

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AS A PREREQUISITE OF A COMPANY'S COMPETITIVENESS ON A GLOBAL MARKET

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International markets demand multilingual communication strategies which often have to be tailor-made to the requirements of a company. The target must be to reach clients as efficiently and effectively as possible. The ability to communicate and understand the intercultural nuances of your business partners', is not only an advantage, but almost a prerequisite for good international sales representatives as well as for administrative staff. Although low skilled workers do not explicitly need language skills for their jobs, they sometimes face situations in which the knowledge of a certain language can be very helpful, e.g. when they come across manuals, handbooks, descriptions and procedure instructions which have not been translated into their own language.

In the study on the effects on the European economy of shortages of foreign language skills in companies (ELAN), commissioned by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission in December 2005 and undertaken by CILT, the UK National Centre for Languages, it was found:

"[...] that language skills can significantly improve export success for European companies. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) which have a languages strategy and invest in staff with language skills are shown to be able to achieve 44% more export sales than those which don't."[1].

While multinational companies have always employed language skilled staff for special purposes, nowadays even small and medium sized enterprises cannot usually survive without international contacts. In order to remain competitive, they increasingly need to build up an international clientele and therefore they need employees with sufficient language skills. By means of internet portals all enterprises - (small, medium sized or large and multinational) - can be traced around the world and it is always possible that business people worldwide can contact them. Handling emails and phone calls in a foreign language is a growing challenge for even the smallest manufacturing company.

If a company wants to avoid the expense of external translators and interpreters, it will need to ensure that their staff will learn the requisite languages. Future applicants will be expected to bring these skills with them.

In the case of CEOs, managers and sales representatives, an international workplace requires that they should be able to translate business skills into any foreign language. It is not simply vocabulary that makes a good company representative but also the capability to express one's thoughts and ideas, to put across the company's strategy, to develop industry awareness and personal skills in the language in question. In short, the person has to think in the language and to make plans and strategies in the context of distinct cultures. Those who want to climb the career ladder must develop these skills because, as indicated earlier, when translators and interpreters stand between the company and prospective customers, there is a potential problem of trust and the possibility of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

According to the above cited ELAN report, investigations have shown that

“a significant amount of business is being lost to European enterprise as a result of lack of language skills. On the basis of the [investigated] sample, it is estimated that 11% of exporting European SMEs (945,000 companies) may be losing business because of identified communication barriers. Analysis of the findings from the survey identified a clear link between languages and export success. Four elements of language management were found to be associated with successful export performance: having a language strategy, appointing native speakers, recruiting staff with language skills and using translators and interpreters.

REFERENCES

1. CILT, the UK National Centre for Languages et al, Effects on the European economy of shortages of foreign language skills in enterprise(ELAN), (<http://www.llas.ac.uk/news/2772#>)
2. Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning/ <http://www.yell-project.eu/en/Handbook>