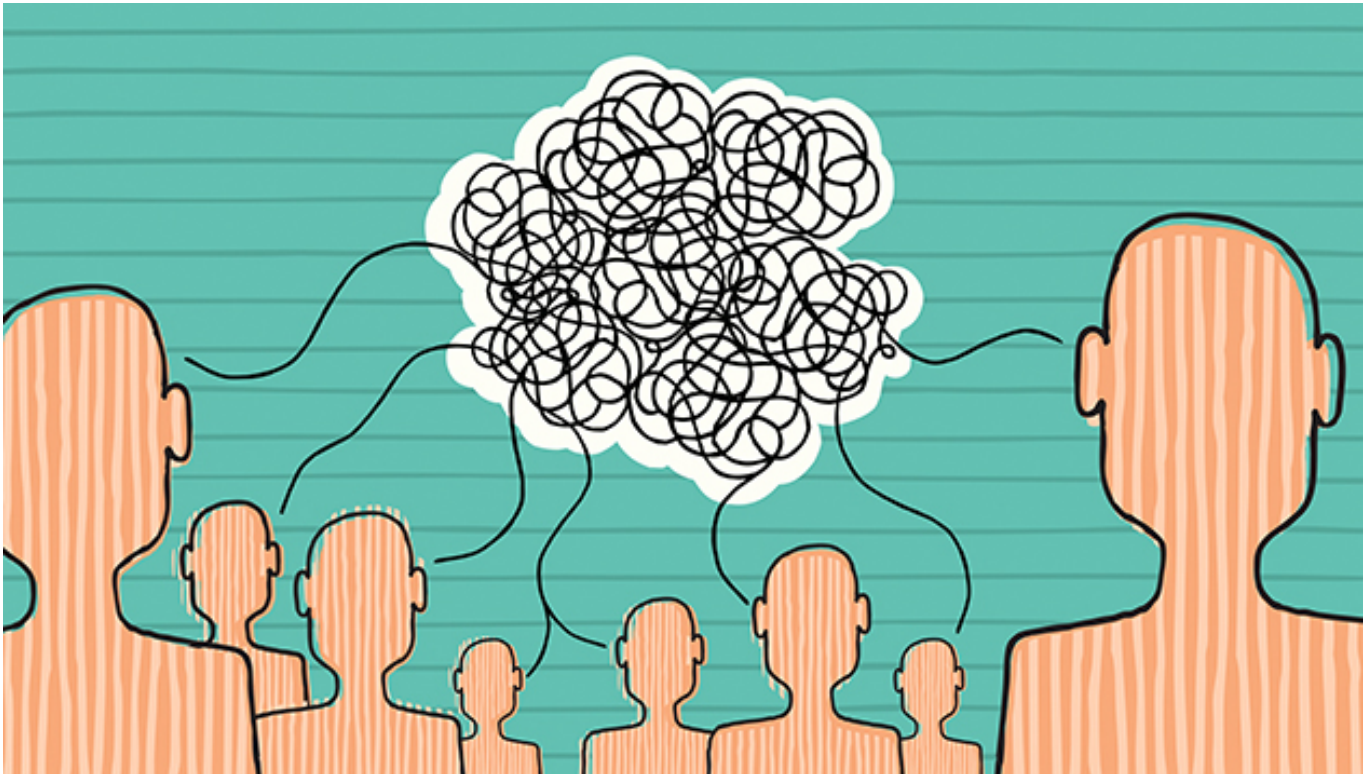


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The sense and nonsense of language requirements

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In a bilingual and increasingly international city such as Hong Kong, are strict language requirements for job applicants holding employers back?

What makes a good communicator? One of the obvious answers is language ability. Conveying your thoughts to someone is infinitely easier when you speak the same language, especially when it comes to the workplace. Where you can get away with sign language when ordering a drink in a bar in rural Russia, you're going to need your words when discussing a new product with the head of marketing.

It's only logical then that language skills are a part of many job descriptions. Employers are keen to hire people who will do well when expressing themselves and listening to others. Yet in a bilingual and increasingly international city such as Hong Kong, the question arises in which language employees should be able to communicate.

While Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong, is it paramount that all staff speak both fluently? Are employers' requests for Chinese-speaking candidates backed up by the specific needs of the business, or is it simply easier, force of habit, or even fear of the unknown? And are companies needlessly missing out on talent by applying a blanket ban on non-Chinese speaking talent?

Yes they are, says **Kayla Tam, campaign officer at Unison**, an NGO serving ethnic minority Hong Kong residents and their families.

"A person's language skills are just one aspect of their abilities," Tam explains. "We know of many who have excellent academic results, work ethic and interpersonal, organisational and management skills, but face immense difficulties securing a job because of their Chinese abilities."

“A person's language skills are just one aspect of their abilities.”

- Kayla Tam, campaign officer at Unison

Last year, the organisation published a report revealing the majority of higher skilled jobs advertised online are inaccessible to non-Chinese speakers. Out of 1,500 internet job postings on Hong Kong-based job sites only 19% were available to those who don't read Chinese and speak Cantonese and/or Putonghua.

While these numbers may not seem that strange considering 89.5% of the population are in fact Cantonese speakers, some argue there's a problem with the motivation behind the language requirements, and its effect on the city as an international business hub.

Tam refers to the practice as "blanket Chinese requirements", arguing there's no need to require perfect Chinese from all candidates, since technically different roles require different language proficiencies.

She adds the language barrier put up by employers may lead non-Chinese residents to feel trapped in the few career options available to them even though they have much to offer. "Some may even decide to leave Hong Kong to countries where they may find more opportunities for career advancement."

Generally speaking, there's little room for non-Chinese speakers in entry and mid-level roles in Hong Kong, agrees Doris Lam, associate director at HR recruitment firm Elliott Scott HR. "But it differs per industry," she says. "For example in many law firms or finance, more often than not there's no requirement for Chinese."

For those companies that do demand Chinese language skills, she acknowledges that some seem to do so without a clear reason. "There are occasions where we feel the language isn't a must for the position," she says.

Especially for managerial roles, she often asks the company to clarify their requirements. "And sometimes it turns out they had never even thought about it, but are open to being more lenient after we bring it up."

Depending on the industry, those who don't speak Chinese may take a little longer to find a role, Lam says. But overall, she doesn't believe Hong Kong is restrictive in bringing in international talent, nor does she think it's a major issue from a recruitment perspective.

If there are strict language requirements she'll still be able to fill the position. "But if not, companies might suddenly have five or 10 more candidates available to them. By loosening the language requirements, companies gain access to a more diverse pool of talent."

“ By loosening the language requirements, companies gain access to a more diverse pool of talent. ”

- Doris Lam, associate director, Elliott Scott HR

It's that untapped talent pool where Debbie Mannas, head of organisation development and talent for Asia at Sun Life, sees an opportunity. She argues part of the reason why hiring managers put seemingly unnecessary language restrictions in place is due to their fear of the unknown.

"People may sometimes use language to disguise their fear of diversity," she says. "Foreign talent are often turned away when seeking lower to mid-level roles because they ostensibly lack Chinese language skills."

"But even when someone of a different ethnic group has grown up in Hong Kong, went to local schools and is fluent in Cantonese with reasonable English skills – much like the rest of the local population – suddenly the issue becomes that their English isn't good enough."

In Mannas' view, demanding fluency in both Chinese and English results in companies ending up with employees who may speak both, but may not be good communicators or have the additional hard-hitting competencies that would make them top talent.

While it's not unlikely that some companies let their (unconscious) bias get the best of them when hiring, others argue the demand for Chinese language skills comes down to company culture.

"If you take for example a local footwear company, you won't find anyone who doesn't speak Chinese, no matter what level you're at," Lam says. That's not to say these companies couldn't benefit from hiring a non-Chinese speaker if they chose to do so, she adds. "If they brought in an American designer they might bring valuable contributions to the culture."

Given the fact that Chinese is a notoriously difficult language for non-locals to learn, where does that leave employers who prefer to have all employees speak the local language, but also want to bring in more international experience and viewpoints?

Lam suggests looking into candidates with, for example, an Australian-Chinese or Canadian-Chinese background, since they can bring the international experience and mindset, while also fulfilling the language requirement.

Alternatively, companies could approach it like a diversity quota. "You might say 'I need at least 10 people on this team to speak Cantonese for business purposes, but outside of that we can look for talent regardless of their Chinese language abilities'," Lam says.

“ You might want to determine the minimum level of fluency needed and work up from there. ”

- Jay Templeton, manager at Impact Language

As globalisation continues to deliver more international talent, it's time to start assessing language like any other skill: based on the individual requirements of the job.

When doing so, it's important to keep in mind that it's unlikely you will find many second language learners who achieve professional proficiency in all four areas of proficiency – reading, writing, listening and speaking – says **Jay Templeton, manager at Hong Kong-based language school Impact Language.**

"It may not be that relevant though," Templeton argues. "For example, a lower level of proficiency in writing might be sufficient as long as the employee has a higher level of proficiency in reading and speaking."

The employer needs to ask which of the four language skills is most important, and in what context the individual will need to use the language, Templeton says. "You might want to determine the minimum level of fluency needed and work up from there. Proficiency descriptions from frameworks like the ILR or CEFR could be a good starting place."

Lam says there's a lot of education to be done internally, between HR and the business. "It is HR's role to challenge the company and say 'You don't know this person or their skills. Why not consider them even if they don't fit the language requirement?'"

Mannas adds: "If speaking the same language was so critical, then you have to wonder why native speakers of any language don't understand each other perfectly."

"It's not that language isn't important," she concludes: "It is – if it's a critical business requirement. Just don't let it blind you to other more critical skills."

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