

Employment reference letter

Employment reference letters are letters of recommendation written by previous employer(s) and form a **central part** of your job application. They confirm the details of your work experience that you provided in your CV and provide recruiters with an employer's assessment of your **professional** and **personal skills**. However, responsibility for the content of an employment reference letter does not lie solely with the employer. As the employee, you also have a **key role** to play in ensuring that the information provided by the employer is **correct** and **reflects positively** on your work as an employee at the company.

The different kinds of reference letters and what they contain

In Germany, companies can issue either a simple or a more comprehensive letter of reference. If possible, and if you have worked for the company for more than eight weeks, ask your employer to issue a comprehensive employment reference. A **simple letter of reference** only has to specify the period you worked at the company and list your tasks, roles and responsibilities. A **comprehensive letter of reference**, on the other hand, contains an assessment of your performance and your professional skills and knowledge, as well as information on how you work, your motivation and your social intelligence. It also highlights your outstanding achievements while at the company and, where appropriate, describes your performance as a manager or team leader. A comprehensive employment reference therefore provides recruiters with a much clearer picture of your potential and your personality.

The language of German employment reference letters

In Germany, companies are required by law to issue an employment reference that is both truthful and written in a way that does not hinder the employee's future professional advancement.¹ In order to comply with this second requirement, the reference may be worded in a way that can be difficult to understand. Some of the phrases used in German employment references are standardized expressions that have very specific meanings. Some of the assessments used in German employment references may appear positive at first glance, but actually have a rather negative connotation.²

It's important to be aware that German employment references tend to be formulated **euphemistically** and contain positively-worded expressions whose true meaning ('satisfactory',

¹ see Anne Backer: *Arbeitszeugnisse*. Entschlüsseln und mitgestalten. Freiburg 2019, p. 10.

² see Günter Huber: *Mein Arbeitszeugnis entschlüsseln und entwerfen*. So knacken Sie die Geheimcodes der Personaler. Freiburg 2016, p. 37.

'good', 'outstanding', etc.) depends on the specific phrase being used.³ Even the **closing phrase** of a German employment reference can contain a 'hidden' message.⁴ So in order to fully understand your German employment reference letter and to have it corrected, should that be necessary, we recommend you read up on the subject so that you're aware of the meaning behind some of the common formulations used.

Rights and responsibilities of the employee

It is not uncommon for an employer to give you, the employee, the opportunity to write your own letter of reference. In that case, don't say no! After all, you're the best person to assess what you achieved while working for the company. However, drafting your own letter of reference in German will mean learning the details of how to write an employment reference for the German job market (see above).

If you are not satisfied with the reference letter provided by your employer because you think it contains incorrect or untrue statements, the first step is to ask your employer to **correct** it. If your employer is unwilling to amend the reference letter, you can seek to have the matter resolved in the labour court, if you believe that the errors are serious enough to make this approach worthwhile.⁵ The same applies if the company you worked for refuses to provide you with a letter of reference.

If you want to receive an employment reference letter, it's up to you to ask your employer for one. Letters of reference are not compiled or issued automatically at the end of your employment contract or if you resigned from your position. You'll need to actively ask your employer for a letter of reference. Unless otherwise stated in your contract, you can request an employment reference letter up to three years after your last day of work.

³ *ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴ see Huber: *Mein Arbeitszeugnis entschlüsseln und entwerfen*, p. 50.

⁵ Backer: *Arbeitszeugnisse*, p. 93–94.