



# The Employment Benefits of Official Language Bilingualism

## A SURVEY OF SUPERVISORS OF BILINGUAL EMPLOYEES

Despite sustained expressions of public support for linguistic duality and second-language education, the strong enrolment gains of past decades have not been maintained. Core French enrolment is declining in most provinces and territories, while French immersion (FI) enrolment has made only slight gains.

In a paper presented at the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages' 2004 symposium on official languages: *Vision and Challenges in the 21st Century*, Jack Jedwab notes that "When it comes to language learning there appears to be a growing gap between attitudes and behaviour.... Many may like the idea of expanded bilingualism in theory but be unprepared in practice to invest the time and resources to make inroads." (Jedwab, 2004).

CPF believes that parents, students, and educators who are convinced that there are substantial academic and employment benefits associated with official-language bilingualism are more likely to view the completion of high school FI programs as an asset and to turn support for linguistic duality into action. Stakeholders across the country have called for initiatives to promote the employment benefits of bilingualism to students and parents. Unfortunately, the lack of evidence-based information on the career advantages of bilingualism makes French-Second-Language (FSL) education promotion a difficult task for advocates, who can do little more than assert that bilingual career opportunities are not limited to the federal public service.

To learn more about the nature of the job market in Canada, outside of Quebec and outside of the federal public service, for workers who can communicate in both English and French, CPF commissioned Ipsos Reid to conduct a small labour market survey of Canadian employers regarding bilingual positions in selected occupations in the service (tertiary) sector, which is currently experiencing significant growth.

## SURVEY OF SUPERVISORS OF BILINGUAL EMPLOYEES – HIGHLIGHTS

### Methodology

Ipsos Reid conducted an online survey among a sample of 476 supervisors of bilingual employees who reside outside Quebec and outside the federal public service, between July 7 and July 15, 2008. The sample obtained during this research is not a probability sample: the findings of this research provide directional, not definitive, information about the market for bilingual workers in Canada. In other words, survey results suggest what the bilingual labour market may look like, but more extensive research is required.

### Profile of bilingual employees

Among the approximately 17,400 employees supervised by the respondents, approximately one in five is bilingual. Of these bilingual employees, nearly one in three is required to be bilingual as a condition of employment. Bilingual employees are equally represented in entry- and mid-level positions, at 40% and 39% respectively, and 21% are senior-level positions requiring significant experience or training in the industry prior to employment.

It is interesting to compare these findings with commonly held beliefs that bilingual employment opportunities are limited to entry-level retail sales positions and with the results of an earlier survey of private-sector employers in the Toronto area, which suggested that most available employment was for entry-level positions for immersion graduates with post-secondary education, and that bilingualism became less important as one moved up in the company (Hart, Lapkin, and Swain, 1998).

The educational attainment of bilingual employees supports the finding that bilingual employees are equally represented in entry- and mid-level positions. Sixty-four per cent of the bilingual employees supervised by respondents have at least some post-secondary education at the community college (26%) and university (30%) levels.



Not surprisingly, 42% of respondents were not able to specify a required level of French-language competence. This suggests that, like post-secondary institutions and ministries of education, Canadian businesses have no standardized tools with which to define proficiency.

### **Employers value bilingualism**

Nearly half the respondents who are involved in hiring decisions (49%) consider bilingualism to be either very (15%) or fairly (34%) important when making hiring decisions. Eighty-one per cent consider bilingual employees to be a valuable asset to their company, 71% say even a basic ability to communicate in French is an asset, and more than half agree that bilingual employees make their company more competitive. More than two in five (43%) say their company encourages employees who wish to acquire French-language proficiency to do so. Twenty-one per cent offer financial support, 14% provide time off, and 5% offer in-house French-language classes.

### **Looking to the future**

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 35% anticipated increase in mid-level hires (lower than their current proportion) suggests that businesses often promote bilingual employees from within. New bilingual employees are most often expected to be hired in sales and service occupations (38%), occupations in the natural or applied sciences (18%) and business, finance, or administrative occupations (13%). The proportion of new hires in natural and applied sciences (18% versus 12%) is greater than the proportion currently employed in this category.

### **CONCLUSION**

We trust that this survey will provide factual bilingual labour market information for evidence-based promotion of the benefits of official-language bilingualism, and that it will encourage the Government of Canada and the business community to support further research into labour-market demand for bilingual employees.

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