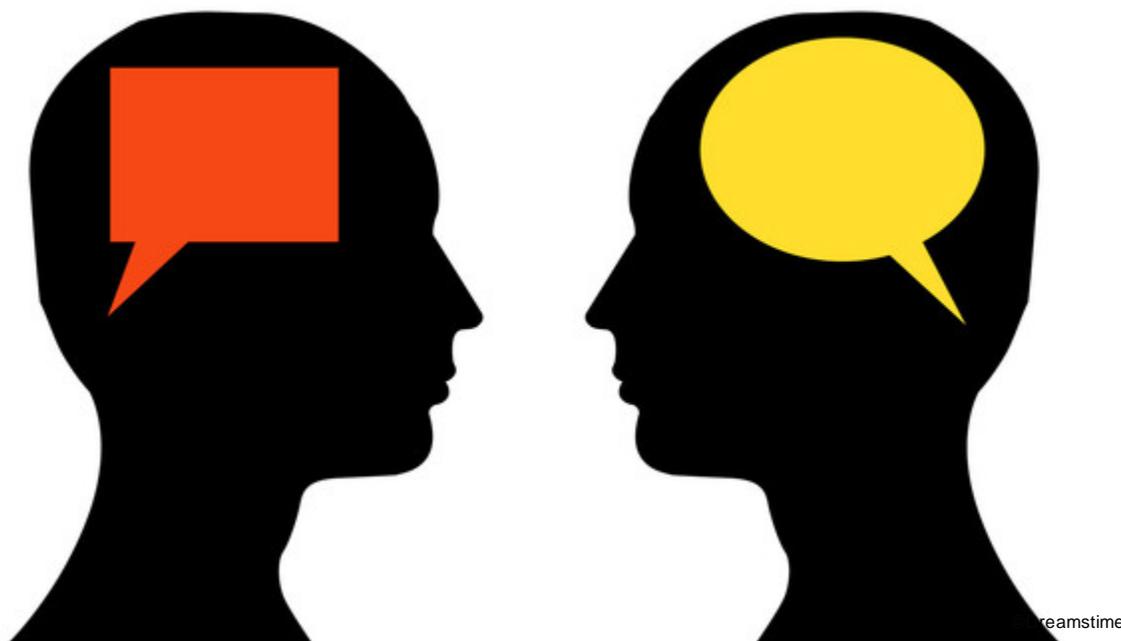


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The multilingual dividend



By Andrew Hill



A few years ago, when Antonella Sorace visited the European Central Bank in Frankfurt to talk about her research into bilingualism, she was astonished to find the bank's multinational staff worrying about what should have been one of their families' principal assets. "They had all kinds of doubts about the benefits of multilingualism for their children; they worried that their children weren't learning to read or write properly – in any language," she says. "I found it very instructive."

The Italian-born University of Edinburgh professor of developmental linguistics should set their minds at rest. Prof Sorace's research has shown that speaking another language offers not only utilitarian communication advantages, but also has cognitive benefits. Her message to business is: "Hire more multilingual employees, because these employees can communicate better, have better intercultural sensitivity, are better at co-operating, negotiating, compromising. But they can also think more efficiently."

Big multinational companies recognise the importance of language skills. McKinsey counts more than 130 languages spoken across the management consultancy, and offers a bursary to those who wish to learn another language before joining. Unilever estimates that up to 80 of the consumer products group's 100 most senior leaders speak at least two languages. Standard Chartered seeks out bilinguals for its international graduate training scheme.

These companies understand the functional benefits of having enough Mandarin-speakers to deal

with suppliers in Shanghai, or French speakers sufficiently fluent to smooth relations with a customer in Carcassonne.

But at a recent FT roundtable in partnership with Bilingualism Matters, a project led by Prof Sorace, executives and consultants said they also believed that companies benefited from the diverse background and skills of multilingual leaders – and would benefit more in future.

“Multilingualism will be better valued and better leveraged by companies,” says Laurence Monnery, co-head of global diversity and inclusion at Egon Zehnder, the executive search company. “Multiculturalism makes better leaders.”

“Do multilinguals make better managers?” asks Ann Francke, chief executive of the UK’s Chartered Management Institute. “Probably the answer to that question is yes.”

Get a business brain

- Bilingualism does not mean perfect, balanced fluency in two languages from birth. Bilinguals are people who know, and use regularly, more than one language.

- Early exposure to two languages does not disadvantage children and may bring benefits, such as flexible thinking. The cognitive benefits apply from childhood to old age.

- No languages are “more useful” or “less useful”: what matters is having more than one language in the brain.

- Starting early is good for developing cognitive ability, but proficiency and number of languages matter more than age of first exposure to the second language.

- “Late” bilinguals who are proficient in their second language also have cognitive advantages.

Source: *Bilingualism Matters*

Research shows bilinguals have an enhanced awareness of other people’s points of view, born from their deeper understanding, from an early age, that some people have a different perspective. They are also better than monolinguals at giving selective attention to specific features of a problem, while ignoring misleading elements, and at switching between different tasks. Prof Sorace points out that bilinguals do not switch off their “other” language, meaning their brains grow to be more adaptable than those of monolinguals – a vital asset in a complex business world.

Most companies still value the practical rather than cognitive advantages of employing linguists. HSBC is one of the world’s most multinational employers and emphasises hiring and cultivating multilingual staff. But Jorge Aisa Dreyfus, the Spanish-born co-head of learning, talent, resourcing and organisational development, says the bank is “probably still paying too much attention to [the fact] that you speak German, so you [can] handle all my German business”.

In any case, for many companies from English-speaking cultures, pressure to employ a multilingual workforce has eased as English has spread as the language of business.

Academics worry that this will make national policy makers and educators complacent. James Foreman-Peck of Cardiff Business School has assessed the cost to the UK economy of under-investment in language skills as “the equivalent of between a 3 and 7 per cent tax on British exports”. A recent study by the British Academy on “the state of the nation” concluded that the UK was entering a “vicious circle of monolingualism”.

While the problem is particularly acute in the UK, other countries are also concerned. A 2006 report for the European Commission stated that “a significant amount of business” was sacrificed because of poor language skills across Europe: 11 per cent of small- and medium-sized enterprises had lost a contract as a result.

Prof Sorace says the cognitive benefits of multilingualism can be acquired by adults who become proficient in a second language. But a downward spiral in the quality of language education undermines the potential to develop that proficiency.

Richard Hardie, who chairs UBS’s London operation, says the Swiss bank’s recruitment website used to specify that it was looking for language skills. But it had to drop the requirement as the quality of linguists it was interviewing fell.

Multinationals have the edge over smaller companies in being able to recruit bilinguals globally, or to give staff with language skills full-immersion assignments.

Will Dawkins, of executive search firm Spencer Stuart, says “most enlightened companies” look for candidates for senior jobs who are not only multilingual but also have “performed a significant leadership task in another language”.

Doug Baillie, chief human resources officer of Unilever, agrees: “Our most successful leaders are the ones who speak more than one language and travel to more than one geography.”

But big companies can sometimes be complacent. Tracey Roseborough, managing director, international, at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, saw the advantages of multilingualism when working with high-potential managers at Standard Chartered, earlier in her career, but says the quality of language skills at some big American multinationals she has worked for has not matched up. “The quality of the conversations wasn’t the same,” she says.

Prof Sorace advises companies to help combat prejudice and misconceptions about bilingualism and to exploit the opportunity to integrate expatriates into their local communities, to the advantage of the employees themselves and their families.

But her principal concern remains the failure of education systems – notably in the UK, whose citizens rank last out of EU members in linguistic ability – to promote languages at school. Add the cognitive disadvantage that monolinguals suffer to the more obvious communication deficit and countries’ neglect of languages translates into a tale of lost potential.

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