



ADVICE & TIPS – BELGIUM



Although Belgium is a small country, it is a job destination for those interested in development, public affairs and social policy. Belgium reports that foreigners represent around 10% of the population.

- *Typical problems encountered:* it is more usual in Belgium than in most other European countries for people to be competent in more than one language. It is difficult to get by with English alone.
- *How to improve your chances:* labour shortages are apparent in high-skill, high-tech areas such as the major engineering disciplines and computing. University graduates in these areas are sought after, particularly those who have some experience and are prepared to be mobile.
- *Language requirements:* Belgium has three official languages: Flemish, which is a form of Dutch (first language of 60% of the population), French (first language of 39%), and German (first language of 1%). Being fluent in one of these will increase your chances of getting a job. Each region specifies either Flemish or French as its official language, with the exception of the capital, Brussels, where all three languages have 'official' status. Employees will be expected to be competent in the official language of the area/organisation in which they work, and there may be requirements to be fluent in at least two languages.

The application letter

In general a letter of application should create enough interest to make the potential employer want to look at your application in more detail and hopefully invite you for an interview. Your application letter, however, should not provide too much information about experience and qualifications; this will be provided in your CV.

An important aspect of a Belgian covering letter is the language. If you are primarily looking for a job at the larger international organisations and institutions located in Belgium, a CV or resume in English similar to the one you use in your home country will do. However, when applying for a job at smaller, local companies you should adapt your CV to local customs and style. In general, the language of the covering letter should be the same as the language of the job posting you are responding to. If you are applying for a job in Brussels, use English or French if you are not sure which language to use. Bring copies of diplomas and testimonials to the job interview; do not include them with your application. Extracurricular activities are considered of great importance in Belgium. It is common to have your cover letter typed.

The Curriculum Vitae

The most common format for a Belgian CV is reversed chronological (most recent activities first). They are usually two pages long.

The CV starts with your personal details, including name, address, date of birth, your telephone number (with international access code) and your civil status (including the names of your children!).

You continue with your education, in case this is relevant to the job you apply to, include the results, your practical experience, your language skills (of great importance) and the references.

Make sure that the people you mention as references are aware of it and that they have agreed to say something positive about you (if a reference is checked it looks rather stupid if the person can not remember you!).

Under 'work experience' you mention the companies for which you have worked, with the exact date the job began and ended.

It's becoming more popular to apply for a job via the internet. Be aware of the fact that an electronic CV does not always look the same as the standard one.

The application procedure

Application interviews are a standard element of the selection procedure for jobs at all skill levels in Belgium. During the interview the recruiter will pay most attention to experience, motivation and social interpersonal skills. Assessment centres are becoming more common. A recruiter wants to have a full picture of the person he or she is going to select, therefore psychological, intelligence, aptitude and psychometric tests are widely used. Expect a Belgian interviewer to pay most attention to your past experience, motivation, and social or interpersonal skills.

Bring copies of diplomas and testimonials to the interview.

Be aware of the language difference in Belgium. Walloons do not appreciate it when they are addressed in Dutch, and people from Flanders do not like to be addressed in French.

Management culture

- Management authority rests on competence rather than on hierarchy in Belgium.
- Belgians always want to reach a compromise, especially when it concerns business.
- Belgian employees have a high work-ethos.
- Any ideas employees have need to be backed up with facts and figures.
- Belgians appreciate personal contact, so prefer to do business face-to-face, rather than over the phone or by e-mail.

Where can I work?

- Major industries: international organisations such as the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), engineering and metal products, motor vehicle assembly, transportation equipment, scientific instruments, processed food and beverages, chemicals, base metals, textiles, glass, petroleum
- Recent growth areas: public services, construction and hospitality
- Shortage occupations: engineers, qualified technicians, IT specialists and commercial and managerial/executive positions
- Major companies: Cisco, Accenture, Randstad Group, InBev, Dexia, Belgacom, Delhaize Group, KBC Group, UCB, Umicore, Solvay Group, Sofina. In structural terms, the Belgian business world consists of some large companies and a very high number of SMEs.
- Major cities: Brussels (capital and largest city), Antwerp, Gent, Liège, Charleroi, Namur and Leuven.

What's it like working in Belgium?

- Average working hours: 40 hours per week.
- Holidays: 20 days per year.
- Average graduate starting salary: €18,000 - €25,000 (salary data collected June 2008).
- Tax rates: residents of Belgium pay personal income tax on their total income from all worldwide sources on a sliding scale. The basic exemption in 2008 is €6,040 regardless of marital status, with further exemptions for dependent children and a spouse. In 2008, income tax after exemptions is set at 25%, increasing to 30% on incomes over €7,420, 40% over €10,510, 45% over €17,610, and 50% over €32,270.
- Working practices and customs: Belgium is an EU country and numerous international organisations and multinational firms operate there. Most of working practices are therefore similar to the rest of Europe. Flexible working and working from home are quite common. The best way to familiarise yourself with a company's culture is to socialise with your colleagues.