

New evidence of employer demand for language skills

The latest (2011) edition of the CBI's Education and Skills Survey provides more evidence that employers value language skills. The report, entitled 'Building for Growth: business priorities for education and skills' shows that only a quarter of businesses say they have absolutely no need for foreign language skills in their company, and states unequivocally that : 'operating effectively in a global economy relies on the right language skills.'

These gems are invaluable in making the case for languages, whether to students, head teachers or politicians. However beyond the headlines there are some more detailed and thought-provoking points concerning the level of language required for different purposes within companies, which languages are most in demand, and which sectors require them most.

Around one in twelve companies say that the ability of at least some members of staff to speak one or more foreign languages is an essential core competence for the business – these are the employers who are likely to be looking for high level of language competence – essentially the ability to do business in another language. However, many more (21%) say the need is for staff who can help build relationships with overseas contacts and a large proportion (40%) say that language competence is beneficial, despite not being a requirement when recruiting staff.

The report makes a strong point that it is European languages which still top the list in terms of demand. With France and Germany (along with the US) the biggest export markets for our goods, French emerges as the language which is most sought after by employers responding to this survey, followed by German. Spanish too is in demand, and after the 'big three' comes not Mandarin, but *Polish*, with Mandarin in fifth place followed by Arabic, Cantonese, Russian and other languages. This roughly confirms other sources of labour market intelligence on languages. A recent survey of job adverts conducted for UCML found French, German and Spanish in the same top three positions, but followed by Italian, Dutch and Swedish.

Possibly the most interesting finding from the survey is that it is the manufacturing and finance sectors of the economy which require languages most, reflecting the global context in which these types of businesses operate. This surely must be a key factor to feed into careers advice for young people choosing which combinations of subjects to study at school or university.

Finally, the report makes an important point about languages and mobility: one in ten employers sees language competence as beneficial for staff's own role within the company because it facilitates international working. This is a point which is also echoed strongly in the European Commission's new report on Languages for Jobs: without languages, individuals are disadvantaged in their ability to take up opportunities for training or employment abroad.

Teresa Tinsley, August 2011

Links and references:

[Building for Growth: business priorities for education and skills, CBI Education and Skills survey 2011](#)

[Labour Market Intelligence on Languages and Intercultural Skills in Higher Education, University Council of Modern Languages, 2011](#)

[Languages for Jobs: providing multilingual communication skills for the labour market, European Commission, 2011](#)