

Working with languages

by Gianni Anchois

There's really no other way.

In my professional career I've been quite fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel, live and work abroad. Key to make the most of it was the ability to speak languages.

So I ended up spending over 30 years working on international assignments, global and european teams together with many talented colleagues who could also speak more languages than their native ones.

It's an interesting dynamic when that happens.

It's not only the fact that by speaking the language you have a better chance to explain yourself and be clearer in your communications.

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THE MORE, THE MERRIER.

Having many nationalities in a team additionally brings in a wealth of diversity in terms of personality, working style and cultural richness. The language capabilities of that team facilitate the communication and foster the development of a much closer team spirit, nurture more straightforward team dynamics and help build a stronger sentiment of trust.

And it has been demonstrated that when dealing with complex tasks requiring creativity and innovation, or managerial issues, cognitive diversity is a key explanatory variable in levels of performance.

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A MATTER OF CONNECTIONS.

When you connect with people in their local language, you can get much closer than just using English as your "lingua franca", and you're also much better positioned to listen to their real needs. This obviously includes colleagues, clients and partners.

The human brain is a complex, difficult and at times uncooperative machine, and learning languages is tough work. Your cerebral circuitry gets a great deal of overwork and stress just by trying to juggle a couple of them. I'm not sure whether there are specific scientific studies available, but I believe that the brains of multi-language people get more tear and wear than the average single-language ones. Understanding a second language requires conscious thought in a way that processing our native tongue doesn't, but also works as a distancing mechanism, it's almost like you're a slightly different person, and this affects the brain workload even further.

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My direct experience is that when the time comes to promote employees, language skills sit pretty much at the bottom of the rankings, even more so if your direct boss is a single language individual.

I frown when I look at companies' board of directors and leadership teams and see just one nationality represented or, worse, a bunch of one-language individuals. It's a serious limitation of human depth, irrelevantly of their other personal abilities and capabilities, which I'm sure in many cases are outstanding. It also distorts the perspective from which to look at things: the business world has ceased long ago to be one-nation centric.

Clients, users and consumers have different behaviours, values and principles strongly tied to their cultural background and their national identity. To assume that a buyer or business partner in Budapest will behave as one in London or San Francisco is not only absurd, it's borderline offensive. The only way to appreciate those differences is to get closer to their inner thoughts, and the best way to do it is to speak their language, thus connecting at a deeper level.

Fortunately, more companies realise the problem (opportunity?) and are trying to build more diverse, international management teams. And with those, to bring in more multi-lingual professionals to enrich the very fabric of the company itself.

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Gianni Anchois is a writer, blogger and technology enthusiast, with a background in electronics engineering, computer science and marketing. He has worked at Olivetti, Italia Online, Yahoo! and Hewlett-Packard, holding international responsibilities across IT services, business management, e-commerce, sales and marketing.