

Considerations for In-Company Business English Training

Over the last couple of years, companies in Hong Kong seem to have been facing a dilemma when it comes to language training. With the handover in 1997 seemingly a distant memory and China's recent entry into the World Trade Organization, companies have channeled valuable resources into Mandarin language training, with English language training still playing an important role, although second fiddle to Mandarin in some companies.

However, we should not forget the influence that a bi-lingual or tri-lingual workforce can have on the productivity and effectiveness of a company. As we all know, Hong Kong is an international centre for business and finance. Many expatriates from English-speaking countries work and reside here and businesses from overseas are eager to develop close links with local companies. The need for staff with good English language skills is as great as ever particularly as this has a direct impact on the company's image with foreign customers and clients and future business development.

From our experience, a sub-standard English ability of staff has a number of potentially costly and damaging effects on a company. Firstly, ask yourself the question – how much time and money are wasted with senior staff having to re-write business documents (reports, formal letters, board papers etc.) so that they meet the required standards? Secondly, how much business is lost with old and potential customers due to miscommunication or the poor English skills of staff, particularly those on the front-line or in sales or marketing. Thirdly, the image factor.

Staff working for companies especially in the finance and insurance industries still write documentation with language that would have been more suitable 30 years ago. Not only is this old-fashioned and long-winded, but the documents also lack clarity and understanding causing further problems for the reader. Staff working in the shipping and merchandising industries tend to write e-mails as if they are telexes, with one paragraph, short incomplete sentences and a heavy use of abbreviations. These may lack a suitable tone, and cause difficulties in being understood.

So what is the solution? Most companies realize the need to improve the English language proficiency of their staff, although may lack resources to train a large group of staff through a regular on-going process. Nowadays, companies tend to consider two options – e-based learning or skills-based classroom training. However, a combination of the two also has benefits.

One solution for providing training to a large group of staff as well as those staff who do not have the time to attend regular training programmes is e-based learning or self-study packages.

E-learning or distance learning programs are common in the market. However, clients can be left frustrated with what they may see as a lack of clear progress or a lack of participation when a program runs, and in some cases, it can be more a headache than a help.

From our experience with these types of programs, there are three aspects to consider. First, is the program relevant to their work? Relevancy will grab the attention of your staff more as they can see how it directly helps them in their work. Second, how much interaction is there with the trainer and what is the trainer's familiarity with the participant's learning capabilities? Most programs on the market are generic in nature and trainers/assessors could be located anywhere in the world, therefore they may not be familiar with the learning problems HK Chinese people experience and due to differences in time, interactive learning opportunities might be limited. Third, do the participants at the start of the course have a clear vision of the program and can 'put a face' to who is at the other end of the program?

Therefore, how do we address these issues. Firstly, distance or self-study programs can quite easily be tailored to fit the industry or the group of staff they are intended for.

Secondly, most companies prefer a 'blended' approach in which participants work through the materials and complete work-related assignment tasks online, receive the feedback on-line, but in addition to this, they also attend a number of workshops that are scheduled intermittently throughout the program. The workshops allow the trainer/assessor to review the main language and themes with the participants and cover common mistakes made as well as giving an opportunity for participants to query points. These also act as a break in the program that in some ways encourages participants to complete assignments so that they are on the same page as others when it comes to reviewing errors and learning points in the workshop.

Finally, to provide a clear vision and objectives for the program, an introductory workshop should be incorporated which helps explain the logistics and expectations of the program as well as introducing some of the key themes of the program.

A recent example conducted by Language Key was with the courier company TNT International Express. The target group was Customer Service staff who were required to write replies to letters of complaint and letters of apology.

A 'blended' program was developed that contained an introductory workshop, two tailored tutorial booklets focusing on the key writing skills, two tailored assignments, and two feedback workshops, one after each assignment submission.

As regards to classroom based training, The Workplace English Campaign continues to make companies aware of the need for English Language training. It has recently changed its policy to focus solely on subsidizing companies for in-house training or benchmarking projects. Companies receive up to 50% of the total course and test fee or a maximum of HK\$3,000 per person on completion of one of the recognized tests. However, it is important to remember that although the WEC will continue throughout 2005, there has been no confirmation as of yet about the future after 2005.

What many companies are concentrating on now is more focused English Language skills-based training. By selecting a group of staff with the same language needs, an intensive tailor-made course can be developed which incorporates clearly defined objectives outlined by the participants, line managers and/or the company's training/H.R. Department.

An example of this type of focused course might include customer service based training programs, which target frontline staff, developing customer service language skills both either face-to-face and/or over the telephone. Contents may include telephone language, greeting people, offering assistance, handling enquiries, asking questions and clarifying understanding, selling your companies products and services, cross-selling, dealing with awkward customers, handling money exchanges etc.

Being more focused in your language training requirements allows staff to take the ideas taught within the classroom and put them immediately into practice in their daily work, since the course is based on the skills required for their work. Remember though that skills-based training does not necessarily increase the overall proficiency of the staff in such a short time frame.

However, if you are looking for a return on your investment, it works. Not only do staff gain confidence in using English, they have a better and clearer understanding and usage of language to perform their work more professionally and accurately.