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MULTILINGUALISM IN COMPANIES - A PRECONDITION FOR SUCCESSFUL ENTRY INTO THE GLOBAL MARKET

VIŠEJEZIČNOST U TVRTKAMA – PREDUVJET ZA USPJEŠAN IZLAZAK NA GLOBALNO TRŽIŠTE

VULIC, Vesna

Abstract: *This paper deals with the importance of the recognition and development of successful language strategies in companies in order to create a more competitive and highly skilled workforce. In order to achieve this goal, measures at national, regional and company level should be envisaged. Multilingualism not only promotes openness and mutual understanding but also opens doors to new markets and business opportunities. Investing in language skills to ensure a supply of highly qualified employees is crucial to fully benefit from the global market.*

Key words: *multilingualism, communication, objective, language strategies, business*

Sažetak: *Ovaj rad se bavi vrijednošću prepoznavanja i razvijanja uspješnih jezičnih strategija u tvrtkama kako bi se stvorile konkurentske i stručne radne snage. Za uspješno postizanje ovoga cilja trebaju se istovremeno predvidjeti mjere na razini tvrtki te na lokalnoj i nacionalnoj razini. Ne samo što unapređuje otvorenost i međusobno razumijevanje, višejezičnost otvara vrata novim tržištima i poslovnim mogućnostima. Ulaganje u razvijanje jezičnih vještina uposlenika u tvrtkama presudno je za ostvarenje prednosti u poslovanju na globalnom tržištu.*

Ključne riječi: *višejezičnost, komunikacija, cilj, jezične strategije, poslovanje*



1. Introduction

The difficult economic climate not only in Europe, but throughout the world, presents companies with the fundamental challenge of how to improve their position in the local, regional and global market. The current crisis means they must use all available tools to improve their business. One of the very important tools is language policy.

The EU has a linguistic diversity of 23 official languages, more than 60 regional and minority languages and hundreds of other languages spoken by people originally from outside the EU. At the Summit Meeting in Barcelona in 2002, the Member States presented their objective that every citizen should learn two languages at school in addition to his or her mother tongue [1]. The fact is that English is still the "lingua franca" of international communication and business, however demand for other languages is also growing. It is obvious that the choice of the right language strategies can help companies improve their business.

2. Why is it important to invest in language skills in companies?

The first European –wide survey of business lost as a result of lack of language skills in companies was published in 2006. The ELAN report is based on a sample of almost 2,000 exporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from EU 27 and candidate countries. The aim was to collect data on approaches to the use of language skills, intercultural competence, awareness of language strategies, loss of business owing to lack of language skills, future exporting intentions and hence projected requirements for further language skills. The importance of the study results from the fact that SMEs account for more than 50% of employment in the EU. As many as 11% of the SME's in the sample declared having lost contacts as a direct result of a lack of knowledge of language and intercultural skills [2]. Language skills are high in demand on the labour market. The lack of language skills poses an obstacle for employees since large companies with international markets look for multilingual people, and in most of them, English is regarded as a basic skill everyone should have. The Business Forum for Multilingualism was set up in 2007 with the aim of exploring how language skills can have an impact on trade and jobs in the European Union. In their report they give a clear overview of what needs to be done to help companies gain access to new markets and new business opportunities in the globalised world [3]. The Forum pointed out that emerging markets such as Brazil, Russia, India and China are increasingly important for companies and adequate language skills are needed to compete there [4].

3. What measures should be taken

The industrial economy is gradually being transformed into a knowledge economy. European companies are supposed to be better positioned than any others for gaining profits in business opportunities that require multilingual communication. Linguistic and intercultural skills combined with the knowledge of several foreign languages present a competitive advantage. There is empirical evidence that skills in several

languages encourage creativity and innovation. Multilingual people can tackle problems in different ways according to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As the Business Forum stated, companies could usefully develop strategies to improve language skills together with national, regional and local authorities [4].

3.1. What role can national governments play?

Initiatives and actions for promoting multilingual business communication should be considered very seriously by national governments. One of the efficient ways to provide support is to encourage language learning at all levels. Goals and priorities should include a wider range of languages and from an early age. Local conditions such as border regions and the presence of communities speaking different languages must be kept in mind when choosing the second foreign language.

Although language learning has been introduced in primary and secondary education most students still do not have the opportunity to study two languages. Students in VET should have practice-oriented language learning modules, tailor-made to their occupations. The investment in student mobility gives results in bringing back valuable knowledge of other languages and cultures. Furthermore, language skills and language learning should be included in national programmes for lifelong learning and social integration. To achieve these goals, education and training systems must ensure a supply of highly qualified language teachers. Allowing teachers to spend time abroad has been identified as essential for them to improve fluency in the language they teach and hone their intercultural skills [5]. National governments should recommend national trade promotion organisations to include language strategies in their support programmes.

3.2. What can regional and local authorities do?

Regional and local authorities should promote awareness about the importance of languages through networks such as Chambers of Commerce and trade organisations. Good practice is to create private-public partnerships which would include local universities and training institutions by providing support for local business communities to organise language courses. A more multilingual local business environment should be encouraged together with border regional initiatives with the purpose of enhancing cross-border exchange and mobility. Multicultural fairs and similar events in business parks and industrial zones are considered to be very important.

3.3. What can companies do?

Companies are fully aware that to be able to meet the need for a highly skilled workforce they need to invest more in developing the right skills of their workforce. The current crisis forces companies to use all available tools to strengthen their business position and foreign language skills and competences are recognised as a competitive advantage. Companies should take stock of existing language skills in the company and study the needs at all levels of organisation. The recruitment policies and development strategies within HR management should

also be revised. Individual language competence targets for employees should be set up. Established standards can be used to determine staff competence in languages. The most frequently used system in the EU is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) created by the Council of Europe [6].

In order to improve the competences of employees, companies can encourage staff by offering language training in ways that are motivating and compatible with the demands of their particular workplace. The employment of native speakers (either temporarily or permanently) is a simple way of doing this when particular markets are being targeted. Co-operation with communicators, translators, interpreters and cultural mediators would improve the business prospects of a company.

The huge possibilities of new media for learning, practicing, revising and testing foreign languages should be taken into account. Numerous flexible and time saving Internet courses can be adapted to individual companies' needs. Internet communication and advertising has to be carefully adapted to target multilingual audiences and its skilful use can reduce the costs of multilingualism.

Finally companies need to seek to promote international mobility for staff and create a permanent platform for lifelong learning [7].

3.4 How can European institutions help?

In order to succeed in creating growth and prosperity within the European Union and encourage new members to enter the European Union, ready-prepared European Institutions should make an effort to raise awareness among Member States about the importance of languages for competitiveness and set language skills firmly among basic skills. In order to raise awareness on this issue, information campaigns need to be launched at all levels, targeted at the whole range of stakeholders in the public, voluntary, and private sectors [8]. They should gather information about community programmes supporting languages for business, set up a web site to work as a "one stop shop", giving guidelines for companies on how to apply for funding.

A permanent platform for the exchange of best practices for companies should be created with the aim of gathering valuable information from the business community, trade organisations, Chambers of Commerce, schools and education authorities. The co-operation at a European level within the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs serves as a good example. The great majority of EU funding comes from the European Social Fund and the Regional Development Fund. The grants can be obtained via the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme. Particularly interesting is the sub-programme Leonardo da Vinci which opens up various opportunities for companies since it targets vocational training.

4. Conclusion

Emphasis on the importance of multilingualism is anything but an ideological hobby horse of the European Union and the Council of Europe [8]. In a globalised world language competences are becoming increasingly important for companies. Therefore companies must invest in the development of language skills that will produce benefits with positive impact. Real progress in language policy will be achieved if

businesses from micro companies to multinationals develop language strategies adapted to the individual needs of each of them. More concretely they should consider the needs of society and the labour market by taking into account the existing situation in the local, regional, national, European and world labour market. Needless to say the language strategies of companies need support through local and regional networks and government as well as the provision of additional financial resources.

The best solutions will be found through partnerships, between both businesses and the education sector and between industry and research. Such co-operation will result in the creation of a highly skilled multilingual workforce capable of exploring and conquering new business opportunities across the globe.

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