

However, people who face lower language barriers can communicate more effectively both internally and externally and will hence be more effective in their work. Non-native speakers of English who can master English, such as the Taiwanese-born Hollywood director Ang Lee, Icelandic-born singer Björk and Colombian-born pop star Shakira (or in fact both authors of this book) have better job and career prospects. MNEs often pay close attention to language skills in recruitment, promotion and overseas postings. For example, some foreign investors in places such as China like to hire graduates from language programmes as they consider good communication more important than subject-specific skills to start a career. At the same time, they would prefer to send a Chinese speaker as expat to head their local operation. Even when there is no formal language policy, multilinguals can play an important role in informal networks that facilitate internal communication (In Focus 3.2). Thus, language capabilities can greatly enhance individuals' career prospects.³⁴

IN FOCUS 3.2



Multilingualists in MNEs

In MNEs, not only top management but technical experts and middle managers have to regularly interact across language barriers when talking to people in other units abroad, or with foreign customers and suppliers. Although MNEs may have an official corporate language, staff in subsidiaries may speak a local language, and staff in headquarters may be more comfortable with yet another language, especially if the MNE is from a small country, such as Finland. Language competence in the corporate language is thus often a precondition for career advancement. Less obvious, however, is that knowledge of other languages can place individuals in critical bridging positions, to help communicate with each other.

For example, in *Kone Elevators*, a study found that multilinguals often become critical communication intermediaries, which enhances their personal network and their access to knowledge. For example, fluent English speakers in subsidiaries were more likely

to be sent to corporate training courses, while headquarter staff with Spanish language competence were sought out by staff in subsidiaries in Spanish-speaking countries as their primary contact. Shared language thus became a powerful glue in informal networks that facilitated knowledge flows within the MNE.

Multilingual individuals who connect different people in different locations and networks acquire knowledge, reputation and influence well beyond their formal role, which helps their career progression. More generally, language skills open new opportunities not only by handling specific situations more effectively but by providing new insights and broader awareness about the company and its business partners.

In meetings, people tend to use the language they expect most members of the group to understand at least minimally, which in practice is often English. The dominance of English might give native speakers of English an initial advantage in international business. However, speaking only English has disadvantages. Learning a language helps to develop sensitivity for subtleties of other cultures – and for the mistakes non-natives make when speaking English, such as Chinese confusing 'he' and 'she', Russians dropping articles and Germans and Japanese moving verbs to the end of complex sentences. Thus some non-native speakers of English find it easier to understand and relate to other non-native speakers. Some may even resent Britons or

Sources: (1) R. Marschan-Piekkari, D. Welch & L. Welch, 1999, in the shadow: The impact of language on structure, power and communication in the multinational, *IBR*, 8: 421–440; (2) V. Peitokorpi & E. Vaara, 2012, Language policies and practices in wholly owned foreign subsidiaries, *JIBS*, 43(9): 808–833; (3) W. Barner-Rasmussen, M. Ehrnrooth, A. Koveshnikov & K. Mäkelä, 2014, Cultural and language skills as resources for boundary spanning within the MNC, *JIBS*, 45: 886–905.