

Despite Need, Bilingual U.S. Workforce Not Likely on Horizon Soon

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By Pamela Babcock

Language training might seem like a Cadillac benefit during these Hyundai times. But experts said that doesn't mean that U.S. companies shouldn't continue to take steps to build these skills.

The dearth of a foreign-language-proficient workforce is a big challenge for human resource professionals in the U.S. A 2006 [report](#) by the Committee for Economic Development in Washington, D.C., found that American companies lose an estimated \$2 billion annually because employees lack "the necessary cross-cultural skills to interact successfully with their foreign counterparts."

Some companies are taking steps to help businesses address their needs. For example, [The Language Flagship](#)—an Arlington, Va.-based partnership among the federal government, academia and business communities—hopes to produce a pipeline of graduates in languages thought critical to sustain U.S. competitiveness and national security. Since 2004, the organization said it has graduated more than 600; it currently has 1,300 students in undergraduate and graduate programs.

"Businesses see this issue as a significant handicap, and the absence of a workforce with these skills is causing problems," said Robert Slater, director of the national security education program that runs The Language Flagship. "[They] use workarounds, [hiring] tutors for quick language learning and bringing on native speakers or translation services when they are needed. But what we're talking about here is a general change in education so that people are available when they come into companies with these kinds of skills."

But it might be difficult to hire for language in the U.S. soon, as only 9 percent of the U.S. population is bilingual, according to Slater.

Keep Realistic Expectations

Monica Francois Marcel, partner and co-founder of Language and Culture Worldwide in Chicago, said the key when it comes to language skills is to "map it to the business and look at what's at stake," such as losing business because of language issues of a team.

Marcel said that because many HR practitioners have never mastered a second language, they might have unrealistic expectations about what can be done. Consider this: Language training for U.S. Department of State foreign-service officers often takes six to nine months, she noted. That kind of investment is not likely to happen at most organizations.

"It's hard to get really competent in a language, and it's expensive," Marcel said. "The companies I work with very rarely are expecting someone to do a full-language acquisition

during their career. If the expectation is that Mrs. Jones really needs to be able to go into Kuala Lumpur and do negotiations in the local language, let's be realistic about what she can do. Is language class where you really want to spend your energy and money, or is there a better way?"

Approaches to Second Language Training

The economic downturn is changing how organizations approach the issue. Many are "finding it harder to justify the budget expense of building language skills and are instead trying to hire for language skills as much as possible and use local country nationals," noted Marcel, who's an adjunct faculty member at Loyola University Chicago.

They put building language skills into the training budget only where they find "it is justified as an absolute requirement of doing business." Even then, they are doing it in more nontraditional ways, she added.

When training is an absolute requirement, Marcel said, it typically is hardwired into the operations budget, the cost of the assignment or project, or the headcount. Often, her company is asked to help find "no-cost, non-classroom-based ways of promoting skills for working in a multilingual environment."

Alleviating Language 'Lurches'

For example, one of Marcel's clients, who found the lack of English language skills in Poland "a sticking point," hired a full-time English language teacher for less money than the cost of employee language training as part of the project team. The "business communication coach" works with employees on their language usage when interfacing with clients and colleagues in other countries.

Another case: Marcel said a leader involved in an important Beijing venture realized he couldn't master the language skills to be successful given the timeline, but in addition he realized that local staff didn't have the strategic expertise to support the venture. He has been assigned a multilingual assistant who acts much like a communication coach by preparing the executive to introduce himself in the local language and by helping him with unfamiliar terminology used in the course of the workday or project.

Another way to address training for workers being sent overseas, she said, is to assign expats a "multilingual language buddy" who, like mentors, can help the expat practice the local language.

There are other creative, low-cost ways to encourage bilingual or multilingual education. Marcel said one is to have global, cross-cultural work teams that might otherwise work in English take time to:

- *Develop glossaries in the native languages of all who are present regarding key technical terms.

- *Learn and incorporate basic phrases, greetings and terms that they can use with one another in e-mails.

Efficiency, Accountability Key

The most in-demand languages for businesses are Spanish and Chinese, followed by Japanese, Korean, Russian and Eastern European languages, according to Slater. For the federal sector, that list includes Middle Eastern and African languages, he said.

Jeff Standridge, vice president of global operations for Little Rock, Ark.-based Acxiom Corp., a global interactive marketing services firm, is a "business champion" for The Language Flagship and is responsible for his company's operations in the Middle East, China and Poland. He said his company needs U.S. employees who speak Polish or Mandarin Chinese who can "communicate straight out of the chute after we set up an operation."

Executive Language Training (ELT) in Lake Bluff, Ill., offers on-site individual or group instruction, as well as computer-based, online education with an online coach. To increase motivation and accelerate learning, companies offer customized training so participants can "identify with the content and see immediate results in their work environment," said Gina Gramatis, ELT's director of training and development. Programs are designed based on learning needs, communication goals and their work environment and job responsibilities.

Slater said the shortage of job applicants with two or more languages is common and cautioned that while someone might say, "I've studied Spanish or Russian," the critical question for HR should be, "Can they use it?"

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