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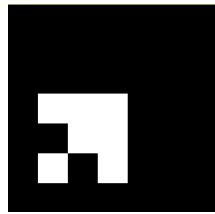
Language Requirements in Berlin's Job Market: A Comparison of International Image and Labor Market Practice

Ali M Abdou, Chakib Khemaissia, Nibras H Nathu, Omid Karimi

B124 Academic Writing and Research Methods



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Paper Title

Language Requirements in Berlin's Job Market: A Comparison of International Image and Labor Market Practice

Research Question

To what extent does Berlin's international and English-friendly reputation reflect the linguistic requirements of its labor market for non-German speaking professionals?

Collaborative report by:

Ali Mohamed Abdou	GH1033452	alimohamed.fathi@gisma-student.com
Chakib Khemaissia	GH1029909	chakib.khemaissia@gisma-student.com
Nibras Hassan Nathu	GH1036309	nibras.nathu@gisma-student.com
Omid Karimi	GH1038348	omid.karimi@gisma-student.com

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B124 Academic Writing and Research Methods

Lecturer

Vahab Esfandani

Module Leader

Prof. Dr. Sara Ramzani

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*We confirm that this collaborative report is
our own work and that we have documented
all sources and materials used.*

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Abstract

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1. Introduction

Once divided by two disparate ideologies, the German capital city of Berlin has earned a reputation for internationalism and globalization. With its thriving technology sector, growing business opportunities, and a large community of English speakers, Berlin has become an attraction for expatriates and international students looking to start a new life or career in Germany. This is largely due to the city’s branding as the ideal multicultural, English-friendly city requiring minimal German language skills. The ease with which one can navigate Berlin’s historical sites, university systems, and social life without fluency in German has only reinforced the city’s attractive reputation.

However, despite this welcoming image, anecdotal reports and personal experiences suggest significant obstacles for non-German speakers when applying for positions outside the narrow subset of expat-based tech startups. This creates a misalignment between Berlin’s international image and the standard labor market’s linguistic requirements. While many may assume that English is sufficient to secure a job, the reality of finding employment often tells a different story. Job listings in the Berlin Metropolitan Area continue to demand fluency in German across multiple job sectors, particularly more traditional industries such as finance, healthcare, and public administration; however, this demand is still visible in international fields such as software development and marketing. This linguistic requirement creates a significant barrier to entering the German labor market, hence challenging the perception of Berlin as a truly English-friendly city outside a touristic scope.

This paper aims to explore the question “To what extent does Berlin’s international and English-friendly reputation reflect the linguistic requirements of its labor market for non-German speaking professionals?” Specifically, this will be done by examining the gap between Berlin’s image and the language demands of its job market, investigating how English-speaking professionals fare in the job market, and identifying which sectors or industries are more accessible to non-German speakers. Furthermore, this paper will compare the relationship between Berlin’s online reputation and online job boards, career

advisors, and first-hand job-search testimonials. The use of primary research will provide contemporary insight into the topic at hand as well as represent the diversity of Berlin’s human talent. Additionally, secondary research into this question will furthermore support this paper’s analysis of Berlin’s job market. However, it is important to note the limitations of each method. Such limitations will be further elaborated in the methodology portion of this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Berlin’s International Image

Berlin has meticulously crafted a portrait of vibrance and multicultural friendliness. As “Germany’s multicultural capital, [Berlin] is home to people from over 190 countries, creating a unique environment where many languages are spoken, and English is often understood” (Kummuni, 2025). Streamlined visa policies tailored for highly skilled workers, the proliferation of numerous start-up incubators that offer numerous English-language networking opportunities, and the dynamically expanding tech ecosystem actively recruit a diverse international workforce. Berlin “even has an area called ‘Silicon Allee’” (Palacios, 2025), further reinforcing the city’s global image. Bertelsmann Stiftung (n.d.) also notes that this multifaceted effort has been successful in attracting a diverse range of global talent, thereby contributing to the city’s cosmopolitan character.

However, despite the city’s immense efforts to appear English-friendly, language remains a significant barrier to employment. According to Berbée and Stuhler (2024), proficiency in the local language has a direct and robust correlation to improved market outcomes, such as better wage levels and enhanced occupational attainment. “Improved German language skills effectively reduce the employment gap and the initial wage gap” for immigrants (Berbée and Stuhler, 2024). This means that while English may unlock certain paths, a strong command of the German language is an indispensable qualification for a more entangled economic integration.

2.2. Language and Employment in Globalized Cities

One of the most consistent findings across multiple studies is the significant role that German language proficiency plays in influencing labor market outcomes for immigrants in Germany. German language proficiency is among the most crucial factors influencing employment and earnings among immigrants, especially for those outside the startup or academic sectors (Berbée and Stuhler, 2024). The increasingly persuasive interconnectedness of a globalized world has immensely reshaped labor markets, labeling proficiency in the local language as a critical determinant for employment, especially for expatriates seeking employment (Shohamy, 2006). The demand for multilingual employees has risen with the rise of globalization. This is because multinational corporations expand their reach to engage with a global clientele, thus creating a need for a widely accepted lingua franca (Mufwene, 2012). Consequently, the English language has indisputably emerged as the dominant “global language of business” (Neeley, 2012), serving as the primary medium for international communication.

2.3. Previous Research on Language Requirements

Gogolin (2002) argues that European nations underestimate the actual linguistic diversity within their borders, thus neglecting the languages brought through immigrant integration. There is an “expectation that immigrants adapt to their new place of residence, also in the sense that they give up their inherited languages and ‘convert’ to the majority language” (Gogolin, 2002). This can further support Berbée’s and Stuhler’s claim that immigrants must learn the local language to integrate into the workforce. Gogolin highlights a hierarchy of language status in diverse contexts where German is the “dominant language.” To complement, Extra (2010) highlights the importance of “[the] widely spoken home language” as an indicator of linguistic diversity. He argues that such linguistic diversity can often challenge monolingual mindsets and function as “agents of change” (Extra, 2010).

2.4. Perception vs. Reality in Germany’s Job Market

Even in companies where English is the official corporate language, German frequently remains the primary language used for communication between German colleagues (Erling and Walton, 2007). This creates a gap between the expectation of an English-only environment and the reality where German language skills are an absolute must-have characteristic. “In the past, companies conducted most of their business in German, and employed [few English-specialists] where they were most needed,” write Erling and Walton (2007), noting that nowadays, “knowledge of English is necessary for communication with people from all over the world.”

Similarly, Extra (2010) further suggests that while cities may be linguistically rich and informal in social settings, public institutions continue to operate monolingually. Formal and official communication from government entities, such as the Foreigners’ Office, Federal Employment Agency, and Tax Office, remains to be conducted primarily in German (Kummuni, 2025). There are also significant obstacles to entry in non-tech or non-startup sectors outside of the comparatively sheltered and very English-friendly tech and startup bubble. A strong and frequently validated command of the German language is required by practically all traditional sectors, such as public services and regulated professions like human resources, accounting, law, and medicine (Palacios, 2025). “Jobs that require you to know or work with German laws are the least likely for you to get without speaking German” (Palacios, 2025). On the other hand, Damelang and Haas (2012) contrastingly highlight that “young foreigners and Germans face significantly lower barriers for employment entry in culturally more diverse German regions.” This perspective argues that international and diverse areas, such as Berlin, have “lower barriers for employment entry” (Damelang and Haas, 2012).

3. Methodology

To address this study’s research question, this paper employs a mixed-method approach comprising primary and secondary research strategies. This will provide a comprehensive perspective on how language impacts employability in Berlin, especially for individuals who are not fluent in German. Additionally, this mixed approach will allow for a relative comparison of secondary works and current-day testimonials as of the summer of 2025.

3.1. Primary Research Methods

Primary data was collected via an online survey distributed through university mailing lists, online forums, and social media platforms. The survey was created using Microsoft Office Forms (see Appendix A). It targeted expatriates and international students and was conducted anonymously with informed consent provided through a data protection disclaimer (datenschutzhinweis) written in both German and English. Additionally, the survey includes sections on demographics, academic background, employment preferences, language skills, and job search experience. Thus, the survey enables the collection of both statistical trends and subjective perceptions regarding the role of language in Berlin’s job market.

Primary research aids and benefits this paper by ensuring contemporary data is included. The survey used in this paper allows this research to “avoid unreliable information from outside sources” (Indeed, 2025). However, primary research comes with its respective challenges (Karunaratna et al., 2024). The survey conducted in this study was particularly time-consuming and difficult to distribute. Issues arose when convincing individuals to take a few minutes to complete the survey, as many individuals had refused to participate in such a study without an incentive. Also, the sample size was limited due to the difficulty in distributing the survey to the large number of Berlin residents. Some respondents may also downplay the issue of language requirements if they had help from inside their company, or, contrary, where some may exaggerate the issue due to bad

experiences during the hiring process.

3.2. Secondary Research Methods

Secondary data was collected through a content analysis of job listings on platforms like LinkedIn, Indeed, StepStone, and businesses' direct hiring portals. Said listings include jobs from various industries, including technology, marketing, education, healthcare, customer service, government, and finance. Each job listing was analyzed to determine the language it was posted in, the language requirements listed, the industry, and the industry level. This data helps evaluate how frequently English-friendly positions are advertised, which industries offer such positions, and whether German language skills are a formal prerequisite or an implicit expectation. Notably, this paper does not aim or intend to explore the differences in salaries and job benefits between positions that require unwavering German language skills and positions that require little or no knowledge of the German language.

Secondary research is a key component of any study, providing nearly unlimited insight into other institutions' discoveries on a topic. Secondary research is an easy, cheap, and fast method of data collection that does not require "[involvement] in developing complicated data collection methods" (Nasrudin, 2025). Particularly with the rise of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, secondary research has become increasingly simple; it merely requires a quick prompt instructing an AI tool to search the internet for sources on any given topic. Additionally, secondary research is more varied, allowing a surplus of data to be used in comparison. However, secondary research comes with its respective disadvantages. For instance, the data may be inaccurate, as no piece can ever be fully verified as authentic. It may also be out-of-date, providing information that no longer applies to the current industry norms and requirements (Nasrudin, 2025).

4. Evaluation and Results

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5. Conclusion

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