



# **“I learnt German at work.”**

Integrating vocational language learning into your company

The “Integration through Qualification (IQ)” programme

[www.netzwerk-iq.de](http://www.netzwerk-iq.de)  
[www.migrationsportal.de](http://www.migrationsportal.de)

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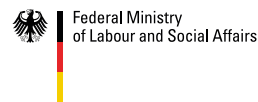
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In cooperation with:



## Good German language skills are becoming increasingly important

Over recent years, the ability to speak and use the German language competently in a professional context has become increasingly important. There are two key reasons for this. On the one hand, more and more employees are being brought in from abroad to bridge skills gaps, and on the other, organisational changes are frequently resulting in new linguistic challenges, even for employees who have been with their companies for a number of years. Many businesses and institutions are therefore starting to see supporting the acquisition and development of language skills as a key issue.

As one manager put it to us, it is about “making the work understandable, ensuring quality, clarifying objectives and guaranteeing that processes run as they should.” Ensuring operational procedures are designed effectively, that quality standards are adhered to, and that customer relationships are maintained are just a few of the areas in which good linguistic skills play a critical role, in every sector and in every workplace.

The tips we have provided in this brochure are generalised and should be seen as suggestions rather than hard and fast rules. Managers have to determine for themselves how they can be implemented within their company, defining their own specific objectives and taking into account their employees’ requirements. In doing so, they can effectively and successfully increase their staff’s communication skills, and in turn the level of professional competence in the company as a whole.

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**Tips and ideas for companies and institutions**

In this brochure, we will cover a variety of aspects of language learning in a professional context, including:

- How to find a good and appropriate language learning programme for your staff
  - Tips on how to make communication within your organisation more effective
  - Advice to help you integrate language learning into your company’s day-to-day activities
  - Ideas to help new employees integrate faster through the use of language mentors
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## Vocational German

“The technical knowledge is there, it’s often just the language that’s missing.”

“Language includes fun, jokes, irony, a shared language, the company’s language.”

“Speaking is the most important factor.”

“What use is knowing the specialist vocabulary if you can’t actually put it to use.”

“Every handshake has to be documented first.”

“We have a lot to do with customers here.”

**Vocational German refers to all situations in your day-to-day working life that involve speaking, reading or writing the language, such as:**

- Communicating with customers, patients, guests, suppliers, etc.
- Understanding and passing on operating instructions, error notifications, information, safety regulations
- Documentation associated with quality management
- Organising work within a team
- Small talk between colleagues
- ...

These communicative situations occur in almost every company, but each individual firm approaches them in a very specific way. This means that the concrete requirements of each company’s employees can vary greatly. For this reason, vocational German also covers learning strategies that can help employees meet the linguistic challenges of their own specific workplaces independently. One of the most important of these is

learning phrases that can be used to verbally ask for help or clarification. Taking into account the context of the communication also plays a key role. Conversations with customers and patients, for example, require different communication skills than conversations with colleagues and managers.

If these aspects are taken into account when developing language learning programmes within a professional context, learners will be able to apply what they learn to their own workplace immediately.

## Workplace-specific language learning: What do you need to think about?

Internal language learning programmes, either as one-to-one classes or in small groups, give you the opportunity to prepare (new) employees for the linguistic challenges of their specific roles. When it comes to designing a course, it is important to clearly define the concrete goals you want the employees to achieve in order to tailor the duration, scope and format to their needs. You will therefore need to work with the provider on the following aspects:

### Determining linguistic requirements

To design a programme that is specifically tailored to your company, your provider will normally need to determine exactly what the specific linguistic requirements are in the individual roles and areas. The following questions can help you with this:

- In which situations is linguistic communication particularly important for your staff?
- With whom will the employees have to speak as part of their role?



A trainer and HR representative at Hexad GmbH debrief following a language course (photo: Yvonne Salzmann)

- What tasks will they have to complete in writing, and which texts will they have to understand?

You may want to ask team, shift or department leaders and other colleagues for their assistance

here. The provider could also visit the workplace themselves if necessary. In addition to this, you should ensure that they see relevant documents that are used within the company.

### Improving the language skills of the participants

The course provider will design a programme to improve the oral (listening and speaking) and

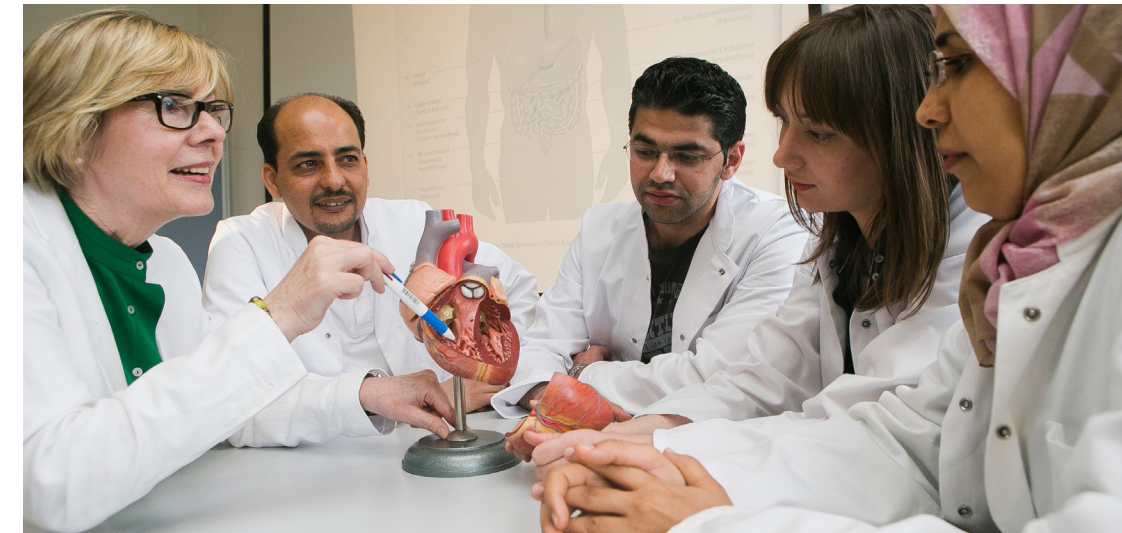
#### Checklist for assessing offers

- Has the provider determined the concrete needs of your company and the potential participants?
- Will the course improve the language skills of the participants in a way that relates to their work?
- Will authentic materials from your company and learning materials tailored to the company be used?
- Does the provider suit your specific organisation in terms of the course period and other framework conditions?
- Have they included offers for interim assessment and a final debriefing?
- Are the trainers qualified to teach vocational German?
- Is there advice as to how the content of the course can be integrated into the company as a whole?

written (reading and writing) language skills of the potential participants. It is also necessary to speak with potential participants to determine what challenges they face in their jobs and where they require support.

### Creating a language learning programme

Based on these foundations, you and the provider can create an individual concept that defines the content and scope of your new programme. This will include which specific communication situations should be covered, whether the course will be taught in groups or with (additional) one-to-one coaching, the location (in-house or at an educational facility) and realistic objectives for the planned timeframe. It is also important to agree at this stage if and how learning progress will be documented, and how it will be assessed at the end of the course. For longer courses, it can make sense to include an additional interim assessment.



Language training at the Städtisches Klinikum Braunschweig (photo: Jörg Scheibe, Städtisches Klinikum Braunschweig)

### Naming contacts

It is very useful for the course provider to have a single contact person at the company. If all feedback regarding the course goes to this one person, the programme can be made more effective, new questions from the company can be integrat-

ed into the course promptly, and responses to any issues can be put directly into practice to optimise working processes.

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**What you can do to make sure your in-house, workplace-focused language course is a success:**

- Take time to discuss your linguistic requirements with the provider.
  - Provide them with materials.
  - Give providers and course leaders the opportunity to visit your company.
  - Bring other employees and relevant parties into the process, e.g. supervisors, works council representatives, and name a fixed contact person.
  - Give your employees acceptable time to learn, e.g. by giving them time off from their regular duties. Voluntary participation is key to success.
  - Give your employees the opportunity to put what they have learned into practice.
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**One company's feedback on a language course:**

"For us, the German courses were a great success in two respects. Even during the first language course, we could see our employees growing in confidence in their day-to-day language usage. Initially their writing improved (e.g. emails) and soon after so did the way they talked, both with their colleagues and with customers. Their newly acquired language skills were always being improved, reinforced and put into practice. The employees also told us that the courses had enabled them to cope better with situations in their private lives where they needed to use German, such as visiting various authorities, or even dealing with their day-to-day post. All in all, communication between us has improved, and that has brought us closer together. Our employees are also considerably more confident in dealing with customers, which in turn makes the company as a whole more successful."

## How can you find suitable providers?

The IQ programme ("Integration through Qualification") can support you in your search for suitable providers.

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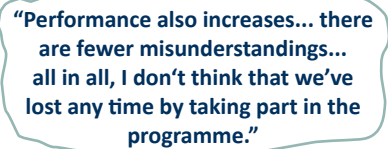
**You can find IQ contacts for the Vocational German programme at:**

- <http://www.deutsch-am-arbeitsplatz.de/ansprech-partner.html>

**The agencies approved by the "Supporting Vocational German" programme can be found at:**

- [http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/ESF/01\\_Grundlagen/liste-berechtigte-traeger-pdf.html?nn=2992896](http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/ESF/01_Grundlagen/liste-berechtigte-traeger-pdf.html?nn=2992896)
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You can also contact local adult education centres and other educational facilities to enquire about developing a tailored programme for your company.



"Performance also increases... there are fewer misunderstandings... all in all, I don't think that we've lost any time by taking part in the programme."



## What funding options are available?

Financial support for language learning courses is available from a number of different funding programmes. However, applications have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis to determine which, if any, public programme is applicable to your employees.

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### Here are just a few of the options:

- Sub-projects of the “Integration through Qualification” programme
  - MobiPro-EU / The Job of My Life programme
  - WeGebAU (Further training of low-skilled workers and older workers in companies)
  - “Bildungsprämie” learning subsidies, education and qualification cheques
  - Basic education funding programmes
  - Training aid
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A brief description of the programmes and further links can be found at:

<http://www.deutsch-am-arbeitsplatz.de/797.html>

As new funding programmes are being developed all the time, we suggest that you also contact IQ or local education agencies for further guidance. Visit [www.migrationsportal.de](http://www.migrationsportal.de) to find out more about the work of Network IQ in Lower Saxony.

## Making verbal communication at your company more effective



In-house language learning programmes help you to develop your employees’ skills in a targeted way. But you can also do a lot yourself in your day-to-day job to make communication easier

within the company and avoid misunderstandings. Many of these ideas seem simple, but they are easy to forget.

**You can make it easier for migrant workers to take part in discussions by:**

- Speaking clearly and slowly, with clear definition between individual words; using simple but full sentences; separating topics clearly and not blending them, e.g. by not giving instructions for another task during a watercooler conversation and not speaking over one another. If multiple people talk at once, a discussion quickly becomes difficult to follow.
- Clearly defining the order of tasks, e.g. first..., then...
- Avoiding little “filler words” that change the meaning of what you say, soften it or make it harsher, e.g. rather than “You could always go ahead and clear away the rubbish”, say “Please clear away the rubbish.”
- Using gestures sensibly to support what you say
- Encouraging them to ask questions and giving them time to do so

**The following concepts are particularly difficult for a non-native speaker to understand:**

- Sarcasm: e.g. “That’s just fantastic” as a negative statement
- Regional expressions and merging syllables together: e.g. “D’ya wanna...?”, “I was gonna...”
- Figures of speech and sayings: e.g. “Follow your nose!”

Of course, you cannot and should not avoid these structures completely. Just be aware that they are not always easy to understand. Take some time here and there to clarify meaning and encourage your employees to ask if they need help.

## Overcoming hurdles in written communication

Forms, regulations and written instructions often use complicated language. Complex sentence structures and long words and phrases can make it difficult to take in information. It often helps to determine which written documents are particularly hard for your new employees to understand. Then, you can revise and simplify them, or add diagrams. This not only benefits employees who have moved

here from abroad, but also other staff working in the company. The process can be, and has already been in some companies, made part of the quality management process.

Here are some examples of how you can make your instructions and documents easier to understand:

“Part of our quality management process involves ‘translating’ the language the engineers use into the language the manufacturing staff use during the preparation stage.”

Current formulation (from operating instructions, accident prevention regulations, etc.)	Simplified version	Note
Disinfection: Scrub the skin with a swab soaked in hand disinfectant.	Disinfection: - Soak a swab in hand disinfectant. - Scrub the skin with the swab.	Short sentences. Order of the steps is clear.
In the event of fire, report to the emergency assembly point immediately.	If something is burning: Go to the assembly point immediately!	Verb rather than noun. Familiar word “go” instead of “report”
Shut down the forklift and make a manager aware immediately.	Stop the forklift, remove the keys and inform the shift leader (name) immediately.	Use of more familiar words
Once the package is complete, it must be wrapped in film.	Then wrap the film around the package	Simple choice of words. Active voice rather than passive.

## The workplace as a place of learning



People have to learn new languages for themselves; no-one else can do it for them. But their

environment, including their workplace, can have a huge impact on their progress.

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Other colleagues and managers can help to improve new employees' German language skills in many different ways.

Here are a few real-world examples to give you some ideas:

- A trainee at a metalworking company takes some time on a Friday during clean-up to help a new non-native employee with the German names for the machinery and tools. Together, they label some of the tools with small stickers.
  - In an IT company, a new employee goes to a client meeting with a colleague. Afterwards, they discuss what she has and hasn't understood and write down a list of phrases she can use herself in future.
  - In a plastics processing company, a non-native employee talks through the working processes on the machinery with his team as they help him to understand instructions and be able to pass them on to others.
  - In an agricultural company, managers provide new staff with a vocabulary list for procedures relating to a harvester, and go through it frequently with them during orientation.
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For this reason, it is important to enable your (new) employees to develop their language skills in-house. Adults learn most quickly when they can use the skills they have acquired immediately, and when the benefits are clear to everyone involved.

How language learning can be integrated into day-to-day processes will differ in every company, depending on its organisation and other busi-

ness-related factors. However, here are a few tried and tested methods to help:

- **Providing lists of words and important sentences:** Compile systematic lists of important, frequently used words. Concentrate on small units of words and repeat them frequently during day-to-day activities, e.g. processes for using a machine or equipment, phrases to use when talking to customers, etc.



■ **Repeat process steps, explaining them as you go in short sentences:**

Give the staff member the opportunity to learn a list of vocabulary relevant to a particular process by showing them how to do it whilst using the words they need to know, e.g. "I take the hand scanner, I hold it over the EAN code. I press the switch, wait until it beeps. The package is now registered".

"I learnt German at work."

■ **Write out key points:** If something important comes up during a meeting or discussion, write it down legibly. Ask if there are any words or expressions you should clarify. If you have used a flipchart here, hang these key points up somewhere staff can see them.

■ **Provide documents:** Provide your (new) employees with documents before a meeting or before they are used so that they can read through the texts in advance, either alone or with the support of their colleagues, to help them prepare linguistically for the specific situation.

■ **Support with creating texts:** Offer help with wording and corrections when writing emails/ letters and when filling in forms. People often find writing in a foreign language more difficult than speaking.

■ **Bring (new) employees into the process:** Actively engage your new employees by giving them the chance to note down words, sentences and processes or collect new words and sentences to go through later. This empowers your new employees to deal with the linguistic aspect of their specific working environments independently.

■ **Correcting errors:** Correcting linguistic errors during a conversation often interrupts the flow and draws attention away from the actual content. Come to an agreement as to when errors should be corrected. If something is not understood, however, it is often better to resolve this straight away.

"You can have the best training in the world, but it means nothing if it isn't integrated into your work."

## Language mentors

It is often a good idea to support this informal learning in a more targeted way by finding motivated employees who can actively help guide their new colleagues through the language learning process. They do not necessarily need to be native German speakers. But they should be confident in using the language.

There are a few things to think about before implementing a language mentor scheme.

- The staff who take part should see this role as a positive one. There can, of course, be more than one person involved.
- They must have time for the role. Sessions may be very brief in some cases, but should always be regular.
- It is important to work with the (new) employees to determine exactly what the focus of their learning should be, e.g. vocabulary regarding a

machine process, appropriate phrasing to use with customers, etc.

- The role of a language mentor is to provide advice. They are not language teachers and will not normally be able to explain the intricacies of the language. There are professionals for this. However, they can support their colleagues in their language learning with their own knowledge, e.g. by giving them tips, telling them which phrases are appropriate in which situations, explaining new words, etc.

The role of a language mentor may also cover making the issue of working with German as a second language an integral part of the company as a whole. As a “language representative”, they can take on all kinds of issues in this area, such as identifying



texts that require simplification, compiling lists of important words used in their area, advising colleagues on how to improve communication, etc.

Although this may seem time-consuming, it does pay off, as by integrating on-the-job language learning into the workplace, you can ensure that German language skills are taught precisely where they are needed.

It can also be useful to have someone responsible for answering questions regarding workplace formalities such as holiday requests, calling in sick, invoicing, etc. Employees who have recently arrived in Germany may also find it useful to have someone who can point them to the appropriate place for queries in their lives outside of work, such as accommodation, insurance, etc.

The sooner issues like this can be resolved, the sooner your new employees can start focusing on their work.

## Final comments



Employees at Helios Kliniken GmbH discuss a case (photo: Andreas Bormann)

If you have ever learned a foreign language yourself, you may still remember the sheer amount of practice and patience it can take. Even with the

commitment and dedication both of your new employees and their colleagues, learning a new language is a process that you can promote and support, but will still take time.

The ideas and tips in this brochure should help you to give your (new) employees the tools they need to carry out their role in the company more effectively, and become more competent in expressing themselves linguistically, by improving their language skills. This will in turn make your company's processes run more quickly and effectively, and reduce the risk of misunderstandings and errors. This not only benefits your new employees by making it easier for them to

integrate into your company, but also makes communicating within teams and the company as a whole far easier, benefitting everyone involved.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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We have tried to use gender-neutral phrasing wherever possible throughout this brochure. However, in some cases we have not done so for reasons of clarity. All genders are, of course, included.

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W. Max Wirth GmbH, Braunschweig



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The “Integration through Qualification (IQ)” programme is sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.



Federal Ministry  
of Labour and Social Affairs



In cooperation with:



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research



**Bundesagentur für Arbeit**  
Federal Employment Agency



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