



# RECRUITING PEOPLE WITH LANGUAGES

get the right candidate for the job



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## Introduction

The first step in achieving business success is in ensuring that you have the right people on board to get you there. If you trade internationally, you need people who understand the language and culture of your target markets.

This booklet is designed to show:

- how the recruitment of employees with languages can help you succeed internationally;
- how to improve communications with international customers and suppliers;
- which types of candidate to look for;
- how to assess their ability;
- which recruitment methods best suit your business.

We also give you some vital do's and don'ts to make the whole process as straightforward as possible. Key resources are highlighted in the text, and collected at the end of the booklet so you know where to go next.

**“I would not be afraid to recruit a candidate with a strong language background and appropriate profile, and offer them subsequent technical training. I would have major reservations about taking on a technical expert with no linguistic ability or aptitude in our field of work.”**

Dr Peter Graham, Interkonsult

**“For us, language competence is the most important quality we look for in a candidate. We recognise that sometimes we will have to train such linguists in the technical side of our business, but are still confident that this is the best approach for our company.”**

Peter Rooney, Managing Director, Fibretech.

## First considerations

There are many ways in which you can boost the language capability of your business. The principal means are:

- Language and cultural training;
- Use of out-sourced services such as translation and interpreting;
- Recruitment of people with language skills.

Every business has different needs, so the suitability of these different approaches will vary. Training and use of out-sourced services are generally the more expensive options. They are at times unavoidable if for example legal documentation needs translating; or an employee with unique working skills and experience needs to operate in a non-English speaking territory. Titles in this series where you can find further guidance on these areas include:

- Foreign Language Training;
- Translation and Localisation; Interpreting;
- Intercultural Skills.



Recruitment of people with language skills - whether native speakers or those with just a basic knowledge of the language which can be developed - may be the most cost effective option, especially as part of an overall workforce development strategy. If staff need to be recruited or moved around the organisation anyway, why not ensure that their skills match the business's international communication needs at the same time?

Thought must be given beforehand to the ability needed in the target language for the job role in question, and in what context the language will be used, so that this can be assessed during the recruitment process. Graduate-level written ability is all very well, but if language use is largely telephone-based then there may be little need for this; a candidate who has learned the language through spoken use overseas without formal qualification may well be better suited.

The following sections introduce you to the different types of candidate you may choose to employ and the many different ways you can go about recruiting them.

Since it was formed fourteen years ago, A & S Metallurgical Resources has been supplying consumables to iron, steel and aluminium foundries in the UK as well as overseas. The recent recruitment of a marketing development manager with linguistic skills has proven a shrewd

move and has resulted in increased export business.

## Different types of candidate

### Native speakers and bilingual candidates

These candidates will usually have the most cultural affinity with your target market, but if this is important to your business, do still check that they have kept in contact with the relevant country in recent years. It is surprisingly easy to lose touch. You will need in all cases to ensure that their English is good enough to operate in your working environment, as poor communication in this respect could be as costly as any benefit derived from their ability in other languages.

Nearly 85% of recruiters in Europe, 88% of recruiters in Asia and 95% of recruiters in Latin America either “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed” that being at least bilingual is critical to succeed in today's business environment. Among recruiters in North America, that percentage was just 34%.

Executive Recruiter Index, Korn Ferry International

Typical sources of such candidates will be overseas graduate or undergraduate students, migrant workers from Europe or elsewhere or those brought up in the UK in a bilingual environment.

Bilingual candidates (who profess fluency in two languages through time spent in the country or upbringing) will vary in terms of how far their bilingualism extends. Find out or example where they were educated, and if they are fluent in writing as well as speaking the language (see *Assessing and matching ability* for more).

**Bambino Mio recruited a number of employees with language skills to support their drive to increase export sales. In 2003, it hired two overseas students, Antoinette and Alex, from Switzerland. The two worked on targeting potential distributors before a major European trade fair. Like many of their compatriots, both are multi-lingual, speaking Italian, French, German and English: their ability to converse in all these languages meant that they succeeded in establishing distributors in a dozen countries.**

## Graduates

More students than ever are choosing to combine language study with other degree disciplines. They see the value in adding languages to their portfolio of skills in order to operate more effectively in an increasingly international business environment.

Language study can be pursued in many different ways through higher education. You can find candidates with a range of experience to suit your needs. You will find:

- Specialist students who have studied a pure languages degree;
- Students who study a language or languages to degree level in combination with other subjects that may be very relevant to your business area, e.g. Finance or Engineering;
- Many other students who study a language to lower levels as a module within their programme, or simply voluntarily in their own time. Such study, though less specialised, may be very practical in its scope and give a graduate student a great grounding in the language, which can be built on through regular usage.

## Other people with language skills

Employers increasingly need language skills at all levels. Imagine a call from a new client in the Far East, which could have massive potential in terms of new business. If the switchboard operator can at least tell which language they are speaking and have a few phrases to keep the caller happy while an interpreter or native speaker is found, their low level ability could have a huge impact.

People may develop their language ability in different ways, many of which are not examined. Look for people who have spent extended periods overseas, or perhaps who have attended evening classes mainly aimed at use on holiday. If they've made some effort already that probably means they will be enthusiastic to pick up new languages as business needs change.

**“I’m surprised that more companies don’t view languages as a prerequisite for customer-facing export staff.”**  
**These are the words of Sally Joyce who is office manager at Bevex Ltd and whose own language skills are a key reason for the company’s export success. Sally was recruited by the company for her language and customer service skills. She is fluent in German and French and also speaks Italian and Spanish.**

## External advertising

If you feel you need to look beyond your business to find the right candidate, there are many ways of advertising the vacancy. Given that your ideal future employee may not live in this country, the Internet is a great way of ensuring that you reach the widest possible audience. Some specialist job sites enable you to advertise at little or no cost, and may even offer you access to search a database of candidates with language skills.

## Methods of recruitment

### Internal appointment

Whether yours is a multinational organisation with the scope for international secondments or transfers, or an SME with limited human resources, it can pay to look at the jobs that need language skills and the existing staff who could cover them first of all. Do you know whether you already employ staff with the languages you need? Very often the question is asked at the application stages, but the information is not retained in staff records. Consider conducting an audit of language and cultural skills in your business - you will almost certainly be surprised by some hidden talent.

If you are able to arrange a transfer, consider not only how you could reap the rewards from the incoming language skills, but also how a current member of staff could benefit from an exchange arrangement.

Traditional media such as newspapers or the trade press may prove successful, but when selecting your medium, consider how important the language ability is next to the other job skills and experience required. Although an advert placed in an Arabic language newspaper may yield a number of strong candidates in terms of language ability, if you absolutely need specialist industry experience, an advert in a trade magazine with some international distribution may yield better results overall. You may wish to translate some or all of the advert into the target language to attract attention and sift out those who don’t meet your minimum requirements.

## Use of agencies

There are many agencies based in the UK that specialise in multilingual vacancies - some that even focus on particular industries as well, such as finance or contact centre recruitment. Although a placement fee is charged as for any other agency, they should be highly experienced in sourcing candidates with a wide range of language skills along with the industry experience you need - and this will minimise the time you need to spend in placing adverts and sifting through CVs.

You will want to ensure you are dealing with a reputable agency. Ask them for testimonials from previous clients and candidates and ensure you agree 'terms of business' (i.e. the placement fee) before receiving any CVs. Any good agency will assess the language ability of its candidates, as well as other skills (for example ICT) that may be relevant to your post.

## Short-term placements

You may not be sure whether you want to commit to employing a new multilingual member of staff - perhaps you haven't seen the benefits for your business yet at first hand. A student placement may be a good way of testing this.

Placements come in many shapes and sizes.

Languages students from UK universities may be looking to extend their work experience during the holidays or as part of a postgraduate placement scheme; or overseas students may wish to spend anything up to a year in the UK in order to improve their English while gaining work experience at the same time. Your local school or college may also be able to arrange short work experience placements for its GCSE or A Level students.

**Local placement programmes are often in place to support collaboration in between educational institutions and businesses. Contact your local RLN for more details (see Where to go next).**

## Typical placements may involve:

- liaison with an overseas client;
- research of a new or emerging export market;
- co-ordinating the translation of corporate materials or documentation.

Do note though that such students should not be used for specialist translation or interpreting work themselves, as they will not ordinarily have had training in these skills.

**“A fundamental part of our strategy is to bring European languages into TriMark,” says Keith Dolbear, Managing Director. France is the company’s most important export market, where it is now well established.**

# BUSINESS CASE

“One of the reasons for our success in France has been the recruitment of French students on work placement,” says Keith.

“They have developed relationships with new distributors and clients in a way that wouldn’t otherwise have been possible, and they have also given us some subtle insights into the French way of doing business.”

## Assessing and matching ability

### Benchmarking

You need to consider exactly how well developed the candidate’s language skills should be in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Think about the working scenarios they will be involved in, such as:

- meetings;
- phone calls;
- e-mail exchanges;
- negotiations;
- conferences.

These all require different use of language.

The National Language Standards can assist you in understanding how different ability levels will enable an employee to operate in the workplace. Descriptors at levels from Entry Level to Level 5 demonstrate what tasks an employee can be expected to undertake in the language. Ask your specialist assessor (see below) about the Standards or follow the address in ‘Where to go next’.

### In-house testing

When interviewing candidates make sure their language ability is tested in a relevant context. This could for example take place:

- beforehand over the telephone;
- face-to-face;
- on paper in a separate part of the interview.

Examples of such assessment could include writing an email, summarising the key points from a report or media article, or a telephone role-play. If you have a native speaker already employed with the organisation, they may be able to assist with this process given a suitable briefing, although ideally a specialist assessor (usually a language trainer) should be engaged.

## Specialist assessment

Language trainers may be able to act as a specialist assessor. Ensure they are briefed as to the expected ability of the candidate, and the type of work they will be engaged in (and therefore the context of their language use). Details of quality-assured local providers are available on the **BLIS Professionals** database.

## Tips for successful recruitment

### Bilateral chambers of commerce

Many countries have chambers of commerce in the UK, which are usually located in London. They may be able to help you find native speakers in search of work in the UK - or alternatively provide you with information as to where else you could look.

### Cultural institutes

Often closely connected with chambers of commerce, cultural associations look after the cultural interests of a given country in the UK. They may be able to provide useful information, advertise your vacancy, or give you advice on how to tap into communities from their country.

### Overseas qualifications

NARIC can provide you with guidance on comparing overseas qualifications with their UK equivalents - they are not always what they at first appear to be.

## Work permits

Check at the earliest stage whether the candidate is permitted to work in the UK, and if so, for how long and if there are any restrictions. Always ask for written evidence.

## Employment legislation and racial discrimination

It is rarely permitted to discriminate for or against a candidate on the basis of their nationality, mother tongue or ethnic origin. Take care when advertising not to refer to 'mother tongue' ability and ensure you consider UK and overseas candidates alike.

## Regular use of the language

Check that the candidate is using the language on a regular basis. Even native speakers can lack confidence in their own mother tongue if it is not used for sustained periods of time.

## Which language?

Make sure you do your homework about the languages you need. If you are planning to do business with clients for example in Belgium, are you likely to need a Flemish-speaker or a French-speaker? Both are spoken extensively, but their usage varies geographically. Do also be aware that there can be significant differences in the same language spoken in different countries - German spoken in Austria, Germany and Switzerland respectively, for example.

# BUSINESS CASE

## Where to go next

### Languages Work

Promoting the true value of languages in the workplace and beyond. Includes case studies of employees using languages in their work, as well as listings of specialist recruitment agencies.  
[www.languageswork.org.uk](http://www.languageswork.org.uk)

### NARIC

The official source of information and advice on the comparability of international qualifications from over 180 countries worldwide with those in the UK.  
[www.naric.org.uk](http://www.naric.org.uk)

### National Language Standards

The approved UK national occupational standards for languages in a work setting.  
[www.cilt.org.uk/standards](http://www.cilt.org.uk/standards)

### RLN East Midlands

Promoting a greater capability in language and cultural skills for business and employment in the East Midlands.  
[www.rln-eastmidlands.com](http://www.rln-eastmidlands.com)

### SOLVIT

On-line tool aimed at helping businesses to overcome communication barriers in international trade.  
[www.solvit.org.uk](http://www.solvit.org.uk)

### UK Trade and Investment

UK Trade and Investment is the government organisation that supports companies in the UK doing business internationally and overseas enterprises seeking to locate in the UK.  
[www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk](http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk)

### Other titles in this series:

Adapting Materials for International Markets  
Basic International Communications  
Commissioning Interpreting Services  
Foreign Language Training  
Intercultural Skills

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CILT, the National Centre for Languages and its Regional Language Networks publish a range of guides for businesses. For more, go to [www.cilt.org.uk/howtoguides.htm](http://www.cilt.org.uk/howtoguides.htm)



**RLN East Midlands**

Robins Wood House, Robins Wood Road, Aspley, Nottingham, NG8 3NH

Tel: 0115 854 1399 , Fax: 0115 854 1617

[www.rln-eastmidlands.com](http://www.rln-eastmidlands.com), [info@rln-eastmidlands.com](mailto:info@rln-eastmidlands.com)

Written by Dominic Luddy

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