What employers do about shortages

European field research at 17 organisations in 13 countries shows which recruitment and retention measures employers actually deploy. The thread: search wider, offer more, select smarter.

Summary

While 77% of European employers already struggled in 2019 to find people with the right skills, good documentation of what firms actually do about it is scarce. The European foundation for working conditions studied it at 17 organisations across 13 member states. The measures cluster in four groups: partnering with education and intermediaries, offering more than pay, recruiting smarter through referrals and wider catchment areas, and selecting on aptitude rather than diplomas. The most striking finding: the will to recruit internationally exceeds its use.

Much has been published about the size of the shortage, in this library too. Much less about what employers concretely do against it. The European foundation for working and living conditions filled that gap with field research: 17 organisational case studies in 13 member states, published in September 2024. This paper summarises the measures and weighs what they are worth.

The backdrop: skills, not people

The report opens with the size of the problem, from the foundation's own company survey covering 2019: 77% of European establishments already struggled then to attract people with the right skills, and more than a quarter found it very difficult.

77% of European establishments struggled to find people with the right skills

European Company Survey 2019, cited in Eurofound, Company practices to tackle labour shortages, September 2024. Retrieved 1 September 2026.

At the same time the mismatch runs both ways: 17% of employees are overqualified for their own work, against 13% underqualified. The shortage sits not only in people but in how skills are distributed over jobs. For Germany and the Netherlands the report notes that almost one in three firms names labour as a production constraint.

Four families of measures

The 17 case studies yield no recipe, but they yield a pattern. The measures cluster in four families:

- **Partnering with the supply line.** Employers tighten ties with vocational education, trainers and public and private employment services, help steer curricula and seek early, direct contact with graduates. Ongoing training and visible career paths belong to the same family.
- **Offering more than pay.** Beside wages, organisations deploy conditions that are scarce: flexible working hours, remote work, help with housing, childcare or health insurance. Whoever cannot improve the working conditions themselves compensates at the edges.
- **Recruiting smarter.** Social media, employee referral programmes and a deliberately larger geographic catchment area. In selection, the emphasis shifts from diplomas to aptitude, soft skills and fit.
- **International, with the handbrake on.** The willingness to recruit through labour migration exceeds actual use. Administrative barriers, slow recognition of qualifications and language keep the route narrow, even at firms that want to take it.

What to take from it

For the Dutch reader two patterns are the most usable. First: nearly all measures that work enlarge the supply for one employer without enlarging supply in the market. Referrals, employer branding and better conditions move scarce people around; only the education partnerships and training routes create new supply. Whoever reads the case studies as a market solution reads them too large.

Second: the international route is the only channel with unused capacity, and its barriers are procedural, not market barriers. That makes it terrain where intermediaries with process knowledge genuinely matter, as the European shortage map in this library also suggests.

What this research does not say

- Seventeen organisations are a pattern study, not a sample. The families of measures are well grounded; their distribution or success rate is not.
- The 77% dates from 2019, before corona and before peak tightness. The figure marks that the problem predates the peak, not today's level.
- The measures are reported by the firms themselves. What did not work rarely makes it into such conversations.

What this means

- **The quotable number.** 77% of European establishments already struggled in 2019 to find the right skills. The shortage predates the 2022 peak and survives it.
- **Most measures redistribute.** Referrals and better conditions win candidates from other employers. That works for a firm and changes nothing about the market.
- **New supply comes from two channels.** Education partnerships and the international route are the only families that enlarge the pool. Both demand years or process knowledge.
- **Selecting on aptitude is the quiet shift.** Diploma requirements lose ground to soft skills and learnability. That squares with the earlier paper on the degree line in the vacancy.

Method and sources

This paper reworks Company practices to tackle labour shortages by Eurofound, the European foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions, published in September 2024 and based on 17 organisational case studies in 13 member states. Reproduction is authorised with acknowledgement; this text is summarised and rewritten, retrieved on 1 September 2026.

The chain belongs here. The 77% and the very-difficult figures come from the same foundation's European Company Survey of 2019 and are therefore pre-pandemic survey figures. The mismatch figures, 17% over- and 13% underqualified, come from the same source. The observation that in Germany and the Netherlands almost one in three firms names labour as a production constraint is passed through by the report from the European Commission's business survey, which this library reads separately in the paper on production constraints. The four families of measures are our summary of the case studies, not the report's literal structure.

Europe, Hiring, All markets

Sources

- Eurofound, Company practices to tackle labour shortages, september 2024