

Executives Lag Behind in English Knowledge

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Russian executives know less English than their subordinates do, and this holds true for companies of almost all sizes and ownership types, according to a recent study.

When you need a foreign language, it's already too late to start learning it, said Luc Jones, a partner at Antal Recruiting in Russia. Starting to communicate in a foreign language requires a lot of time and energy. Usually, candidates don't have either of these and simply have to pass up a good job opportunity if it requires a foreign language, he said.

Jones said he constantly has to explain to job-seekers at all levels that if they knew English, they could land more prestigious work. Often, he gets the reply, "I haven't needed English yet. I'll learn it when I need to," he said.

"But this is the wrong approach," said Jones, a native of Britain who speaks fluent Russian.

Around the world in companies of all sizes, executives' knowledge of English is lower than the overall average, a study by the Economist Intelligence Unit for EF Education First found.

In the study, 572 executives were surveyed from 1,207 commercial and noncommercial organizations in 18 industries in 24 countries. The annual revenues of the companies ranged from \$1 million to \$10 billion.

Breaking that down further, 56 percent of respondents were in Europe, 30 percent in Asia, 12 percent in North and South America and 2 percent in the Far East.

The study found that executives speak English just as well as their employees only in companies with revenues of \$100 million to \$500 million. In other instances, directors usually lag behind their subordinates.

Executives in the smallest and largest companies tend to know English the worst. This is the case likely because small companies often work only in their national market, while large corporations have so many worldwide branches that employees can work their whole lives in their national subdivision and not need to communicate in a foreign language, the study authors wrote.

The study also attempted to assess the overall level of English knowledge in companies in each country.

It discovered an "incredibly large difference" between countries where knowledge of English is good and those where it is poor. Whereas in Europe's best English-speaking countries, such as Sweden and the Netherlands, corporate employees' knowledge of the language is, on average, about 65 to 70 percent, in Russia, Chile and Brazil, it doesn't reach 50 percent.

When key employees don't speak English, they provide a bad example to all personnel, and the corporate culture doesn't grow as it otherwise could, said Eduard Baldakov, general director of EF Corporate Language Learning Solutions.

"I often hear from clients, 'I don't want to guess, I don't want to plan.' But language is a long-term, deferred investment," said independent coach and career specialist Yekaterina Lopukhina. "Not everyone wants to look that far into the future."

Several Russian managers said they don't really need to know English.

"I know English pretty well, but I hardly use it at all in business. I don't need it," said Natalya Fedrushkova, development director and owner of the team-building company Smartberry.

Fedrushkova said Russian executives represent even foreign companies in negotiations.

"In our business, all projects are short-term," she said. "There's a month of preparation, then the event. Russian-speaking managers lead the projects. The foreign higher-ups don't work with us."

Studying a foreign language is a difficult and time-consuming process that may not pay off, said Boris Scherbakov, general director of Dell in Russia. Scherbakov knows English well, but he wasn't able to quickly learn German when it became necessary at work. After two months,

he decided that it was taking too much time and energy and didn't make much sense, he said.

Alexander Bogza, deputy director of Yevrobeton, said he understood from the very beginning that he would need to know English. He faithfully studied English in school and in college, and to this day he continues to take English classes to perfect his knowledge. For the most important negotiations, he takes an interpreter along.

The world has become global, and for this reason, knowledge of English is necessary for any growing business, said Vladimir Melnikov, general director and owner of Gloria Jeans. The company now has offices in Shanghai, Sao Paulo and Boston, and all the firm's documents are drawn up in both English and Russian.

"We all speak English," Melnikov said. "We want to be educated people, and we know that English is important for business."

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