

Why Are Companies Hiring More Multilingual Workers?

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

[...]9 out of 10 U.S. employers say they rely on U.S.-based employees who have language skills other than English, according to research from Ipsos Public Affairs for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. [...]focusing on English-speaking customers can hurt local business growth, since it ignores a large portion of the U.S. population who speak other languages, Fagnilli said. [...]they provide better service."

FULL TEXT

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Interacting with clients and customers around the world has become part of doing business at many companies, including small operations with just a few employees. Thanks to the ability to connect instantly with global customers, as well as with new employees and freelancers who are working remotely, employers are recognizing the importance of hiring talent who can communicate in languages beyond English.

With the help of multilingual employees, many companies are doing business in countries they never imagined, as well as better serving their local clients and customers who speak various languages.

In fact, 9 out of 10 U.S. employers say they rely on U.S.-based employees who have language skills other than English, according to research from Ipsos Public Affairs for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. The survey also found that the need for employees who speak foreign languages during the workday has risen significantly in recent years, and that need is expected to grow, especially for those who speak Spanish, Chinese and French.

Improved Customer Service

Having multilingual employees on staff is critical when serving customers and improving customer relations, said Mariana Fagnilli, vice president and director of the global office of diversity, equity and inclusion at Liberty Mutual Insurance. The Boston-based company boasts 33,000 U.S. employees and actively seeks new hires who speak Spanish, Portuguese, Hindi, Korean, German, Dutch, Arabic, Russian, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, French and Japanese, among other languages.

"It can be difficult for customers to express themselves in a second or third language, so when they are able to speak in their native language and be understood, it makes a big difference and makes us better listeners," Fagnilli said. "Our ability to understand other native languages increases their comfort in sharing their perspective and ultimately leads to a better experience."

The same holds true at Infinity Dish in Boca Raton, Fla., a DISH Network provider that employs more than 450 multilingual workers as salespeople and customer service representatives who speak Spanish, Mandarin, Tagalog and Arabic, with additional languages being added regularly.

"In 2022, relying solely on English-only employees means missing out on a lucrative portion of the market and denying accessible customer support to a large number of your clients," said Infinity Dish Operator Laura Fuentes. "Point blank, we couldn't conduct business at the level we want without our multilingual employees."

Deeper Client Relationships

Some companies struggle to connect with potential partners and customers in other countries if there is a

language barrier. But when those firms hire multilingual workers, they can better understand clients and improve business relations, said Steven Walker, CEO at Spylix in Phoenix.

Of his firm's more than 100 employees, one-third are multilingual, Walker said. This has proved useful because not only does he save money on translators, but "the quality of relationships [with international clients] and understanding has gradually increased," he said. "Now, we are more aware of our target audience's needs and wants."

Faster Business Expansion

Companies that seek to expand worldwide may find it impossible to grow without employing workers who understand other languages, said Ian Sells, co-founder and CEO of RebateKey in Sheridan, Wyo. "Having multilingual workers can provide contextualized information about people and places, which is beneficial in creating and establishing connections and relationships with business networks around the globe," he said. "Having multilingual employees also ensures that you understand another culture better, [bridge] gaps and ensure cultural sensitivity," he added.

In fact, focusing on English-speaking customers can hurt local business growth, since it ignores a large portion of the U.S. population who speak other languages, Fagnilli said.

"Being multilingual and multicultural helps us bring a different point of view and build creative solutions that will ultimately impact the sustainability of the business," she said. "Our current customers are not the same customer we will have tomorrow, and every company needs to be ready for that."

Fagnilli explained that in recent years she and her team have focused specifically on the Latino community, since it accounts for over half of current U.S. population growth.

"To ensure Liberty Mutual can best engage with and tailor to the Latinx community, our strategy team is partnering with our Amigos@Liberty employee resource group for guidance on how to better market and service this growing segment," she said.

Multilingual employees can also help grow a company's bottom line by being more well-rounded in their jobs, said Jennifer Mazzanti, co-founder and CEO of eMazzanti Technologies, a company with 50 employees in Hoboken, N.J., that employs technical workers who speak English, Spanish, French, Albanian, Greek and Italian.

"After years of working with multilingual employees, we learned that they solve problems faster," she said. "Hence, they provide better service."

Fueling Creativity and Diversity

Having a workforce where everybody speaks the same language may limit creativity, while adding staff who speak various languages can expand a company's point of view and transform how it operates, said Joshua Rich, CEO and founder of Bullseye Locations in Somerville, N.J.

"Multilingualism is not only a skill, but [it] also shapes one's personality," Rich said. "With their open-mindedness and ability to think broadly, these workers not only make the workplace more efficient, but [they] also help me close deals and cater to international customers."

SHRM Resource Hub Page

Overcoming Workplace Bias

Recruiting Multilingual Employees

Given the current talent shortage, many companies are getting creative when seeking multilingual employees.

Walker said he advertises jobs primarily on social media, where he includes an e-mail address so job seekers can ask and answer questions.

"State the level of fluency of the language in the job description and advertise the job in the language your company is seeking, and in the candidate's fluent language," he suggested.

At RebateKey, Sells also turns to social media for help finding multilingual candidates. "We search for potential applicants from online Facebook communities," he said. "We ask for help from our remote workers, who then post the job openings to local Facebook communities."

Along with recruiting at colleges and universities, the HR team at Liberty Mutual also collaborates with

professional organizations to find multicultural employees.

"We use a variety of databases that reach talent of all backgrounds, highlighting the need for a multilingual employee," Fagnilli said. Her advice? "Consider partnering with organizations such as Prospanica, HACR [the Hispanic Association on Corporate Responsibility], The Partnership, Ascend and others to connect with talent of all backgrounds and at all levels of employment."

Fagnilli said that at Liberty Mutual, multilingual employees have proved invaluable. "Those who are multilingual have a cultural agility that is practiced every day, which is critical for any employer that is concerned with the sustainability of their business, whether within the U.S. or overseas," she said.

"Multicultural people bring that to the table as part of their identity."

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