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## How Foreign Language Study Can Enhance Career Possibilities. ERIC Digest.

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TEXT: IN WHAT FIELDS ARE FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS IMPORTANT?

Proficiency in a foreign language, especially when combined with knowledge of and skills in another professional area, is highly desirable in the marketplace. While fields such as librarianship, government and politics, and some areas of education, seek employees who possess foreign language proficiency in addition to expertise in their particular discipline, it is business that places the greatest emphasis on both foreign language capability and knowledge of specific subject areas like management, tourism,

or finance.

## HOW DO INTERNATIONAL BUSINESSES VIEW FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS?

A number of studies have shown that American multinational firms rely overwhelmingly on technical or professional ability as the primary criterion for selecting managers for international assignments (Inman, 1979). The ability to adapt to a new environment, along with previous international experience, is viewed as of secondary importance, while foreign language capability in and of itself ranks far below the other attributes as a selection factor. In contrast, a number of Japanese companies require a specified proficiency level in a foreign language, generally English, before an employee may be sent abroad. In other cases, notably in European companies, proficiency in English may be a hiring criterion (Inman, 1983).

Once U.S. employees have been selected for overseas assignments, a majority of employers provide (or at least make available) language and intercultural training. In most cases, proficiency in a foreign language is not required. It is generally considered "desirable but optional." Language training is ordinarily viewed as a pre-assignment or on-assignment benefit, with attendance usually voluntary. Employees themselves are often responsible for arranging for the instruction, although the employer may provide financial support. The amount of time available for language training is often severely limited, as training must compete with the press of other activities and obligations in the time available before departure.

The level of proficiency attainable in corporate-sponsored language training programs is also limited. Most companies sponsor approximately 100 hours of instruction, and only limited progress can be anticipated with exposure this brief. The underlying assumption of this kind of policy is that business matters will be handled in English; foreign language skills will be used primarily in social situations or for getting along in everyday activities like shopping, asking directions, or requesting information. In contrast, proficiency in English is frequently required of non-native English-speaking corporate employees, whether the company operations are in the United States or abroad. Training programs in English (as a second or foreign language) of 500 to 1000 hours and one to two years in length are common.

Many corporate executives cite the extensive use of English in international settings as the basis for their companies' policies. Some note that the initial excitement of their employees is followed by discouragement and even frustration as they become fully aware of the magnitude of the effort required to develop any meaningful proficiency in another language. Other executives state that ideally their representatives would speak local languages. Actual practice, however, has shown that it is a "rare occasion when professional capability, language capability, and a job assignment all come together at the same time" (Inman, 1979).

## WHAT MATERIAL BENEFITS ARE THERE FOR THOSE WITH FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS?

An employee possessing a solid combination of language and business/managerial skills can have a competitive edge over others without language capability. Bilingual individuals, often those for whom English is a second language, are in great demand. A majority of companies meet their translation and interpreting needs through employees whose major responsibilities are not language-related. In a few cases, proficiency in a foreign language may result in a pay differential of up to 10% (Inman, 1985). For example, the U.S. Army recently adopted a policy of providing a supplement ranging from \$25 to \$100 per month to personnel with foreign language skills. The specific amount of compensation the Army provides is based on the language known, the individual's proficiency level, and the importance of language skill to the person's work assignment (Carney, 1987).

## WHAT PROBLEMS CAN RESULT FROM NOT KNOWING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

While improvements in the business climate have been documented when individuals with foreign language and cross-cultural skills have been employed, countless blunders and inefficiencies have also been recorded (Ricks, Fu, and Arpan, 1974). For example, senior staff members of foreign firms attempting to enter the complex Chinese market often have no Chinese language proficiency, nor even a rudimentary knowledge of the social customs or economic system of the country. They are soon confronted with an unfamiliar bureaucracy and many frustrating delays.

Managers admit that miscommunication occurs fairly frequently in international business settings. In business dealings, details and nuances of meaning are often missed or misinterpreted by individuals lacking real proficiency in the language being used, although all parties may believe that their overall business and daily operations run more smoothly with employees who are proficient in the foreign language. They also know that communication problems mean more time required for negotiations and other business dealings. As a result, efficiency suffers, and decisions are often made on the basis of incomplete data. Managers also report difficulty in establishing rapport with their foreign counterparts, as well as limited opportunities for social interactions due to their lack of language proficiency.

Perhaps even more significant than a lack of foreign language capability, however, is cross-cultural misunderstanding. Corporate leaders note that difficulties often occur when "methods of analysis and motivation differ." Of special concern are the "different approaches to solving problems, getting cooperation, and achieving agreement," even when all communication takes place in the same language, notably English.

Although it is difficult to place a monetary value on missed opportunities or unsuccessful business dealings which result from communication problems, some companies have

documented problem situations their employees have encountered for use in subsequent training sessions.

#### HOW HAVE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS RESPONDED TO THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE TRAINING?

To meet this need, many colleges and universities, and even secondary schools, have developed and offered nontraditional, interdisciplinary foreign language courses. These programs have resulted not only from the demand of the job market, but also from the dissatisfaction of both foreign language students and employers with traditional foreign language courses that have provided learners with inadequate preparation for professional use of their foreign language skills. Foreign language curricula, therefore, have expanded in scope from being predominantly literature-oriented to incorporating career training or professional education. Some nonlanguage fields, especially international business, have also begun to systematically include foreign language study in their requirements. In these programs, the content of nonlanguage courses is frequently presented in the foreign language, thus mutually reinforcing the two disciplines. A period of study and work abroad is also a common feature of such integration.

Economic interdependence among nations and renewed American interest in other cultures and peoples have led to increasing enrollments in foreign language courses, particularly in Pacific Rim languages. An emphasis on cross-cultural concerns is implicit in these kinds of courses. In addition, student and faculty exchanges figure prominently in most international programs.

The integration of career and foreign language studies contributes significantly to both the business community and the foreign language education profession. It fills a critical need in both disciplines and is leading to increasingly successful global interactions.

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