

ACTFL

AMERICAN COUNCIL ON THE  
TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES



## Making Languages Our Business:

### Addressing Foreign Language Demand Among U.S. Employers

Survey findings from the American Council on the  
Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) with the support  
of Pearson LLC and Language Testing International





### **The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages**

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction. ACTFL is an individual membership organization of more than 12,500 language educators and administrators from elementary through graduate education, as well as government and industry.

Since its founding (in 1967), ACTFL has become synonymous with innovation, quality and reliability in meeting the changing needs of language educators and their students. From the development of *Proficiency Guidelines*, to its leadership role in the creation of national standards, ACTFL focuses on issues that are critical to the growth of both the profession and the individual teacher.

### **Lead with Languages**

**Lead with Languages** is a national campaign powered by ACTFL, aimed at making language learning a national priority. The campaign promotes nationwide awareness and action around the rapidly rising importance of foreign language skills—in the workplace, and in the nation's economy, national security and international standing. Its ultimate goal is to create a new generation of Americans who are competent in other languages and cultures, and who are fully equipped to compete and succeed in a global economy.

### **Pearson LLC**

Pearson is the world's learning company, with expertise in educational courseware and assessment, and a range of teaching and learning services powered by technology. Its mission is to help people make progress through access to better learning. Pearson LLC believes that learning opens up opportunities, creating fulfilling careers and better lives.

### **Language Testing International**

Since 1992, Language Testing International (LTI) has been the leader in the development of language proficiency testing for more than 100 languages in over 40 countries. As the exclusive licensee of ACTFL, LTI conducts thousands of tests for small employers to Fortune 500 companies, including both state and federal government agencies and academic institutions.

### **Ipsos Public Affairs**

Ipsos Public Affairs is a non-partisan, objective, survey-based research practice made up of seasoned professionals. It conducts strategic research initiatives for a diverse number of American and international organizations, based not only on public opinion research, but elite stakeholder, corporate and media opinion research.

**The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the *Lead with Languages* campaign commissioned Ipsos Public Affairs for this research, with the support of Pearson LLC and Language Testing International.**





**For U.S. employers, the demand for foreign language skills is greater than ever before. Whether it's in the boardroom, in the field, with customers and partners, or on social media, companies today are increasingly more likely to conduct business in a language other than English. Consequently, a command in multiple languages is a valuable asset for U.S. students and employees—not only in boosting their marketability in the workplace, but in helping them thrive in a global economy.**

A 2018 survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) brings this reality to light in unequivocal terms: **nine out of 10 U.S. employers report a reliance on U.S.-based employees with language skills other than English, with one-third (32 percent) reporting a high dependency.** Moreover, demand is on a sustained rise. A majority of employers report that their need for foreign languages has increased over the past five years and project that it will continue to grow. The findings are in line with other surveys of hiring managers and human resources professionals pointing to a growing demand for foreign language skills over the past decade<sup>1</sup> and a 2017 report showing postings for bilingual workers more than doubled between 2010 and 2015.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, many employers in this study report a foreign language skills gap—i.e., that their employees are currently unable to meet the employer's foreign language needs—and that this gap results in lost opportunity and lost business.

In an era when STEM curricula are overshadowing all other subject areas, foreign language may often be treated as a competing discipline. Instead, it needs to be recognized as a complementary and often interdependent skill that produces the globally competent workforce employers are seeking. The authors of this report argue for a world-class U.S. education system that prepares its graduates to be proficient in other languages and cultures. In return, U.S. employers will benefit from a pipeline of prospective employees with the language skills they require to successfully compete in a global economy.

*Staffing is very hard, trying to find someone that meets all the requirements for the job and who also speaks the language required.*

— Midsize Professional Services Firm



*We are a construction firm that needs manpower. We could hire more Spanish-speaking employees if we had managers able to communicate effectively in Spanish. It would open up new labor markets to us.*

— Midsize Construction Company

## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

**U.S. employers' growing demand for multilingual employees.** There is a high demand for foreign language skills among U.S. employers (90 percent) with projections that this need will continue to grow. Midsize employers report a greater need for employees with foreign language skills compared to their smaller and larger counterparts. With a five-year outlook, employers in the healthcare and social assistance sector are the most likely to expect an increase in demand (64 percent), followed by employers in trade (59 percent), education services (57 percent), professional and technical services (55 percent) and construction (54 percent).

This strong and growing demand for foreign language skills is a natural result of evolving conditions in the U.S. marketplace. American employers are operating in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural economy in which 65 million U.S. residents speak a language other than English (40 percent with limited or no English proficiency<sup>3</sup>) and 96 percent of the world's consumers and two-thirds of its purchasing power reside outside U.S. borders.

**Greatest shortages among high-demand languages.** Overall, a third (34 percent) of U.S. employers reliant on foreign languages report a foreign language skills gap when asked if their employees are able to meet their foreign language needs. Further, the foreign languages with the greatest demand among employers also rank as having the biggest shortages. Eighty-five percent of U.S. employers say they're reliant on Spanish, making it by the far the most sought-after language. This is followed by Chinese (34 percent), French (22 percent) and Japanese (17 percent). Meanwhile, 42 percent of employers say they're experiencing a shortage in Spanish skills, followed by 33 percent, 18 percent and 17 percent reporting gaps in Chinese, Japanese and French skills, respectively.

**Foreign language skills' impact on the bottom line.** The assertion that English is the most widely used global language of business may be true, but American employers should not assume that they can rely on the English abilities of their customers, suppliers and partners. Nearly one in four employers surveyed overall acknowledges losing or being unable to pursue a business opportunity over the singular lack of foreign language skills—a finding that is consistent with other research on language skills' impact on a company's bottom line.<sup>4</sup> That figure increases to 50 percent for those that say they have a foreign language skills gap. Even among employers that say they do not have a foreign language skills gap, 10 percent acknowledge having lost a business opportunity due to a lack of foreign language skills.



- Exporters are more reliant on foreign language skills than non-exporters and project a bigger need over the next five years. Furthermore, they are almost 60 percent more likely to have a shortage of foreign language skills, and more than twice as likely to lose business because of an insufficient foreign language capacity.
- The high-level conversation around foreign language business needs often centers around large organizations, which have more resources and flexibility in hiring. However, small and midsize employers, which represent 99 percent of all U.S. firms and employ over 50 percent of private-sector employees, are notably more vulnerable to losing business due to a lack of foreign language skills.
- Overall, midsize employers appear to be the most vulnerable to a gap in their language capacity. The data in this report suggests that as small employers mature into midsize organizations, their overall reliance on foreign language skills increases to a level on par with large employers. However, they are two and half times more likely than large employers to lose out on business due to a lack of foreign language skills.



*My company has many overseas clients and [that's] why our leadership has made it a priority to hire people with different language skills.*

— Midsize Professional Services Firm



*It's imperative for Human Resources to have a dependable full-time translation service.*

— Large Hospitality and Travel Employer

**A high demand for foreign language skills in domestic and international markets.** In almost every industry sector, the demand for foreign language ability is strong in support of both domestic and overseas markets. However, U.S. employers are almost twice as likely to deploy their foreign language capacity domestically than internationally, with 97 percent using these skills to some extent domestically, but only 54 percent doing so overseas (see “U.S. Employers’ Domestic and International Foreign Language Needs,” page 8).

Compared to U.S. employers with foreign language needs on the domestic front only, U.S. employers with at least some foreign language needs internationally have more use for all high-demand languages except Spanish. Most notably, this is the case with Chinese (46 percent vs. 20 percent), French (29 percent vs. 14 percent), Japanese (25 percent vs. 8 percent) and German (24 percent vs. 10 percent). Though Spanish has the highest demand overall, there is no significant difference in demand between groups.

Currently, 19 million U.S. working-age adults—about 10 percent of the United States’ overall working-age population—are of limited English proficiency. As a result, foreign language skills on the domestic front are proving essential not just in serving and selling to consumers, but in managing and communicating with employees. A majority of U.S. employers (58 percent) say that their employees use their foreign language skills to communicate both internally with colleagues and externally with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. Another 13 percent say they use their foreign language capacity for internal communication, exclusively.

**Use of Language Service Providers (LSPs) to complement in-house multilingual staff.** Use of external language service providers (LSPs) also demonstrates the vital role of languages in meeting internal diversity and linguistic needs, with a majority of employers ranking translation of human resources and employee materials as the leading function for LSPs. Overall, two-thirds of employers report a reliance on LSPs, though almost universally as a complement to their in-house multilingual staff, rather than as a stand-alone service.

**Tracking, testing and training.** In the most basic measure of a company’s language strategy, a majority of employers (58 percent) track the languages spoken by their employees. But only about a third (37 percent) of foreign language-dependent employers invest in language testing and 29 percent in language training, despite large gains in satisfaction with employee proficiency among those that do.

## RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These findings have significant implications for education policy. Specifically, they stand to influence how U.S. policymakers prioritize language education and recognize the role of language in staying economically competitive.

Insights from this study are also relevant for students and their families. In particular, this information will make them more aware of the increasing need for employees who are proficient in languages other than English. Accordingly, they will be able to make more informed decisions in planning their academic pursuits.

Additionally, the research points to seven critical steps to help employers address their need for language skills and build a company-wide language strategy. In particular, smaller organizations with fewer resources than their larger counterparts stand to gain the most from implementing practical and locally driven strategies.

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<sup>1</sup>See: CareerBuilder, "Employers Expect Uptick in Hiring in the New Year, CareerBuilder's 2010 Job Forecast Finds," December 2009, <https://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?id=pr542&sd=12%2F29%2F2009&ed=12%2F31%2F2010>; CareerBuilder, "Job Market Showing Gradual Improvement, According to Quarterly Job Forecast from CareerBuilder and USA TODAY," April 2010, <https://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?id=pr561&sd=4%2F1%2F2010&ed=12%2F31%2F2010>; CareerBuilder, "Hiring Outlook for 2012 Remains Cautiously Optimistic, CareerBuilder's Annual Job Forecast Finds," December 2011, <http://press.careerbuilder.com/2011-12-28-Hiring-Outlook-for-2012-Remains-Cautiously-Optimistic-CareerBuilders-Annual-Job-Forecast-Finds>.

<sup>2</sup>New American Economy, "Not Lost in Translation: The Growing Importance of Foreign Language Skills in the U.S. Job Market," March 2017, [http://research.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NAE\\_Bilingual\\_V9.pdf](http://research.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NAE_Bilingual_V9.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>See: Jeanne Batalova and Jie Zong, "Language Diversity and English Proficiency in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, November 11, 2016, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/language-diversity-and-english-proficiency-united-states>; Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "The Limited English Proficient Population in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, July 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/limited-english-proficient-population-united-states>.

<sup>4</sup>See: United States International Trade Commission, *Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises: U.S. and EU Export Activities, and Barriers and Opportunities Experienced by U.S. Firms*, USITC Publication 4169 (Washington, DC: 2010), <https://www.usitc.gov/publications/332/pub4169.pdf>; European Commission, "ELAN: Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise," December 2005, [http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/elan-summary\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/elan-summary_en.pdf); James Foreman-Peck and Yi Wang, "The Costs to the UK of Language Deficiencies as a Barrier to UK Engagement in Exporting: A Report to UK Trade & Investment," 2014, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/309899/Costs\\_to\\_UK\\_of\\_language\\_deficiencies\\_as\\_barrier\\_to\\_UK\\_engagement\\_in\\_exporting.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/309899/Costs_to_UK_of_language_deficiencies_as_barrier_to_UK_engagement_in_exporting.pdf); Joint National Committee for Languages, "The Contributions of Language to the Economic Interests of the United States," Briefing paper for the Commission on Language Learning of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, November 25, 2015, <https://www.amacad.org/multimedia/pdfs/TheContributionsOfLanguageToTheEconomicInterestsOfTheUnitedStates.pdf>.

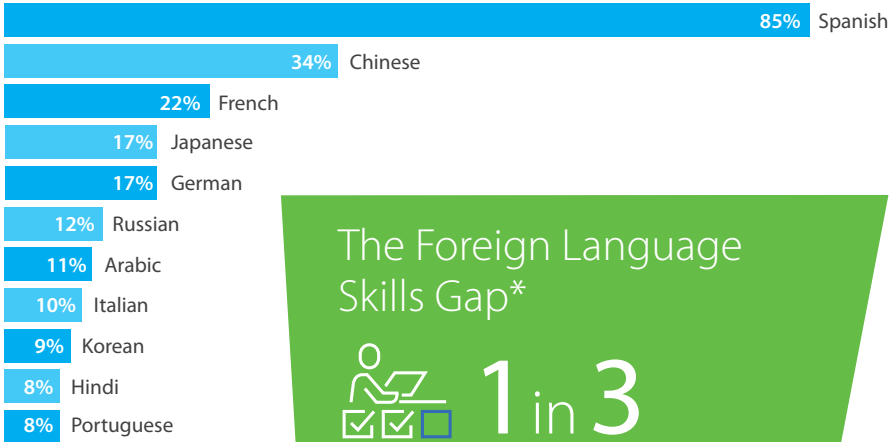
# What Foreign Languages Mean for U.S. Employers

9 out of 10   
rely on employees with  
language skills other than English

56%   
say their foreign language demand  
will increase in the next five years



Most In-Demand Foreign Languages  
Reported by U.S. Employers



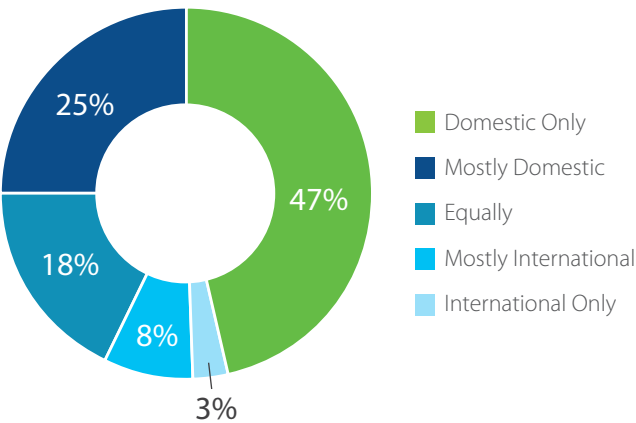
The Foreign Language Skills Gap\*

 **1 in 3**  
foreign language-dependent U.S.  
employers reports a **language skills gap**

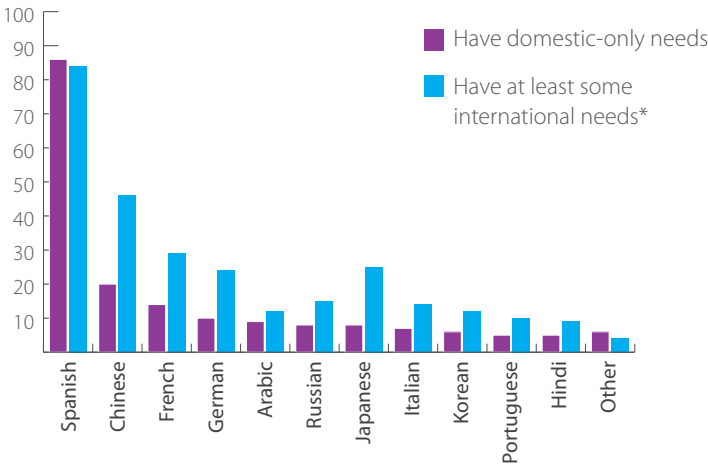
 **1 in 4**  
U.S. employers lost business due to  
a **lack of foreign language skills**

\*A foreign language skills gap occurs when an employer has foreign language needs that are not currently met by its employees.

U.S. Employers' Domestic and  
International Foreign Language Needs



Demand for Specific Foreign Languages, by U.S.  
Employers with Domestic-Only vs. International  
Foreign Language Needs



\*Because employers with at least some international foreign language needs may also have some domestic needs, it cannot be assumed that a given language is necessarily used for the international market.

# Employer Recommendations

- 1 Conduct a Language Needs Analysis.** Identify linguistic strengths and weaknesses in your organization, and define current and future language needs. This helps create clear goals and measurable outcomes for attaining the necessary language capacity.
- 2 Conduct outside language testing and assessment.** Professionally test employees as a first step to identifying your workforce's linguistic strengths and weaknesses.
- 3 Maintain an inventory of the linguistic and cultural competencies of your workforce.**
- 4 Make foreign languages a strategic focus throughout the recruitment process.** Set hiring targets for employees with foreign language skills based on your organizational goals. Prominently communicate interest in employees with multilingual and cross-cultural competencies in all recruiting resources and corporate communications.
- 5 Train talented candidates and employees who lack the required level of language proficiency.** Immersive training, private coaching, online programs and blended learning methods are viable options.
  - Consider personalized, sector-specific training. Not all roles require full proficiency. Many require a working knowledge of a language within a specialized domain. Fulfill these needs with functional, immersive language training relevant to a specific field.
- 6 Identify and cultivate a pipeline of multilingual talent.**
  - Partner with colleges and universities with international studies, foreign language and study abroad programs. Articulate industry language needs to help them design relevant programs—including curricula promoting the functional use of languages in law, engineering, healthcare, tourism, social services or other sectors.
  - Offer internships and job opportunities for qualified students and recent graduates with the linguistic and global competencies your organization requires.
- 7 Advocate regional, state and national policies that are responsive to industries' foreign language and workforce needs, including the funding of early language-learning programs.**



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