

# People who speak multiple languages make the best employees for one big reason

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PARLEZ VOUS



The more languages you speak, the more hireable you are. (Reuters/Michaela Rehle)

Speaking a different language—whether it’s your grandparents’ tongue or high-school Spanish—fundamentally changes the structure of your brain. Put a bunch of these malleable minds together in a company, and you create the potential for some truly original thinking.

We already know that businesses thrive on the diversity of ideas created by a multicultural workforce. Multicultural awareness is an essential soft skill in work as well as life, and it goes beyond office culture to economic benefits: According to a recent survey by the Economist, two-thirds of 572 international company executives say that their teams’ multicultural nature [increases their organization’s innovation](#).

But the languages these diverse teams speak might be just as significant as their cultural offerings. According to one school of thought called linguistic determinism, the structure of a language we speak influences the way we see the world around us. This would imply that people from different

language backgrounds think, behave, and communicate in different ways. (For an example of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in practice, we can turn to the recent film *Arrival*, which explores how an alien species' language altered the speakers' perception of time—and therefore the universe.) In this sense, speakers of different languages display [different mental models and different semantic associations](#).

Observations of multi-language work teams show that [mixed-language groups have a propensity to find innovative solutions for practical problems](#). This is because they use a range of communication strategies in flexible and dynamic ways. When speakers from different language backgrounds work together using a common language, they draw on subconscious concepts that lie below the surface of the language they happen to be conversing in.

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For example, in the German mind, the English word “put” conjures up different images: “legen” means to lie horizontally, “setzen” to make something sit, and

“stellen” to stand something vertically. Each of these meanings automatically gives the German speaker access to new ways of approaching a practical problem. In this way, using different languages in collaboration may lead to new connections being made, especially when dealing with complex tasks.

So what is going on in the heads of these polyglots? Recent investigations into the structural plasticity of the bilingual brain have shown that [multilingual brains function differently to monolingual brains](#). We see when individuals speak a second language, different parts of the brain's Broca's area—the area of the brain involved in language production—light up as opposed to when they use their mother tongue.

In fact, the group of neuroscientists has also discovered [the bilingual brain is structurally different to the monolingual brain](#). The left inferior parietal cortex—an area of the brain heavily involved in the processing of language, forming concepts, and thinking abstractly—is denser in bilinguals than

monolinguals, and becomes denser as language proficiency increases. Moreover, bilingual people have also been found to have altogether [more gray matter than monolinguals](#).

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We also know that individuals are inclined to make more rational decisions when they think in a non-primary language. A study with bilinguals in the

US and South Korea showed that [using a second language eliminates a tendency toward loss aversion](#), and therefore reduces decision-making biases that unduly influence how risks and benefits are perceived. They propose this happens because speaking an additional language provides [greater cognitive and emotional understanding](#) than just the native tongue.

Evidence is growing that proves cognitive benefits for bilinguals, such as that they can end up with improved attention, [intelligence](#), and [better verbal and spatial abilities](#). Likely as a result of structural changes in the networks and connections of the brain, this would suggest they have an increased capacity to process information. This is thought to happen because, like any brain games, logic, or visual exercises, language learning can stimulate and alter the structure of the brain in the same way that a person can build muscle mass. This could explain why multilingual individuals in a team promote cognitive diversity: Their brains all see problems and solutions in different ways.

These findings show that bilingual people may have highly valued employment attributes: analytical thinking, conceptualizing ability, working memory, and dexterity. Clearly, these skills are assets when it comes to rational planning, managing complexity, and problem solving, which are central for executive function.

Forming a multilingual team is like having different cognitive tools in your tool kit: The greater the diversity in your set, the more you can accomplish. This is yet another reason why companies should invest in a diverse talent pool. Not only do a range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds help improve company culture, but the more languages a team speaks, the

greater their potential propensity to think up original solutions that draw from all of their backgrounds. In this way, strategically recruited work teams can secure a competitive edge and grow a company's intellectual capital.

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