



STUDENTS REAP the Employment Benefits of BILINGUALISM Through Post-Secondary Studies in French

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This article provides guidance counsellors and academic advisors with information on the real world benefits of pursuing French as a second language throughout a student's academic career.

Employers value bilingual employees

For individuals, bilingualism is a stepping stone toward global citizenship. For our country, it is an essential element in economic competitiveness. But in both cases, bilingualism matters not just for its inherent benefits, but because of the role it plays in fostering our multilingual and multicultural society.¹



Employment rates in Canada are higher for those who speak both English and French (70%) than for those who speak only English or only French (about 60%) according to the 2006 census. Bilingual employees also earned about 10% more than English-speaking and 40% higher than French-speaking.²

Results of a 2008 survey of 63 companies across Canada indicated that 84% of employers considered knowledge of both English and French to be an asset or gave preference to English-French bilinguals. Similarly, 81% of those who supervised bilingual employees considered them to be a valuable asset to their organizations. Findings suggest that the demand for bilingual employees outside Quebec and the public service is increasing, with one in five respondents anticipating greater demand. Respondents who anticipated greater demand expected to hire a median number of five new employees in the next three years. Nearly half the respondents (46%) agree that it is hard to find employees who are bilingual, which suggests a need to offer more opportunities for, and to engage more students in, post-secondary FSL education. Supervisors expect that 54% of new bilingual hires will be entry level, 34% mid-level, and 12% senior level. The greater proportion of entry-level positions makes intuitive sense, since business expansion is usually more dependent on entry-level positions. The anticipated increase in mid-level hires (lower than their current proportion) suggests that businesses often promote bilingual employees from within.³

Recruiters often see bilingualism as a sign of experience and education.

Moreover, when two employees have equal skills, companies are more likely to promote a bilingual employee. Bilingual employees are perceived as more sociable and more persevering – “*having bilingual skills in a rapidly changing world made the employee much more flexible and more valuable to the company in their capacity to adapt.*” Nearly one third of all hiring managers contacted by CareerBuilder.com in 2006 claimed that they will recruit more bilingual employees. Similarly, a study by Canadian Heritage concluded that bilinguals can find a job and change jobs more easily than those who speak only one language.⁴

Employers' valuation of bilingual employees is well founded. Bilinguals are better able to analyze their knowledge of language. They are able to focus more on meaning and take into account only relevant features when there is distractive information. Bilinguals demonstrate more mental flexibility and perform better on tasks requiring mental manipulation. They are original in verbal expression, demonstrate non-verbal intelligence and can answer open-ended questions more freely than monolinguals.⁵

Employers also value the fact that those with two well-developed languages are more sensitive to communication. There is some evidence to suggest that they are better able to understand the needs of others and to respond appropriately. Through exposure to cultural differences they may become more respectful of differences between people and their cultures and may be able to communicate with a large variety of people.⁶

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Students value post-secondary French Second-Language studies “Now [that] I’m at university, I really realize how important (a second language) is going to be to me in the future. That’s why I’m determined to master French by the time I graduate and start looking for work.”⁷

Some French-language institutions outside Quebec report that significant enrollment comes from English-language students; for example, almost 70% at Campus Saint-Jean in Alberta and just below 30% at the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface in Manitoba. At the University of Ottawa, enrollment in undergraduate French Immersion Programs increased by about 60% between 2008 and 2013.⁸

The Ontario University Student Alliance has expressed support for French post-secondary programs and notes that “steps are currently in motion to improve the state of French programs in post-secondary education and student enrollment.” The Ontario Distance Grant has been expanded to include full-time students enrolled in French programs, and a proposal has been made to establish an Advisory Committee on Post-secondary Education, composed of representatives from student groups, as well as experts from the public, private, and non-profit sectors.⁹

In a 2005 CPF survey of 400 university students, the most compelling reason for choosing to continue French in University was their enjoyment of their high school French programs. Their next choices were the prospect of improved employment opportunities, the usefulness of French when travelling, and the belief that French was easy.¹⁰

Many post-secondary students participating in focus groups hosted by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages cited second-language skills as being a real asset for employment and career opportunities. They viewed the need for knowledge of other languages as a given in the modern, increasingly global context—and therefore as an integral part of post-secondary education in today’s world.¹¹



Students thrive in post-secondary French Second-Language studies “When entering a French course at the beginning of the year, we were told what was expected of us in terms of our level of proficiency in French. The professor was available if we did not understand subjects discussed in class.”¹²

The 2005 CPF survey also found that most students who took university French courses were pleased with the quality of their secondary French courses. Most had no difficulty with the transition from high school French to university French and felt that the coursework was not too difficult. They were comfortable with their understanding of lectures and the required readings, but were less comfortable writing essays in French. When asked about

the type of help they would like the universities to offer, students requested more frequent opportunities to speak with Franco-phones, the opportunity to study at a French-language university, and the opportunity to resubmit written work after the professor had corrected the grammar. Some students were in favour of language upgrading courses.¹³ ■

END NOTES:

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