

Wirral Multilingual

The Importance of Languages

By Stuart Burke

Is your business making the most of the potential global audience for your product or service?

Are you looking to break into international markets or expand on your existing presence?

Could you benefit from getting to know your foreign customers better?

Evidence identified by the British Academy's 'Languages: State of the Nation' report last year shows the UK is suffering from "a growing deficit in foreign language skills at a time when global demand for language skills is expanding".

The organisers of the 2013 'Language Festival' – held in partnership with *The Guardian* – have suggested that the UK "is at a crucial crossroads", and also found that:

- The range and nature of languages being taught is insufficient to meet current and future demand.
- Language skills are needed at all levels in the workforce, and not simply by an internationally mobile elite.
- A weak supply of language skills is pushing down demand and creating a vicious circle of monolingualism.

Comparisons of recent National Employer Skills Surveys indicate that 17% (2009) and 27% (2011) of vacancies in administrative and clerical roles went unfilled due to shortages of foreign language skills. Employers tend to obscure these deficits in the UK workforce by hiring native speakers, eliminating language requirements from job adverts, or focusing their business strategy solely on regions where English is the dominant language.

The 2012 CBI Employer survey, based on responses from 542 companies, found that nearly three quarters of UK private sector employers see a need for – or at least a benefit in having – foreign language skills in their business. However, low levels of uptake are a cause for concern. In England, the proportion of students sitting GCSEs in a foreign language fell from 78% in 2001 to just 43% in 2011 in the wake of the decision in 2004 to make languages optional.

Employers value not only language skills per se, but the inherent skills and attributes – in particular the international and cultural awareness – that speaking a foreign language brings.

Evidence linking language skills to better business performance and the ability to

access new markets is strong. Employers have made clear that they want to see more people come into the workforce with at least a basic knowledge of foreign languages, along with a more globally attuned mindset.

Of the UK adult population, 39% claim to be able to speak at least one language, besides their mother tongue, well enough to have a conversation. This compares to an average of 54% across 27 European countries.

Currently a large proportion of the explicit demand for language skills – around half – is for the major western European languages most frequently taught within UK schools: French, German and Spanish.

Indications of future demand show that a growing number of languages will be needed as the UK expands its global connections and responds to new economic realities.

These include not only world languages such as Mandarin, Arabic and Russian – but also Turkish, Farsi and Polish. Without a system of language provision that can respond to the speed of globalisation, communication and mobility between people and places, we are already at a disadvantage.

Language learning spans a vast range of areas such as business, cultural and community interaction and helps foster understanding in an increasingly globalised world. I set up 'Wirral Multilingual' towards the end of 2012, with the aim of raising awareness locally (in the North West of England) about language learning and demonstrating the benefits for both individuals and businesses.

What significance does this have to such a small geographical area such as the Wirral (population circa 320,000), you may ask? Events taking place in 2014, such as The Open Championship in Hoylake and the International Festival for Business just across the River Mersey in Liverpool will see visitors to the area from across the globe, providing local businesses with unrivalled opportunities to build international

connections and commercial value, due to their international reach and significance.

Given the wide range (and sheer number) of people attending such events, it is vitally important that employees of Wirral businesses have the skills to communicate effectively with customers from different cultures and backgrounds. I believe this understanding is key to delivering a successful customer service experience and ultimately repeat business.

If there exists a language barrier or cultural differences, it can be an awkward experience for staff and customers alike.

Wirral Multilingual aims to help increase staff awareness of other cultures and provide them with tips and techniques to provide a great service to overseas customers – including:

- Greeting guests in their own language
- Use of appropriate gestures
- Avoidance of slang/jargon

Thus enabling them to be true ambassadors of both their company and the Wirral region.

As the Swiss linguist and semiotician Saussure so eloquently put into words: "In the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs."

Thanks for reading. I would like to leave you with a selection of useful business tips when dealing with other cultures...

- In Japan, the receiving and giving of business cards is taken very seriously, so don't just stick them in your pocket or drop them on the table!
- In Russia, avoid jokes. The British sense of humour isn't always understood or appreciated and can fall flat, causing embarrassment all round.
- In Dubai, don't arrange meetings on Fridays, as this is the Muslim day of prayer and rest.



Wirral Multilingual was born out of a passion for learning about other languages and cultures from around the globe, and aims to promote the world of cultural diversity – and opportunity – that exists on the doorstep of those currently living and working in the Wirral Peninsula.

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