



FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING

get your messages across
in the global marketplace

There may come a time in your company's development where you decide that you need to improve the language competence of your workforce with a view to increasing your export sales or improving relationships with overseas colleagues and clients. This booklet will show, step by step, what you then need to consider to address your training needs successfully.

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Foreign language training – is it for us?

Your company trades in export markets, or would like to. You have a French office and they're getting frustrated about having to conduct meetings in English despite the fact that the majority of the managers present are French nationals. You have just been bought out by a Spanish company. Your engineering division has just signed up to a technical joint venture with a Chinese organisation which could result in important medium-term benefits for your firm if the research proves positive.

The question comes to your mind: do you need to consider language training for your staff?

Ask a number of different people and you may well get a number of different answers. Not if we can avoid it. Maybe. Probably. If you listen to some people, definitely.

But undertaking language training is no different to committing to any other expenditure in your business: in the end, you will have to take a decision based on the benefits you will gain compared with the investment you will have to make. This booklet is designed to give you the information you need to come to that decision.

So what are the options?

Using English

You can conduct business overseas in English only, but unless you have a bigger and better mousetrap than everyone else, it's unlikely that you will have customers beating a path to your door. Given that 75% of the world's population doesn't speak any English at all, how will they know about your product anyway?

Placements

Employing foreign nationals, overseas students or people with language skills is a good option for a short-term fix, particularly if you need EU nationals, where work permits are unlikely to be a barrier.

Translation and interpreting

A first step before undertaking language training could be having your literature translated – professionally of course – into your customers' languages. Your website is another area to consider: research shows that Internet users are four times more likely to buy your product on-line if the information is available in their mother tongue. Business interpreting can also produce bottom-line results for your company. Guides to commissioning good translation, website localisation and interpreting services are available from CILT, the National Centre for Languages (CILT) and the Regional Language Networks (RLNs).

About this guide

There may come a time in your company's development where you decide that you need to improve the language competence of your workforce with a view to increasing your export sales or improving relationships with overseas colleagues and clients. This booklet will show, step by step, what you then need to consider to successfully address your training needs. At the end of the booklet you will find contact details for the most useful organisations and websites.

“France is an important future growth market for us. I plan to continue improving my French, because communication with clients in their own language is a key part of gaining their confidence and developing positive relationships.”

Market Development Manager,
foundry supplies company

Step 1: Analysing your company's language needs

It may be clear where the need lies within your organisation for language training; you may on the other hand need to take a more systematic look at where the gaps are that need to be filled. A language 'audit' is a possible first step.

An audit can identify which skills already exist within your workforce and what priorities exist for developing additional skills. You may decide that you will support the provision of language training for personal development reasons, or to improve language skills in anticipation of future developments in non-English speaking markets. Alternatively, you may target one or more key employees who would benefit from training. Whichever option you decide on, consultation with the employees in question will form a key part of the audit. Once this is received and analysed, recommendations about training delivery can be made.

Different needs

These will differ widely from company to company: in one organisation, it may be critical to train the switchboard operator to deal on a basic level with incoming calls in a number of key languages; in another, the incoming goods staff who deal with foreign suppliers may need to be able to communicate effectively with drivers who don't speak English well; in a third, there may be a need for a technical manager to quickly develop the ability to survive in Russian because of a forthcoming two-year project in the country.

ANALYSIS

Support for an audit

All these needs are different, but unless they are accurately identified from the start, it may prove difficult to develop the best training options to meet them. Various ways of carrying out such an audit exist: one of them is the subsidised Export Communications Review, as part of on-site consultancy, provided by the British Chambers of Commerce on behalf of UK Trade and Investment, the Government's lead organisation for supporting UK companies in overseas trading. Your local RLN will also be able to assist in signposting to a language audit service, or you may wish to discuss this part of the process with your potential training provider. The SOLVIT tool highlighted at the back of this booklet will also help you to assess your position.

“I’m delighted that my German skills are being put to good use. I couldn’t have taken on the assignment in this way had I not spoken German, and I know the experience will be a positive one, both for me and for the company.”

Manager, Power Technology company, on three-month assignment in Germany

Step 2: Choosing a training provider

Choosing an organisation that can deliver language training is no different from the process of choosing a supplier for any other product or service. You will want to be assured, for example, of their reputation and professionalism, of the quality of the people they use, and of their ability to meet the needs of your own company.

A Nottinghamshire company specialising in the production of custom-made metallic fibres was already a successful exporter to Europe and the Far East. Languages were central to this success, with many of the 25 staff having some competence in customers’ languages; language skills were also a key requirement in the recruitment process. The company’s MD, himself a fluent German and French speaker, decided that some basic competence in Japanese would be an important factor in him developing relationships with existing and potential Japanese clients.

Using information from the BLIS Professionals database and in consultation with the local RLN, a number of suppliers were given the background and asked to produce a proposal for one-to-one Japanese training. The supplier who was judged to be best placed to deliver the training was rewarded with the business and the MD is now working towards developing his basic skills in the language.

What to look for

Training issues that you may wish to ask for detail on include:

- Can your chosen supplier match the provision of training with the needs identified through your language audit or otherwise?
- What approach or methodology will they use?
Your staff don't want to feel as though they are back at school.
- Can they offer a demonstration training session?
- How flexible are they in delivery?
- How do they assess the candidate's initial level of competence in the language and in the different skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)?
- Can they provide details of an existing client with whom you can make contact for an informal discussion?
- Will they provide regular feedback on the training?
- Will material relevant to your own business be included?
- Can they provide replacement tutors in the event of absence or illness?
- If lessons have to be cancelled, what are their terms and conditions?

- Can they offer appropriate, nationally recognised, end-of-course assessments?
- Will the training include some elements of business culture and communication relevant to the language(s) studied?

Training providers come in a variety of shapes and sizes. There are large, private, nationally recognised companies; some academic institutions offer business language training; regionally based private companies and sole traders are also common in the field. All are capable of delivering well-designed packages of training relevant to the needs of your company. As with the choice of other suppliers, make sure that you ask a number of training providers to tender for the business, and select the one that you judge will best meet your requirements.

“Learning Spanish will be a good opportunity for my own personal development and will mean I can participate in international projects.”

Project Manager, environmental consultancy

Step 3: Language learning options

So you have analysed your needs, identified your trainees, chosen a supplier, and are ready to start.

What next?

One of your most important decisions will be to decide on how the training will be delivered. Every company is different, and what suits one organisation will not suit the next.

LEARNING OPTIONS

Flexibility is the key when choosing a supplier: your chosen provider should provide a delivery option that is appropriate to your needs. Various options are possible.

A Derbyshire-based lubricants company has for the past two years been offering language training to its employees as part of a drive to develop a European identity at its UK site. The company believed that equipping staff with foreign language skills was key to creating this identity, but was uncertain about what options to choose as far as delivery was concerned.

In conjunction with a local supplier, corporate and individual needs were identified; training courses were then developed to meet these needs. Some managers required language skills to make them more effective in their jobs; others wished to learn for personal development. Courses were organised for small groups of staff according to their need, and existing skills were taken into account when arranging these groups. In addition, a number of managers opted for one-to-one training. More recently, a new graduate involved in credit control has begun one-to-one intensive training with a view to her dealing in the medium-term with customers in Germany.

“It was important for us to consider all the training options,” comments the firm’s training and development manager. “Rather than impose one training model on everyone, we needed to consider and find solutions that fitted the needs of all our employees.”

One-to-one or group training?

If you have an individual member of staff who needs to make rapid progress then one-to-one training is the obvious choice. But be aware that the cost of the training will not normally be significantly different if you have more than one employee involved, so you should consider whether you can reduce the cost per employee by involving others. They may not have an immediate need, but could benefit from the training in the future. You might even want to consider pooling employees with a sister company or local cluster company for joint training sessions, to help reduce the cost to you.

Group training is necessarily more cost-effective. However, if effective learning is to take place, the groups should not be too large: between six and eight is often considered to be a suitable number for business learners. Be sure that groups are broadly organised according to existing ability: trainees are likely to become frustrated if there is a wide variety of competences within the group. Depending on the company culture, senior staff may not be comfortable in a mixed group with more junior staff and might prefer one-to-one training.

Intensive courses

The need is immediate. You require someone who can conduct business in Hungarian in two weeks’ time. You need an intensive course.

Take a deep breath and reflect. Look at the section in this booklet about setting realistic aims for the training: nobody is going to become fully competent in a language in a short space of time. Does this mean intensive courses are not worth considering? No, but experience suggests that they work best for those business people who will have the opportunity shortly afterwards to use the language they are learning in

real-life situations; this will often be the case if they are taking on an assignment abroad.

Typically, intensive courses are more useful for managers who already have some knowledge of the language, or of a closely related language: they can build on their existing capability and then put this into practice during their time in the country where they will be working.

Weekly sessions

A common option is to provide regular weekly sessions. These allow sufficient time between sessions for appropriate self-study, but also generate sufficient momentum to ensure successful outcomes. Beginners, for example, can often reach a reasonable level of operational competence in a language in around 75 hours: a 90-minute session once per week coupled with a modest amount of self-study means that they could achieve this within a year.

Such sessions can be conducted during or outside working hours; another option is to offer them over the lunchtime session, where employees commit some of their own time to the learning process. 'Twilight' sessions are another option, but training that runs from 17:00 – 18:30 after an eight-hour working day is not usually everyone's favourite option ...

If numbers allow, running two group sessions at the same level each week offers the option for staff to attend one or the other depending on work commitments.

Distance or open learning

This is an option where you have no 'visible' trainer: you work on your own with materials provided in the form of books and CDs, via the web, and often a

mix of all these. Training structured in this way is not an ideal stand-alone option for some individuals, who appreciate regular face-to-face contact with the trainer. However, regular telephone, email or video-conference contact can be sufficient to make this an attractive and flexible option for individuals who have the necessary self-discipline and motivation.

“I'm surprised that more companies don't view languages as a prerequisite for customer-facing export staff.”

Office Manager, beverage conveyancing manufacturer

Self-study

This should be an important element of any programme that your provider is delivering, whether group or one-to-one, intensive or 'drip-feed' (e.g. weekly sessions). Supplementing face-to-face contact with the trainer with self-study in the employee's own time is an established methodology for effective language learning. You should ensure that the material provided for self-study is appropriate to business learners: it is not a good sign if your learners feel as though they are back at school and being given homework. There are many good websites where individuals can access material to complement the training they are receiving during their language training sessions. Your provider should be able to signpost these for you.

“We recognise that to win business, we have to be very mindful of our customers' needs, and language is one of the key elements in achieving this.”

Export Manager, mattress manufacturer and exporter

Step 4: Agreeing outcomes

Setting realistic targets for your trainees is one of the most important aspects of the whole process of commissioning language training. Business people in the 21st century are often used to having problems solved or needs met in rapid time, and to having suppliers who can deliver end results quickly. A provider of language training should be no different from other suppliers in terms of quality of service and cost-effectiveness; but the process of language learning is one that requires a longer time-scale (despite what some of the adverts claim).

Language learning is not a quick fix. Everyone's brain is hard wired into their mother tongue from an early age, and, as adults, this affects the way we learn a second language. To effectively reprogramme your brain requires motivation and commitment from the learner, a dynamic and well-delivered course from the provider – and time.

A little goes a long way

Nobody will make you fluent in a language in six weeks, despite extravagant claims in some adverts. To become truly fluent in a language takes a long time and often involves living in the country where the language is spoken. However, it is possible to develop a limited but effective level of functional competence in a language in six weeks – or less in some instances – and there are positive business benefits to having a reasonable degree of competence in a foreign language. As this case study shows, a little bit of language can make a lot of difference. Our guide on Basic International Communications also offers further advice.

Our company has been active in Central and Eastern Europe for over a decade and export business now represents 90% of our turnover. Hungary is a key growth market for us, especially since EU enlargement, and we visit the country regularly. As in many Central European markets, trading successfully in Hungary depends on passing the personality test': building good relationships and establishing trust. I have found that learning to speak a few words of Hungarian make a great first impression and ensure your company is remembered."

Factors involved

Your expectations will depend on many factors: the existing skills of the trainees, their motivation, their level of education, the frequency of the training, and the language they are learning. European languages are closer to English than, say, Far Eastern ones, and are therefore easier to learn as some patterns will be familiar. These factors should be considered with your provider when agreeing outcomes.

Qualifications and assessment

Such outcomes may include attainment of a nationally recognised language qualification. Academic qualifications are rarely appropriate for business learners; there are a number of suitable assessments and your provider should be able to advise on them. Both are available at various levels, from beginners upwards. There are new qualifications being developed all the time, and your provider should be able to advise you on what is appropriate for your trainees' circumstances.

OUTCOMES

The National Language Standards are the nationally recognised benchmark for vocational language learning.

You can achieve accreditation based on the Standards via the N/SVQ route or through a range of nationally recognised, vocationally-related language qualifications. Providers may also structure their training to conform to the Standards.

European Language Portfolio

The UK European Language Portfolio (ELP) for adults was developed by CILT, the National Centre for Languages to provide a portable and motivating way for the individual learner to maintain an up-to-date record of their language learning experience and to track their changing levels of performance. The ELP has a format which is recognised throughout Europe and it allows individuals to record any language skills, even those acquired outside formal learning (e.g. basic German picked up on business trips). Your course provider may offer this, or you can obtain it directly from CILT.

“Languages are integral to our business.”

MD, double Queen’s Award winner for Innovation and International Trade

Step 5: Agreeing investment required

It is difficult to give a generalised picture of what professionally delivered language training should

cost. This will depend on the language, the method of delivery, the amount of training you commit to, and on the part of the country where your business is based.

Costs involved

In round terms, training from an established and recognised organisation should cost between £35 and £50 per hour. Some providers will request travel expenses on top of this, and provision of training materials will also have to be discussed. Be aware that giving each trainee his or her own copy of whatever books/tapes/CDs are being used may sound expensive; it may, however, prove cost-effective, since it will allow them to undertake self-study in their own time to support the face-to-face training they are receiving. For economies of scale, you may consider setting up an in-house language materials bank.

Shop around

As with choosing any supplier, requesting a range of proposals is always a good idea and will give you a feel for the market hourly rates in your part of the country. And if one supplier’s price differs significantly from the others, as with any service, it will be for a reason.

INVESTMENTS

Where to go next

CILT, the National Centre for Languages

Responsible for promoting a greater national capability in language and cultural skills.

www.cilt.org.uk

European Language Portfolio (ELP)

Portable record of language skills, devised by CILT and validated by the Council of Europe.

www.cilt.org.uk/elp.htm

Export Communications Review

An export communications review provides companies with impartial and objective advice on addressing language and cultural barriers in overseas trade.

www.chamberonline.co.uk/exportzone

National Language Standards

The National Language Standards are the scale of competence for languages in the work setting.

www.cilt.org.uk/standards.htm

Regional Language Networks (RLNs)

Operating throughout the UK, RLNs are supported by CILT in promoting language and cultural skills for business and employment.

www.cilt.org.uk/rln

SOLVIT

A site offering information, advice and solutions in international communications.

www.blis.org.uk/solvit

Other titles in this series:

Adapting Materials for International Markets

Basic International Communications

Commissioning Interpreting Services

Intercultural Skills

Recruiting People with Languages

All publications are available from Regional Language Networks

Regional Language Networks

www.cilt.org.uk/rln

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