



# Cisco closed critical talent gaps by building an internship program for refugees that centered on skills

In 2015, Germany welcomed an unprecedented number of refugees and other displaced people from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq with open arms. One of the employers that committed to supporting these new arrivals was the German division of global technology company Cisco.

Cisco's free learning platform, "Networking Academy," was well suited to helping refugees on the path to resettlement and economic empowerment. After Cisco partnered with ReDI School of Digital Integration, a nonprofit tech school, to get this platform in front of more refugees, Oliver Tuszik, Cisco's then-country manager for Germany, was inspired to create 20 paid internship positions for refugees.

While this program started life as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) effort, Cisco soon realized that refugees represented a large — and largely untapped — talent pool with technical skills that were in short supply.



“ We have a skills gap. Employers are learning more and more that they have to take into account people who, from an old perspective, may not 100% match from a resume perspective — but who 100% match regarding the attitude, the motivation, and the eagerness to learn and work.

**Carsten Johnson, CSR Territory  
Manager, Cisco**

## About Cisco

**INDUSTRY:**  
Technology

**No. OF EMPLOYEES:**  
84,900 globally

**LOCATION:**  
Germany

**ALMOST 150,000 IT JOBS**  
are currently vacant in Germany due to a shortage of skilled workers.

Source: E3 Magazine, 2024

## Making the switch to a skills-based approach

To identify refugees with the right skills, Cisco took a [practical, skill-based approach](#) focused on removing barriers:

### Rethinking degree requirements

For years, many Cisco job posts listed a bachelor's degree as a minimum requirement, even when the role could be performed without one, creating an unnecessary barrier to entry for candidates who trained in other regions. Cisco has since increased its focus on describing core skills and competencies required for roles instead.

### Turning corporate volunteering into talent scouting

Many German Cisco employees, including the leadership team, volunteer as trainers or mentors for ReDI School, providing a key opportunity to identify high-potential talent with needed skills. Volunteers also regularly post about their experiences on LinkedIn, helping to get Cisco's learning platform and opportunities for refugees in front of more people.

### Building language skills through exposure

Cisco found that new interns from refugee backgrounds often had strong technical expertise but initially struggled with the German language. Providing plenty of opportunities for interns to work directly with local coworkers helped them rapidly increase their fluency and get settled at the organization.

## The results

**Access to a gender-diverse talent pool:** The IT talent pool in Germany skews predominantly male. Hiring refugees from countries like Syria — where women's participation in computer science programs is high — has made it easier for Cisco to bring more women IT professionals on board.

**Loyal, engaged employees:** Many interns brought in through Cisco's internship program were offered full-time roles and remain at the company to this day. The program has also inspired other employees to get more involved with Cisco's CSR efforts — logging almost 3,000 volunteer hours with ReDI School.

**Mutually beneficial relationships:** In 2022, Cisco paired 15 leaders across Germany with students from ReDI School. Not only did the refugees have the opportunity to learn and expand their networks, but mentors reported that their mentees' helped them grow their social media skills, broaden their horizons, and increase their cultural understanding.

### Embrace the benefits of skills-based hiring today

Watch our free [LinkedIn Learning path](#) for tips and best practices to help you get started.

