

# Speaking the language of safety



Could you leverage language skills for a safer workplace?

**Donavan Whyte, VP EMEA** at language

training provider Rosetta Stone explains why manufacturers with multi-national workforces are increasingly investing in language training to safeguard standards and avoid falling foul of regulation.

**T**he UK is one of the most multicultural and multilingual countries in the world.

In Avonmouth, home to FMCG giant Accolade Wines, for example, 11% of the population does not count English as their first language. In automotive-centric Kenilworth, near Birmingham, this rises to 20% and in the high value manufacturing hub of Rotherham, Sheffield at least 25% of the population do not count English as their first language, according to data collected in the 2011 census. In some specific areas in Rotherham this rises to over 30%.

This regional multiplicity is reflected in the workforces of most industries, with multicultural and multilingual workplace environments very common – from restaurants and factories, to creative agencies and banks.

While this unique mix of culture and language undoubtedly delivers many benefits to businesses, it can also throw up a number of significant challenges relating to effective communication. Such



challenges can impact on a number of important areas, such as productivity and efficiency – or crucially in high risk environments like manufacturing, on health and safety.

Workplace accidents can be devastating to an individual and their family, not to mention enormously costly for the company. For example, if a company is working to a 10% profit margin and had to provide an injury compensation cost of £100,000, it would require a £1 million increase in turnover to offset the loss.

## Breaking down language barriers

In a 2013 report supported by Rosetta Stone, the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences underlined an enormous demand for language skills, concluding that “there is strong evidence that the UK is suffering from a growing deficit in foreign language skills at a time when globally, the demand for language skills is expanding.”

Language is at the heart of communication; and communication –including signage and guidelines – is at the heart of safe, effective process. In some manufacturing environments, this can mean the difference between life and death.

By providing staff with the necessary training, businesses can break down language

barriers, enabling workers from a range of linguistic backgrounds to communicate effectively with one another. It is important to have the goal of providing workforce training in a common language, but also to train supervisors in the languages that are most common among the staff. With a high turnover of staff common in manufacturing, equipping supervisors with the necessary language skills can be the most effective short-to-medium term solution.

The dangers of failing to address language skills were highlighted in recent coverage by *The Economist*.

In an article that responded to a Centres for Disease Control (CDC) report on a poultry plant accident in Arkansas, *The Economist* revealed that over 150 workers at the plant were hospitalised when chlorine gas, an irritant, was released when chemicals after improperly mixed.

The investigation showed that that a monolingual Spanish-speaking employee had caused the accident because the safety instructions were written in English. Furthermore, the article reported that “68% of the workers at the plant spoke Spanish as a first language... Just 17% of the plant’s workers used English as their native language. The CDC chided the plant for failing to provide proper training in the workers’ languages.”

Language training is the best way for companies to ensure that signs indicating how to operate equipment or warn workers of hazards are clearly understood; equipment is less likely to be misused because operations manuals can be easily read; and instructions given by supervisors are far more likely to be followed accurately.

## Benefits beyond workplace safety

Strong language skills and therefore more precise communication can impact business performance. Process can be sped up and made more efficient, ultimately leading to increased productivity and collaboration.

Enhancing staff language skills is a powerful way of creating a consistent, happy and engaged culture. It cultivates better working relationships and a greater understanding of the direction and goals of the business.

## Setting the example

Paying heed to language skills is not just a necessity for UK plants with multi-cultural workforces. As companies expand overseas an appreciation of the challenges and opportunities in breaking down language barriers are essential in establishing consistent workplace standards and processes across international sites. Language training allows proven and successful examples set in the UK to be used as a template abroad.

Unfortunately, despite the obvious benefits of language training, many organisations will view the process of training their staff as costly and lengthy.

This is particularly a problem in environments that traditionally have high staff turnover and a flexible workforce that changes based on demand. However, the truth is that, with the technology and training available

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today, cost and time are not the concern they once were. Your most suitable supplier will offer opportunities for bite-sized learning that is available anywhere and anytime and is very cost-effective regardless the size of your business.

## Implementing a successful language initiative

In order to implement an effective language skills programme, a business must first make a comprehensive assessment of its language needs. The need to remain realistic is critical in this process – with considerable care required to accurately identify the language(s) that will truly make a difference to safety, process and productivity. It is also essential to identify the key people that need to be trained as a priority, establishing who would have the biggest impact on safety and performance.

Once the languages, required proficiency levels and personnel have been identified, a business must look for the right partner to support its training

initiative. They must partner with an organisation that has the capacity to support the necessary languages and to deliver quality training. These days this must incorporate a strong technological element – that is, appropriate training software that can be accessed by training participants anywhere and anytime, allowing them to work on their language skills at their convenience. It is strongly advised to ensure the potential training supplier delivers continuous and solid service to support the implementation and use of the training programme.

## Play it safe

Ultimately, workplace health and safety is a key priority for businesses in the manufacturing industry. There exists both a very serious responsibility and a huge opportunity to enhance health and safety standards through language training.

The benefits are clear and, in the mid-to-long term, can deliver significant return on investment, as potential incidents are avoided, productivity is enhanced and staff are kept happier. **END**