



Alan Tolley, Managing Director

R&D Tool and Engineering – a strategic approach to language and culture

From a position three years ago where all business was conducted in English, R&D now has language skills at the centre of its trading in overseas markets and plans further recruitment of language speakers in its quest for increased export sales.

Based near Mansfield, R&D Tool and Engineering Ltd supply tooling to the plastics moulding industry worldwide: their moulds are used to produce plastic bottles and containers for products such as soft drinks, cosmetics and detergents. The company formed in 1976 and now has over 300 employees and a total group annual turnover of \$40m. The company was a finalist at the 2004 East Midlands International Business Communication Awards.

Conscious decision to deal multi-lingually

Peter Lloyd, the company's Sales and Marketing Manager, is a comparatively recent recruit to the organisation, having joined in 2004. "When I was appointed," he comments, "a decision had already been taken to improve the company's ability to deal with customers in languages other than English." Previously, the firm had typically been able to 'get by' through the use of English, but Peter goes on to explain: "We recognised that proficiency in the language and cultural awareness allowed non-English speaking customers to feel more comfortable dealing with us, and made them more likely to build long-term relationships."

Alan Tolley, the MD of the Mansfield operation, had in 2002 recruited an account manager based in Strasbourg to be responsible for customers in France, Portugal, Spain and North Africa. Having the ability to do business in French, Portuguese, Arabic and Spanish as well as English was clearly one of the major considerations in his recruitment.

"From a sales and marketing point of view," says Peter, "it's important for us to move beyond the areas where we have traditionally done business. Although the majority of our sales have been overseas for some years now, developing new markets is the key to our future success, and we are aware of the importance of languages and culture in achieving this."

Recruitment of language speakers is the cornerstone

Peter himself is a competent German speaker and is capable of conducting business in the language. From a strategic point of view, however, the company has recognised that there is a need to have within the organisation a range of language skills. To this end, they have recently recruited a bilingual Czech/English account manager (who is also fluent in Russian and speaks some Polish) to undertake market development in Central and Eastern Europe. UK Trade and Investment staff in Prague were a great help in suggesting recruitment agencies who could help find candidates for this position. In addition, they now have a French national (who also speaks Spanish and some Italian) as an account manager in Mansfield as well as a British manager with skills in French, Italian and Spanish.

“Language competence was one of our major selection criteria when recruiting,” explains Peter. “We need some technical ability and understanding of our markets, but we feel that it’s easier to develop that in someone who has business and linguistic skills than to ask a well-qualified technical person to learn to speak two languages in addition to English.” Having a high number of language speakers on site also means that technical drawings, tender documents and specifications can be translated into English for in-house use without the expense of engaging an outside translation company.

The company’s considered approach to language and culture is also reflected in its website and literature. Internet users can currently find R&D’s site in French and German and will soon be able to access it in Spanish; the firm’s general literature has been available in a number of languages for some time. For the past year, the company has been sending out press releases in five languages to the trade press in regions that include Continental Europe, Mexico, Brazil and Egypt. R & D recently had a full article outlining the firm’s achievements and services published by a German-language business magazine. As Peter Lloyd puts it: “We can’t expect our potential overseas customers to read only English-language publications.”

Languages - part of the mentality

“Our approach is strategic and long-term,” he continues. “Our policy is to grow our business by looking after our existing, mature markets while at the same time developing new ones. The company mentality, from senior management to production staff, is that languages should play a central part in that growth.”

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