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## **Integration of Foreign Doctors in German Hospitals: A Qualitative Study - Barriers and Best Practices Encountered Through Their Journey**

This is not news, but Germany needs experts! Many companies, businesses, hospitals, and care facilities have already become dependent on the availability of skilled foreign workers who are willing to migrate to Germany. They fill the open positions that cannot be covered by the local population, and one of the most important areas that continue to face a shortage of national experts is the medical sector.

In this sense, the objective of the research was to analyze the professional journey of a group of foreign doctors by examining their integration process into the German labor market. We took into account the personal experiences of these foreign doctors, especially their perceptions and feelings about the obstacles that they encountered during their acculturation. Based on our analysis of this qualitative research strategy, the most salient findings are summarized below:

### **Elements that Promote Integration**

- **Introductory orientation or welcome events:** These seem to be very supportive, in the initial phase, in promoting integration of foreign physicians into the organization, but are only a foundation for further actions which must take place. Most participants found these events useful in dissemination of general information about their new workplace, as well as in providing an informal setting to get to know other colleagues, but did not suffice in promoting a deep understanding of the different processes in the work environment.
- **Mentors:** A supervisor or a qualified colleague who is willing to guide the new doctors, at least for one year, is vital, and gives the newcomer the security that there is someone who fosters their development on a long-term basis.
- **Language courses:** Offering advanced language courses is a win-win situation, since the better integrated foreign doctor can more happily collaborate in the work arena. Foreign doctors can continue improve their language competences, not only in terms of the professional language, which is very advantageous for the employer, but also to improve their language skills for the trust and relationship-building with colleagues and patients. In order to feel comfortable in their new surroundings, better language skills give the new employees the chance to create their own social networks. This is a must in overcoming phenomena such as loneliness and isolation.
- **Orientation and Integration Services for accompanying families:** Supporting the effective integration of the newcomers' families also has a vital positive impact on the integration and, even more important for the employer, a positive influence in the long-term retention of an employee.

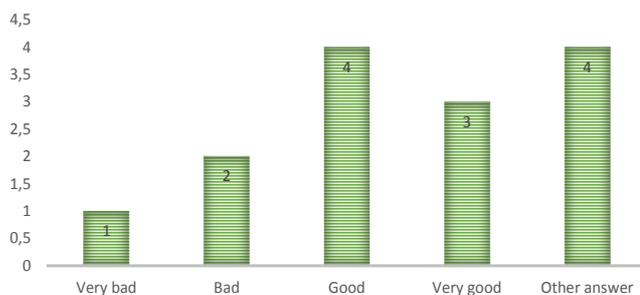
### **Elements that Hinder Integration**

- **The German cultural and regional cultural and language challenges:** Integration into Germany is a major challenge for foreigners working in all sectors and German is not the easiest language to learn. It is common that people learn German as a second foreign language, after investing years of their education in learning English. When working as a doctor, communicating effectively plays a decisive role in the outcome of diagnosis, treatment or a medical procedure. Especially if a dialect is spoken, it is key that the doctor understands local nuances, expressions, and meanings and feels comfortable with the local flavour of the

language, understanding in addition the cultural differences in patient expectations in terms of formality, distance, rules and regulations, power and roles, et al. Therefore, it is essential that foreign doctors are equipped with a deep understanding of cultural and linguistic norms on an everyday basis, as well as with the hospital regulations, the organizational culture of the clinic and the professional terminology that is required to provide the patients with quality care.

- **Power distance issues:** Many participants had problems adjusting to the differences in distribution of decision-making and power hierarchies in German hospitals. At the same time, it was mentioned that the roles and relationships between assistant doctors and the nursing personnel was different from what they were accustomed, thus also leading to irritations, frustrations and conflicts.
- **Prejudices, Discrimination, and Downgrading:** This is the most important taboo issue which arose in the interviews. Some of the participants reported sensing that their German colleagues and the nursing staff had doubts about their medical know-how, attributing the quality of their medical expertise to the poverty of their countries. Others felt that their professional capacities and their personal skills were automatically questioned because of their cultural background and/or religion. In addition, it was common that doctors were used as translators, which felt as a demeaning and inappropriate use of their professional status. Although in dire crisis situations this may be acceptable, it is not an efficient solution for the communication with patients and this is not the kind of work a doctor was hired for.

### HOW DID IT FEEL TO START WORKING IN GERMANY?

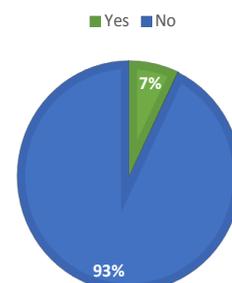


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### Opportunities the hospitals and clinics can seize:

- **Building of interculturally competent German and foreign personnel:** With the steadily increasing number of foreign doctors, foreign nursing staff, and foreign patients in Germany, it is essential that the employees of a hospital are interculturally competent in providing appropriate efficient and effective skilled care. There are a multitude of training, consulting and coaching measure which can be undertaken to achieve a higher degree of intercultural sensitivity and awareness, plus the accompanying behaviors to successfully build a healthy environment for collaboration. If the administrative personnel, the supervisors, the assistant doctors and the nursing personnel can communicate in a constructive and collegial manner and prejudices and discrimination can be worked through, employee and patient satisfaction and the productivity of the organization will improve exponentially.
- **International Representative:** The amount of foreign physicians will continue to grow in the upcoming years. With this in mind, it is advantageous to create an inhouse contact expert who is in charge of supporting these foreign employees on their integration journey. This office can offer support on bureaucratic issues, and identify the needs for intercultural interventions.

### 4.3 DID YOU RECEIVE SUPPORT FROM YOUR EMPLOYER TO AID YOUR CULTURAL INTEGRATION?



- **Using their Knowledge:** Foreign doctors who have gone through an acculturation process, have a higher level of cultural competence and a more sophisticated sense of the integration issues than their German colleagues who have not experienced such a situation. This gives them an advantage when treating patients with a migration background. Having a multicultural team in an organization can also have the advantage of bringing new ideas and new perspectives into the working environment.

Migration and active recruitment of highly skilled workers from abroad will continue to provide a good opportunity for compensating for the shortage of highly-skilled professionals in Germany. Considering this, it is important that companies and organizations recognize the impact that attracting and retaining these workers will have in the proper development of their businesses. Organizations need to emphasize the importance of more than just a *Willkommenskultur* among all the different actors within the organization which includes the administration personnel, as well as the local and the foreign workforce, but also a culture of respect.

Cultural standards play an essential role in the way that human beings evaluate the behaviour of others, as they reflect the social values and norms that are shared by a certain group of people. Offering intercultural interventions of many kinds and forms exposes the unspoken irritations and frustrations, provides a safe environment for learning how to work in a multicultural team, and improve the intercultural skills of the employees (locals and foreigners), to avoid misunderstandings, and thus reduces conflict situations inside of the organization.

One of the most important issues concerning foreign doctors in Germany should be the usage of their knowledge and culture to improve the day to day work. According to the literature, many efforts have been made to make the recognition of foreign qualifications in Germany easier and faster, however the matter of multicultural differences at the workplace and how to deal with such an issue, has not been an important subject until now. It was found that almost any manager nowadays, especially at a German hospital, needs to deal with cultural diversity management issues every day, and knowing how to deal with these issues is vital to shape the strategy of any organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*“[...] to be effective in interacting across cultural boundaries, organizations need to be sensitized to the values of understanding, appreciating, and respecting human and cultural differences.” (Okoro & Washington, 2012)*

Cost-effective and yet humane healthcare is becoming increasingly important with the demographic changes in our society. Recruiting foreign physicians and learning how to retain them means creating a new kind of competence and communication culture. This can provide a better quality in patient management for any hospital and support and motivate all employees. To be recognized as a house of international knowledge and competence will become an important success factor for all stakeholders in the institution.