

➔ **MANAGING WORKPLACE FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCY**

A guide for SMEs



How can I build an inclusive and effective foreign language strategy for my company?

This guide recommends the practices we can put in place to set up an effective plan for the improvement of language competence at our company. The main points or procedure will be presented as follows*:

- Management commitment
- Build a team of championship
- Reinforce employee competencies
- Communicate effectively
- Evaluate effectiveness



Management commitment

Management plays 3 key roles in building an inclusive and effective foreign language competency improvement at workplace:

1 Demonstrate commitment and accountability

Demonstrate commitment and accountability by:

- ➔ Identifying relevant performance measures in foreign language training management and monitoring progress regularly
- ➔ Assigning of resources (e.g. personnel, budget) to foreign language training management initiatives

2 Communicate

Communicate the importance of foreign language skill in doing business with partners, especially with foreign ones throughout the organization. This can be emphasized during management meetings, company events, or informal sessions with employees

3 Be a role model

Be a role model for behaviour expected of managers and employees by:

- ➔ Participating actively in initiatives to promote willingness in learning and self-improving foreign language competency amongst the staff (e.g. training, workplace activities, employee networking groups, etc.)
- ➔ Being the first flag and a model in demonstrating the practice of using foreign language skill in all relevant activities of the company (dealing with partners, communicate with stakeholders, etc.)



Build a team of champions

Building an inclusive and effective strategy for foreign language competency improvement is not just the responsibility of the company's owners. To effectively facilitate organisation-wide application of the strategy, "team of champions" or "first-flag team" could be appointed in a way to motivate other employees.

For larger organisations, foreign language competency management teams or committees could be set up to:

- ➔ Develop, implement and monitor initiatives to promote effective foreign language practice at workplace
- ➔ Raise awareness of the benefits of obtaining high level of foreign language skill for the organisation and employees
- ➔ Understand the needs of the staff based on their functions and work with HR and senior manager to address them

Who should be appointed?

These committees could be chaired by a senior executive. Employees at all levels should be involved, including senior and middle managers.

Reinforce employees' competencies

To build an appropriate environment for developing foreign language competency at workplace, both employees and managers play important roles. Organisations should equip them with the relevant knowledge and skills, and encourage them to practice and share experience to foster the professionalism of the firm in term of foreign language communication for both daily conversation and regular business practices.

Organisations can build competencies by embedding them in formal HR practices:

- ➔ **Recruitment** – hiring candidates who fit in with the organisation's values on foreign language improvement. Especially, looking for and attracting foreign candidates should also be a critical option to create a diverse working environment
- ➔ **Learning and Development** –equipping employees with the knowledge and skills (foreign language training) to work effectively in diverse teams
- ➔ **Performance management** –assessing employees on their ability to work effectively in a diverse team and/or manage a diverse team

Reinforce employees' competencies

What are key attributes and behaviours which employees and managers should display to foster foreign language learning environment at workplace?

Managers should:

- ➔ Be aware of different generations, cultures and values
- ➔ Understand how those differences may affect the foreign language learning process and willingness among the employees
- ➔ Make fair HR decisions
- ➔ Be able to communicate sensitively and effectively
- ➔ Lead by example

Employees should:

- ➔ Be able to self-motivate in learning and practicing foreign language for better collaboration in a global context
- ➔ Be able to adapt to different working styles
- ➔ Be able to communicate sensitively and effectively
- ➔ Be willing to learn about other diverse groups

Reinforce employees' competencies

Recruitment

To promote an inclusive and effective foreign language competency development at workplace, organisations need to recruit candidates who are able to work with or lead diverse teams. Besides, companies should also attract foreign candidates with adequate foreign language skills to build a diverse working environment.

The following are some suggestions on how organisations can incorporate this concept in their selection process:

- ➔ **Identify which level of foreign language competency is most important to the organisation.** The competency level identified may vary depending on the position we are recruiting for.
- ➔ **Build into the recruitment process a means of assessing candidates on these competencies.** Some commonly used measures include behavioural interviews, certifications, or company entrance tests.
- ➔ **Train the interviewers** to be able to effectively administer these measures. Sample recruitment interview questions may help to prepare the interviewers.

Reinforce employees' competencies

Training & Development

Inducting new employees into the organization's workforce

A good orientation programme is useful to help an organisation 'jump start' the employee to get him/her up to speed. Organisations should include their vision for building an organization of high level in foreign language skill to help new employees understand the values and behaviours expected by them.

Orientating foreign employees

For foreign employees, organisations should facilitate their entry not only into the workplace, but also into a new country.

Organisations can:

- ➔ Provide an orientation package which includes relevant information such as rental and housing, laws and regulations, social and cultural norms to new employees before they arrive
- ➔ Introduce the new employee to existing employee(s), who can help to address questions and provide reassurance prior to arrival
- ➔ Conduct an orientation programme about living and working in the companies' country

Reinforce employees' competencies

Training for Employees and Managers

Organisations should develop training programmes to equip employees and managers with the skills to be more effective in working with and leading diverse teams using high quality foreign language skill. In developing a training framework for one organisation, there is a broad range of training for employees' areas to be considered.

For All Employees:

- ➔ Organisational vision, strategy and values in creating a professional and foreign language-proficient working environment
- ➔ Self-awareness: understanding the importance of obtaining and improving foreign language competency and how this can facilitate their career
- ➔ Understanding others (nationality, culture, generation, gender)
- ➔ Communication skills and strategies

For Managers:

- ➔ Coaching and mentoring team members from different profiles
- ➔ Inclusive recruiting, training and performance management
- ➔ Managing employee populations (e.g. mature employees, different nationalities)

In determining the type of training, also consider other issues and/or goals which one organisation is grappling with as a whole so as to save training cost for the company. For example, is there a lack of understanding of different cultures and generations, communication and teamwork skills, or awareness of organisational values so that we can combine one training course of all?

We can also leverage informal platforms in addition to formal training. For example, managers can be encouraged to join to facilitate understanding and interaction.

Reinforce employees' competencies



Performance management

We have to ensure that the career planning and performance management systems within the organisation facilitate the foreign language competency strategy.

In addition, organisations could **take into account employees' ability to work well with and manage a diverse team** in assessing performance.

- ➔ Expectations of competencies and behaviours should be communicated to employees on a regular basis (e.g. during performance appraisal discussions).



Communicate effectively

Organisations can consider including the following key messages in their communication:

- ➔ Why it is important for the organisation to have a foreign language-proficient work environment
- ➔ How a foreign language-proficient workforce will benefit all employees
- ➔ The role which all employees play in creating an inclusive and effective foreign language strategy at workplace
- ➔ Strategies and tips for employees on how to enhance their foreign language skills at work
- ➔ How employees can deal with sensitive issues in business communication (e.g. misunderstandings, discrimination) and employee channels to raise their concerns
- ➔ Key progress and achievements

Communicate effectively

It is important that management level is involved in delivering the key messages to highlight their commitment.

This can be done through:

- ➔ Incorporating key messages at company-wide events (e.g. corporate retreat, annual review, townhalls)
- ➔ Updates on the company intranet
- ➔ Internal milestone training programmes, such as the induction programme or new manager training
- ➔ e-newsletters, posters, brochures.

Evaluate effectiveness

It is important to track the progress of the organisation's foreign language training programme to evaluate if the objectives are being met and to identify areas of improvement. This could include monitoring the results in the following areas:

Workforce management

Organisations can track whether the foreign language competency development strategy has efficiently supported their workforce management. This could include:

- ➔ Recruitment – e.g. recruitment success rate, average time to hire
- ➔ Employee engagement – e.g. absenteeism rate, employee surveys
- ➔ Proficiency rate – e.g. percentage of employees improving in their foreign language skills through company tests or training evaluation

Effectiveness of diversity management initiatives

The diversity management initiatives should also be tracked to identify areas of improvement. The following areas can be monitored:

- ➔ Employee awareness of foreign language training and development initiatives
- ➔ Employee feedback and perception of practices/policies
- ➔ Commitment of senior management in supporting the initiatives
- ➔ Effectiveness of managers and employees in working with colleagues of diverse backgrounds

These can be tracked through:

- ➔ Employee focus groups to gather feedback
- ➔ Number of complaints or feedbacks from employees
- ➔ Exit interviews to obtain feedback on employees' perception of the organisation's inclusiveness.

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