

Language Competence – The Forgotten Twin
By Leslie Aguilar



Expert Forum



Look closely at most organizations' diversity and inclusion strategies; there is something missing. Cultural competence probably has a place on the agenda, yet its fraternal twin – language competence – is often overlooked, lost, forgotten or placed in the parking lot. Culture and language go hand in hand. If “demographics are destiny,” then language competence represents an organizational necessity and strategic advantage.

U.S. LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

Language diversity exists in a broad range of industries, professions, organizational levels, and consumer groups. Did you know...?

1) In the U.S., nearly _____ million people over the age of 5 (_____% of the population) speak a language other than English at home.

2) Immigrants represent 15.8% of the U.S. civilian employed population, but are over-represented in high- and low-skill industries, such as:

_____.

3) International students account for what percentage of all full-time graduate students in these areas?

_____ % Electrical engineering

_____ % Computer science

_____ % Industrial engineering

_____ % Chemical or mechanical engineering

_____ % Economics

Answers:

1. 60.6 million, 21%

Source: American Community Survey - U.S. Census Bureau, Language Use in the U.S., 2011.

2. information technology, engineering, math, sciences, construction, agriculture, warehousing, accommodations, services, household help, and segments of health care such as physicians, nurses, and home healthcare aides

Sources: The Brookings Institution, Immigrant workers in the U.S. labor force, 2012; Migration Policy Institute, Foreign-Born Health Care Workers in the United States, 2012.

3. 70%, 63%, 60%, 50%, 50%

Source: Inside Higher Ed, Foreign Student Dependence, 2013.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS MATTER!

Language barriers influence business results. They affect people's livelihood, health, safety, and, in some cases, language barriers are a matter of life and death. Did you know...?

4) In a survey of 100 executives in large U.S. corporations...

_____ % said that language barriers existed between the managers/executives and other

Language Competence – The Forgotten Twin
By Leslie Aguilar



Expert Forum

workers.

_____% said language barriers were leading to inefficiencies.

_____% reported collaboration and productivity were negatively affected.

5) Factors that strongly influence buying decisions among multicultural customers and newly arrived residents of the U.S. include:

_____.

6) It is widely documented that language barriers in health care contribute to:

_____.

7) In the construction industry, Latino workers are fatally injured at a rate ____% higher than their non-Hispanic counterparts. An OSHA study found that one out of every ____ construction fatalities is related to language barriers.

Answers:

1. 65%, 67%, 40%

Source: Forbes, Reducing the Impact of Language Barriers, 2011.

2. (over and above price and value) respectful treatment, language capabilities, sense of comfort (familiar products), staff members who understand them.

Source: American Demographics.

3. poor quality of emergency care, misdiagnosis of illness, over-prescription of drugs, increased medical errors, higher levels of harm done to patients in adverse events, and lower comprehension and thus lower compliance by patients with doctors' treatment plans.

Sources: Armada and Hubbard, Diversity in Healthcare: Time to Get Real, 2010; International Journal for Quality in Health Care, Language Proficiency and Adverse Events in U.S. Hospitals: A Pilot Study, 2007.

4. 70%, 4

Source: Perdidio, Enhancing workplace communication with language and culture training.

LANGUAGE ACCESS REGULATIONS

Because of the far-reaching consequences of language barriers, there are U.S. federal and state requirements to provide linguistically appropriate services to limited English proficient (LEP) customers. For example, LEP defendants in a court of law have the right to understand what is happening and to be understood by the court. Hospitals receiving federal funding must provide LEP patients access to their preferred language. Regulatory requirements apply to health care, social services, law enforcement agencies, and more.

WORKPLACE PRACTICES MATTER

If you don't provide guidance on how to address employee and customer language diversity, then individuals are left to figure out how to address language situations according to their own personal and perhaps political experiences. You'll get inconsistent results. Sometimes you'll get bad results. It's not uncommon for well-meaning supervisors to implement "English Only" actions that negatively affect safety, team



communication, employee morale, and customer satisfaction. And, blanket English-only policies usually don't fare well in a court of law (or in the press and community). It's better to be pro-active – to have a Language Competence Strategy to tap the potential of multiple language skills while minimizing tensions and communication breakdowns. “...have a Language Competence Strategy to tap the potential of multiple language skills while minimizing tensions and communication breakdowns.”

SO, WHAT IS LANGUAGE COMPETENCE?

Organizations and industries define language competence (also called linguistic competence) differently. Here is a definition focused on healthcare institutions provided by the *National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) – Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development*. (Notice that the diverse audiences extend beyond language groups.)

“Linguistic competence is the capacity of an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively, and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences including persons of limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are not literate, individuals with disabilities, and those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Linguistic competence requires organizational and provider capacity to respond effectively to the health literacy needs of populations served. The organization must have policy, structures, practices, procedures, and dedicated resources to support this capacity. This may include, but is not limited to, the use of:

- ? bilingual/bicultural or multilingual/multicultural staff;
- ? cross-cultural communication approaches;
- ? cultural brokers;
- ? foreign language interpretation services including distance technologies;
- ? sign language interpretation services;
- ? multilingual telecommunication systems;
- ? videoconferencing and telehealth technologies;
- ? TTY and other assistive technology devices;
- ? computer assisted real time translation (CART) or viable real time transcriptions (VRT);
- ? print materials in easy to read, low literacy, picture and symbol formats;
- ? materials in alternative formats (e.g., audiotape, Braille, enlarged print);
- ? varied approaches to share information with individuals who experience cognitive disabilities;
- ? materials developed and tested for specific cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups;
- ? translation services including those of:
 - legally binding documents (e.g., consent forms, confidentiality and patient rights statements, release of information, applications)
 - signage
 - health education materials
 - public awareness materials and campaigns; and
- ? ethnic media in languages other than English (e.g., television, radio, Internet,

Language Competence – The Forgotten Twin
By Leslie Aguilar



Expert Forum

newspapers,
periodicals).”

Source: Goode, T., Jones, W., Jackson, V., Bronheim, S., Dunne, C., & Lorenzo-Hubert, I. (2010).

Cultural and Linguistic Competence Family Organization Assessment Instrument.

Washington, DC:

National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.

BE STRATEGIC

In this article, we’ve touched on the impact of multiple languages on U.S. customers, employees, organizations, and society. Add global considerations to the equation, and language competence becomes ever more critical. Demographics are destiny and it’s time to be strategic about language competence within our institutions and organizations.

This is the first article in a two-part series. The second in the series, *How to Develop a Language Competence Strategy*, will appear in the next issue.

Leslie Aguilar is author of *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts* best-selling video, *Understanding the “T” in LGBT: Gender Identity and Gender Expression* online learning, and other diversity and inclusion resources. You can reach Leslie at <http://www.diversityinclusioncenter.com>.

Leslie Aguilar is author of *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts* best-selling video, *Understanding the “T” in LGBT: Gender Identity and Gender Expression* online learning, and other diversity and inclusion resources. You can reach Leslie at <http://www.diversityinclusioncenter.com>.