

# Global Business Adopting A Single Language Strategy

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# Introduction

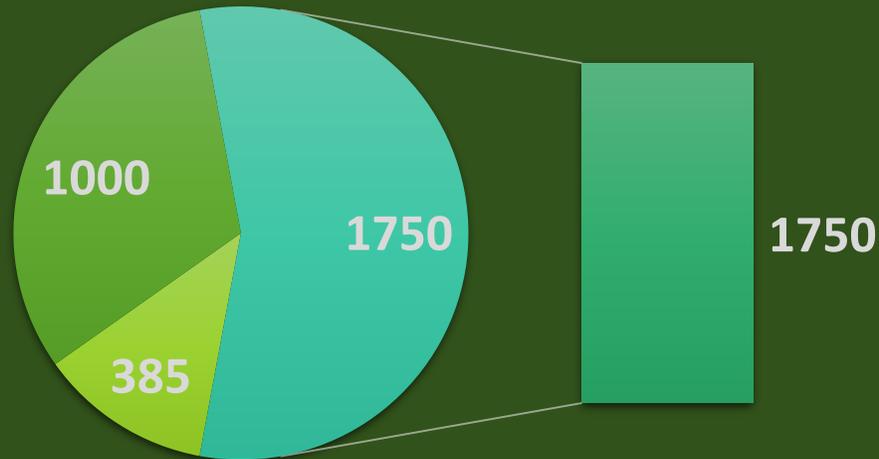
- English – A Global Revolution
- Why English only?
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- Obstacles to Successful English-Language Policies
- An Adoption Framework
- Improving employee buy-in
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# English – A Global Revolution



English Speakers Worldwide in millions



- Native Speakers
- Fluent speakers from India, Nigeria & formerly- colonised nations
- Spoken Worldwide

- Fastest spreading language in history
- Spoken by 1 in 4 people
- 775 million internet users

Source: Harvard Business Review  
<https://hbr.org/2012/05/global-business-speaks-english>

# Why English only?

- Competitive pressure
  - If you want to buy or sell, you have to be able to communicate with a diverse range of customers, suppliers, and other business partners.
  - If you're lucky, they'll share your native language—but you can't count on it.
  - Companies that fail to devise a language strategy are limiting their growth opportunities to the markets where their language is spoken.

# Why English only?

- Globalization of tasks and resources
  - Language differences can cause an information bottleneck, when geographically dispersed employees have to work together to meet corporate goals.
  - Better language comprehension gives employees more firsthand information - vital to good decision making.
- **Case Study: Swiss food giant Nestlé saw great efficiency improvements in purchasing and hiring thanks to its enforcement of English as a company standard.**

# Why English only?

- Mergers & Acquisition integration across national boundaries
  - Negotiations regarding a merger or acquisition are complicated enough when everybody speaks the same language.
  - Cross-cultural integration is notoriously tricky.
- **Case Study: Germany's Hoechst and France's Rhône-Poulenc merged in 1998 to create Aventis, the fifth largest worldwide pharmaceutical company, the new firm chose English as its operating language**

# Adopting a Global Language Policy

- Not easy!
- Still radical
- Certain to meet with resistance from employees
- Many may feel at a disadvantage (i.e. English “isn’t as good as others”)
- Team dynamics and performance can suffer
- National pride can get in the way

# Adopting a Global Language Policy

- Implementation Tips - Involve all employees
  - Leaders should make a persuasive case for why it matters to employees and the organization.
  - Employees must be assured that they will be supported in building their language skills.
  - Companywide cultural-awareness training will help non-native speakers feel heard and valued.
  - Leaders should rally workers behind using English to accomplish goals, rather than learn it to meet proficiency standards.

# Adopting a Global Language Policy

- Implementation Tips - Managers
  - Managers are referees and enforcers and must take responsibility for ensuring compliance.
  - They need training in how to address sensitive issues arising from the radical change.
  - Groups should set norms prescribing how members will interact
  - Managers should monitor behaviour accordingly.

# Adopting a Global Language Policy

- Implementation Tips – Native/Non-native speakers
  - Native speakers must level the playing field
    - Native speakers can learn to speak more slowly and simplify their vocabularies.
    - They should refrain from dominating conversations.
    - They must encourage non-native speakers to contribute.
    - Native speakers may need coaching on how to bring along less proficient colleagues who are working at a disadvantage.
  - Non-native speakers must comply
    - Nonnative speakers have a responsibility to comply with the global English policy
    - Should refrain from reverting to their mother tongue, even in informal meetings or communications.

# Obstacles to Successful English-Language Policies

- Change always comes as a shock
- Compliance is patchy
- Self-confidence erodes
- Job security falters
- Employees resist
- Performance suffers

# Obstacles to Successful English-Language Policies

- Common responses:
  - *“The most difficult thing is to have to admit that one’s value as an English speaker overshadows one’s real value.”*
  - *“For the past 30 years the company did not ask us to develop our foreign-language skills or offer us the opportunity to do so. Now, it is difficult to accept the fact that we are disqualified.”*
  - *“They’re afraid to make mistakes so they will just not speak at all.”*
  - *“It’s too hard to write in English, so I don’t do it, and then there’s no documentation at all.”*

# Obstacles to Successful English-Language Policies

- When companies merely announce the new policy and offer language classes rather than implement the shift in a systematic way :
  - Non-native speakers can feel that their worth to the company has been diminished, regardless of their fluency level.
  - Employees often worry that the best jobs will be offered only to those with strong English skills, regardless of content expertise.
  - Low-fluency speakers report worrying about job advancement because of their relatively limited English skills.
  - Employees often underestimate their own abilities or overestimate the challenge of developing sufficient fluency.

# Obstacles to Successful English-Language Policies

- The bottom line is:
  - Employees stop participating in group settings.
  - Processes fall apart.
  - Companies miss out on new ideas generated in meetings.
  - People don't report costly errors.
  - People offer observations about mistakes or questionable decisions.
  - Engineers report loss important information—particularly in side exchanges—despite receiving meeting notes afterward.

# An Adoption Framework

- Adoption depends on two key factors
  - Employee buy-in
    - the degree to which employees believe that a single language will produce benefits for them or the organization.
  - Belief in capacity
    - the extent to which they are confident that they can gain enough fluency to pass muster.

The two dimensions combine to produce four categories of response to the change, as shown in the matrix “Four Types of Employee Response”:

# An Adoption Framework

## 4 types of employees response

**DO I BELIEVE THAT IT IS A GOOD IDEA?**

**WEAK BUY-IN**

**STRONG BUY-IN**

### **OPPRESSED**

“I don’t think I’m capable of learning English, and I don’t see the benefit to me or my company to learn it.”

### **FRUSTRATED**

“My company and I would benefit if I learned English, but I don’t think I can do it.”

### **INDIFFERENT**

“I can learn English, but I don’t see the benefit for me or my company.”

### **INSPIRED**

“I am capable of learning English, and it would be good for me and my company if I did.”

**LOW BELIEF**

**HIGH BELIEF**

**CAN I DO THIS?**

# Improving employee buy-in

Shifts in buy-in call for different measures. But they don't operate in isolation: Buy-in and belief go together. Strategies that can help people feel more confident include:

- Messaging, messaging, and more messaging.
  - Continual communication from the CEO, executives, and managers is critical.
  - Leaders should stress the importance of globalization in achieving the company's mission and strategy and demonstrate how language supports that.
- **Case Study:** Rakuten: CEO, HiroshicMikitani signaled the importance of the English-language policy to his entire organization relentlessly. For instance, each week some 120 managers would submit their business reports, and he would reply to each of them pushing them to develop their language skills. I surveyed employees before and after Rakuten implemented the adoption framework. Results indicated a dramatic increase in buy-in after Mikitani showed his employees that he was “obsessed and committed to Englishnization,” as he put it. The vast majority of the employees surveyed said that the policy was a “necessary” move.

# Improving employee buy-in

- Internal marketing.
  - Because a language transformation is a multiyear process whose complexity far exceeds most other change efforts, it is crucial to maintain employee buy-in over time.
  - At Rakuten, the now-English intranet regularly features employee success stories with emphasis on best practices for increasing language competence.
  - Companywide meetings are also held monthly to discuss the English-language policy.

# Improving belief in capacity

- Offer opportunities to gain experience with language
  - Whether through education, employment, or living abroad, experience tends to give people the confidence they need to succeed in this task.
  - Provide overseas language training and job rotations, that open new doors and allow employees to stretch their skills.
  - Rakuten has sent senior executives to English-speaking countries like the UK and the U.S. for full language immersion training.
  - Employees have also been offered weeks-long language-training programs in the Philippines.
  - Rakuten also plans to send more than 1,000 engineers to technology conferences outside Japan.

# Improving belief in capacity

- Foster positive attitudes
  - Attitudes are contagious: People's faith in their own capabilities grows when they see others around them—peers, managers, friends—having positive experiences with the radical change.
  - Managers can model good risk-taking behaviors by showing that they too are trying new things, making mistakes, and learning from those mistakes.

# Improving belief in capacity

- Use verbal persuasion
  - Encouragement and positive reinforcement from managers and executives—simple statements like “You can do it” or “I believe in you”—make all the difference.
  - To mitigate turnover threats at Rakuten, managers identified talent that the company wanted to retain and tailored special programs for them,
  - Also, Mikitani repeatedly assured his entire workforce that he would do everything in his power to help every employee meet his or her English-proficiency goals.
  - He made it clear that he believes that with effort everyone can adequately learn the language of business and that he did not want to see anyone leave the company because of the English-only policy.

# Improving belief in capacity

- Encourage good study habits
  - Companies need to contract with language vendors who specialize in helping employees at various levels of proficiency.
  - The vendors need to be intimately familiar with the company context so that they can guide employees' learning, from how best to allocate their time in improving skills to strategies for composing e-mails in English.
  - Language development is part of every job and people should be granted time during the workday to devote to it.

# What About Cultural Identity?

- Many global employees fear that an English-only policy will strip them of their cultural heritage. I propose an alternative point of view. The more people you can communicate with, the better positioned you are to spread your culture and your message. If people can't understand what you're saying, they can't engage with your company or your brand.

Q & A