

Addressing the Language Gap in Construction

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Breaking down barriers in the industry for safety, inclusion & productivity

Language barriers in the construction industry are a pervasive problem which are not being adequately addressed. These obstacles present severe consequences in terms of safety, work efficiency and workforce morale. Effective communication — facilitated by language training and technology — is essential for creating a safer and more productive environment on construction sites.

Let us imagine Employee X, a skilled construction worker whose first language is not English. Due to limited English proficiency, Employee X struggles to communicate effectively with colleagues, posing risks to themselves and others. Their strong work ethic and dedication often go unnoticed due to a lack of integration with their peers. Now consider a scenario where Employee X encounters a significant safety hazard on-site. Without adequate language training, Employee X may be unable to convey the scope or urgency of the danger, potentially leading to serious consequences.

Research from the University of Reading reveals that up to 50% of construction workers are migrants, the majority of whom are non-native English speakers. It is important to consider here that non-native English speakers face disproportionately higher risks of

workplace accidents due to communication breakdowns. This distinction is exacerbated by ad hoc translation practices, which include relying on bilingual employees. This reliance breeds inaccuracies — especially when expressing highly technical jargon — which are further accentuated by unavoidable hindrances such as noise, team rotations and slang. These makeshift solutions are insufficient in high-stake situations where precise and timely communication is crucial.

Consequences of a Communication Breakdown

Inadequate communication can have a negative impact on measurable outcomes such as productivity and additional costs, as well as intangible elements like morale, teamwork and trust. Simple misunderstandings can have knock-on effects which cause delays, reworks and added expenses, straining both budgets and timelines.

Insights from LetsBuild reported that recent worksite studies in Europe reveal the consequences of communication breakdowns: 1 in 3 projects fail, a mere 37% finish on time, and only 52% achieve the goals. This can be compared to worksites with robust communication practices which see 71% of projects completed on time and 80% achieving their objectives. Simple mistakes stemming from poor communication can also lead to financial burdens such as the purchase of incorrect apparatus or incurring legal fees from unmet commitments.

Teamwork, strong morale and shared trust are imperative to successful projects. Unfortunately, unaddressed language barriers hamper collaboration and often result in discontent and frustration among team members. Perceived inequalities, especially when non-native speakers are in the minority, can lead to feelings of exclusion and resentment. This dissatisfaction often results in high staff turnover, further delaying projects and increasing costs.

For non-native speakers, marginalization can foster a destructive work environment, compromising both safety and productivity. Construction companies with poor communication practices risk not only the well-being of their workers but also their

professional reputation, as high accident rates and inefficient projects tarnish their records and reduce future opportunities.

The construction industry is a leading contributor to the European economy and continues to grow in scale. According to the European Builders Confederation, the construction sector generates about 9% of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the European Union and employs around 18 million people. Despite its forward momentum, it remains traditional in its practices. Harnessing the power of technology and digital tools offers significant potential for addressing language barriers.

The Role of Multilingual Training & Resources

You could easily ask why language is specifically important to the construction industry. By its very nature, it is jargon-heavy and relies on clear messaging and precise instructions being passed down the chain of command. The industry is uniquely diverse, which breeds an extremely dissonant common language, therefore heightening workplace misunderstandings and risks while highlighting the necessity of companywide language training.

Employee X from the prior example would have benefited from targeted language proficiency tests, followed by tailored training programs. Workers must be equipped with industry-specific vocabulary with a focus on safety-related terminology, as these are as essential as everything else in their toolbox. Flexible online training ensures accessibility and allows progress to be monitored, preventing individuals from falling behind.

Providing health and safety guidelines, safety cases, toolbox talks and project briefings in multiple languages would foster a sense of equality and reduce time wasted on reiterating instructions. In a similar vein, outlining concise protocols for the management of multilingual teams can help preempt and mitigate communication challenges. Furthermore, appointing individuals to facilitate intercultural expression can create a more cohesive and considerate work environment.

Leadership plays a crucial role in driving these changes. It is vital that senior team members lead by example, emphasizing the importance of open communication and active participation in multilingual training practices. Leadership should also prioritize regularly assessing the effectiveness of communication practices, and adapt strategies as needed to ensure continuous improvement.

I urge construction companies to acknowledge the diversity of their workforce and the absence of a common language as critical challenges. Language proficiency is not only a supplementary skill but an essential tool for upholding safety standards and productivity. Industry leaders should prioritize investing time and resources in digital language training to reduce communication barriers.

How Effective Language Training Benefits a Business

Returning to Employee X, let us now imagine the benefits they would have reaped from comprehensive language training.

Armed with a strong vocabulary, Employee X has the confidence to communicate competently — especially in regards to hazards —and to contribute ideas which add value to the project.

They are no longer underutilized, their work does not go unrecognized and they become an irreplaceable asset to the team.

Ultimately, by making multilingual training and resources a standard practice, companies can create a much safer, more inclusive and more efficient workplace.

Neil Berry, worldwide senior vice president of Babbel for Business, leads Babbel's global business-to-business (B2B) organization, expanding Babbel's reach across diverse markets and industries. With 30-plus years in software as a service (SaaS), Berry brings extensive expertise in scaling businesses. Babbel for Business serves more than 2,000 clients across 30-plus countries with its innovative language learning platform. Visit babbelforbusiness.com.