

# Rewarding Workplace Bilingualism

Bilingual employees are good for business and good for America, says **Amado Padilla**, who argues that heritage language speakers should be adequately compensated for their skills

**M**any secondary school districts require that students complete at least one year (and in some school districts two years) of a world language for graduation. In addition, many universities and colleges have instituted a foreign language proficiency requirement that calls for students to demonstrate mastery of a second language. However, the rationale for a world language requirement is rarely given or explained to students. Generally, there is some folk wisdom surrounding a foreign language requirement such as: "It will help students better understand and appreciate other cultures and their people." This is admirable, especially in an increasingly multicultural society like the United States.

There is a mixed message though in our language education policy when it comes to heritage language students. English monolingual students are told in various ways (e.g., school graduation requirements) that proficiency in a foreign language will be an asset for them. At the same time, students from language minority homes are told in countless ways that English language proficiency is the ticket for success in this country and with this comes the added message about the virtue of shedding the home language. So what should it be—foreign language for native English speakers and linguistic assimilation into English and home language attrition for heritage language students?

In recent years, there has been much lip service given to the opportunities in business and government service for persons with bilingual skills. Foreign language teachers use the idea of increased economic opportunity as a "motivational" hook for trying to induce excitement in students about the payoff for developing bilingual skills. However, a review of the literature on the economic advantages of possessing two languages did not result in a single empirical study that documented that bilingualism gave the person a financial and/or economic edge over a monolingual person with the

same education or experience. What we did find though were many references to the need for employees to be knowledgeable of other languages and cultures. Below are two of many such statements found in our search:

- According to a recent issue of *Smart Business* magazine, a survey of major firms by the Washington-based Employee Relocation Council found that companies spend an average of \$1 million to replace employees who can't handle overseas assignments. 58% of these returnees to the U.S. indicate that they had difficulty adjusting to the language and culture of the new nation.

- A brochure of the Modern Language

Association states "If you've ever thought of being a nurse, a doctor, a police officer, a judge, an architect, a businessperson, a singer, a contractor, or a web master, you will multiply your chances of success if you speak more than one language. A hotel manager or a customer-service representative who knows English and Spanish or English and Korean may look much better at promotion time than one who knows only English."

Therefore, to explore the question of economic gain for being bilingual, I along with several colleagues conducted a phone survey of employers in Santa Clara, California. Our goal was to determine whether there was an economic advantage

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for bilinguals in the local job market. We contacted banks, hospitals, police departments, a county social service department, the regional office of the INS located in the county, school districts, and several nationwide communication companies with local offices. Most of the information was obtained from spokespersons within the human resources office and/or personnel department. Our phone interviews consisted of five questions: (1) Is there a hiring preference for people who are bilingual? (2) Do you have a salary differential for bilingual employees? (3) How do you determine if the applicant is truly bilingual if this is a prerequisite for the job? (4) Are there specific language needs that your company is especially interested in because of types of clients served? (5) If your company or department does pay more to persons possessing bilingual skills, is that for all jobs or is it different depending on the level of the position (e.g., managerial vs. entry level)?

We selected Santa Clara County because it is the center of Silicon Valley. This area is a treasure trove of people from all over the world and if linguistic diversity and appreciation for bilingualism can be found anywhere it is in Santa Clara County. For example, the 2000 census indicates that 45 percent of all residents in the county spoke a language other than English at home.

A few highlights of our study revealed that among phone companies there is a wage differential for bilingual employees. A spokesperson for AT&T said that their salaries vary according to the level of the position, while MCI said that they use a separate transfer service if bilingual speakers are required, but that these workers do get paid more. In addition, Sprint said that they pay bilingual workers 5% more than monolinguals and that this applies across the board regardless of the position level. The INS reported that the border patrol requires competency in Spanish or another language depending on the area in which the person works. In fact, training for the border patrol includes intensive Spanish language instruction.

The public social service agency that was contacted stated that they have no hiring preferences for people who speak more than one language, but they do pay bilingual social workers up to \$1,200 more a year. However, the spokesperson for the agency said that there was no formal mechanism in place for bilingual professionals. In other words, social workers were assigned to projects when a bilingual professional was needed (primarily Spanish and Vietnamese). Therefore, social workers employed fulltime



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were not required to use a second language on a day-to-day basis. Bilingual professionals were only used on a project-to-project basis and when used, they were paid \$100 more a month.

A local branch of a large nationwide banking chain stated that it did not have a hiring preference for bilingual applicants. Although at this same bank, several bilingual bank tellers indicated that they use their Arabic, Spanish, Taglog, and Vietnamese skills at least several times a week. A Kaiser Permanente spokesperson said that they do have hiring preferences for individuals who are bilingual, especially if the language is Spanish. However, they do not have a salary differential for their bilingual employees. Further, they have not established any procedures for checking the proficiency level of applicants who claim to be bilingual. The personnel department simply trusts that the individual is telling the truth about their bilingual skills.

Several school districts were also contacted and none indicated a preference for bilingual teachers unless the person was specifically applying for a bilingual teaching

position or as a foreign language teacher. School administrators indicated that they were always on the "lookout" for teachers who were bilingual, especially in Spanish, but this didn't guarantee the person a job and certainly not an extra stipend.

A job search website geared specifically for Latinos was also examined for job listings and language preferences. We found that for the most part, the jobs listed on the website did not necessarily pay more for bilingual skills, but being bilingual was a requirement for employment for many of the listed positions. Interestingly, although there was no financial incentive for an applicant to be bilingual, many of the jobs posted indicated that the applicant had to be a fluent Spanish/English speaker!

The results of the survey are disheartening because they suggest that bilingualism is still not highly valued in a geographic area known for its multicultural and multilingual diversity. Many corporate leaders and politicians have referred to Silicon Valley as the "new industrial engine" of the new multinational economy. However, we are left wondering why bilingualism is not more valued



by public and private employers alike, especially in a county as rich in language diversity as anywhere on earth. How can those of us who value bilingualism look our heritage language learners in the eye and say that there are economic advantages in store for them if they maintain the language of the home while also learning English. I believe strongly that there should be some direct and tangible economic advantage to being bilingual. It is not enough to simply tell a student from a heritage language home that there are cognitive, cultural, or social advantages to being bilingual. It would be comforting to know that bilingualism also pays off in the long run in terms of monetary incentives.

There are a few things that we can do to change the low status of bilingualism in the workplace especially among our heritage language youth. First, as language educators we must continue to encourage our students that there is inherent value in maintaining a home language. This requires the concerted effort of parents, schools, and influential role models such as recording artists, and TV and movie personalities. Second, we need to unite with ethnic oriented business organizations to adopt policies that support heritage language maintenance under the banner of "it's

good for business." Third, major corporations and government agencies that require bilingual personnel need to be brought to the table and shown that bilingualism is a special skill that requires considerable time and energy and that such skill should be compensated financially in the same way as other skilled workers—after all "it's good for business." Finally, we need to exert pressure on politicians and the federal government to provide stipends and other forms of economic incentives for students and teachers interested in maintaining the language of their ancestors. After all "what's good for business is good for America, and what's good for America is good for business." In sum, everyone's goal will be met when youth from non-English speaking homes can experience economic opportunities because they have maintained their home language and become well-educated world language specialists. Such individuals will have more reason to see themselves as Americans first, yet be proud of their ethnic and linguistic roots. ■

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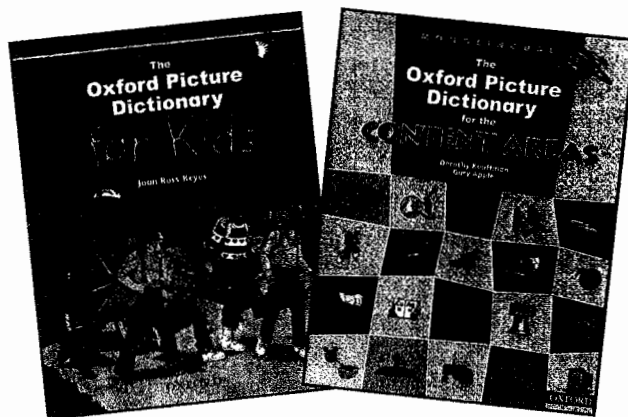
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