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Weekly Workout
By Margaret Ambrose

People laughed at Elizabeth Caulfield when she embarked on a translation course majoring in French. “They would say, ‘Oh, that’s going to be *really* useful,’” says the former solicitor. “And they had a point – I mean, you’d think a degree in French wouldn’t really advance your legal career in Australia. But I loved the language so I thought, what the hell.” In fact, all that parlez-vous-ing did help her career. She now works as a legal translator at the Australian embassy in Paris, and she often thinks about those who laughed – as she walks to work down the Champs Elysées.

While learning a second language enabled Elizabeth to change fields, most people who begin language courses do so to advance their careers within their current company, says Melbourne’s Corporate Language Communications director Maggie Bracher. “Increased globalisation means that many companies have international branches. To move up the corporate ladder, you need to have some basic language skills and cultural understanding. Learning another language really opens doors.”

Ann Casey says that learning Japanese was a move that led to the biggest promotion she has experienced in her career, even though it was based on a desire to take up a hobby, rather than because her company had its World Headquarters in Tokyo.

“The company was expanding and we were having delegations from different departments visit from World Headquarters. There were other people more senior than me who went for the job, but I was made projects co-coordinator because I have knowledge of Japanese. It’s very basic, but it was enough to give me an edge.”

That’s because learning an additional language gives you advantages in other ways. “When you learn another language you also gain an insight into the culture,” Bracher says. “You are able to conduct business more comfortably when you have a background into where that person is coming from.”

An added bonus of learning another language is that your English communication skills also improve. “You become more aware of your own language and communications skills,” says Bracher. “It makes you analyse and improve the way you are communicating with other people.”

Okay, you’re convinced. What’s next?

Courses for careers

Gone are the days of sitting in musty old classrooms, reciting endless verb conjugations and leaving with little knowledge of how to apply them to real life situations. To cater for the growing demand, a lot of language schools are developing classes especially designed for business-people. As well as courses with a focus on corporate or business skills, there are courses which are designed with specific occupations in mind.

The Vocational Language Learning Centres (VLLC) in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide run Flight Attendants Proficiency Courses that provide students with the skills they need to pass the language examinations held by all the major airlines. The course teaches a range of terms and expressions used specifically by cabin crew, and also includes role-playing situations. VLLC also offers the Hospitality Industry Language Proficiency Course which specially targets expressions and language usage as it pertains to the hospitality industry.

Similarly, some universities offer language courses with an emphasis on specific vocations. The University of Western Australia, for example, conducts courses in languages for the multimedia industry.

What languages are hot

“In the business sector, the Asian languages that tend to be called on are those of our Asian trading partners – Cantonese and Mandarin, Japanese, Indonesian, Thai and Korean,” says Bracher. “German, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese are the five European languages that come up time and time again, not only for European trading and business, but also because of South America, where they speak Portuguese or Spanish.”

Different languages for different careers

The decision to study a particular language could depend on what field you are in or wish to move into. “If you’re in the travel industry for example, it’s best to go for the major ones – French, German and Spanish. Plus, of course, Asian languages,” says Bracher. Although, she says, language requirements can change with the industry.

It used to be that IT was a field where you could get away with having English as your first and only language, but that’s slowly changing. “We are finding that a lot of IT companies are requiring all the different languages, because nowadays everyone wants to have a website and have that website translated,” says Bracher. “We’ve even trained a few people in African languages for use in IT.”

For other industries such as agriculture or mining, which have strong trading connections to Africa or South America, it’s useful to learn a European language. Yes, you read correctly. French is a good one, “because there are a lot of French speaking African countries,” explains Bracher. “And there is a lot of mining in South America, so Portuguese and Spanish are good to know.”

Have you left it too late?

So your General Manager wants you on a plane to Japan in six months. You don't even know what alphabet they use in Japanese and you're wondering what would be the point of starting something now. It's never too late, says Bracher. "The more time you've got the more you'll achieve. But even if you start a month before you go, you can pick up quite a lot of language basics, cultural information and business information, which can benefit you in the way you go about conducting business in another culture."

Career aspirations aside, learning a language can be a stimulating and satisfying hobby. Imagine how proud you'd be at not having to read the subtitles of the latest Czech film, and imagine how impressed your friends will be when you're at that trendy new Italian restaurant, know what every dish on the menu is, and *can pronounce it with the correct accent*.

Contacts:

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