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THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGES IN AN  
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SETTING

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## POVZETEK

Z internacionalizacijo podjetij in svetovno globalizacijo se današnje gospodarstvo postopno približuje enotnemu, združenemu trgu. Kot rezultat takega pojava se podjetja soočajo s povečanim številom konkurentov. Kot odziv na te okoliščine in tudi zaradi konkurenčnosti uporabljajo podjetja med drugim tudi jezikovne spretnosti. Da bi analizirali vpliv omenjenega znanja na posameznikovo kariero, se empirična raziskava osredotoča na tri področja: zaposlovanje, priložnosti za napredovanje in priljubljenost določenih jezikov. Ugotovitve kažejo, da so jezikovne spretnosti sicer pomembne za podjetja, niso pa potrjene kot dihonomna prednost s strani kandidatov za delovna mesta ali napredovanje.

*Ključne besede:* jeziki, podjetja, zaposlovanje, napredovanje, konkurenčna prednost.

## SUMMARY

With the internationalization of businesses and the globalization of the world, today's economy is gradually moving towards a single, unified market place. As a result of such a phenomenon companies have to face an increased number of competitors. To respond to such circumstances and with the intention of staying competitive, organizations use, amongst other techniques, language skills. In order to analyze the influence of said skill on an individual's career, the empirical research focuses on three areas: employment, promotional opportunities and the popularity of certain languages. The findings show that while language skills are important for companies, they are not acknowledged as a dichotomous asset by contenders for job positions or promotions.

*Keywords:* languages, business, employment, job promotion, competitive advantage.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

i.e.	Latin Id est, "that is"
M&A	Mergers And Acquisitions
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprises
no.	Number
cca.	Latin, approximately, around, about
CEO	Chief executive officer, managing director
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WTO	World Trade Organization
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication.



# 1 INTRODUCTION

Language is the ability to communicate through a conventional system of symbols where particular signs are assigned to have particular meaning (Hatch 1992). As languages present a source of advantages and challenges in organizations, a lot of companies and business professionals have started to pay aggrandized attention to language skills. But before more is said on the topic under discussion a few notions and theories have to be delineated.

## 1.1 Communication

According to C.S. Rayudu the term communication is defined as »a process involving the sorting, selecting and sending of symbols in such a way as to help the listener perceive and recreate in his own mind the meaning contained in the mind of the communicator« (Rayudu 2010, 2).

Communication has always, even in its most basic form, provided all creatures with a vital mechanism for survival. It is the turning of simple puffs of wind into a sequence of coherent words that set the human race aside. It defined and distinguished them from other species. Evolutionary speaking, it was amongst the key factors that determined their survival and allowed their rapid spread and subsequent global domination. As the evolutionist Philip Lieberman states in his book "Eve spoke": »Speech is so essential to our concept of intelligence that its possession is virtually equated with being human... what sets us apart from other animals is the "gift" of speech« (Lieberman 1998, 5).

Despite the subject at hand being the centre topic of profuse scholarly deliberations, scientist are nowadays still having trouble determining the "roots" of communication, i.e. why humans communicate and when exactly the capacity for language came to be (Jackendoff 2006). Of course, there have been and there still are a lot of theories. At times opposing and at times complementing each other most hypotheses though agree on communication evolving around 100,000 years ago from the need of transmitting information (Tomasello 2008).

One specific school of thought in particular, concerned with the subject matter, is worth acknowledgment: Noam Chomsky's "Universal grammar" theory. The American philosopher and cognitive scientist, who also informally holds the title of father of modern linguistics (Fox 1998), revolutionised the aforementioned field by implying that language abilities are innate (Ellegard 1979). By doing so he provided a plausible solution to the dilemma that has for a long time plagued the minds of intellectuals: how do children develop linguistic abilities effortlessly despite their complex nature? A fully fledged ability to communicate is in fact an extremely sophisticated skill. It relies on simultaneously working several different parts of the brain focusing, amongst others, on word order and meaning, language structure and precise motor control over mouth and tongue. And in spite of being amongst the most complex methods of exchanging information in the world, it is carried out with such ease it proceeds

almost unperceived (Ellegard 1979). A fact that only serves to further validate Chomsky's assumption of speech being a biologically evolved, inborn skill rather than an acquired, learnt one.

Historically speaking, there have been other copious attempts at discovering the origins of language. Its development has always spiked an interest, so much so that it has contributed to a vast number of myths and legends. Amongst them, probably the most widely notorious story is the Hebrew Bible's Tower of Babel according to whose scripture the origin of a universal language can be attributed to Adam and today's myriad of diverse languages to the punishment that God inflicted to humanity for their arrogance and insubordination (Altmann and Enzinger 1999). No matter the reason behind it though, it's true that today's world is utterly dependent on an organized flow of information. Speech is, as it should be, indubitably classified as a revolutionary achievement to which the human race owns its status of evolutionary giant (Nowak 2001).

## **1.2 Benefits of learning a second language**

Learning is a lifelong process and learning how to communicate efficiently amongst the crucial cornerstones of a successful life (Allwood 1994). As an extensive part of our life depends on an effective exchange of information it is paramount to acquire the capacity to understand and share thoughts in the early stages of life.

In the course of human life a curious predicament occurs at the moment one realizes that communication is remarkably heterogeneous. Considering that speech does not proceed in a single, universal language, meaning it alters depending on the part of the world one finds oneself to be, it is generally considered widely advantageous and at times even essential to arm oneself with as much knowledge as possible. Learning an additional language provides humanity with, not only the dexterity to connect with other people but also an increased insight into different cultures, experiences, ways of thinking and living (Kohonen et al. 2014). Certainly, becoming proficient in a foreign language takes time and dedication but the return on capital invested is very well worth the effort. In fact, according to numerous studies carried out by psychological (Bialystok 2011) and psycholinguistics associations (Bialystok and Majumder 1998), the advantages of bilingualism are bountiful and include, amongst others, an improved perception, a stronger cognitive skill, an increased creativity, an enhanced mental development and a heightened attention to detail (Adesope et al. 2010).

Having strong language skills though, does not exclusively affect the function of the brain. In fact, according to numerous theories, it transcends its sphere of influence onto other areas like, for example, a person's vocational field (Piekkari, Welch and Welch 2014). As it has become commonly acknowledged, the degree of world globalisation and job market saturation have over the years intensified. As a consequence, such escalation has brought on

with itself a number of challenges, amongst them the principal being an increased competition (Synge 2000). College degrees, which were once considered exceptional accomplishments, have become regular occurrences and as such have somewhat lost their weight becoming more alike job requirements than distinctive achievements (Forest and Kinser 2002). In the present day business system, which regards every accomplishment, experience, skill and talent as a dichotomous asset, employees in possession of supplementary education are often considered a superior choice. Consequently, being erudite in a foreign language could offer a distinguishable and competitive advantage making one more desirable and likely to be recruited by companies.

While the benefits of learning a foreign language are abundant, there is a fundamental challenge that makes people hesitant towards acquiring a new skill. It is, in fact the lack of success. Considering that learning in general differs in degrees of progress, homogeneity of results and susceptibility to external and internal elements such as motivation, most are wary at the prospect of a second language acquisition (Gass and Schachter 1989). And their uneasiness is at least partly substantiated. In fact, there have been and still are divergent thoughts and theories on whether there exist cognitive and developmental differences between children and adult learning. While some experts claim that learning a language that is second to one's native differs only in style rather than process (Gonzalez 2008), others claim that learning in adults is controlled by a completely different cognitive module. To provide the latter with proof is also a relatively recent study by Dr. Paul Thompson, a professor at the University of California, whose findings clearly state that unlike adults, children use the unconscious parts of their brain to process language (Viñado 2014). Other than by cognitive scientist, an interesting approach is also presented by a psychologist's perspective. Professor Ausubel of the University of Illinois provides a different outlook at things by stating that the ability to learn is relative. In fact, it is his assumption that children learn faster because they don't have large vocabularies. Adults on the other hand have much more complex thoughts and therefore have the need to communicate in a different manner (Ausubel 1964).

Be that as it may, no matter whose theory one chooses to agree with, learning languages certainly brings about an immense amount of advantages.

## **2 LANGUAGE AND COMPANIES**

With the aim of reaching a wider audience and thus increasing their profits a lot of companies nowadays choose to expand their business on international markets. Amongst the number of difficulties they encounter in their endeavor is also communication. Consequently, and in order to increase their competitiveness, corporations today adopt a variety of policies conceived especially to overcome language barriers. Of the lot of solutions available, two methods have resulted especially effective: the multilingual (Segal-Horn and Faulkner 2010) and the monolingual approach (Neeley 2012).

### **2.1 Multilingual approach**

Corporate language policy can be defined as a policy that supports or discourages its employees from using a certain language in their working environment (Thomas 2007). And as there »exist something like 5,000 languages in about 200 countries...« (Edwards 1994, 1) »we are today witnessing an even stronger trend towards multilingual communication both in the international sphere and due to increasing migration processes also at an intra-national level« (House and Rehbein 2004, 1).

The multilingual approach is based on the principle of a diversified communications portfolio, meaning it's based on the premise that states that in order to succeed in a global business setting a company must be able to connect with as many markets, clients, partners, and/or possible consumers as possible (Segal-Horn and Faulkner 2010). As the former president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, once famously stated: »If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart« (Coverdell 2008, 49). Having diversified language skills goes to support not only a smooth communication process but also a better understanding of cultures different from our own. It shows respect towards an associate, builds trust and founds strong, intimate relationships which in turn help ensure the success of a business and cross border cooperation. As the authors of the survey on European multinational companies state themselves, multilingualism demonstrates an »ability to think across boundaries« (Didiot-Cook, Gauthier and Scheirlinckx 2000, 17).

Notably, organizations with a multilingual approach towards business also tend to have different views and attitudes towards problems. Their diverse personnel allows them to create teams with miscellaneous experiences and perspectives, which in turn grants them the ability to think divergently and solve obstacles in a creative and innovative manner (Lauring and Klitmøller 2015). The alternative, i.e. not investing into the company's language portfolio on the other hand paints a metaphorical bleak picture. In fact, studies show that weak foreign language skills lead to failed transactions and lost opportunities which can at times damage organizations for millions. To validate such claims are the European Commission's report

(European Commission 2010a) and the Economist Intelligence Unit global survey (Education First 2012). The first in fact estimated that around 11 % of small and medium-sized companies lose business as a direct result of inadequate language abilities while the second reported that language differences and misunderstandings impede business deals, hinder international expansion and make operations in foreign markets problematic. Furthermore, the latter also recorded 89 % of the total 572 interviewees to share a common belief in the existence of a connection between advanced language skills and higher profits, revenues and market share. Concurrently, companies who fail to diversify and widen their communication system repertoire are at risk of losing competitiveness and are unquestionably incapable to operate in the current, modern setting (Mühlbacher, Leihns and Dahringer 2006).

While one might argue that there is really no need to expand one's communications portfolio farther than English, advocates of the multilingual approach disagree. To quote Jo Lo Bianco, a professor at the University of Melbourne and specialist on the subject of languages: «There are two disadvantages in global language arrangements: one is not knowing English; and the other is knowing only English» (Vincent 2014, 1). In fact, while the language might have established itself as the lingua franca of today's world (Crystal 2003), it proves insufficient for companies that wish to thoroughly benefit from international commerce. Indeed long-term business deals and moreover partnerships are largely dependent on creating strong relationships and language and linguistic knowledge play a fundamental role in said process. According to a research conducted by the Confederation of British Industry, around 65 % of 291 British employers interviewed claimed a need for foreign language skills, i.e. knowledge in languages other than English (Confederation of British Industry 2014). Another analysis provided by the United States Bureau Of Labor Statistics listed translators and interpreters amongst the fastest growing occupations, announcing that their demand is set to rise, from 2012 until 2022, by a staggering 46.1 % (Bureau Of Labor Statistics 2013). Furthermore, the European Commission's conference titled "Languages mean business" concluded that companies that are able to speak more than just English have a competitive advantage compared to their competitors (European Commission 2007a). And the list of studies, researches and statistical data proving that just one language is not enough goes on and on.

While in theory the multilingual concept seems pretty straightforward, in practice the matter is much more intricate. In fact, according to an article recently published in the International Journal of Business Communication, language diversity generates a certain level of difficulties in the working environment. As reported by the authors, unfamiliar terminology, vernacular, accents and linguistic errors, often create confusion, slowing down the process of communication rather than accelerating it as its main objective is. Such circumstances though, can be gradually remedied through education (Lauring and Klitmøller 2015). In fact, training, whether at an individual or organizational level, is fundamental for all companies and especially those with an international presence that aim to benefit from a globalised world. Investing in the language skills of one's personnel can solve the aforementioned difficulties

and lead to a series of related occurrences, such as increased employee satisfaction, motivation, experience and loyalty (McGovern and Shelly 2008), higher profits and improved company productivity (Rakuten 2014).

## **2.2 Monolingual approach**

The second method of breaching language barriers and establishing an effective means of communication, as to thoroughly capitalize on the world's increased globalization, is the monolingual strategy. Companies that adhere to this kind of program, that is a single language policy, aim to favour and promote the use of a single language over others. And, as English has over the years established itself as the unofficial primary language of business (Mitchell 2009), the approach has also become known by the name of "Englishnization" (from the eponymous movement that supports the use of the English language as a lingua franca) (Matsutani 2012).

Amongst countless benefits that this particular approach provides, like an incremented operational agility and growth in market share (due to an easier access to foreign markets) (Rakuten 2014) Tsedal Neeley, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School and one of the leading figures on the subject monolingual strategies (Harvard Business School 2015), claims that there exist three leading advantages that make the approach so popular (Neeley 2012). The first argument, as to why the world and in particular businesses are progressively shifting towards linguistic integration is competitive pressure. The strain under which organizations are put to perform and trounce their competition has led them towards utilizing any and every advantage at their disposal. And achieving high language proficiency in a single language falls directly under that domain as it provides growth opportunities and the possibility of new business (Piekkari, Welch and Welch 2014).

The second argument she gives is the globalization of tasks and resources. In fact, in the hope of lowering costs, companies today delocalize their operations dispersing them on an extensive geographical scale. While the idea reflects positively on a financial level, it staggers the smooth procession of a corporation's communication (Barrar and Gervais 2006). A single, unifying language on the other hand facilitates communication externally and internally reducing the level of misunderstandings between personnel and increasing the company's overall efficiency. More than that, a monolingual approach also provides employees with common ground enticing an exchange of information which are vital to profitable decision making (Extra and Gorter 2008).

The third, and last factor that assistant professor Neeley lists as crucial towards driving companies to a monolingual language policy is M&A integration across national boundaries. In fact, mediations between participants, during mergers and/or acquisitions, are extremely strenuous even without parties having to translate meetings. Mistakes are commonly made

and meaning lost which can lead to lengthy and protracted bargainings or even complete cease of negotiations. Utilizing a single standardized language during proceedings and throughout a newly merged company facilitates cooperation and assists in the process of reaching a mutually beneficial decision (Mendenhall 2005).

While there are a number of advantages that come with adopting a monolingual language policy, the approach does not come without its difficulties. In fact, the implementation of such a practice is a particularly arduous and audacious proces. Amongst the list of difficulties that companies have to overcome when introducing changes, employee reaction is definitely amongst the first (Saksvik 2009).

The implementation of a single language can be met with an array of different emotions ranging from excitement and elation to trepidation and disdain. And while positive attitudes are a powerful driving force, so are the negative ones. There are serious consequences to introducing a new language policy to non native and non fluent speakers, amongst which the first, a decrease in company productivity (Neeley 2012). In fact, if staff is lead to believe that their worth and position in a company is related to their proficiency in the newly established corporate language (no matter their other expertise) they will feel apprehensive over the future. As assistant professor Tsedal Neeley states: »When a company announces a language change without any thought or preparation for employees, many people lose the promotional path that they've spent their whole lives developing« (Hoare 2012). This leads to feelings of frustration and detachment which inevitably translate onto employee performance (Tengblad 2012). In fact, lower language proficient operatives stop participating in meetings and perhaps communicating altogether which leads to unhealthy organizational dynamics. Furthermore, as a result of one's ability or will to contribute being cut off, there is a significant decrease in the amount of information and ideas circulated, which costs companies a lot of potentially valuable ideas (Neeley 2012).

And these kind of attitudes will not just go away on their own, but will keep on persisting until managed by the company's executives. In fact a study carried out by professors Pamela Hinds, Catherine Cramton and Tsedal Neeley at a company that implemented a single language policy, noted 70 % of the total 164 employees interviewed maintaining high levels of discontent with the switch in language policy despite two years having passed (Neeley 2012). Not an overlookable figure if one takes into consideration that employee discontent was the basis on which some companies, like Air France, lost their battle for the introduction of English as their corporate language (Daley 2000).

Considering that language strategies depend on two major factors, staff buy-in and faith in personal abilities, organizations have to, not only ascertain that all of the personnel is indoctrinated in the common belief that change is good, but also devise a careful plan with which to put their ideas into action (Neeley 2012). Of course, there are many different ways of surpassing the challenges, but according to professor Tsedal Neeley four of them are

particularly effective. First, a company should make sure to involve all employees equally. No special rules should be granted and everyone, from top management to operational level employees should abide by the newly appointed policy. Second, managers should monitor the progress of the implementation process. That is, they should incite employees onto embracing the new language, help them adjust their traditional workflows around and in conformity to the new practice and if necessary carry out corrective measures. Contemporarily, they should also assure that employees with an already high language proficiency do not use their advantage as a means to degrade but rather to motivate and help their colleagues. Lastly, company employees have to refrain from regressing back to their native tongue in all, formal and informal, situations as this will not only speed up their process of learning but also make them more at ease with the new language.

While the success of some companies, like for example Rakuten (Rakuten 2014) might induce one to think that the implementation of a monolingual policy is an easy process, things are definitely not so. Real change takes effort and dedication. Forasmuch company management is advised to devise an implementation strategy that will instill confidence and arouse employee motivation and commitment (Neeley 2012).

As suggested by assistant professor Neeley, the design of such a plan of action should be based primarily on developing language learning opportunities. Whether through formal education and training or living abroad, experience is a crucial step in the course of education (Guile and Griffiths 2001). In fact, an active engagement and exposure to memorable learning experiences can stimulate self-confidence and assure employees of their abilities. This in turn motivates them to further their studies effectively locking them in a self improvement loop.

Aside from providing its employees with learning opportunities, organizations must also ensure a positive working environment. Enthusiasm and passion are contagious and by fostering attitudes that serve the cause, companies can not only successfully implement the desired policy but simultaneously improve the performance of its employees (Patterson et al. 1997). As Mr. McLaughlin, a professor at Stanford University notes: »Training can be offered. Dollars can be provided. Consultants can be engaged to furnish missing expertise. But will, or the attitudes, motivation, and beliefs that underlie an implementor's response to a policy's goals or strategies, is less amenable to policy intervention« (McLaughlin 1987, 172). And considering the value that employees have in the scheme of things, it is critical for organizations to find ways to ensure and support a healthy working environment.

### **2.3 Practical examples of multilingual and monolingual language policies**

The work environment has changed dramatically during the course of history, and more than ever in the last few decades. The development of digital communication and the rapid progress of information technology alone have completely modified the way companies

operate (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1998). Expanding one's business on an international scale is, in today's world, no longer considered a novelty but rather a necessary step for an organization's growth. And on those cases that when companies resolve to increase their market share by stepping onto new markets, they are set to come up against a number of challenges (Ajami et al. 2014). Noted amongst said challenges is also the necessity to interact with people of diverse nationalities, cultures, beliefs, customs and languages. Hence the decision of some companies to implement language policies.

A multilingual language policy, like beforehand clarified, is the concept whereby a company gravitates towards building a wide and diverse communication portfolio. Either by hiring employees with an already extensive knowledge in languages or by mandating language training, organizations that adopt this kind of policy are well-aware of the benefits of being able to communicate with a large number of people.

Amidst numerous companies that successfully implemented such a policy, Golla and Nestlé can also be listed. The first of the two, Golla, is a Finnish fashion electronics bag designer and manufacturer. With products sold in more than a hundred countries and offices in Germany, United States, China, Japan and Finland, the organization has, realizing the power of communication, readily adopted a diversified language policy. Like the company's management themselves claim «It's easier to reach out to people that way, and they feel at home if we speak their language. Also, it's then easier to convince them and to make them understand our products» (European Commission 2010b). Correspondingly, just in 2010, with as many as 75 employees, the company boasted proficiency in as much as fourteen languages. And company management isn't ready to stop there either, says Human Resources manager Kajsa Pajusalo (European Commission 2010c). Whether through recruitment or training, the company is actively trying to introduce new languages into their communications portfolio. And their efforts in the multilingual language policy department were not in vain, it seems. In fact, aside from being recognised by the European Commission for their success in the implementation of a multilinguistic policy (European Commission 2010a), Golla can amongst their list of accomplishments also boast the "Top 20 Global iBrand" award (Golla 2014).

The second example of a successful implementation of a multilingual language policy is the company Nestlé. The Swiss based organization is a multinational food and beverage giant that publicly celebrates diversity by providing equal business opportunities to people from all cultures and nationalities. Their key values interpret divergence as an asset, business imperative and most important, a competitive advantage. With 339,000 employees and operations in 197 countries (Nestlé 2015), the company is nowadays able to list a total of 50 different languages in its communications portfolio. And to ensure it stays on top of its competitors, the organization pays special attention to the language skills of its workers. In fact, other than basing their recruitment practices on a combination of academic success and

language knowledge<sup>1</sup>, the organization also provides training to a selected number of managers. The focus of these corporate sanctioned tutorings being to provide employees with the required language skills to be able to "promote the right product to the targeted local consumers". And considering that the company has, since its establishment in 1866 become one of the largest in the food processing industry with a net profit of almost CHF 14,5 million it's safe to say that their choice of language policy has worked for them (Nestlé 2015).

The multilingual strategy is, other than by bigger corporations, also favoured by small startup companies (European Commission 2011a). In fact, considering that newly established organizations usually don't have as extensive financial capital as larger companies do they tend to economize wherever and whenever they can (Kidder 2012). A multilingual language approach fits those need perfectly, as it guarantees companies the most cost effective method of reaching a wide audience of people.

Amongst such examples could be listed Everypost; a social media management mobile application that offers its services in six different languages to users all over the world. Their CEO and company co-founder, Fernando Cuscuela, in fact, firmly believes in languages having transversal effects on business. By adding to their communications portfolio, he claims, the company not only widens its customer base, but simultaneously maximizes its profit (Cuscuela 2013). Their belief in the multilingual approach is also shared by My Social Book, a company whose main activity is converting social network records into paperback books (My Social Book 2015). In fact, by adopting a multilingual approach, the company has managed to reach an international audience, giving it more users than if it would have operated in just one language.

While multilingual strategies base themselves on a multitude of languages, a monolingual approach is founded on the promotion of a single language. And considering how English has unofficially established itself as the primary language of business, it is understandable why it has become the first choice for many organizational policies. In fact, deeming multilingualism inefficient many organizations such as Nokia, Rakuten, Renault, Airbus and Samsung have joined the "Englishization" movement (Neeley 2012).

Of the aforementioned organizations one in particular has, by disclosing its decision to transition the company's working language from Japanese to English, caused a lot of clamor. In 2010, Hiroshi Mikitani, Rakuten's CEO, made headlines by stating: "English is the only global language. If you want to become successful in other countries, you need to internationalize the headquarters" (Neeley 2012). The news quickly exploded all over media outlets and was met with an ocean of diverging reactions. While some applauded Mikitani's bravery and long-term businesslike thinking, others, like Honda's CEO Takano Ito, straight up ridiculed him, going so far as to calling his decision a stupid one (Neeley 2012). Not

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<sup>1</sup> As a condition of employment applicants must speak at least 2-3 languages.

minding the commotion though, the Tokyo based electronics company persevered with its original plan and in just two years managed to successfully switch all communication, written and oral, to a single, unifying language.

Despite being largely opposed and disagreed with, Mikitani persisted in his idea of using a monolingual language policy as a means to realizing his ambition, that is becoming the number one Internet service company in the world (Rakuten 2015). And his efforts have not been in vain. As evident proof of both his arduous labor and tremendous success serve the company's annual reports. According to the provided data the organization has, since the introduction of English as the corporate language in 2010, managed to almost triplicate its gross transaction volume. Moving in just four years from ¥2,6 trillion (Rakuten 2010) to an astonishing ¥6,7 trillion, the company can nowadays boast, among its many accomplishments, "Japan's leading Web brand" title, awarded each year by the Nikkei BP Consulting Web brand survey (Rakuten 2014). By mandating English as the obligatory language, Mikitani, currently the fourth richest man in Japan, managed to not only advance his business but also help his own employees. In fact, not only has the initiative allowed the company to recruit a highly talented foreign workforce but it has also pushed Rakuten's personnel onto improving their language skills and reaching their target TOEIC scores (Rakuten 2014).

A single positive change can bring on a cascade of benefits and in the case of a simple switch of corporate languages, Hiroshi Mikitani made sure to take advantage of every single one. Like the old adage which says: "High risks have high rewards" (Casault 2014) not everyone is as lucky to reap them. And sadly, Air France, the French flag carrier, serves as an excellent cautionary tale of what can happen when decisions are rushed and unthought through.

According to numerous articles and tv coverage stories, in 2000, Air France mandated all their pilots to speak with the air traffic control at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in English (Daley 2000). What started as a decision aimed at improving the organization's operations quickly turned into a real, publicly followed scandal. In fact, without a proper implementation strategy in place the company's employees rebelled, protesting that it was their right to speak in their native tongue while on the job. The new decree in fact lacked the preemptive research and preparation needed to introduce a policy change. Amongst other evident key problems that lead to the project's downfall was also the lack of staff training that would have otherwise increased the pilots English proficiency and made them more at ease with the new changes. As it is though, in the wake of the numerous protests and objections raised and without a proper, methodical plan to adhere to, the project unavoidably failed in just fifteen short days after its induction.

## 2.4 English as a lingua franca

Amongst a vast number of languages to choose as a second to one's mother tongue, one in particular has predominated and informally established itself as a sort of lingua franca of the modern world (Crystal 2003). English, the West Germanic language (Ringe and Taylor 2014) whose origins can be traced down to early 5th century, has since its humble beginnings greatly spread its reach and influence. It has, today, a special status in over seventy countries (Crystal 2003), is one of the six official languages of the United Nations (along with Arabic, Chinese, French, Russian and Spanish) (United Nations 2015) and is unmistakably amongst the most commonly spoken second languages in the world (Crystal 2003). Unofficial surveys report various figures on the number of people speaking English. The total ranges from a mere 350 million (Purwati 2012) to a staggering 1.75 billion (Neeley 2012) of which native speakers, fluent speakers from formerly colonized nations (such as India) and second language speakers. The number, though, is only set to rise and it is forecast that by 2020 two billion people will be using it or learning how to use it (British Council 2013).

In an increasingly globalized economy, where business exceeds its borders, the command of a second language has become a highly valued and sought after skill (Pride, Hughes and Kapoor 2013, 254). On a personal level, being fluent in English, today's key business language, has become indispensable and all those who lack knowledge of it are at a significant disadvantage (Baker and Prys Jones 1998). In fact, competition has grown extensively in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the worldwide integration of the workforce. That combined with the present-day trend of companies to operate on an international level further stresses the importance of the language for any entrepreneur or business professional (Synge 2000). Being able to communicate with people of different nationalities and therefore different cultures and languages increases one's chances of employability, making them more marketable and broadening their opportunities of career growth and development. »English has become an increasingly core element in determining employability« (Education First 2014). Of course, one might play "devil's advocate" and argue that technology and translation tools are making rapid progress towards making future knowledge of any foreign language obsolete. However, practically speaking, the future in which one will rely solely on the performance of previously mentioned devices is considerably distant (Kelly 2014). Furthermore, considering how language is directly linked to building stronger relationships with clients, partner, buyers and suppliers personal knowledge is still largely favored (Chartered Management Institute 2015).

Other than on a personal level it is equally important to study the significance, profitability and value of the English language from a company's standpoint. In fact, employing a well educated labour force allows businesses to accomplish the difficult task of abating linguistic borders, which in turn allows them access to new markets broadening their operating range. Adopting a common mode of speech also raises a firm's prominence allowing the

development and maintenance of business relationships and opening the door to potential future transactions. In fact reports have been known to quote that if two countries use the same language, the amount of trade between them will be higher than if the language was different (Piekkari, Welch and Welch 2014).

Since English has become the preferred universal language it comes logical to think that it would be highly valuable for any association to invest in the language skills of its employees. Education, formal and informal, should be actively promoted by the highest management levels. It has become in fact not anymore a question of want but need.

While it has become clear, that English has established itself as the dominant language of the 21st century (Dröschel 2011), there is an important question to be raised. In fact, considering the amount of time, energy and effort needed to acquire a new skill or better an already existing one, it becomes quite logical to ponder on the longevity of the English language. Taking into consideration that other languages, such as Latin and Greek (Dröschel 2011) have also played the role of a "lingua franca" and they have lost their significance, it is worth considering if the same might not happen to English. Indeed one might argue that there are other languages with a much larger audience than English. Mandarin Chinese for one is considered to be the most widely spoken language in the world. And considering China's economic rise (Neeley 2012) and the number of native speakers revolving around one billion (Noack and Gamio 2015), one could argue that the language could quite quickly surpass English as a global language. The hypothesis, while plausible, is widely considered to be misguided. In fact, a lot of people reason that these numbers might be misleading. Indeed, although China is one of the largest countries by population and it has a considerable number of native speakers, the country's language isn't uniform. Mutually unintelligible language varieties and dialects permeate China significantly reducing the total number of speakers. Furthermore, according to Harvard's professor Neeley, Mandarin, China's most popular dialect (Li and Thompson 1989) is not an easy language to learn. Depending on the level of fluency one might want to acquire, it might take years to properly speak the language (Kane 2006). Admittedly, knowing any language used by a large population is an advantage but taking all of the previously mentioned facts into account it does not seem that the English language will be replaced as a bridge language anytime soon.

Another notion to take into consideration while deliberating on the subject of "lingua franca" are the negative effects such a language brings. In fact, many are concerned that a language standardization might threaten local ones (Dovring 1997). In the specific case of English the language has, by becoming part of the regular educational curriculum of schools, high schools and colleges pervaded a large number of countries. And by becoming a mandate it secured itself a large number of speakers. A negative consequence of that is that too often English words become adopted into the everyday vocabulary, rather than adapted onto one's native language. And after time, as more and more speakers become familiarized with the new word,

the term embeds itself into the language thus in a way impoverishing it and unquestionably changing it (Harrison, Rood and Dwyer 2008).

Of course, what is seen as negative is largely dependant on individual opinion. While some see impoverishment, others see enrichment. Furthermore, considering that languages borrow terms from each other all of the time, expecting it to remain a constant would be unrealistic (Birner 1999).

## **2.5 Learning opportunities**

As aforementioned, learning opportunities are crucial in the course of education and a specifically important step in the process of implementing language strategies. In fact, whether through official or unofficially organized training sessions gaining experience is, through involvement and exposure to a new language, the surest way to an expeditious and all-encompassing education (Guile and Griffiths 2001). Learning in general is not just about obtaining and retaining informations and facts. Rather it is about applying data to real life situations. Acquiring realistic awareness of the world is the primary difference between knowing something and actually understanding it (Ebersöhn and Eloff 2004). Which is precisely why experience has prodigious value and is central to a successful development of abilities. In fact, not only does it increase confidence in one's skills but in a business setting it has the potential of increasing employee efficiency and productivity.

Seeing how training has positive transversal effects on company performance, a lot of organizations today try to encourage a "culture of learning". And to further support such commendable practices, various institutions have outset onto, not only spreading intelligence in said topics, but also funding and subsidizing learning opportunities.

With the aim of emphasizing two intensely powerful aspects of the language learning process, practice and direct involvement, various programs and associations have sprung up all over the world. Amidst them was also the CELAN project. An undertaking funded with the support of the European Commision, CELAN was a platform specifically designed to analyze and spread awareness on the importance of languages. By establishing a network of companies, associations, trade unions, industry representatives and others, the platform studied the current linguistic and language related needs of European enterprises. In fact, like the organization's mission statement itself claimed, it is the project's principal objective to enable companies to »improve their professional performance through effective language strategies and to provide the European Commission and Member State governments with pertinent advice« (European Commission 2011b). Officially closed on the 31 March 2013, after reaching it's purpose of existence, the project's chief tasks included: inquests and analysis of linguistic requirements for European companies and SMEs of particular sectors and creation of new and advancement of old online applications that support business's language demands (Celan 2013).

Another organization, interested in raising language awareness is the European Union. With its many offers and fundings, the institution is a major stepping stone for many SMEs but also larger corporations. A prime example of the opportunities that the Union offers is the posting abroad project (European Commission 2015). By subsidizing and consequently considerably lowering costs for companies the program offers the chance to work abroad and in that way not only improve one's language proficiency skills but also bring new knowledge and experiences into the company.

A second project funded by the European Union is The Lifelong Learning Programme, more specifically its "Languages" subsection. The project is designed specifically »to raise awareness of the importance of acquiring linguistic skills, boost access to language learning resources and develop teaching materials« (European Union 2013). And with a budget of nearly €7 billion the program is an amazing opportunity for anyone, young and old, to learn something new and further hone their linguistic skills.

Lastly, among a number of institutions providing learning opportunities is World Learning, a nonprofit organization that operates in more than 60 countries through a variety of different programs (World Learning 2015). Amidst a number of projects and arrangements that promote language learning, there is also one suitable to company needs. It is the "Professional Exchanges & Training", a program that provides people with professional development opportunities needed to acquire knowledge and skills necessary to grow in a workplace.

Though the number of mentioned opportunities is limited, it is important to note that there are a lot of other options to learn and grow. Besides specialized companies that offer their services for remuneration, there are also a lot of government grants and subsidized projects that companies can take advantage of in order to improve the skills of their employees. In the specific case of Slovenia, the government regularly offers co-financing projects to help and encourage company management to further educate its employees (Andragoški zavod b. l.).

### 3 INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

The objective behind the empirical part of this thesis is to further evolve the first, theoretical segment by providing answers to some critical questions regarding the role and importance of languages in a business setting.

From various studies, inquiries and investigations, it has become clear that there exists a causal relationship between languages and company performance (European Commission 2010a). And for those companies that operate on an international level it has become quite customary to request, as a prerequisite of employment, that job applicants be proficient in at least one foreign language (De Mejía 2002). As such, the focus of this research will be directed towards the "language-employee" relationship. That is, the analysis will try to analyze certain circumstances regarding:

- the role of languages in the process of employment,
- the popularity of certain languages,
- the language-job promotion relation.

To be more accurate, the first issue will concern itself with observing whether language knowledge has any weight in the recruitment process. That is, if bilingualism or multilingualism can provide one's credentials with that extra allurements needed to acquire a working position.

The second point is closely related to the first one as it is, in a way, its continuance. It will in fact try to ascertain which languages are the most important to know in a business setting.

The third and last point of the research will, on the other hand focus on one's career, i.e. it will try and discern what happens once one already has a job. It will explore whether there is a connection between language knowledge and the opportunity of promotion. That is to say whether language is a dichotomous asset that can set one apart from the rest of the competition.

Learning in general takes time, effort and dedication and becoming proficient in any language is an equally arduous undertaking (Remland, Jones and Foeman 2014). Considering that, it becomes logical to ponder whether the expenditure is worth the investment. In today's globalized world where market saturation (Le Défi Media Group 2015) is quickly becoming a too familiar term, the aforementioned issues present an interesting point of discussion for anyone, looking or about to look for employment. And as the subject at hand is not only interesting but also informative, the topic at hand is one very well worth delving into and exploring.

### 3.1 Research methodology

With occurrences like world globalisation and company internationalisation gaining more and more traction every day, the role languages play in a business setting has become increasingly important (Janiūnaitė, Pundziene and Petrait 2013). In order to better understand their value, it is the focus of this research to analyze certain aspects regarding its influence in the work environment.

Social reality can be analyzed through a number of different ways. While at first the idea was to carry out the research in the form of a structured interview, it was very quickly made apparent that such an approach would not prove beneficial. In fact, employees, and especially those working at higher positions, are usually overwhelmed with work and have no time to fit an interview into their already overloaded schedules. Consequently, the approach had to be adjusted in a manner that would suit a professional's busy lifestyle.

As surveys combine the benefits of being low cost, convenient for the respondents and quick to process they proved to be the optimal choice. To further outline on the method of gathering information; as to guarantee that all participants were examined in the same way the data was gathered through a standardized procedure and language, i.e. English. The questionnaires were consigned in electronic form, that is they were sent to each person individually through electronic mail. Considering that the questions were presented as open-ended and closed ended, the research instrument took the form of a semi-structured survey.

The research was primarily of exploratory character. Meaning it was conducted with the aim of providing insight into people's experiences, opinions and outlooks related to the subject of languages. For that reason it was sent to people of all ranks, working in small to medium enterprises or larger corporations operating on an international scale. As the research was of qualitative nature, the sample size was kept relatively small<sup>2</sup> though big enough to observe and reach a conclusion. The responses were sorted and grouped to identify similarities and differences. Considering the subjectivity of the survey, the results were analyzed through an interpretative and deductive approach.

While surveys as a method of gathering data have a lot advantages, there are also certain limitations that such an approach brings. Amongst the key challenges is the difficulty of obtaining information. In fact, people are usually reluctant towards taking surveys (Assembly of Behavioral and Social Sciences 1979). And, considering that e-mail users are constantly hassled by spam messages, online questionnaires are easily lost in the multitude. Furthermore, as there is no interviewer present, there is no way of additional examination, that is supplementary questioning about what it is that the subject actually meant. Respondents may also misunderstand questions or instructions making the collected data less reliable.

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<sup>2</sup> Up to 50 respondents.

### 3.2 Survey structure

The survey started off, as literature suggests (Trochim, Donnelly and Arora 2015), with a few very easy, basic questions aimed at gathering the respondents basic information like: gender and approximate age. The aim of the aforementioned was to warm up the interviewees for more demanding questions and simultaneously collect data that might potentially prove pertinent in differentiating the responses.

Thenceforth the questionnaire concentrated on collecting data connected with employment such as: the name of the company, the country in which the company operates and the specific position of the individual held inside the organization. The goal of these queries was to establish a framework on which to base the analysis on. That is to say, they were posed with the aim of ascertaining whether they would represent a factor of differentiation to further answers.

The next three questions in line focused on the process of employment. Namely, how many times did the respondents go through it, what makes one stand out from the competition and what is their opinion on the importance of languages during such a process. As to help with the decision, in the first part, the answers were provided in the form of multiple pre-established values ranges. With the purpose of not leading the survey takers onto an answer, the second part was, on the other hand, formulated as an open question. The last part was designed as a Likert scale with five different response levels.

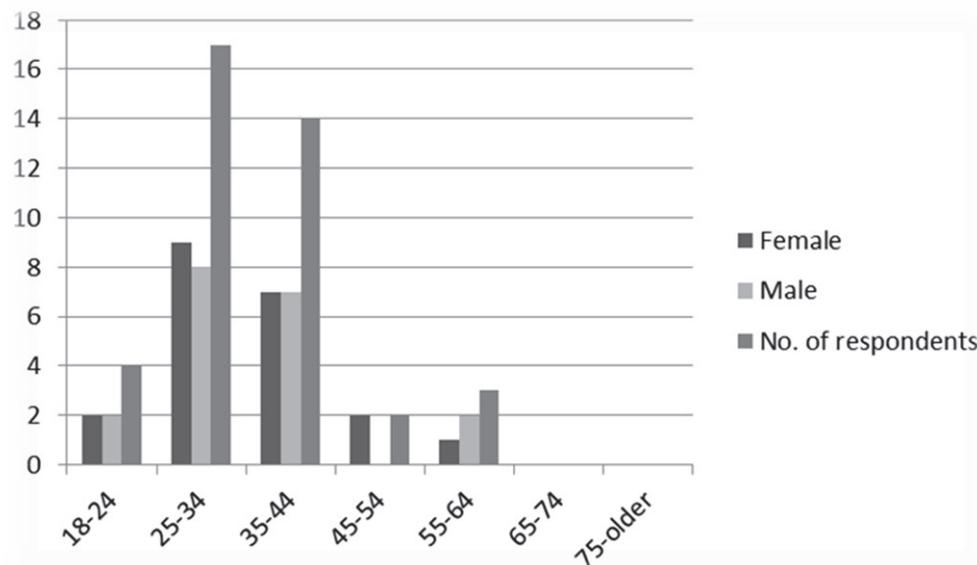
The following group of questions studied the popularity of languages. Meaning, their purpose was to understand which foreign languages people considered to be the most important. The three questions were posed in such a way to be able to distinguish what company employees think and what the actual circumstances are. Furthermore, this part of the research also analyzed if there exists a single language that, according to people's beliefs, trumps over others.

Lastly the questionnaire examined the role languages play in the process of gaining a promotion. The first query was structured in such a way as to understand whether languages were at all considered a factor of influence, while the second specifically focused on quantifying said importance. The last question on the other hand was focused on future prospects and intended to find out the employee's willingness towards building a new skill.

With a total of fourteen questions the survey aimed to gain as much possible data with the least amount of questions asked. In fact, considering the aforementioned challenges of employees not having the time and willingness to answer long inquiries the questionnaire was specifically tailored to meet their needs.

### 3.3 Research results

The questionnaire entitled "The importance of languages in an international business setting" was distributed to people working in small and medium sized enterprises and larger corporations. The research registered the thoughts of 40 respondents, of which respectively 21 were female and 19 male. Of those, the biggest age group, with a total of 17 respondents, was the one ranging from 25-35. As illustrated in the bar chart below (Picture 1), other categories included fourteen answers in the 35-44 age group, four answers in the 18-24, three answers in the 55-64 age group and lastly two answers for the 45-54 age group. The last two age groups, ranging from 65-74 and 75-older, were unrepresented.



**Picture 1: No. of respondents arranged by age group and gender**

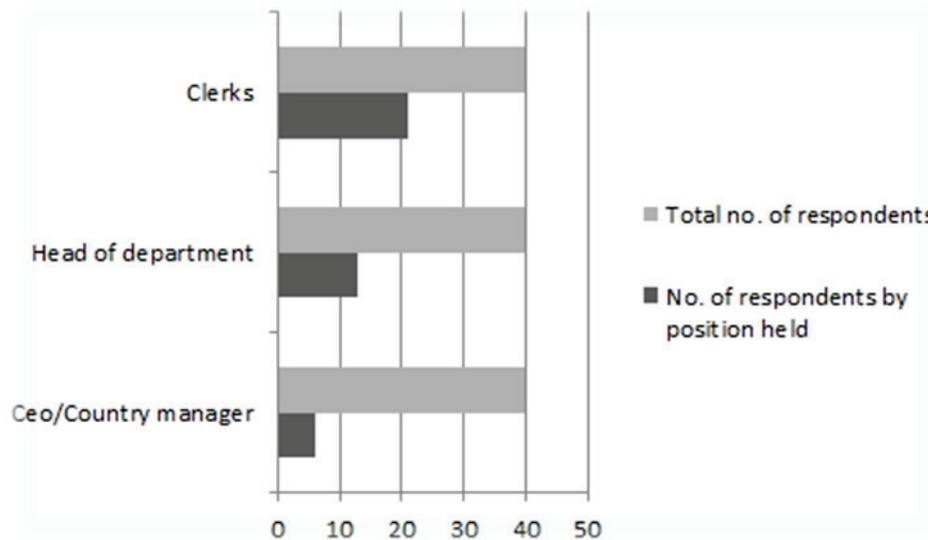
As aforementioned, employees of larger and smaller companies were interviewed. Of the total 18 companies examined the most answers, that is 55 % of them, came from MSC, Ltd. Following right after were Alianca, Ltd. with 10 % and Panalpina World Transport Holding, Ltd. with 8 %. The rest of the recorded answers were all single or occasionally double responses.

Major companies, that is larger corporation's names included: MSC, Ltd., Panalpina World Transport Holding, Ltd., INEOS, Ltd., Impax Laboratories, Ltd., Bayer, AG and IBM, Ltd.

Small to medium company names, on the other hand included: Makelight Interactive, Ltd., Spiritvana, Ltd., Adriatikagent, Ltd. and Alianca, Ltd.

The aforementioned organizations were situated in central and northern Europe. Namely, responses were gathered from: Croatia (32.5 %), Slovenia (55 %), Germany (2.5 %), Ireland (2.5 %) and the United Kingdom (7.5 %).

The positions held by the respondents varied greatly. From assistants to CEOs, the questionnaire was though predominantly fulfilled by operational clerks and managers in departments such as: sales, finances, human resources, export and import. Offering a graphic presentation of the respondents divided into three groups: CEOs/ Country managers, Heads of department/ Managers and clerks, is the picture below (Picture 2).



**Picture 2: Representation of respondents divided into three groups**

Of the total number of interviewees, most of them went through the process of employment only 1-3 times, while a relatively low number, respectively 7 and 5, went through it 4-6 and 7 or more times.

At the question: "In your opinion, what makes one stand out during the process of employment?" respondents answered with four different answers. Namely:

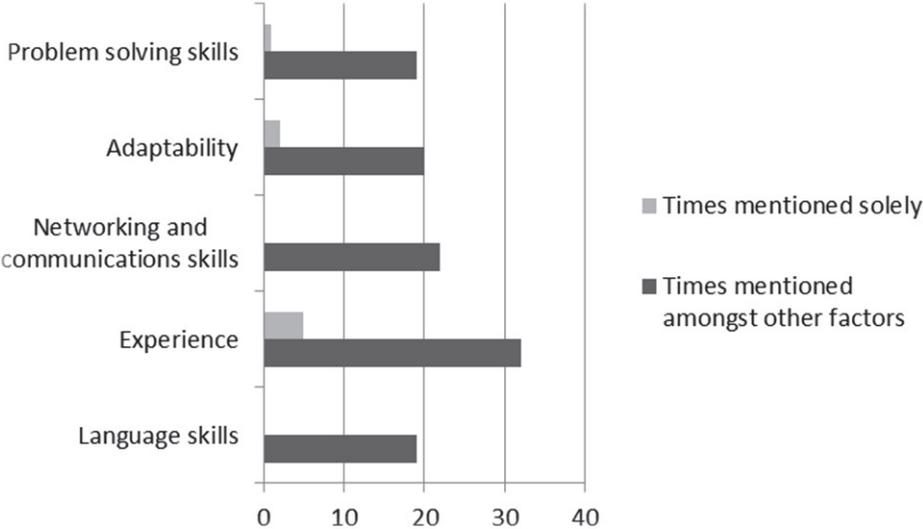
- networking and communication skills,
- experience,
- problem solving skills and
- adaptability.

Of those, experience was the most commonly mentioned. With 57.5 % of the total answers, the remark was mostly suggested by operational clerks and head of departments. Networking and communication skills were mentioned 17.5 % of the times, while problem solving skills and adaptability only 12.5 %. Of all of the gathered data, not one noted language skills as a dichotomous asset.

While previously unmentioned, language skills were in the next question, that is on the five-level Likert scale characterized as rather valuable. Very important was in fact the preferred choice of answer for 19 respondents. The rest were split between: important, moderately important and of little importance with respectively 14, 6 and 1 answer. The unimportant alternative was left unmarked.

The most spoken foreign language was, with 37 respondents answering uniformly, English. The remaining three times the response differed was in the cases where respondents considered the language their primary mode of communication. Other interviewees also recognized: Italian, Croatian, German, Spanish, Serbian, French and Russian<sup>3</sup> as being amongst their linguistic skills. Furthermore, out of the gathered data, 31 people identified solely English as the most important language while 7 of them considered Italian, German and French to be equally important. In addition, two people considered one language, i.e. English, to be enough for their working position.

The first question concerning promotion required interviewees to choose, from a provided list one or more skill/s that are considered important in order to gain a better working position. As demonstrated by the below picture (Picture 3), while language skills were mentioned 19 times amongst other factors, they were never listed solely. On the other hand experience, adaptability and problem solving were singled out 5, 2 and 1 times.



**Picture 3: Skills needed to obtain a work promotion**

Accordingly, a relatively low number of interviewees connected languages with job promotion opportunities. In fact, more than 50 % rated languages to be, on a scale from 1 to 5, a low 1. The rest of the survey takers likewise ranked languages to be of little importance and

<sup>3</sup> Ordered by frequency of repetition.

consequently rated it with a number 2. One person assigned it a medium 3 and two people a relatively high 4. None of the respondents considered languages to be of enough significance to assign it the highest number.

The last out of the 14 questions recorded the extent of people willing to learn a new language in order to get a job promotion. Out of 40 people, a positive answer was given only by 5, while the rest of the interviewees, that is 87.5 % of them answered negatively.

### **3.4 Discussion**

The main subject of this thesis was chosen with the ambition of gaining insight into a specific segment of the topic of languages, i.e. their role in a business setting. From the employment process, to gaining a promotion it was the ultimate aspiration of the research to gather data that would allow the development of a hypothesis.

Preceding the empirical research, the thesis was based on a few core assumptions. Amongst the first were a few regarding the process of employment. Namely:

- languages play an important role in the process of employment and
- languages are widely accepted as a dichotomous asset that help job applicants differentiate themselves from the competition.

In fact, it was believed that people in general, and specifically those seeking employment, regard languages as a valuable advantage. With the globalization of the world and the popularization of the cosmopolitanism ideology, various sources, such as books, journals and studies keep stressing the marketability of language skills. In review of the way businesses are operating, that is in review of their internationalization, it seems reasonable to think that proficiency in a foreign language can provide people with a sharp edge and therefore increase their opportunities and chances of employment. And considering that bilingualism and multilingualism not only expand one's ability of communication but also drive cultural awareness it was assumed that the survey takers would express a similar judgement.

Questionnaire results though, did not echo such perspectives. While around 48 % and 35 % of the survey takers did respectively individuate languages as "very important" and "important" skills to have, none characterized them as a dichotomous asset. Indeed, in the question that required interviewees to write in the determinant they thought played the most decisive role in the process of employment, of 40 people not one recorded languages. Interestingly, while it was assumed that they would be on a par with another element, i.e. experience, the analysis of the data proved the expectation to be erroneous. In fact, experience was mentioned an amazing 57.5 % of the times, considerably beating all of the other responses.

Furthermore, it was presumed that the more often individuals went through the process of employment, the more they would be aware of the advantages of language knowledge. In fact,

with their practical contact and familiarity with the practice it was understood that they would value the skill at a higher rate. The analysis of the collected data through proved discouraging. De facto, respondents that marked to have gone through the recruitment process more than four times, more specifically those who have marked the answers: 4-6 and 7-more, did not consider languages at all relevant. And their attitudes towards the communication skill were more than obvious from their provided answers. None of them, in fact, considered the ability a distinctive qualification making their replies equivalent to those who went to the process of employment a lower amount of times.

The next set of presumptions regarded the popularity of languages. Specifically, it was assumed that:

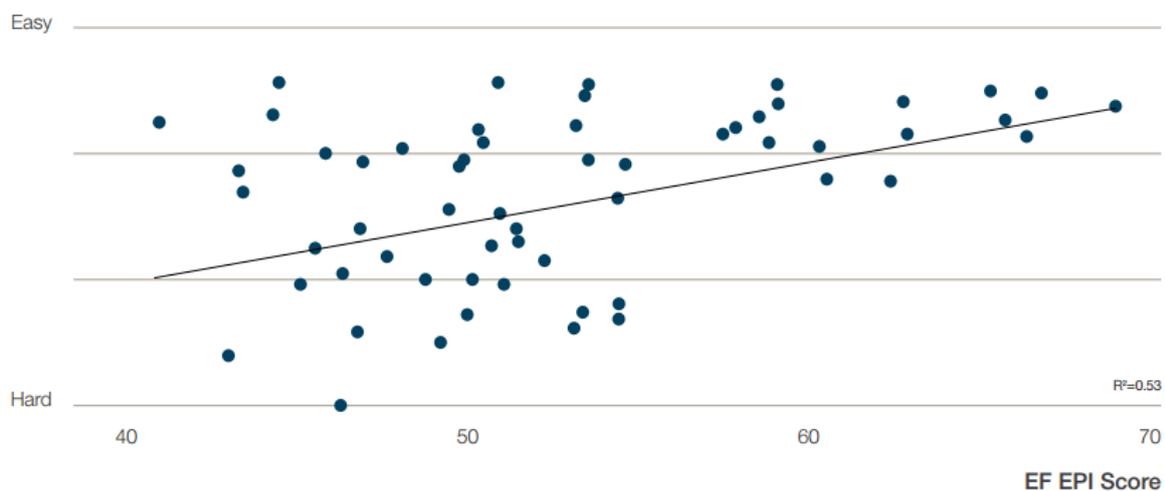
- in a business setting one language is not enough to communicate with international audience,
- out of all the languages that an individual can speak, English is usually considered the most important.

In order to increase their market share and profits, a lot of companies nowadays resolve to operate on an international level. Considering said custom it is deducible that they will need to interact with an audience speaking a different language from their own. Forasmuch it is important for organizations to differentiate their communications portfolio. And while English is acclaimed as one of the most popular and widely spoken languages, it is often not enough to speak just one language. In fact, not everyone has had the opportunity or the chance to learn a foreign language and if they had, it might have not been English.

The analyzed data from the survey results shows that the presumptions were mostly correct. At the question "Do you believe one foreign language to be enough for your working position?" nearly all interviewees answered with a definite no. The deviation from the prevailing answers was present in two cases. To further elaborate, the inconsistency originated from two relatively young females, aged respectively between 18 and 24 and 25 and 34, coming from the United Kingdom and Slovenia. The first acting as the head of the Human Resources department and the other working as a clerk in the finance department. Both respondents claimed that one language, specifically English, was enough for their day to day work operations. The statement could be interpreted as them not needing another language because of their profession. In fact, because the first hails from the United Kingdom where the official language is English, one could understand the motivation of monolingualism being the professed choice. Still considering that the working position is as high as a department manager and the company is, with branches all over the world, an international one (Pret a Manger 2015), it is a bit strange that one would profess one language to be enough. Similarly, in the second case the reasoning behind the preferred alternative could be interpreted as one

not needing more than two modes of communication<sup>4</sup>. In fact, while working in the finance department one does not perhaps have as much contact with clients and partners to justify the need of another foreign language besides English.

The second assumption, that is the one that recognized English as being the most eminent out of all the languages that an individual can speak, was also proved to be mostly accurate. Considering the ease of doing business that the language allows, the result did not come as a big surprise. In fact, as the image below indicates (Picture 4), as proficiency in the English language rises so does the ease of doing business with countries where English is not the official language.



**Picture 4: Ease of doing business score**

Source: Education First 2013, 38.

While not everyone indicated the foreign language as the most noteworthy, 95 % of the respondents did. A total of two replies diverged from the prevailing answer both acknowledging Italian as the most important language. Furthermore, English was not uniformly declared as having the most significance. Out of the 38 cases, it was singled out 31 times, that is in around 82 % of the cases. In the rest of the circumstances the language was accompanied by others, such as: Italian, French and German. The reasoning behind such replies could be explained either by the fact that interviewees misunderstood the question (thinking they had to write in the language that they considered the most important for work purposes rather than the one they considered important in general) or they actually accredited the second language equal significance as the first.

<sup>4</sup> One native and one foreign language.

A further impression was left by the total number of languages spoken by an individual. On average, out of the 40 gathered answers, the respondents spoke on average two foreign languages. The most commonly indicated being, as expected, English. An interesting observation though is, that out of all the answers only one person spoke a language that could be considered atypical, i.e. Russian. It is impossible to ascertain if the latter was an oddity or perhaps a common occurrence, but if we, on the grounds of this research, postulate that the occurrence was in fact a peculiarity, the language could possibly prove to be a competitive advantage. In fact, in those economic sectors where there is a need for Russian, employees would definitely distinguish themselves and be at a considerable advantage from their competition.

The third series of presumptions were connected to the last issue analyzed in the empirical part of the thesis, i.e. the relation between languages and job promotion. The assumptions were as follows:

- languages are largely considered to be amongst the most important skills to have in order to get a better working position and
- people are willing to learn a new foreign language in order to gain a promotion.

Considering the increase in world globalization, the rate of company internationalization and job market saturation, language skills keep gaining importance. While there are other ways of distinguishing oneself from the competition in order to gain a higher position inside the organization, it was believed that a mostly multilingual society will acknowledge and confirm such hypothesis. Given, gaining proficiency in a new mode of communication is a long and strenuous endeavor but it was supposed that people in general judged the benefits to outweigh the downsides. In fact, other than gaining a new competence, employees that commit to the process of learning a new foreign language also open new opportunities for themselves. And as their qualifications expand so do their chances of success. For example one might, in spite of his lack of experience, be able to compete for an international post basing his promotion solely on his knowledge of language. Indeed organizations, and especially those with an international presence value languages and sometimes equal them to other highly sought after skills like problem solving and networking skills. Furthermore, while other competencies might be hard to come by, languages are in this day and age relatively easy accessible. The fast development of information technology has in fact made knowledge available to a large number of people. Whether through phone and free, downloadable applications or free courses available online, education has through the years made considerable strides greatly aiding those in search of further education.

As it turns out though, both the premises were proven wrong. The first, that postulated that languages are amongst the most important skills one can have in order to get a work promotion, was disproved by one the survey questions. Namely, the query that required from respondents to indicate, from an already provided list that featured five different alternatives,

one or more determinants that play a meaningful role in the process of recruitment. The analysis of the accumulated data proved that while language skills were acknowledged 47.5 % of the total 40 times, they were never listed solely. Meaning that, while people believe they might influence the procedure of gaining a better job position, they are not the only factor. And standing alone, languages will never get one as far as other determinants such as the two most commonly mentioned, experience and networking.

The next question in line, that is the one that concentrated on quantifying the relation between languages and work promotion, further proved the above findings. In fact, the query called for respondents to numerically assess, on a scale from 1 to 5 (one being a really low and five a really high value), the importance of language skills. The biggest portion of the survey takers, that is around 93 % of them, voted said skill to be of very low importance. Namely the grade one was given 21 times while the grade two was given 16 times. The middle grade three was given once and surprisingly (considering the rest of the answers) the grade four was given twice. Both times the highest evaluations were given by Slovenian respondents. The divergent interviewees, respectively male and female, had in common their age and professional position. In fact, both were aged between 25-34 and occupied the position of head of departments, one of sale and the other of export. Based on that we could deduce that people that are younger and have more contact with their audience favor and consider language skills to play a crucial role in the process of job promotion. Unfortunately, the surveyed population is too small to ascertain whether such a hypothesis is actually true.

The second premise, that presupposed that people in general are willing to learn a new foreign language in order to gain a better working position was also quickly "shot down". In fact results showed that only 5 % of the total voters, that is only two people out of all the interviewees thought of languages as being worth the effort to gain a promotion. The two cases were again presented by head of departments: communications and sales. The latter was already mentioned in the previous paragraph as having quantified language skills with a high grade, while the first representative came this time from Germany. Interestingly enough, the woman, aged between 45 and 54 years old, assessed languages to be of little importance and thus almost inconsequential in the process of obtaining a better working position. Contemplating said evidence, it is possible that she might judge languages to be of limited consequence to job promotions but in the case that they were, she would be willing to learn them. Following said train of thought, it is unavoidable but to ask how many more people share the same conviction. Because according to numerous researches, the demand for knowledge in foreign languages is high while the willingness to learn is the one that is low (University of Phoenix Research Institute 2011). Consequently it is almost compulsory to ask oneself, whose reality is actually true. And do the survey results reflect the real situation of things or only the perception of its respondents.

Other than allowing a better grasp and understanding of the aforementioned issues, the research simultaneously allowed an observation of a few interesting circumstances. For

example, considering the easier access to education and the technology facilitated learning, it was assumed that younger generations of workers would have a more widely developed communications portfolio. The results on the other hand showed no distinctive differences between age groups. Likewise, despite researches claiming differently (Harasty et al. 1997), gender also did not seem to (at this level of research) pose a distinctive factor of differentiation when it came to language knowledge.

Also worth observation is the country from which most of the data came from. In fact, out of all the recorded answers, 82.5 % came from Slovenia and Croatia. While the survey was written in English and sent to a number of different countries like Austria, Switzerland and Russia, those two provided the questionnaire with the most feedback. The reason behind it could be that while addressing the respondents, the country of origin was mentioned. Therefore interviewees coming from countries like Slovenia and those close to it perhaps felt more obligated than others to help and fill out the survey. Except for countries, the amount of gathered survey information was also contingent upon the position held inside the company organization. In fact, as expected most of the responses came from clerks. Followed right after were managers and head of departments and finally CEOs and country managers. But such a phenomenon can most probably be explained by the amount of time one allots to solving matters not strictly connected to the working position.

Aside from considerations regarding the subject matter of the research, there are also a few significant issues regarding the research method itself.

The chosen approach for gathering data definitely presented a number of advantages to it. For example, as it was sent through electronic mail, it was cost effective, easy to administer and made available to a large number of people regardless of their country of residence. Furthermore, as it was relatively anonymous (it required interviewees to give only their company name and place of activity) it might have made respondents more at ease and therefore more willing to answer. And although the distributed questionnaire did provide the empirical part of the thesis with some interesting and pertinent material, there were some definite shortcomings to the chosen method of collecting data.

Amongst the first was definitely the lack of personal contact, which made the necessity of further questioning impossible. In fact, discovering what it is that the respondents really thought and meant with their answers was not feasible without the physical presence of an interviewer. The latter would have granted a more flexible and in depth interrogation. As it is, the reasonings of the survey takers can only be speculated upon.

A further difficulty stemming from the aforementioned obstacle was also the inability to recognize if the respondents understood the posed questions correctly. Considering that people have different perspectives, a single query can in fact have a number of diverse interpretations. Furthermore, seeing how the survey was written in English, individual

language proficiency could have also affected the findings of the research. Moreover, the lack of a physical presence of the interviewer unabled the detection and reading of the body language of the respondents. In fact, communication is composed equally out of verbal and nonverbal communication. And what people say with their posture, gestures, tone of voice and face expressions, whether consciously or unconsciously, is just as important as the things they choose to express orally.

Besides the absence of the interviewer which alone brought a number of difficulties, a second challenge was presented by the respondent's person. That is to say that the interviewees also greatly affected the survey proceedings and results. Considering that one is unable to monitor and control how attentive survey takers are when responding, research data might have been compromised. In fact, depending on how much time and thought was allotted to completing the questionnaire results might be less or more reliable. Furthermore, there is no telling how truthful and authentic the respondents were. While the survey was anonymous and therefore there was no need of dishonesty, interviewees might still have been tempted to falsify data. Alternatively the questionnaires might have been also, for lack of time or willingness, handed down to other employees for completion.

The form of the information gathering method itself also presented an issue. In fact, considering the respondent's tendency to skip long questionnaires, the survey had to be succinct and to the point. This ment that, in order to minimize the imposition effect on interviewees, open ended questions requiring long answers an moreover their sole number was limited. Consequently supplementary explanations and commentaries were not supplied although they were, at times, needed.

Lastly, there is the issue of the accuracy of the gathered data. Indeed even if we presume that the respondents answered personally and truthfully, the question of the veracity of the collected information still remains a point of doubt. In fact, does the survey actually reflect reality or only the opinions of the interviewees? And considering that a considerable majority of the respondents came from Central-Eastern Europe, more specifically 82.5 % of the answers came from Slovenia and Croatia, do the research results also hold in other areas of the world?

Furthermore, it is important to note that qualitative research is extremely subjective, not only to the respondents but also to the idiosyncratic worldviews of the researcher. That is «Subjectivity guides everything from the choice of topic that one studies, to formulating hypotheses, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data» (Ratner 2002). And considering that an interpretive model was used to construe the data it is crucial to note that the empirical conclusions reached might be prone to errors and therefore not apply to every and all circumstances.

In order to develop conclusions of greater applicability the aforementioned issues would have to be solved. Accordingly, a future direction in which the research might progress is a quantitative one. In fact, the effectuated qualitative analysis provides an excellent foundation, that is it contributed a number of hypothesis pertaining to the phenomenon of languages within the context of a business setting. These conclusions would now best be further tested through a more structured analysis that would rely on and »employ mathematical, statistical and computational techniques« (Plano Clark 2012). The latter would in fact, with the extrapolation of data, guarantee the discernment of existing trends and the creation of unbiased conclusions that would be applicable to a larger population. Of course, as not every job has the same requirements, the results would have to reflect the requirements of different sectors and moreover the needs of different countries.

Merging the data from the two types of research, that is qualitative and quantitative research, together would help mitigate the weaknesses of both methods and help emphasize their strengths. The first would in fact provide an in-depth understanding on the subject while the second would serve as a counterbalance providing the necessary objectivity and minimizing the margin for error.

As it is though, in this point of the research, we can only hypothesize on the role and importance of languages in the business environment.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Globalisation or the «process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions...generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and the exercise of power» (Held 1999, 16) has over the years been growing at a rapid rate (Ernst & Young Global Limited 2010). And with organisations involved in international trade and investment policies such as UNCTAD, WTO and OECD assisting and animating its occurrence, the phenomenon has slowly but steadily influenced all aspects of life (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2009).

One such affected area has also been the business sector. In order to counter the negative aspects, like increased competition and intense level of imitation (Mourdoukoutas 2011) of such a phenomenon a significant amount of companies chose and still choose to internationalize their operations. That is, such a process provides a considerable amount of motivation for organisations to restructure and branch out their activities overseas in order to capitalize on certain foreign country's more permissive labor laws. With such a choice though come a lot of challenges. In fact, amongst the major issues companies face when conducting their business in an foreign environment, languages are usually at the top (Colemont 1988).

In order to stay ahead of these issues a lot of organisations designate a language policy. The two preferred choices usually being the monolingual or the multilingual approach. While the first focuses on creating an enviable and diverse communication portfolio the second aims at utilizing a single language as an expression of unity.

While the theoretical part of the thesis concentrated on analyzing the existing situation of things, meaning analyzing theories, approaches and practical examples, it was the main objective of the empirical part to examine whether there exists a discrepancy between reality and provided data.

While some of the assumptions presumed true after perusing literature turned out to be genuine, others were erroneous. The findings show that:

- Languages play an important role in the process of employment but they are not acknowledged, as previously considered and popularized by literature, a dichotomous asset.
- In a business setting, one language is not enough to communicate with an international audience.
- When communicating with an international audience, English is considered the most important language to know.
- Language skills are not considered an important skill to have in order to gain a work promotion.

- People are unwilling to learn a new foreign language in order to get a better working position.

Conclusively, while languages are in theory acclaimed as a decisive and distinctive competitive advantage for professionals (Schjerve and Vetter 2012) and businesses (European Commission 2007b) alike, it seems that in practice things are not so. In fact, while languages have proven to have an important role in the day to day operations of organisations they have not resulted to be a crucial factor neither in the employment nor in the job promotion process of an individual.



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## APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Survey



**SURVEY: THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGES IN AN INTERNATIONAL  
BUSINESS SETTING**

1. Gender

- Male
- Female

2. What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75-older

3. Company \_\_\_\_\_

4. Country \_\_\_\_\_

5. Position held in the company \_\_\_\_\_

6. How many times did you go through the process of employment?

- 1-3
- 4-6
- 7-more

7. In your opinion, what makes one stand out during the process of employment?

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*Priloga 1*

8. In your opinion, what role do languages play in the process of employment?

- Very important
- Important
- Moderately important
- Of little importance
- Unimportant

9. Write in the foreign languages you use for work purposes.

---

10. If any, which language/s do you consider to be the most important?

---

11. Do you believe one foreign language to be enough for you working position?

If yes, please write which one.

---

12. Which of the below listed skills is/are in your opinion the most important in order to obtain a work promotion? (Multiple choice)

- Experience
- Language skills
- Networking and communication skills
- Problem solving skills
- Adaptability

13. In order to obtain a promotion rate how important you believe language skills to be.

(On a scale from 1 to 5; 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest number)

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14. Would you be willing to learn a new foreign language in order to get a job promotion?

- Yes
- No

Thank you for your feedback.