak the local language, you do change the dynamics of the interactions that happen around you."*

- Interviewee 26

In some cases, tech professionals make an effort to speak Danish, but still feel that it doesn't make a difference. Several explain that even when they initiate conversations in Danish, people quickly switch

to English. This makes it harder to practise and creates the impression that their effort isn't truly welcomed.

Others sign up for Danish classes, but struggle to keep up while working full-time. Some describe having to choose between attending lessons or paying into a union while some are forced to stop because courses are too expensive. These examples reflect experiences from a period when Danish language classes were not free – unlike today, where the government again offers them at no cost.

In the workplace, Danish is not always formally required, but still matters. Some describe situations where meetings, internal jokes, or key decisions happen in Danish – even in teams that are officially international. This creates a sense of being on the margins, unable to fully participate or move ahead.



*"I couldn't quite crack the next level of full sort of integration or full comfort, and I think language is a big part of that for sure."*

- Interviewee 11





## Mismatch of expectations

Some international tech professionals arrive in Denmark with high expectations – shaped by global rankings, employer branding, and the country's strong reputation for happiness, balance, and quality of life. But daily life does not always match the image.

One example is the “happiest country” narrative. Some feel it creates pressure to feel content or grateful, even when struggling. One person says the story of Denmark as a perfect place made them question whether it was their fault for not feeling happy. Another explains that while they admire Danish culture, it can still feel opaque or difficult to access.

In some cases, people move expecting a smooth transition. They hear that Denmark is welcoming, efficient, and family-friendly – but find early years marked by low-paid jobs, social disconnection, or unclear norms. One person says they expected to stay long-term, but now feel like Denmark only wants expats temporarily, not to keep them.



## Social & cultural appeal elsewhere

For some international tech professionals, the decision to leave Denmark is not just about challenges within the country – but also about the pull of social and cultural connection elsewhere. Familiarity, comfort, and stronger support networks become powerful reasons to move on.

One example is the desire to return to a known social environment. A few people choose to go back to their home country or region, where they already have friends, family, or a shared cultural background.



*“I think the time with family and friends was the main reason I left. I felt like I needed a safe place for a while to rest and then decide what to do.”*

– Interviewee 18



*“There's this double-edged sword – Denmark says it needs more internationals, but then makes it really hard to integrate.”*

– Interviewee 9

Some also describe mismatches at work. Employers promote international culture and flat hierarchies but struggle to deliver on these promises. A few report that their company's global branding doesn't match the internal culture. Expectations shaped by job descriptions or onboarding turn out to be different from everyday dynamics.

When expectations are high but the emotional experience is mixed, disappointment can follow. For some, this mismatch becomes a quiet source of self-doubt or loss of motivation. Over time, it shapes whether they choose to stay – or look elsewhere for a better fit.

## What companies say about social and cultural disconnection

### Survey results from 43 Danish companies



*“Just making the office language English clearly isn't enough.”*

– Company survey respondent

Overall, employers recognise that inclusion doesn't happen by itself. Retaining international professionals requires more structured social support and openness to different cultural perspectives.

**56%** of companies say that lack of social integration or feeling unwelcome contributes to international professionals leaving Denmark.

**41%** point to challenges with cultural integration.

These findings echo the experiences of interviewees who felt excluded despite being professionally successful.

Yet, **51%** of companies offer no formal integration support, and 57.5% do not refer international staff to external support services (e.g. expat networks, unions, or municipal resources).

While some companies promote English as a working language or encourage informal mentorship, few offer structured support for social connection, cultural adaptation, or spousal integration.

Several companies acknowledge hidden barriers, such as informal conversations in Danish or norms that are difficult for newcomers to decode.

A few employers stress the importance of supporting international professionals outside of work.

03

## Archetype 3: Bureaucratically burned

For international tech professionals, dealing with visas, permits, and other paperwork is part of the journey. But in some cases, the stress of navigating Danish bureaucracy becomes more than just an inconvenience – it becomes a reason to leave.

Being “bureaucratically burned” doesn’t always mean a rejected application. Often, it’s about unclear rules, moving targets, and constant pressure to prove you belong. This is especially true for non-EU citizens, who face stricter rules and fewer rights.

In this study, about one in three participants described bureaucracy as a key factor in their decision to leave Denmark.

### Interviewees identified as archetype 3

Interviewees	Gender	Age range
8 of 26	3 female / 5 male	27-49
Citizenship	Tech profile	Experience abroad
6 EU / 2 non-EU	2 digital specialists / 6 digital integrators	6/8 had lived in another country before
Nationalities		
Argentina (also Italian citizen), Dutch, Bulgarian, German, Slovak, British, Indian, Mexican (also French citizen)		
Destination country		
Australia, Australia, <b>Bulgaria, Germany</b> , Hong Kong, UK, India, Mexico		

\*4 of the 8 interviewees returned to their home countries. These are shown in bold.

This archetype includes international professionals who came to Denmark with plans to stay – but ran into a system that felt rigid and hard to navigate. Some faced changing visa rules that directly affected their ability to stay. Others couldn’t find the right help when problems came up.

For some, a single event – like a job loss, delayed paperwork, or rule change – became the tipping point. Even if they had done everything right, they still ended up having to leave. For others, it was the ongoing stress and uncertainty that slowly wore them down. Leaving wasn’t always what they wanted – but it became the only realistic path forward.

## Case example: Burned by the system

Interviewee 22, USA, 36

An American tech professional moved to Denmark to pursue a master’s degree at Aalborg University, attracted by the practical curriculum and affordable tuition. What began as a study experience gradually turned into nearly a decade of life in Denmark, during which she built a strong professional network and held multiple roles across startups, consultancies, and public-private partnerships.

Despite her proactive efforts—including volunteering at industry events, and completing Danish language modules – her ability to remain in Denmark was repeatedly undermined by changing immigration policies.

“

*“I job-hopped four times just to keep up with the salary requirements. Each time they changed the rules, I had to pivot. It was like a hamster wheel.”*

At one point, a startup employer couldn’t meet the new minimum salary threshold, so she quietly took on a second consulting job just to remain eligible. When a consultancy she worked for went bankrupt, she had to find a new job immediately – despite the loss being entirely beyond her control. These breaks in employment reset the clock for permanent residency, making stability feel permanently out of reach.

Over her nine years in Denmark, she explains that the immigration rules changed “more than 40 times”, often applied retroactively.

“

*“I’ve never heard of a country doing that. Usually, new laws apply to new arrivals. But in Denmark, the bar just kept moving—even for people like me who’d already lived and worked there for years.”*

What frustrated her most wasn’t just the laws themselves, but the lack of institutional support to navigate them. Municipal services were unhelpful, and even her union had little experience supporting non-EU internationals.

“

*“What I needed was an immigration lawyer, not a résumé workshop.”*

Ultimately, she left Denmark – against her wishes – when a family health emergency required extended time in the U.S. Without permanent residency, even after nine years of contribution, she would have had to start from scratch upon returning.



## Bureaucratic departure factors

Five recurring themes emerged from interviews with international tech professionals who encountered challenges related to immigration, residency, and registration systems in Denmark:



Visa & immigration system complexity



Lack of system support & guidance



Financial pressure points



Practical & daily life hurdles



Streamlined systems abroad



### Visa & immigration system complexity

Some international tech talents encounter a confusing and inflexible visa system with shifting rules, creating instability and hindering long-term planning. Processes are often described as slow, opaque, or circular – where even following the rules doesn't guarantee progress or outcomes.

Some interviewees describe having to change jobs not out of ambition, but to meet updated visa requirements or salary thresholds. For some, this led to periods of uncertainty, job hopping, or burnout.



*"The number one challenge I faced was the immigration laws [...] I had a job that I liked and then they made the rule that you have to have a higher minimum salary. But I was at a startup and they couldn't pay that salary at the time."*

- Interviewee 20



*"I was eligible to apply for permanent residency. But instead of getting permanent residency, I'm risking getting kicked out."*

- Interviewee 23



### Lack of system support & guidance

Some international tech professionals report a significant absence of public sector guidance and support when it comes to navigating life and bureaucracy in Denmark. Even those who are proactive and highly educated describe the experience of arriving without a clear starting point.



*"The university didn't have very good services for foreign students generally. I struggled academically for one semester because I was behind and I felt that the guidance was very poor."*

- Interviewee 20

Some describe Denmark's administrative culture as highly structured but not intuitive to outsiders. For non-EU internationals in particular, the burden of navigating legal and practical requirements falls heavily on the individual, they explain.

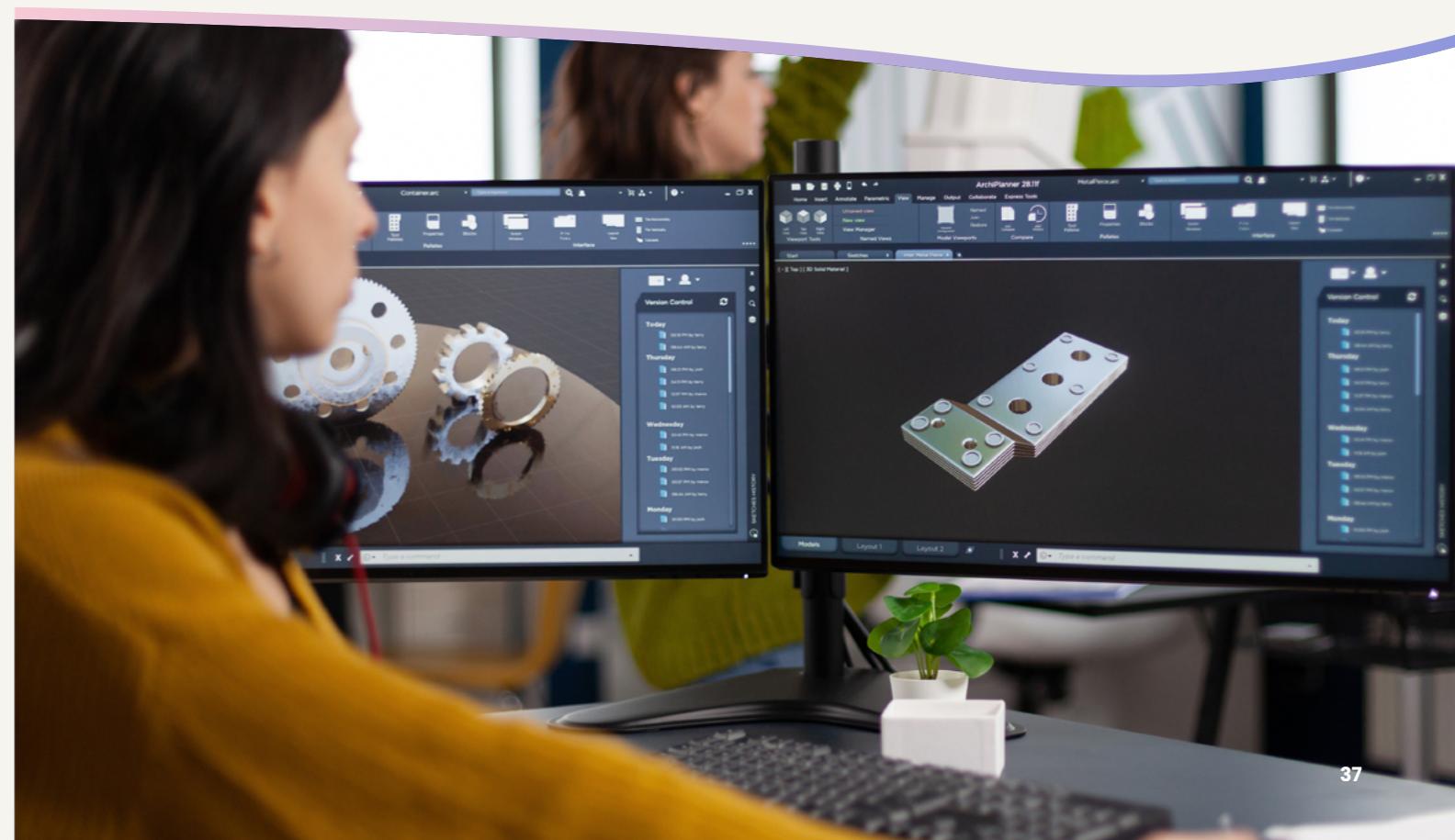
A recurring theme is the feeling that systems assume local knowledge, leaving newcomers to "figure it out" themselves. This do-it-yourself expectation puts pressure on those already juggling jobs, family, or studies.

Lack of support was also evident at the point of departure. Several interviewees said that leaving Denmark involved a surprising number of steps – from deregistering CPR numbers to resolving tax and insurance – yet they had no clear guidance on how to do so. Some only received help after directly contacting HR, while others completed the process entirely on their own.



*"[...] then it was pretty much like 'Cool, you're on your own – sorry to see you go. Just make sure you're handing your laptop and your phone when you leave'."*

- Interviewee 4





## Financial pressure points

Some international tech professionals describe financial strain as a compounding factor in their decision to leave Denmark. While some arrived expecting a strong welfare model and equitable salaries, the reality of high taxes, elevated living costs, and limited financial flexibility gradually undermined their sense of stability.

Several interviewees noted that their take-home pay felt significantly lower than expected, especially when compared to salaries in their home countries or to the cost of everyday life in Denmark. This pressure was particularly pronounced for families, where a single income often wasn't sufficient.



*"At one point, you want to have a stable environment for your kids and a stable school environment. But also secondly looking at the figures – going back to Germany with my husband's salary – we have so much more at the end of the month left over. [...] So, financially, we're so much better off and we don't have the pressure of me having to find a job."*

– Interviewee 15

Others reported struggling to build savings or afford the lifestyle they had envisioned in Denmark. Even with full-time work, daily costs and lack of systemic financial relief made long-term planning difficult.



*"I couldn't afford, necessarily, the life that I wanted to have in Denmark."*

– Interviewee 11

These economic pressures were often made worse by visa-related salary thresholds, childcare fees, or limitations on dual-career households. When paired with bureaucratic hurdles or a sense of professional stagnation, finances became a decisive factor for leaving. The result for many was a lingering feeling that the system made it hard to stay – or grow – on one's own terms.



## Practical & daily life hurdles

Beyond immigration rules and financial strain, some international tech professionals encountered everyday frictions that made life in Denmark more difficult than expected. While individually manageable, issues with housing, CPR registration, and healthcare often added up to a sense of fatigue or exclusion.

Basic systems – like banking, healthcare, taxes, and insurance – were often described as complex, opaque, and unintuitive. Some struggled to access clear, step-by-step guidance, particularly in English.

CPR-related issues were a recurring challenge. Rigid rules and mismatches could result in people being locked out of essential services like healthcare or housing – especially after job changes, study gaps, or moves between municipalities.



*"Then we realised that the Danes only have to have 5% down payment for the house and although both of us are EU members we need to have 20%. So that was already the first set back where we thought 'That doesn't sound really fair'."*

– Interviewee 15

Housing also emerged as a barrier to stability. Some faced high deposits, short leases, or restrictions when trying to buy property.

The healthcare system, while generally trusted, was often hard to access without Danish fluency. Several reported long waits, unclear entitlements, or lack of emergency coverage – particularly around childbirth.

Others described the mental load of having to constantly self-navigate a system that didn't feel designed for them. The absence of tailored guidance or basic orientation – especially outside major cities – made settling in harder than expected.

In the end, these small but persistent hurdles contributed to a feeling that integration in Denmark required constant initiative – and came with few safety nets.





## Streamlined systems abroad

For some international tech professionals, leaving Denmark wasn't just about local challenges – it was also about the comparative appeal of systems elsewhere. Other countries – a mix of home countries and new destinations – offered clearer visa pathways, faster bureaucracy, and more flexible approaches to housing, family reunification, or permanent residency.

Several interviewees had lived or worked abroad before Denmark and made direct comparisons. While Denmark was often seen as stable, it was also described as rigid, with limited room for negotiation. In contrast, other countries were perceived as more responsive, quicker to process paperwork, and better equipped to accommodate individual circumstances.

A recurring reflection was that Denmark's reputation for efficiency doesn't always apply to newcomers. Some felt that international professionals were expected to adapt to systems not designed with them in mind – whereas elsewhere, public services and integration pathways felt more internationally oriented.

For those already facing social, financial, or professional strain, moving to a place with fewer bureaucratic barriers became a pragmatic choice.

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*“I would not have moved if I was not happy with the job conditions as well. But I was happy. Bulgaria is the lowest tax country in the EU. My rent is three times less for three times more. [...] Denmark can't offer this to you.”*

– Interviewee 10

In this way, the relative simplicity and cost-effectiveness of life in other countries quietly tipped the balance – offering an alternative that felt more sustainable and tailored to international professionals.



## What companies say about bureaucratic challenges

Survey results from 43 Danish companies

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*“Show more empathy for the people who came here. Understand that we have to comply to everything, while we don't have the same rights.”*

– Company survey respondent

Employers recognise that international professionals often face greater administrative burdens – and that reducing friction in public systems could significantly improve retention.

**58.5%** of companies say that immigration-related processes (e.g. visas, work permits) pose challenges for international employees.

**27.5%** say these issues significantly impact retention; **35%** say they somewhat impact it.

However, only **20.5%** list immigration or visa-related challenges as a main reason for talent departure. This suggests the issue is recognised, but not always prioritised in retention efforts.

Just **42.5%** refer international staff to public services or organisations for support with housing, tax, or visa-related matters.

Over **51%** of companies offer no specific integration support at all.

**55.3%** of companies recommend simplifying visa and permit processes as a key improvement. Others call for clearer information and better support systems.

# 03 Recommendations



This study highlights several challenges international tech professionals face when trying to build a stable and fulfilling life in Denmark. These challenges, or frictions, are sometimes structural, but they also play out in everyday interactions.

Based on interview findings and input from the public and private stakeholders, the following focus areas and recommendations aim to support stronger retention of international talent. Each recommendation is presented through the lens of three main stakeholder groups: *public sector, companies, and talents*.

01

## Recommendations for: Public sector and unions

Many international tech professionals are struggling to build lives in Denmark. Their experience navigating public systems, careers, and daily life often determines whether Denmark becomes a long-term home or a short-term stop.

This study highlights four key areas where public institutions can strengthen retention and integration:



**Ensure stability and transparency in immigration rules and support structures**



**Support entry and re-entry into the Danish job market.**



**Reduce friction and uncertainty in public systems through greater visibility and proactive support.**



**Promote dual-career support initiatives for spouses and partners.**



**Communicate more clearly and realistically about career opportunities and work culture in Denmark.**

The following pages outline each recommendation with background, key challenges, and concrete actions.



## Ensure stability and transparency in immigration rules and support structures

### Challenge

Frequent changes to the rules governing residence and work permits create a climate of uncertainty that discourages long-term settlement. Relocating and planning a life in Denmark becomes difficult when rules are repeatedly revised, sometimes with retroactive effect. This erodes trust and makes Denmark less attractive compared to countries with more predictable frameworks.

At the same time, internationals often lack clarity on where to turn for guidance. While unions, municipalities,

and HR departments are frequently approached, none of these actors are legally authorised to provide binding advice on residence and work permits. The only authority empowered to handle these cases is the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration (SIRI), supported by International Citizen Service (ICS) centres. Because this division of responsibility is not always clear, internationals often experience a frustrating mismatch of expectations assuming they will receive help from local actors, only to be redirected or left unsupported.

### Recommendations

By ensuring predictable rules and clear guidance, Denmark can strengthen its reputation as a stable and transparent place for internationals to build their lives.

**Stabilise the legal framework for residence and work permits to avoid frequent and retroactive law changes, ensuring predictability so internationals can plan for long-term settlement.**

**Strengthen and clarify the role of SIRI and ICS. Make these the clearly recognised, well-resourced, and accessible entry points for all immigration-related guidance. Ensure that internationals know from the outset that these are the competent authorities for case-specific advice.**



## Support entry and re-entry into the Danish job market

### Challenge

Despite strong qualifications, many international professionals face barriers entering or re-entering the Danish job market. Long job searches, opaque hiring practices, and reliance on informal networks limit

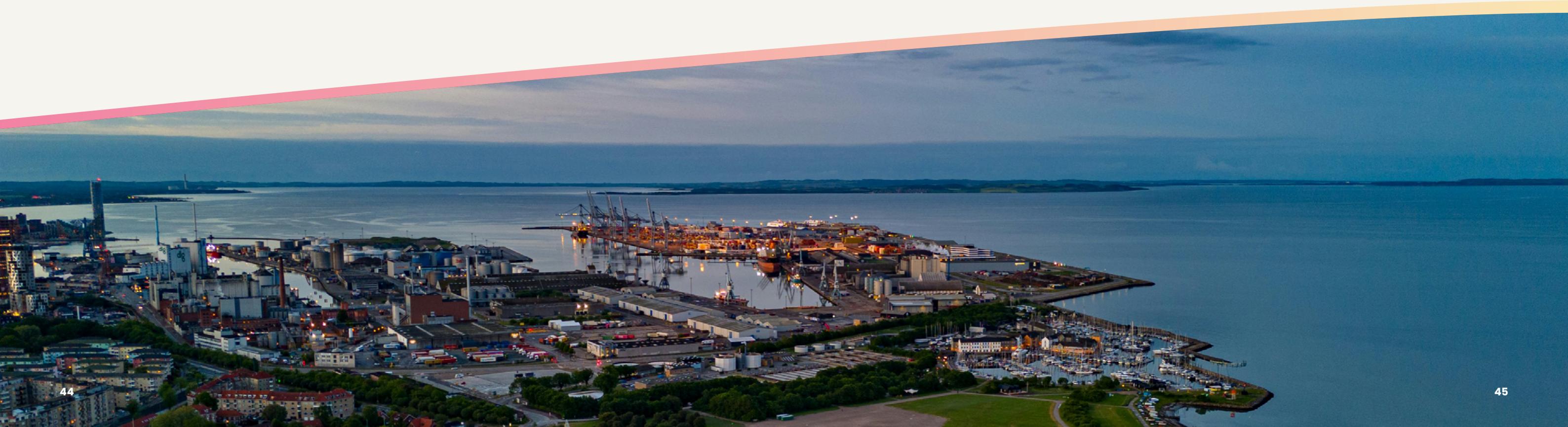
### Recommendations

Public institutions should invest in targeted support for job market (re)entry. Actions include:

**Tailored job support through municipalities, job centres, and unions, with sector-specific coaching and insights into Danish hiring culture.**

**A searchable talent database of internationals with Danish work experience, allowing employers to reconnect with pre-integrated professionals.**

**Public-private re-entry programmes with short-term placements, networking events, and career coaching.**





## Reduce friction and uncertainty in public systems through greater visibility and proactive support

### Challenge

Periods of transition – such as job loss, visa renewal, or family reunification – often cause stress, confusion, and inconsistent treatment. Many international professionals don't know where to turn and feel that

public systems are not designed with them in mind. This can erode trust and lead individuals to leave Denmark, even when they would prefer to stay.

### Recommendations

Public services must become more accessible, proactive, and empathetic. Priorities include:

Increase visibility and reach of existing resources such as International Citizen Service hubs, lifeindenmark.dk and workindenmark.dk. Promote these more actively through employers, educational institutions, municipalities, and onboarding materials.

Develop tailored, English materials for employers and employer organisations that explain municipal newcomer services. These should include step-by-step guidance for different life situations – such as arriving in Denmark, losing a job, or applying for family reunification – to enable more consistent referrals across the ecosystem.

Audit and streamline existing public communication to ensure inclusion. Some official resources remain partially translated or primarily designed for native Danish users. Review and update existing materials to ensure clarity, completeness, and accessibility in multiple languages. Consider usability testing with international residents to avoid exclusion and misinterpretation.



## Promote dual-career support initiatives for spouses and partners

### Challenge

For many international families, the integration of the primary worker's spouse or partner is a decisive factor in whether they choose to stay in Denmark long-term. When partners struggle to find meaningful employment, it often results in financial pressure, emotional strain, and a growing sense of disconnection from Danish society. This dynamic can undermine even the most successful professional placements.

Existing programmes such as the Copenhagen Career Program (offered by International House Copenhagen in cooperation with municipalities) and regional initiatives like Business Region Aarhus Program for Accompanying Partners already provide valuable workshops, job coaching, and career guidance in English. However, awareness and accessibility remain limited. These services should be more visible through relocation materials, employer onboarding, municipal welcome kits, and national talent attraction campaigns.

### Recommendations

Public actors should embed dual-career support into integration strategies from day one – treating spouse employment as a central element of long-term retention, not a secondary issue. While existing initiatives are in place, awareness and accessibility remain limited according to the interviewees from this study. These efforts should be scaled, better communicated, and expanded to more regions.

Promote awareness of existing public programmes, such as the Copenhagen Career Program for spouses and Business Region Aarhus Program for Accompanying Partners, which offers workshops, job coaching, and career guidance in English. Ensure these services are visible through relocation materials, employer onboarding, municipal welcome kits, and national talent attraction campaigns.

Foster public-private collaboration to identify and promote “spouse-friendly” job opportunities connecting employers with qualified international partners already based in Denmark.

Share real-life success stories to normalise dual-career pathways, build confidence, and combat the narrative that Denmark is not a viable place for international spouses to work.



## Communicate more clearly and realistically about career opportunities and work culture in Denmark

### Challenge

Many international tech professionals arrive in Denmark with high expectations shaped by national branding campaigns and international rankings. Denmark is widely promoted as a place with strong work-life balance, flat hierarchies, and a progressive work culture. While these strengths are real, they are often interpreted differently across cultures – and the nuances behind them are rarely explained upfront.

Interviewees in this study described a mismatch between what they expected and what they experienced, particularly in areas like ambition,

feedback, professional development, and informal communication. Some were surprised by the indirectness of feedback or the limited visibility of career progression opportunities. Others struggled to understand how leadership and decision-making processes worked in flatter organisational structures.

Without more detailed, realistic communication about the Danish job market and workplace norms, even well-intentioned attraction efforts risk contributing to disillusionment and premature departures.

### Recommendations

Public actors involved in talent attraction should align on a more honest, detailed, and inclusive communication strategy. This includes:

Clarifying cultural norms behind key concepts like work-life balance, flat hierarchy, and the Danish understanding of ambition. Help international professionals decode how these values translate into everyday workplace expectations.

Preparing internationals for common frictions, such as indirect feedback, informal hiring networks, or limited visibility around promotions. Acknowledge the areas where newcomers may struggle—and provide tools or insights to navigate them.

Sharing diverse, real-life stories from international professionals, including both positive surprises and common challenges. These stories can help set realistic expectations and build trust in the branding narrative. Prioritise voices from outside the capital region, across sectors, and from a range of cultural and professional backgrounds.

Align messaging across platforms by collaborating across publicly funded organisations, service portals and unions (e.g. Work in Denmark, lifeindenmark.dk, International House websites, Digital Hub Denmark, Copenhagen Capacity, regional newcomer initiatives etc.). Ensure that attraction and integration narratives reinforce, not contradict, each other.



## Recommendations for: Companies

Companies play a central role in retaining international talent. For many tech professionals, the workplace is their main entry point into Danish society – and often where decisions about staying or leaving are made. While many companies already make significant efforts to support international employees, this study finds that retention can be strengthened further by addressing a few recurring frictions. These include unclear guidance around bureaucracy, ambiguous professional growth paths, and limited support for social integration.

Three priority areas emerge:



**Provide structured guidance on bureaucratic and practical matters.**



**Strengthen onboarding, mentoring, and inclusion support.**



**Facilitate social integration and cross-cultural understanding.**

The following pages detail each recommendation with background, challenges, and concrete actions.



## Provide structured guidance on bureaucratic and practical matters

### Challenge

International employees often face significant friction navigating Danish bureaucracy, especially during life transitions. Even small missteps – like forgetting to register an address change or misunderstanding tax rules – can have serious consequences.

While these systems are the responsibility of the public sector, many professionals turn to their employers for help, particularly during time-sensitive moments like visa renewals or access to digital ID. Several interviewees felt isolated or unsupported in these situations, and in some cases, this directly influenced their decision to leave Denmark.

Although some larger companies provide relocation assistance or in-house support, many SMEs and

startups lack the internal capacity to guide employees beyond the onboarding phase. Surprisingly, this study finds that **57.5% of companies surveyed do not refer international staff to the free public services and support systems available** – despite the fact that these resources are designed precisely to fill that gap.

This mismatch is particularly visible among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While larger companies often have dedicated HR departments or relocation programmes, SMEs rarely have the resources to provide the same level of structured support. As a result, many international employees in smaller companies are left without guidance that could have supported both their professional and social integration.

### Recommendations

Companies should support international employees with bureaucratic and practical matters, not by replacing public services, but by acting as informed, proactive facilitators:

Familiarise yourself with publicly available resources such as lifeindenmark.dk, workindenmark.dk, and local International Citizen Service hubs. Refer international employees to these trusted sources as part of onboarding, offboarding, and during life transitions.

Make use of guidance and tools from employer organisations such as Confederation of Danish Industries and Danish Chamber of Commerce, which offer structured advice on strategic recruitment, onboarding, and long-term retention.

Assign an internal point of contact who can help international employees access external support when needed.

Provide accessible resources and referrals through updated English-language checklists and collaboration with public actors or relocation experts for specialised support.



## Strengthen onboarding, mentoring, and inclusion support for international employees

### Challenge

Several interviewees described entering the Danish labour market as confusing and isolating - even when securing a job. Without structured support, many struggled to interpret workplace expectations, build relationships, or understand how to grow professionally. For those facing job loss or re-entry

into the market, the lack of guidance and visibility made it even harder to stay.

This study shows that unclear communication around roles, performance, and growth paths can lead to disengagement or early departure.

### Recommendations

Combine practical support with cultural orientation and clear growth planning.

Leverage initiatives like Onboard Denmark or BELONG for guidance, templates, or training programmes tailored to companies hiring international employees - especially SMEs.

Cover not only tasks and tools, but also Danish norms on hierarchy, collaboration, and feedback. Use mentorship or buddy systems to build trust and help international staff interpret unspoken expectations.

Explain how professional development works in your organisation, including timelines, promotion criteria, and performance assessment practices. Clarify how growth is evaluated in practice - not just in principle - to align expectations and empower staff.



## Support social integration and cross-cultural understanding

### Challenge

Many interviewees cited social and cultural disconnection as a key reason for leaving Denmark. Despite efforts such as learning Danish, joining clubs, or volunteering, many struggled to form close relationships, particularly with Danes.

Workplace integration was also difficult: unspoken

norms, indirect communication, and informal conversations in Danish often limited inclusion. Even in English-speaking environments, language barriers and restricted access to informal networks left some feeling peripheral. Without a sense of belonging inside and outside work, retention is difficult, regardless of professional success.

### Recommendations

Companies should actively support the social integration of international employees through both everyday culture and structured inclusion efforts:

Encourage informal interaction across departments through team lunches, after-work events, or onboarding buddy systems and make sure international employees are included.

Foster open communication about norms and explain Danish social and professional expectations, including feedback styles, decision-making, and unspoken dynamics.

Be mindful of language use. Even when English is the working language, avoid excluding others in casual Danish conversations. Support employees learning Danish by recognising their efforts and offering practice opportunities.



03

## Recommendations for: International tech professionals

International tech professionals bring valuable skills, perspectives, and global experience to Denmark's digital ecosystem, yet adapting to a new country, culture, and job market can be challenging. Success often hinges not only on qualifications but also on understanding local expectations, building networks, and navigating unfamiliar systems.

While many appreciate life in Denmark, some face confusion, disillusionment, or missed opportunities whether interpreting workplace norms, re-entering the job market, or finding reliable information at key moments. Greater clarity, confidence, and support could help bridge these gaps.

This study identifies three priorities:



**Seek clarity on job expectations and career development opportunities.**



**Engage actively with Danish workplace and communication norms.**



**Build knowledge about public systems and use available support.**

The following pages detail each recommendation with context, challenges, and practical actions.



## Seek clarity on job expectations and career development opportunities

### Challenge

Many interviewees described uncertainty around their roles, performance expectations, and long-term career prospects. Without explicit feedback or clearly defined growth paths, it was difficult to know whether

they were meeting expectations – or how to advance. The flat hierarchies and informal communication styles that characterise Danish work culture often added to the ambiguity.

### Recommendations

Proactively build knowledge and seek transparency about Danish work culture, job expectations, and development opportunities – both before arriving in Denmark and throughout your employment.

Research Danish workplace norms, expectations, and communication culture before arrival to ensure your goals align with the local context.

Ask targeted questions during interviews and onboarding about how performance is evaluated, how promotions are handled, and what professional growth typically looks like within the company.

Initiate regular feedback conversations or career check-ins to align expectations, clarify performance, and identify development opportunities.

Stay visible and informed in the Danish job market through platforms like LinkedIn, industry events, and peer networks – which can also help you understand local standards and employer practices.



## Engage actively with Danish workplace and communication norms

### Challenge

Cultural friction was a common theme among interviewees. While Danish workplaces are often described as informal and egalitarian, many international professionals found it difficult to interpret

unspoken rules around humour, disagreement, hierarchy, or group participation. Language barriers in informal settings also limited inclusion, even in English-speaking environments.

### Recommendations

Actively engaging with Danish workplace culture and communication norms can build trust, reduce misunderstandings, and support stronger integration at work and in daily life.

Observe and ask about local work culture, including how decisions are made, how disagreement is handled, and what kind of communication is valued.

Use Danish in casual settings where possible – even simple phrases can signal effort and increase inclusion.

Ask clarifying questions when norms are unclear. Demonstrating curiosity and openness is often appreciated and can help bridge cultural gaps.



## Build knowledge about public systems and use available support

### Challenge

As mentioned earlier, several interviewees found it difficult to navigate Danish bureaucracy – particularly during job transitions, housing moves, or visa renewals. Information was often fragmented, overly technical, or only available in Danish. This created

### Recommendations

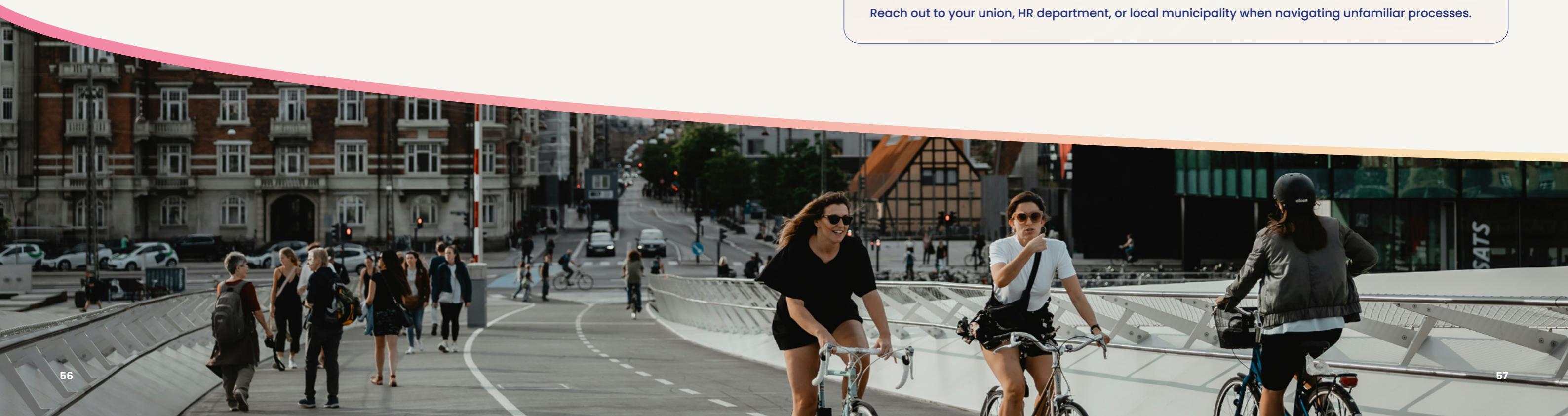
International professionals can benefit from understanding the structure of public systems and using trusted support channels early. Resources exist – the challenge is often knowing where to look and when to ask.

Visit an International House or a Citizen Service centre to receive hands-on guidance on public registration, healthcare, Digital Post, tax, and more.

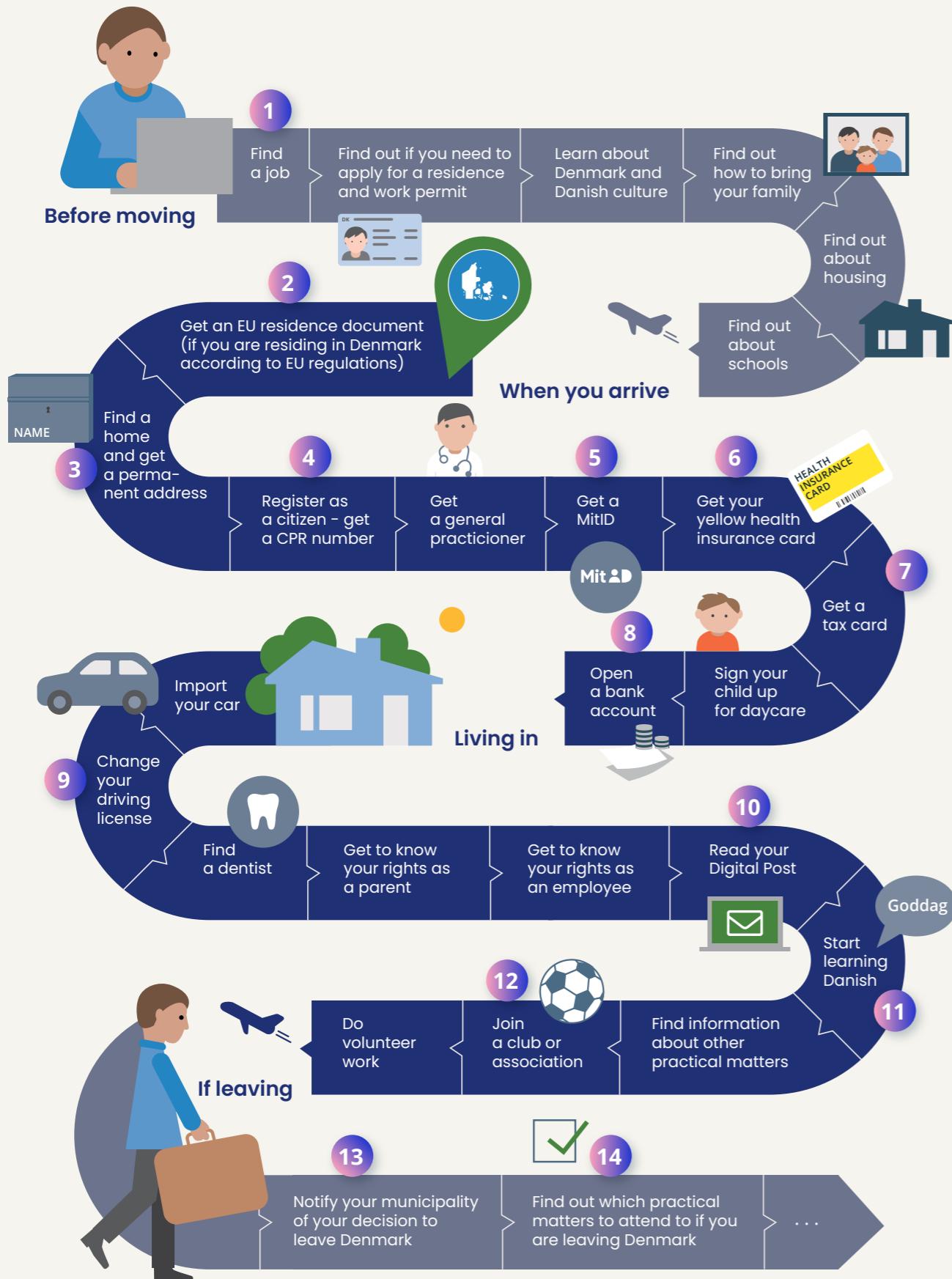
Download apps and tools recommended in official guides, such as “Your journey in Denmark” – a visual, multilingual overview developed by International House Copenhagen.

Use official websites like lifeindenmark.dk, workindenmark.dk, and the Danish Tax Agency (skat.dk) for updated information on rights, procedures, and contact points.

Reach out to your union, HR department, or local municipality when navigating unfamiliar processes.



## Your journey in Denmark



Source: City of Copenhagen

## Looking ahead

This report sheds light on why international tech professionals choose to leave Denmark – even when they are highly skilled, well-integrated at work, and motivated to stay. Their stories reveal that retention is about more than just jobs. It is shaped by a complex interplay of professional opportunities, cultural belonging, and practical support.

The insights collected here are not just reflections of the past, but calls to action. They highlight where existing systems – public, private, and social – fall short, and where small, targeted changes could make a meaningful difference.

Our hope is that this report will serve as both a conversation starter and a resource for action. The

findings will be disseminated to relevant stakeholders across municipalities, industry associations, and national policymakers. Just as importantly, they will be shared with companies, international professionals, and those working to make Denmark a better place to live and work for global talent.

This work does not end here. Digital Hub Denmark and our partners remain committed to deepening our understanding of talent retention and to continuing the dialogue with both internationals and employers. Monitoring these trends over time – and working collaboratively across sectors – will be essential if Denmark is to strengthen its position as an inclusive and attractive tech nation.

# 04 About the method



This report applies a mixed-methods design, combining in-depth qualitative interviews with a targeted company survey to build a nuanced

understanding of the factors shaping international tech talent attraction and retention in Denmark.

## Qualitative component: In-depth interviews

A core element of this study is a series of 26 qualitative interviews conducted with international tech professionals who have left Denmark within the last three years. The interviews aimed to uncover the lived experiences, motivations, and challenges of skilled digital workers who chose to relocate away from Denmark.

The interviews were 90 minutes, semi-structured, and followed a common guide, covering themes such as:

Motivations for coming to Denmark and expectations upon arrival.

Career and work experience, including job satisfaction and employer support.

Social integration, language barriers, and sense of belonging.

Structural and policy challenges, such as visa processes, taxation, and housing.

Cultural adaptation and lifestyle alignment.

Comparisons with other countries where they had lived or worked.

Departure reasons, and recommendations for improving Denmark's appeal to foreign talent.

Interviewees represented a wide mix of backgrounds ranging in age, nationality, professional role, and family situation. They included both digital specialists and digital integrators, and lived in all regions of Denmark. Their reflections offer rich, firsthand insight into what drives international professionals to stay or leave once in Denmark.

## Quantitative component: Company questionnaire

To complement the individual perspectives, we conducted a survey among **43** Danish companies that employ international digital professionals. Respondents included HR professionals and business leaders from a range of organisation types, including startups, SMEs, and large corporations.

The survey investigated:

Retention patterns: Frequency and timing of international employee departures.

Perceived causes of departure: Career stagnation, bureaucracy, cultural integration, family factors, cost of living, and more.

Support mechanisms offered by companies: Language classes, mentorship, relocation support, and perceived effectiveness.

Impact of policy and visa systems on retention.

Career development opportunities for international employees.

Suggestions for national improvements, such as simplified bureaucracy, better family support, and cultural inclusion.

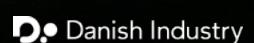
The survey employed a structured format with both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It was built around a shared understanding of "tech talent", defined as either digital specialists (e.g., developers, system architects) or digital integrators (e.g., product designers, analysts).

Together, these two data sources form the analytical foundation of the report. By combining micro-level perspectives from individuals with macro-level feedback from employers, the methodology enables evidence-based conclusions and actionable recommendations for improving Denmark's appeal as a destination for global tech talent.



# Digital Hub Denmark

In collaboration with



Research partner

