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How to get ahead in the global marketplace

The way to succeed in business is to increase your communication skills, says Kate Hilpern

With English still recognised as the primary language of international business, it's all too easy for Brits to dismiss the need to speak in other tongues. But with university no longer the privilege of a few and with all business becoming increasingly global, many argue that speaking at least one foreign language is the only way to get ahead.

"We appointed a new commercial director last year who speaks Russian, French and Portuguese, and our latest marketing recruit speaks French, Spanish and German," says Paul Robinson, global chief executive at KidsCo, which spans territories using 18 different languages. "There's no doubt that languages on a CV immediately make potential employees stand out, and, with the degree of globalisation we are experiencing, I think it's safe to say that multilingual graduates will be snapped up like they're going out of fashion."

PricewaterhouseCoopers agrees such people are increasingly sought after, especially if they have spent time in other countries. "Part of the PwC experience for our clients is the ability for us to put ourselves in their shoes. Being able to do business with them in their own language is part of that experience, particularly in emerging markets where we need to show we understand local business practice, cultural nuances and conventions," says Richard Irwin, head of student recruitment.

Language and cultural identity are inextricably linked, says Steve Shacklock, managing director of the specialist language recruiter Euro London Appointments. "So, in Japan, business cards are presented with both hands face up and should be read this way too. Failing to do this would be seen as offensive. In Germany, there is more formality in business than you'd expect in the UK or USA. And in the Middle East, the thumbs-up gesture can be considered offensive."

Little wonder that growing numbers of universities and business schools offer their students not only the opportunity to learn languages but to adopt international practices by sending them overseas. "On our international business degree, learning a language is compulsory," says Spencer Coles, director of marketing and student recruitment at Regent's College, London. "There are seven on offer, of which students can take one or two, and that's backed up with study abroad for two semesters, including work experience."

Coles says cultural immersion is key in learning a language. "It's about understanding different dialects and building up knowledge of how the language is used in a business context. It's also about learning everything from how the economy ticks to how people socialise - all things that you can't learn in a classroom alone."

Graduates from the University of Surrey are also increasingly able to explain in job interviews how their linguistic and intercultural competence may be of value to a business, says Andrea Dlaska, professor of language studies. "Employers particularly value work experience abroad and students' ability to reflect on their experiences and transfer what they've learned to new contexts," she explains.

"We view language-learning opportunities for all our students as an essential part of internationalisation, so, irrespective of their disciplinary backgrounds, students may choose to study a foreign language from a beginner or more advanced level, and an increasing number of Surrey undergraduates spend a professional training period abroad," says Dlaska. "We have a focus on student-centred, collaborative learning. We use peer and self-assessment as a matter of course by encouraging our students to use the European language portfolio to assess their language skills, to reflect on progress and to document experiences and skills for employers."

People often underestimate how much they know from a language they started learning at school - and how motivating it is to tap into that knowledge, says Dlaska. "Learning a language helps us to acquire a new mindset as much as a new skill set. It helps us appreciate the efforts non-native speakers of our own language have made, for instance, and this can facilitate communication with international business partners."

Martha de Monclin, a PR consultant at Bijou PR, has no doubt that learning French has helped her succeed in business and have a fulfilling career. "The degree course I took allowed me to live and work there for two years, and, years later, French companies that I work with as a PR consultant like the fact that I speak their language, understand their country, and that I can help them in the UK," she says.

At the School of Oriental and African Studies, around 40 languages are taught to students studying a range of subjects, with some spending a year overseas. "It's about ensuring language skills are up to native level," says Nick Butler, the head of student recruitment. "It's polite to be able to say 'hello', 'goodbye' and 'good afternoon' in Japanese, but not terribly helpful in terms of doing business in Japan. It's why we work on ensuring our students go away with a level of language that is near perfect. In Japan alone, we have links with around 20 universities."

For Marie Taillard, professor at ESCP Europe business school, a good understanding of customs, rituals, religious sensitivities and so on are often overlooked as critical. "All our management courses are taught in at least two countries, and students don't just learn the language and familiarise themselves with the culture - they go through the process of finding accommodation in the local country, setting up bank, mobile phone and utilities accounts, finding local healthcare providers and so on," she says. "These skills are what recruiters tell us year after year make our graduates stand out among other highly qualified management graduates."

Some of today's employers conduct part of interviews in a foreign language, says Alison Pearce, senior lecturer in strategic management and international business at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University. "It's one of the reasons we teach students languages from the first day they join our international business management programme, and offer extra language modules at no extra cost. Many students go on to graduate with a 'double degree' in which they've developed their language skills to degree level - as well as business."

Language is a great mirror for culture, says Pearce. "The word 'yes' means different things in different languages, and much communication is through non-verbal means. Someone who understands this is valuable in building and managing international business. Learning a language is an excellent way to understand different attitudes and practices in business and life across the world."

Nevertheless, says Wayne Gibbins, partnerships director at professional social network Viadeo, there remains a complacency in this country towards learning languages because English is so widely used. "We are only fooling ourselves. If you are going to do business internationally, you have to embrace local language and culture," he says.

According to recent research by Euro London Appointments, 86 per cent of employers believe languages are an important skill. "Languages are the key to flexibility within a global workplace, with almost three-quarters citing French, German, Spanish and Italian as the most useful, and over a third expressing an opinion that more exotic languages such as Mandarin would grow in demand, particularly in areas such as the financial services sector," says Shacklock.

"My language skills have consistently increased my appeal to employers and clients," says Yehuda Shapiro, a marketing consultant and writer, whose degree is in French and German, but who also speaks Italian. "Time and again, I find companies underestimate the complexity of selling beyond their linguistic borders."

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