

Bertelsmann Stiftung & German Economic Institute | October 2024

Bridging the gap: How young people and companies (can) align in the apprenticeship market

A survey of German youth and companies

Introduction

The German economy is facing a pressing shortage of skilled workers. This shortage of individuals who have completed at least vocational training is expected to worsen due to demographic changes. Over the next decade, nearly five million more people will retire than the number of young workers entering the job market. Adding to this challenge is the growing trend of apprenticeship positions going unfilled, while many young people struggle to secure apprenticeships. Recently, the number of vacant apprenticeship positions hit a record high of over 73,000. At the same time, more than 63,000 young people were either unable to secure

an apprenticeship or had to explore alternative career paths. This situation, often referred to as a “matching problem,” can be broken down into three categories:

- Regional mismatches: when available apprenticeships are located too far from where potential candidates live.
- Occupational mismatches: when young people’s career aspirations don’t align with the training opportunities companies are offering.
- Qualification mismatches: when companies view applicants as underqualified or lacking the necessary skills.

This study explores whether communication between companies and potential apprentices during the search process plays a role as a potential fourth category of mismatch. Early findings suggest that “[...] information about available apprenticeship positions is not reaching the intended audience”¹ and that the choice of communication channels influences both the number of applications received and the successful filling of positions.² To improve recruitment efforts, companies need to assess not only the content of the information they provide and the channels they use to reach potential apprentices but also how effectively young people are receiving and interpreting that information.

Study methodology

This study is based on data from two key representative surveys: the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s youth survey, which gathered responses from over 1,700 individuals in Germany aged 14 to 25 ([Ausbildungsperspektiven 2024](#)) and the German Economic Institute’s survey of German companies, which collected feedback from nearly 900 HR professionals ([IW Personalpanel 2024](#)).

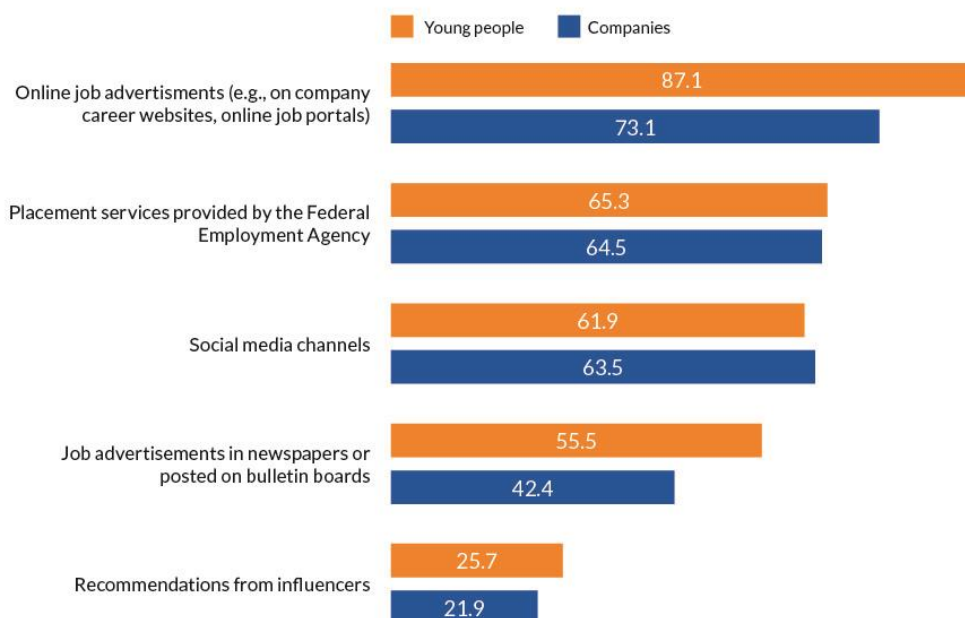
¹ German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF; 2024). Berufsbildungsbericht 2024. Bonn.

² Ebbinghaus, Margit / Gerhards, Christian / Heyer, Philipp / Mohr, Sabine (2023). Viel hilft viel?! – Welche Wege Betriebe nutzen, um Ausbildungsplatzbewerber/-innen zu finden und wie erfolgreich sie damit sind. BIBB Report 3. Bonn.

Survey results

- **Diverging views on the apprenticeship market:** Forty-four percent of companies were unable to fill any or all of their apprenticeship positions during the 2023/24 training year. Meanwhile, one in four young people felt there were too few apprenticeship opportunities available.
- **Apprenticeships as a strong foundation:** More than 80% of both young people and companies see vocational training as a solid foundation for a successful career. Six out of ten young respondents and HR professionals believe apprenticeships provide sufficient earning potential for a “good life”. However, around half of both groups feel that the dual education system lacks the societal recognition it deserves.
- **Increasing emphasis on skills over formal qualifications:** Nearly three-quarters of companies report that, during the hiring process, individual skills are becoming more important than formal qualifications. However, only just over half of the young people surveyed share this view. Companies with higher levels of digitalization are even more likely to prioritize skills over formal degrees (95%).
- **Apprenticeship search and marketing:** Young people tend to seek apprenticeships where companies are advertising (see Figure 1). Both groups prefer online job postings, followed by listings with Germany’s Federal Employment Agency, social media, newspaper ads, bulletin boards, and finally, influencer recommendations.

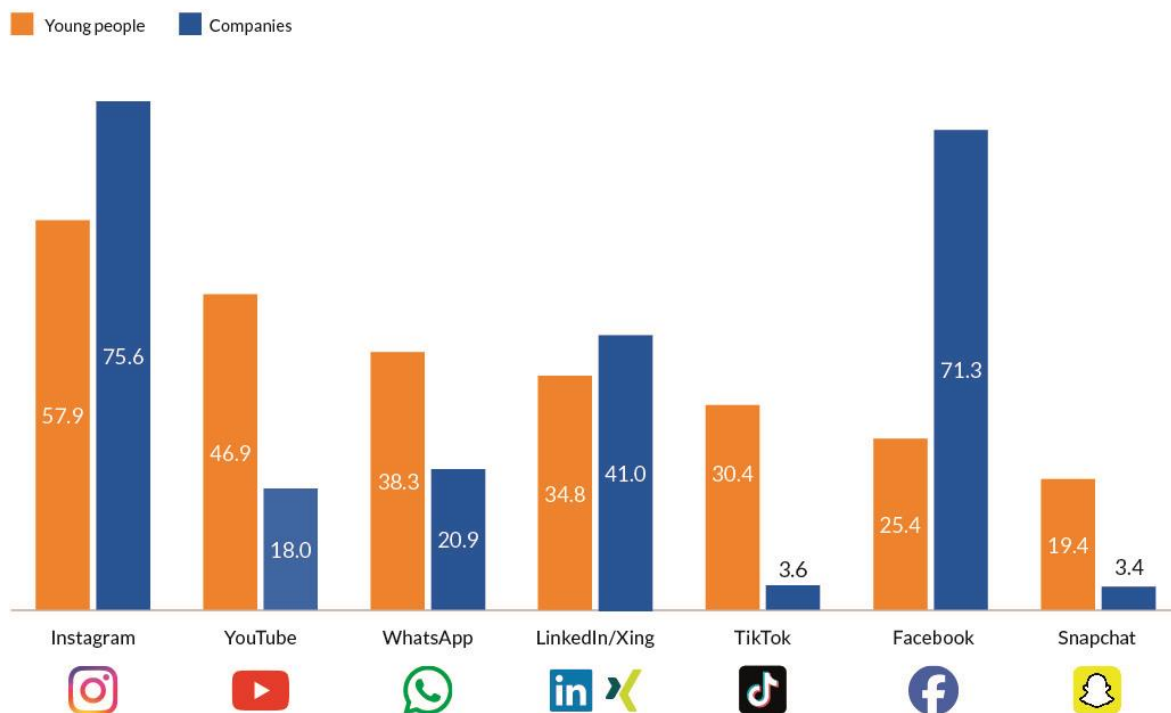
Figure 1: Formats for apprenticeship searches/job postings



Question posed to young people: “Where do you search or would you search for apprenticeship positions, or where did you become aware of apprenticeship opportunities?” (Responses for “Often” plus “Sometimes,” in %): Question posed to companies: “Through which channels do you advertise your apprenticeship positions?”

- **Differences in social media usage:** Social media's growing influence warranted closer examination (see Figure 2). While both companies and young people recognize its importance, their usage patterns differ strongly. Instagram ranks as the top platform for both, but companies are underutilizing platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Snapchat, which are popular among young people. Conversely, Facebook is used by 71% of companies but only appeals to a quarter of young people surveyed.

Figure 2: Use of social media channels for apprenticeship searches/ job postings



Question posed to young people: "How often do you use or would you use the following social media channels to search for apprenticeship positions, or have you used them before?" (Responses for "Often" plus "Sometimes," in %): Question posed to companies: "Which social media channels do you use to advertise your apprenticeship positions?"

- **Hands-on career exploration:** Internships remain the top method for career exploration, favored by 91% of young people and 84% of companies. Similarly, company tours are preferred by 88% of young people, though only half of companies offer them. Companies also use approaches such as training ambassadors, career fairs, and school partnerships, which are valued by three-quarters of young people. Even traditional methods like brochures and flyers (offered by about half of companies) remain important, with 75% of young people citing them as a key source of information.
- **What makes apprenticeships appealing:** Both young people and companies largely agree on the key factors that make apprenticeships attractive: a positive work

environment, respect, interesting tasks, job security, and opportunities for personal growth. However, opinions differ on compensation: 78% of young people consider a high apprenticeship salary important, compared to only about half of companies. Other factors that matter more to young people than to companies include flexible work arrangements (64% vs. 49%), opportunities for additional qualifications during training (58% vs. 51%), and the option of a four-day workweek (36% vs. 10%).

Recommendations

The study shows that communication gaps and differences in how young people and companies seek information are major contributors to the mismatches in the career orientation process. This makes communication a potential fourth type of mismatch. To help companies and career orientation professionals improve their communication strategies and better meet young people's needs, the following recommendations are offered:

- **Emphasize skills over formal qualifications:** As competencies become increasingly valued over formal degrees, companies should highlight this shift in their communication de-emphasizing formal credentials and showing openness to applicants with lower academic qualifications. Career counselors should also inform young people about this change.
- **Broaden communication channels:** Companies should adjust their communication strategies to better align with young people's media habits, integrating platforms like Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp more effectively. It's important to use a mix of channels in a way that's authentic, targeted and professional.
- **Engage youth through relatable content:** Understanding young people's social media preferences is crucial for companies seeking to engage in effective outreach. Companies should explore cost-effective ways to connect, such as involving current apprentices to create more relatable content for potential candidates.
- **Boost direct engagement:** Apprenticeship ambassadors are an effective means of engaging young people. Companies should also focus on organizing more on-site visits and strengthening school partnerships to better showcase their training programs.
- **Involve parents in the process:** Since parents play a crucial role in career decisions, companies should consider creative approaches like engaging senior apprenticeship ambassadors or hosting career orientation events specifically for parents.
- **Expand practical experiences:** Internships and company tours are vital for career exploration. Companies should offer more opportunities for hands-on experience, which also helps them better assess the skills of potential applicants.
- **Highlight key factors that make apprenticeships attractive:** Companies should focus on promoting a positive work environment, engaging tasks, and job security to make apprenticeships more appealing to young people.

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