

BUSINESS

# Launching in November: This free research-backed toolkit helps internationals excel in Danish workplaces

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Real networking strategies, cultural identity games, conversation starters and more. In November, an exciting new workplace resource for businesses to onboard and retain international talent will be made freely available online.




Easy workplace exercises based on three years of social research, to make internationals thrive and feel welcome. Photo: Project Onboard Denmark

Hiring, onboarding and retaining highly skilled internationals is a hot topic in Denmark.

A shortage of domestic labour means businesses are in acute need of foreign talents – but international hires frequently report that Danes are socially unforthcoming, workplace integration is thorny, and the Danish monoculture gives no space to diversity.

Help is coming: in November, an exciting new workplace resource for businesses to onboard and retain international talent will be made freely available online.

[Project Onboard Denmark](#) is a series of free-to-access digital tools, informed by three years' dedicated research, designed so that leaders and team managers can help their international employees feel welcome and able to contribute in the workplace.

“These tools are self-explanatory, so you don’t need to find time and money for a consultant or a cultural trainer to come and do it,” says project co-lead,  Privacy

researcher Professor Claire Maxwell, who specialises in internationally mobile professionals and their families.



Professor Claire Maxwell co-leads Project Onboard Denmark. Photo: Københavns Universitet

### **Understand: why is it hard to onboard internationals?**

“Why and how is it difficult for small and medium sized enterprises to hire and onboard internationals? That was our starting point,” says Maxwell.

In collaboration with executive coach Signe Biering and associate professor and diversity expert Dr. Poornima Luthra, Maxwell surveyed and analysed results from  
Privacy

134 companies, interviewed over 80 CEOs and team leaders, as well as recent graduates and established experts.

“We found that often, one person in the organization knows onboarding and integration is important, but their ability to communicate the kind of changes that are needed to actually impact work culture, to change the way in which they view internationals, is lacking.”

“That means you need senior leadership who make time for this. Then they say, ‘can’t HR deal with this?’, which means nobody takes responsibility, and it becomes overwhelming.”

The sense of overwhelm is common, observes Maxwell: “people often say ‘more internationals means we’ll have to start speaking English – that that feels like too big a change’, or ‘what will this poor person do at four in the afternoon? None of us want to invite them home for dinner’, all the way to reasonable bureaucratic hurdles like, ‘they can’t get a CPR number until they’ve got an address.’”

### **Making cultural difference approachable**

That’s where POD’s simple workplace exercises come in. They provide easy inroads to the otherwise hard to navigate landscape of onboarding.

They teach that onboarding, at its core, is about listening, sharing and understanding – and they give teams of professionals a set of fun frameworks in which to do this.

Exercises like the Cultural Thumbprint, for example, developed by associate professor and diversity expert Dr. Poornima Luthra, encourages employees to reflect on their own approach to communication and leadership.

The Cultural Thumbprint is a digital questionnaire based on POD research. Respondents receive a personal ‘map’ of their professional characteristics and their

individual cultural lens. By sharing these as a group, employees gain insight into one another's preferred ways of working.

"I've tested this several times and found it to be very powerful. I've just had a senior head of HR for one of the very big Danish companies tell me 'I need this, because it would help my international, remote-based team to relate to one another,'" says Maxwell.

"I remember very vividly one guy who was Middle Eastern, who had worked in Dubai and London, and many other places. His Cultural Thumbprint surprised him when he saw that his mobile working experience had changed his entire approach to working in a team."

### **Less about content, more about conversation**

Meanwhile, the Culture Game, spearheaded by executive coach Signe Biering, is a digital card game and 'intercultural icebreaker' that mixes Danes and internationals and helps them talk about common things they notice about Denmark.

"This exercise makes it fun for teams to talk about the 'Danishness' of the company, and to point out issues such as equality, our directness, our humour and so on," says Biering. "It's a nice way to touch on complex questions of culture that people might otherwise shy from."

Maxwell points out the value of breaking the conversation barrier: "it's almost less about the content and more about the meeting of conversations," she says.

"If we have a sense of someone being more complex, and that they've done lots of learning along the way, we're much more likely to respect that person."



Signe Biering is an executive coach trained in psychology, with a background in diplomacy. Photo: Signe Biering Nielsen

### **Putting networking on the agenda**

“Networks in Denmark are not either purely professional or purely social – they often interlink. In many workplaces, networks have existed from when they went to university or school,” says Maxwell.

One of the top complaints of new internationals in Denmark is that they feel stonewalled by Danish social and professional circles. Biering agrees, noting that Danes learn ‘a particular way of networking from childhood’.

POD’s Networking, Professional and Social Plan gives internationals inspiration, tips, and strategies for creating an individualised networking plan based on preferences, needs, and goals.

“I work with leaders every day, so I also see from the organisation’s perspective. What can we actually ask of a company? For the networking tool, the international has to do the work. I can’t network for you,” says Biering.

“But this tool, which you can easily access and implement via the POD website, helps both the international and the employer to recognise that building

network happens at many levels. It gives practical help, but it's also about putting it on the agenda.”

Where companies and employees address networking with direct intent, it leads to development. This thinking is at the core of all of POD's tools.

Implementing POD in the workplace is as simple as signing up on the website, taking the digital exercises into the workplace, and bringing people together with intention.

### **Built on altruistic values**

“What's unique is that POD that it's a true cross-sector partnership, not driven by commercial interests. Because it was backed by innovation funding, we could be more altruistic and really push the scope,” says Maxwell.

She describes the sparring in the POD team as 'generative' and adds, “Poornima is a diversity and inclusion expert, and Signe brings this wonderfully complex understanding of 'Danishness' and is very international herself. We've had some interesting debates.”

Indeed, Biering is incredibly astute when it comes to Danish culture. “It's sticky and hard to see. It can pop up in the most unexpected ways,” she says.

“My work bridges psychology, but my background is in diplomacy. That means I also understand organisational complexity. I know companies would rather waste money than do difficult things. POD lowers the bar so they don't feel it's hard, strange or challenging to address onboarding,” says Biering.

### **Onboarding is a shared responsibility**

POD is designed to work for resistant, capacity-poor users, and multiple people are encouraged to take responsibility. “It's a whole company approach, but you don't have to do the whole thing all at once,” says Maxwell.

“Companies shouldn’t feel that it’s all on their shoulders, so we’ve also got a whole set of tools just for internationals. They also want to take responsibility for their own lives; they’re very capable, but sometimes they need a bit of support to get going,” says Biering.

That starts with baby steps, and simply putting onboarding on the agenda is the first.

“As Signe would say, helping internationals to feel welcome is about acknowledging complexity and encouraging reflection,” says Maxwell. “None of this is rocket science. The POD tools just help to push you further.”

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