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Having the Edge: Language Training for U.S. Expatriates

SHRM **Research**

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"Since proficiency in a language and its local culture is the essence of communication, the ability to competently express in more than one language will continue to grow in value as globalization drives company growth."

—Source: Carobolante, L. (2004, January). Redefining Global Communication. *Mobility*.

Recently, I purchased a grandfather clock crafted with Swedish lines, made in China, from a U.S. catalog company. While the directions to assemble the clock were in English, it was evident by the odd use of grammar that a non-English speaker wrote them. Ordinarily, I could casually find my way through the peculiar sentence structure, but in this case I had spent a considerable amount of money on the clock and was concerned that successfully putting it together depended on following the instructions provided.

Unfortunately, expatriate assignments don't come with an instruction booklet, no matter how awkward the grammar. Every day, U.S. firms send expatriates overseas, at an average annual cost of \$350,000 for a family of four, yet many of these employees and their families have little to no proficiency in a language other than English. Still, U.S. international assignees are often expected to develop and manage global businesses and their spouses to handle the home, with minimal facility in the local language.

International HR Professionals Tell the Story

To gauge the current view on the importance of language training, more than 30 international human resource (IHR) professionals were interviewed for this article. These professionals live and work in the United States and/or overseas, for U.S.-owned and/or foreign-held international corporations, in public- and private-sector firms and for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

Their work gives them a "close-up" view of the impact of foreign language skills. To gain an in-depth understanding of this topic, interviewees were asked a number of questions regarding various aspects of how language training affects the lives and work of U.S. expatriates.

Along with citations from recent research, many responses are quoted, giving the reader direct input in a conversational mode. Clearly, the interviewees confirm that U.S. expatriates who speak the local

language benefit from having the extra "edge" during international assignments.

Language Training 101

"Many people tend to assume that foreigners who cannot speak the local language are either stupid or gullible."

— **Source:** Sautters Osland, J. (1995). *The Adventure of Working Abroad: Hero Tales From the Global Frontier*.

Today, international work includes business travel, regular overseas commuting, short-term assignments (six months to a year), and the traditional expatriate assignment (generally two to five years). With the high cost of assignments and the critical importance of establishing solid relationships with international colleagues, it is worth taking time to learn the local language -- at whatever level possible.

In a 1997 study of more than 400 expatriates from 49 multinational companies, the importance of language skills was identified as a key component for effective performance on international assignments. Language skills were seen as critical to task performance and cultural adjustment.¹ Further, Gardenswartz and Rowe -- authorities on diversity -- note that different language usage in the workplace is becoming more common and that being monolingual is increasingly a detriment.²

Learning a language is hard work and requires both motivation and dedication. A minimum of three hours a week of focused study, in addition to homework, is required to make progress. One of the keys to learning a foreign language is being willing to make mistakes and laugh at oneself. Once an international assignee experiences the satisfaction of responding to colleagues' greetings, saying "please" and "thank you" and ordering off a menu in the local language, he or she will be more motivated to learn the language. The ability to speak a foreign language -- at whatever level -- places U.S. expatriates in a position to more easily open doors of opportunity in the global marketplace (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1
Ten Reasons to Provide Language Training

1. Establish credibility with management and colleagues at the international assignment location.
2. Build relationships in a foreign culture—for the international assignee, spouse and family.
3. Facilitate acceptance, trust and respect.
4. Increase effectiveness, efficiency and productivity on the job.
5. Better understand and adjust to the host country's culture.
6. Allow for easier day-to-day living for the spouse and family.
7. Be able to communicate in times of stress, fear and danger.
8. Help to create a global perspective within the assignee's company.
9. Enjoy the experience of living abroad.
10. Diffuse the negative American reputation.

International human resource professionals were asked if their companies provide language training for expatriate assignments and if this is important. The following are examples of their responses.

Lance Richards, Senior Director of International Human Resources at Kelly Services, takes a strong stance on the importance of language training. "I include language training in any recommendation for any sort of short-term or expatriate assignment. Regardless of the length of the assignment, whether three months or three years, people assigned overseas have got to get through at least essential levels of the local tongue. Not just for the convenience of being able to get around, but for the pure statement it makes about the importance of thinking and acting locally! Local staff pay close attention to this and they watch the expats to see who is taking the time to learn, and who's clearly just 'passing through.'"³

Alan Freeman, a global human resource executive who has created and managed international assignment programs in large global organizations, always offers language training to the assignee, accompanying partner/spouse and children. The format of language training varies -- from individual sessions, including residential total immersion programs on occasion, to group lessons delivered both predeparture and throughout the assignment. "The type and length of training are based upon the individual's organizational level, expected length of assignment, and degree to which the assignee would be required to work directly with local individuals."⁴

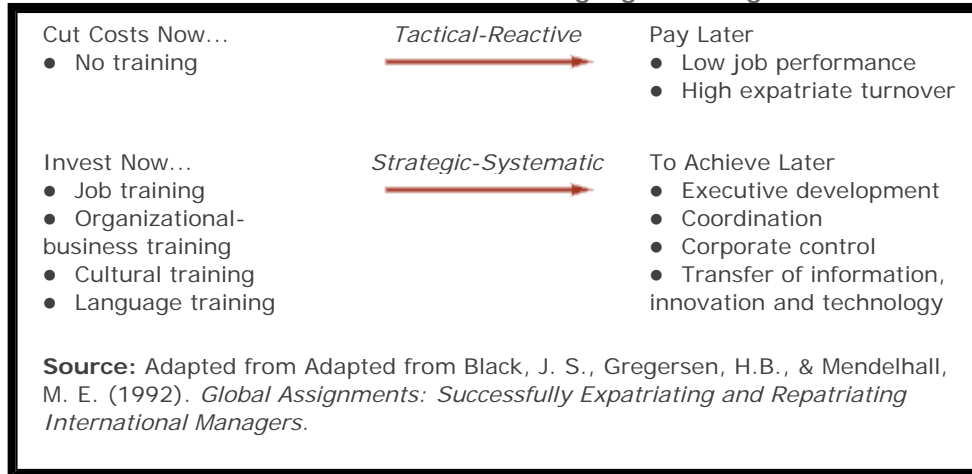
In the global HR arena, training for international assignments often involves both cultural and language training, yet training strategies differ (see **Figure 2**). In the strategic-systematic approach where the philosophy is "invest now," culture and language training are high on the list. To prepare employees and families for international assignments, the approach to language training falls into two methods: individual lessons a few hours a week -- often continued on assignment -- or immersion programs. Weekly language lessons are the more common approach, as they do not take a great deal of time. In comparison, immersion programs offer in-depth training and require significant time and monetary commitment on the part of the employer and expatriate. **CERAN LINGUA International** (www.ceran.com), headquartered in Belgium, is an example of an organization that offers immersion programs worldwide.

Tim Dwyer, National Director of IHR Consulting at KPMG LLP, emphasizes the connection between culture and language training. "I always encourage my clients to provide both language training and cross-cultural training to their assignees and families. I don't think there should be a limit or cap to this benefit. As long as the expat and family are interested in studying the host location's language, they should be encouraged to do so at the company's expense. Culture and language are, of course, intimately intertwined. Such training facilitates integration in the host location and helps to increase understanding of the people with whom the expatriate family will work, live and go to school."⁵

However, not every company offers language training. Matthew Neuman, Staff HR Consultant at Saudi Aramco Oil Co., moved to Saudi Arabia a few years ago.⁶ In his case, language training was not offered.

The company did not feel it was necessary because English is the official language in the office. Consequently, he and his wife took language training at their own expense to enrich their expatriate experience.

**FIGURE 2: Differences in Two Approaches to Training
Ten Reasons to Provide Language Training**



Proficiency: How Much Is Enough?

"Often it is not mastery of the language that counts but the effort and commitment shown by the expatriate in acquiring the ability to converse. This shows respect for the local culture, and that is appreciated anywhere in the world."

—Source: Evans, P., Pucik, V., & Barsoux, J (2002). *The Global Challenge*.

Language training for U.S. expatriates and their families is a worthwhile investment. As the authors of *Doing Business Internationally* explain, "language skills, acquisition of a foreign language(s), is emphasized by many organizations as important to facilitate a free flow of communication throughout a global organization, which must cope with a multitude of languages, despite English being the *lingua franca* of international business."⁷

What is considered "proficient" when speaking a second language? When asked this question, IHR professionals said it depends on the situation, generally agreeing that it is not necessary for everyone to master a second language. The following are several points of view.

According to Monica Francois, partner at Language & Culture Worldwide, LLC, there is a debate about levels of fluency. "If you can really think in the language, this may be a measure of 'fluency.' It is the frames of reference that also imply fluency. Not knowing vocabulary and slang terms can be real barriers to communication." As she points out, the level of fluency needed for an expatriate assignment may be determined by asking questions such as "what is your job function, and what is the environment where

the job is performed?" Francois emphasizes "if your function is marketing, then I'd say, yes, you need solid language skills."⁸

Others agree that levels of fluency may differ and that realistic expectations must be set. Yet not everyone stays with language training. According to Lorna Larson-Paugh, First Vice President of Strategic Human Resources Consulting at Countrywide Financial Corporation, fluency may be a long-term goal. "I think that in any country, it is important to be able to speak a few words. Our ability to learn a language really varies, so I don't think proficiency is mandated. However, I think that it is important to show respect for the people and culture to try and learn."⁹

Dwyer does not think that one can make an across-the-board generalization about proficiency. "The most important determining factor should be the nature of the job the assignee will be doing. It is one thing to want to be able to converse in friendly patter with your colleagues in their language, but quite another to be able to negotiate a contract with the supplier or client."

Other IHR professionals agree. "I highly recommend language training," states Andrea Bugari, principal at The Global Effectiveness Group and who lives in London. "It helps overcome culture shock and sends a strong message of good will to the host country. However, language training has to be set in a realistic framework of what can be achieved in what kind of time frame. After all, expatriates will not master a language if they just start learning it before they go on assignment. But at least they can start to slightly socialize in the foreign language, and open/close their presentations and meetings in the foreign language."¹⁰

Michael Mead, Senior Manager of Corporate HR-Policies and Executive Aircraft at Raytheon, agrees from another angle that language training for U.S. expatriates is important, stating, "language training makes the whole assignment much more meaningful and is an excellent educational process that enhances travel and other nonwork activities."¹¹

Getting by with English: Is Success Possible?

"To express yourself in another language is a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for understanding another culture."

— **Source:** Trompenaars, F, & Hampden-Turner, C. (1998). *Riding the Waves of Culture*.

Taking another perspective, IHR professionals were asked if the U.S. expatriate who does not speak the host country language could be effective on the international assignment. As they explain, cross-cultural understanding and building relationships based on trust and respect are key issues. However, reactions about success are mixed, as seen below.

IHR managers who had positive experiences overseas indicate that success is possible. Richards states, "you definitely can be successful. If we limited expat assignments to U.S. managers who spoke foreign languages, no one would ever leave the United States! Language competency is just one of the many criteria to look for assignment success. It is an 'important to have' but not an 'absolute requirement.' This falls into the assignment risk mitigation category, not in the derailment category."

IHR professionals believe that expatriate success depends on the situation, the individual and the international assignee's role. For instance, Stuart Allan, International HR & Resourcing-Global Lead at KBR, says "people most likely to be effective without language training are in technical specialist roles or internal roles supporting/managing other expats. Yet a lack of language training can lead to barriers in communication and teamwork with the potential for misunderstanding and may prevent deeper understanding of wider intercultural differences."¹²

In partial agreement, Lynette Snyder, Senior International Human Resource Manager at International Foundation for Election Systems, points out that it depends on the nature of the international assignment. "In Latin America, in order to be successful in business, it's who you know versus what you know, so language would be helpful in building those relationships. In Europe, generally people speak English very well. I think it's more important in developing countries where they may feel threatened by the United States."¹³

Speaking from more than 30 years experience, Neal Goodman, Ph.D., president of Global Dynamics, Inc., is tentative about success as an international assignee without having foreign language skills. It is his belief that it is not possible to do an adequate job without knowing how to speak the local language. "Learning the language without learning about the culture means you make a fool out of yourself in more than one language. You can be successful, but *not as effective as* if you know the host language. You are not going to know what is going on in the lives of people if you cannot watch the news, read a paper, have empathy for people around you. You are limited to those who speak English."¹⁴

While some IHR professionals say -- from experience -- that success is possible without speaking a foreign language, increasingly this assumption is being questioned. Lorelei Carobolante, a global management consultant, notes that "competently communicating in a multicultural business environment involves a combination of both linguistic and management skills. While employees bring home country management skills to a project or assignment abroad, they do not easily translate into a foreign language setting."¹⁵

Dean Foster, president of Dean Foster Associates, points to the degree of effectiveness sought. "You will always be kept at arm's length from the real action. Business success in many other cultures involves

deeper personal relationships with key decision-makers, something that is difficult and near impossible to do without being able to speak the language."¹⁶

According to one international HR manager at a large multinational manufacturing company, expatriates who are monolingual can be successful but not at the level they would be with language ability. Much more effort is required. In agreement, in her role as a relocations destination consultant, Beverly Mayhew, president of Orientations, Inc., says you can be successful but at the cost of being dependent on those around you. "If this is not a trusting environment (particularly in Asia where there are very clear hierarchy lines), it could be very difficult to move toward success."¹⁷

Language as a Global Business Competency

In research and practice, the level of knowledge, skills and abilities takes center stage in globalization. *Global Literacies*, a landmark study of CEOs from 28 countries, revealed four key global competencies -- identified as literacies -- essential for success in the 21st century (cultural literacy includes language skills).

Personal Literacy + Social Literacy +
Business Literacy + Cultural Literacy =
Global Literacy = World-Class Excellence

Among those global leaders interviewed, Sir Peter Bonfield, CEO of British Telecommunications, a \$23 billion telecommunications giant, states that "growing a global business requires a new cadre of people who know how to operate across Europe and beyond, are multilingual, can work in partnership with other shareholders and boards, and are professional and can listen."¹⁸

Authors Rosen et al. highlight another effective global leader, Jean-Louis Beffa, CEO of Saint-Gobain, one of France's largest industrial conglomerates. As Beffa explains, "global capitalists leverage a diverse workforce to serve diverse customers. They know that different people bring their own experiences and habits to work and that all these differences are vital for creativity and innovation. By learning multiple languages, building an international board of directors, and creating multinational teams, these leaders create a sense of wholeness, incorporating all that diversity."¹⁹

The culturally appropriate use of language skills aids in establishing trust and respect that is essential for global business relationships. Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, social science researchers in the intercultural relations field for more than 30 years, interviewed 180 business people for their book *Understanding Cultural Differences*. They explain that messages sent by greetings represent a basic but important hidden cultural code reflected in the language itself that helps create rapport. When U.S. expatriates can greet international colleagues in their language, it creates positive business relationships.

It is also important to understand the expectations of different greeting rituals. For example, in the United States, people smile and greet each other when they arrive at work in the morning; this is automatic cultural behavior. However, in Latin American countries, people smile, shake hands and talk about family or other personal matters. If these gestures are omitted, employees in the office assume something is wrong or they may be offended. ²⁰

U.S. Expatriates Who Speak the Local Language and U.S. Expats Who Do Not

"Many U.S. managers have limited language skills, travel exposure and contextual understanding of countries in which they are asked to make and mediate policies that bridge complex cultural differences. This suggests that U.S. managers likely need even more support in managing global dilemmas than managers from other global regions who are more multi-culturally savvy."

— Source: Watson, M. R., Peirce, E., & Rosen, B. (2002). *Ethical Dilemmas in the Global Arena: How Well Prepared Are Human Resource Managers?*

U.S. expatriates are not known for their bilingual skills. The ways in which language is used reflects communication patterns and different values and belief systems. As described in an *Academy of Management Review* article regarding theory of communication interactions in culturally diverse workgroups, misunderstandings distort the intent of the communication. ²¹

In a comparison of common selection criteria for expatriate assignments of candidates between the United States, Europe and Scandinavia, Black et al. present data reflective of different values regarding language fluency. For the United States, language does not make the list of 13 selection categories; language is ranked second out of eight criteria for Europe; and in Scandinavia, language is ranked seventh out of 10 selection criteria. ²² As noted in **Figure 3**, business executives outside the United States often speak other languages.

Figure 3
Who Speaks the Most Languages?

Netherlands: 3.9	Mexico: 2.5
Sweden: 3.4	South Korea: 2.5
Brazil: 2.9	Hong Kong: 2.3
Germany: 2.7	Canada: 1.8
Philippines: 2.7	New Zealand: 1.6
France: 2.7	United Kingdom: 1.5
Singapore: 2.6	United States: 1.5
Japan: 2.6	Australia: 1.4

Source: Black, J. S., Gregersen, H. B., & Mendelhall, M. E. (1992). *Global Assignments: Successfully Expatriating and Repatriating International Managers.*

Global human resource literature increasingly points to the importance of speaking a foreign language. Carobolante notes that "global HR, as a partner to business development, is beginning to incorporate new parameters when structuring the training of the workforce, recognizing that foreign language and cultural communication capabilities pay significant dividends to business execution." ²³

As described here, many of the IHR professionals interviewed have definitive views on the differences

between U.S. expatriates who speak a second language and those who do not. For Mayhew, the difference is crystal clear. "Acceptance, plain and simple. Those who make the effort are respected for their attempts, no matter how poorly they perform."

Larson-Paugh points out that those who can speak the host country language are more effective immediately. "If you don't try, you will be ineffective because the local teams will assume you don't care. If you try and can't speak very well, you have done your 80% and local teams will accept your effort." Snyder echoes these sentiments. "At work, it shows the new colleagues that it's a give and take, a willingness to learn a new language. Colleagues will be more receptive to someone who is attempting to learn. It shows equal footing. Outside of work, it's pure survival."

Paula Daeppen, a health provider and international volunteer in Zurich, Switzerland, is an American who has lived in Europe for many years. She affirms that the difference is effectiveness. "I doubt the ability to acclimate and integrate in society without language skills, which also impacts personal and professional satisfaction."

Bob Ernt, Senior Consultant of Expatriate Services Department at Cargill, Inc., gives his opinion. "It is more likely that the expat and family will do more than 'get along' in the host country. It increases the odds that they will learn more about the culture. Also, they are more likely to be aware of the subtle aspects of interpersonal communication. That is, the important meeting is probably conducted in English but the informal conversation before and after may be in the host language. Much can be learned from informal conversation." ²⁴

Where is Fluency Critical?

"Global HR, as a partner to business development, is beginning to incorporate new parameters when structuring the training of the workforce, recognizing that foreign language and cultural communication capabilities pay significant dividends to business execution."

Source: Carobolante, L. (2004, January). Redefining Global Communication. *Mobility*.

The *Future Trends* study, published by Towers Perrin/IABC Research Foundation in 2003, polled respondents to learn how communication professionals can improve performance. International firms indicated the issues they face in communicating globally, and 28% identified language among the top three global issues they need to deal with proactively. ²⁵ For globally successful companies, multicultural experience is key (see **Figure 4**).

When IHR professionals were asked to explain where are language skills important, they had a number of perspectives. For example, Neuman argues that speaking another language is important everywhere but particularly so when the culture is significantly different than that of the United States (e.g., Asia or the

Middle East). On the other hand, Dwyer does not want to create geographic limits nor differentiate between countries.

Foster adds that in business meetings in Europe one often asks what language to use and often English is selected to accommodate the Americans in the room. "Fluency in the local language, while not immediately apparent amongst English-speaking Europeans, is critical. In relationship-oriented Latin America, speaking Spanish or Portuguese can go a long way to building critical personal trust." Bugari offers another viewpoint: "the location is not so much a factor as the length and purpose of the

assignment. Companies should do some return on investment (ROI) regarding language training to learn what can be achieved in a couple of weeks, what is the business language of the host country, how important is it for the expat to integrate in social/informal networks, and what is the need of the expatriate."

On the Home Front

"Only 31% of the participants had language training prior to moving to their host country, but those who did had significantly better adjustment than those who did not have predeparture language training."

—Source: Copeland, A. P. (2002). *Many Women Many Voices: A Study of Accompanying Spouses Around the World*.

According to the Global Relocation Trends 2002 Survey Report, foreign language fluency is one of the key critical success factors for family success during an international assignment. 26 IHR professionals were all in agreement, and some of their viewpoints are elaborated as follows.

As Francois attests from working with international clientele, "when spouse and family members have language training, it really enriches their experience. Language training gives them a window into their new environment. As statistically the number one reason people leave international assignments is poor adjustment by the family/spouse, language training is critical, given that it can help build relationships and connections which in turn help the family feel more comfortable and at home in their new roles."

Safety and security are critical for the spouse and family. Mayhew recalled the frustration and fear when she could not communicate and emphasized the important role that speaking the local language has in

Figure 4
Multicultural Experience Matters

Globally successful companies:

- Provide executives with multicultural experiences.
- Acknowledge their need to improve cross-cultural experiences.
- Arrange cross-cultural experiences for employees.
- Have executives who speak multiple languages.

Source: Source: Black, J. S., Gregersen, H. B., & Mendelhall, M. E. (1992). *Global Assignments: Successfully Expatriating and Repatriating International Managers*.

providing feelings of comfort, safety and security as well as having a positive financial impact for the family. "If you can purchase in the local economy because you can speak with the local community, you usually gain in savings power."

Peggy Love, President of Full Circle International Relocations, Inc., agrees that some level of proficiency is essential and it shows local nationals that expatriates are willing to try. "Often, we have the attitude that if we can't be the best then we shouldn't even try. The worst attitude is to disregard language training because the world speaks English. In this day and age we need to stay as far away from the perception of the 'ugly American' as possible." ²⁷

Dale Koepenick was an expatriate in Germany for eight years and knew that she had to learn to speak German. "For the spouse who handles the day-to-day living requirements, language skills mean the difference of being independent versus being in a fog." She found it arrogant to think that everyone in the world should speak English and described learning another language as challenging but a very rewarding experience. ²⁸

Final Advice

"Within global businesses, activities such as leading, motivating, negotiating, decision-making and problem solving are all based on the ability of managers from one culture to communicate successfully with colleagues, clients and supplies from other cultures."

— **Source:** Adler, N. J. (2002). *From Boston to Beijing: Managing With a World View.*

To close, three senior IHR professionals offer their advice regarding the benefit of foreign language skills for U.S. expatriates:

"Companies that fail to provide language training to their expats are significantly adding to the possible risks of any international assignment. When expats are clocking in at \$350 - \$500K a year, the nominal cost of language training pales against the potential costs of assignment failure. Plus, it's very simply the right thing to do."

— **Source:** Lance J. Richards (Senior Manager, International Human Resources, Kelly Services)

"I also would emphasize that language training should be viewed as only one component of a comprehensive developmental program provided to empower assignees and ensure their personal and professional success when working internationally."

— **Source:** Alan Freeman (global human resources executive)

"Encourage them to invest some time to reach the conversational level to get more out of their time abroad and to also be more efficient and accepted in the business environment."

— **Source:** Ottavia Salis Gross Hanna (Head Global Assignment Management/XHMG, Human Resources, Credit Suisse Financial Services)

Without a doubt, the investment in language training is worthwhile. Providing U.S. expatriates and their

families with language training increases their opportunities to assimilate into the local culture and helps minimize the difficulties of culture shock -- thus supporting successful international assignments. U.S. expatriates who have language skills will be more effective, gain the respect and trust of their colleagues, and more easily establish partnerships and solid working relationships with local nationals that will, in turn, generate good will for the organization and positively impact the bottom line.

Footnotes

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14 Neal Goodman, Ph.D. (President, Global Dynamics, Inc., ngoodman@global-dynamics.com, www.global-dynamics.com)

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27 Peggy Love (President, Full Circle International Relocations, Inc., peggy.love@fullcircle.com,

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28 Dale Koepenick (President, FAUSA – FAWCO Alumnae USA, dakoepenick@cs.com)

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