

Is a foreign language course a benefit or an investment?

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Each year, companies in Slovakia pour tens of thousands of euros into language training for their employees. However, many of these companies consider this a benefit for employees, but not as an investment in human resources. In addition, the return on money invested is not measured by the vast majority of companies at all. More details on this topic is contained in the Slovak Association of Language Schools (AJS) survey.

Language courses as a reward
Each year, medium-sized and multinational companies operating in Slovakia spend tens of thousands of euros on language training for their employees. The reasons for spending the money vary. Approximately half of the surveyed companies pay for foreign language courses for their employees as the language is commonly used at work in the company. Further, around 33% of employers perceive foreign language courses as a form of reward for their employees, while the remaining 17% spend money on these courses only in special cases, for example, when moving managers abroad or to another position.

"Foreign languages should not only be considered a benefit or an ad hoc activity, but a long-term, targeted and consistent investment in the company and in its business," said Klaudia Bednárová, President of AJS and Director of The Bridge English Language Centre in Bratislava. However, as the survey reveals, at least half of the companies which took part do not appreciate this fact. Moreover, even fewer of them are able to calculate the real benefits and return on investing in language training.

Independent testing

While 60% of companies surveyed by the Slovak Association of Language Schools evaluate investments in training and education only by a final test, the remaining 40% do not evaluate the results at all. The irony is that a third of the companies who do the tests do not draw any conclusions

from the outputs. "This results in situations where a company often continues pouring money into absent employees, or those making no progress. The annual costs of language training can be up to 300 euros on average per learner-employee," said Klaudia Bednárová.

Some surveyed companies target their language training specifically, e.g. they only pay for courses for employees who actually use the language, while the company pays the full amount for no longer than three years. These investments are checked by testing and monitoring attendance. If an employee fails these tests or is absent from the language lessons more than allowed, the company then stops language investment for that particular person.

Since the final tests are mostly carried out by a school whose foreign language teachers also train the company's employees, the dependence of language schools on good results may, according to Klaudia Bednárová, result in an artificial increase of the outputs due to a conflict of interests. "Testing the improvements in knowledge levels should therefore be independent, ideally carried out by a third party or using a tool independent of the particular school that provides language training to the company," she emphasized, adding that comprehensive testing tools based on European standards are already available for Slovak companies. As an example, she points to the Tracktest online system, which records employee's study progress

over time and for all aspects of language – writing, grammar, reading, comprehension and listening.

Lowest price wins

Up to two-thirds of the companies surveyed choose their language schools using tenders. In most cases, selection is made based on value for money, while the value or quality is defined by the school's references, the CVs of teachers, their pedagogical background or the company's previous experience with a particular school. According to Bednárová, if the rules are generally set this way, in most cases the winner will be the school that quotes the lowest price, and that ultimately results in lower quality and lower value, since at low prices no language school is able to pay for the best teachers. In the end, good teachers make good schools.

Therefore, the tenders should also include, for example, sample lessons, but currently less than a tenth of companies require this. Even fewer companies require language schools to submit a long-term educational plan as part of tenders. "Companies without a plan setting out the starting point and the destination in language learning often spend their money to no effect," she added.

Language as the road to know-how

Measuring the return on investment is not only a question of testing the employees; it also includes monitoring further use of language to the company's benefit. Therefore, foreign languages should not be a target in itself, but a means to achieving

know-how or other skills. Foreign language knowledge is one thing, but the ability to use it in personal communication or at public presentations is another one. As Bednárová mentioned, "Managers studying foreign language should not only study the language, but also try to learn presentation skills and soft skills using it".

In addition to teaching

communication skills, foreign languages are also a tool to obtain foreign know-how, e.g. from electronic or print media or on the internet. Through this transfer, employees can bring new ideas to their company and thus contribute to growth. "It may sound trivial, but this still does not happen within our companies. The engagement of employees in a company's growth is low in Slovakia," Bednárová added.

Her words have also been confirmed by the TNS Slovakia survey, according to which the employee engagement index in Slovakia stands at 50 points, while the European average is up to 17 points more. "The issue of personal involvement and relationship to the brand is frequently mentioned at large companies abroad. Within ethnically mixed teams, there is strong competition, and thus the ability to use foreign language to a company's benefit represents a clear advantage," said Martin Kanis, a manager of the international teams of Ferrari, Mercedes-Benz and Targobank in Germany within the last decade.

Arguments in favor of greater involvement of companies in the field of language learning as well as better control and utilization are clear. Ultimately, it depends on the companies themselves whether and how they will implement the recommendations of experts in their HR systems.