

Village Is More Global, Language Is More Vital

Summary

Marcin Skomial

Marcin Skomial writes frequently for The New York Times as well as other newspapers on subjects related to business, education, and culture. He wrote the following article for the Times of Sunday, October 13, 2002.

1 Agnieszka Ossolinska-Jaskowski didn't have work experience in the legal field. She didn't have any important contacts in the legal business. And she didn't yet have a diploma from Montclair State University in New Jersey, where she was studying to be a paralegal.* What she did have was fluency in Polish. And that was enough to get her a job at Brand, Brand & Burke, a personal-injury law firm* in Manhattan.

2 "I thought I was at a disadvantage because I had been in the United States only for a couple of years at the time," said Mrs. Jaskowski, who is 29. "But my Polish background actually gave me an edge."

3 Brand, Brand & Burke, in fact, had recently begun a push to win more clients in New York's growing Polish population, and had placed an ad in

* *paralegal*: a person trained to assist a lawyer and to perform certain legal duties, but who is not licensed to practice law * *personal-injury law firm*: a law office that specializes in representing people who have been hurt in accidents

Nowy Dziennik, the city's biggest-circulation Polish-language newspaper, specifying mastery of Polish as a requirement for a new position as a liaison with Poles. Mrs. Jaskowski's familiarity with legal issues helped her candidacy, the firm says, but it was her bilingualism that clinched the job.

"A few years ago, the Polish community was underserved by the legal profession, so we decided to hire a few employees who could speak Polish," said Ronald Burke, a partner at the firm. "We were open to hiring a native speaker of English with fluency in Polish, but we preferred an immigrant who would be more sensitive to the needs of other immigrants. Agnes never worked as a paralegal before, but we thought that she would rise to the occasion with on-the-job training."

In the current stumbling* economy, job seekers are leveraging* every qualification they can think of to sway* potential employers. And with immigrants continuing to flood into New York, long the city of immigrants, and its suburbs, speaking a second language is a talent that matters in almost any field.

Take nursing. The hiring managers at the Presbyterian Hospital in New York, which employs people from 88 countries, say they consider mastery of a foreign tongue a strong plus. "The closer you get to delivery of care, the more critical is a second language," said G. Thomas Ferguson, senior vice president and chief of human resources. "A nurse who can talk to a patient in a native language is very important."

It helped Merari Sánchez-Vega get her job there three years ago. Ms. Sánchez-Vega, a registered nurse who was born in the United States but whose parents emigrated from Puerto Rico, is the only nurse of 18 on her floor who can speak Spanish. And even though most Hispanics who are admitted speak English, they feel more at ease when she talks to them in Spanish, she says. "It is their primary language, so they naturally prefer to use it rather than English," Ms. Sánchez-Vega said.

In New York, real estate is another field in which it helps to have multilinguists on the payroll, especially at firms active in neighborhoods with large ethnic populations.

"I'm hiring from different language groups because we are serving customers of many nationalities who sometimes can't speak English," said John Ma, president and owner of Century 21 Milestone in Jamaica, Queens. The 62 agents at his firm speak a host* of languages that include Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Urdu and Italian, he says. Mr. Ma, who himself emigrated from Hong Kong, said many of his customers were newcomers to America who spoke little or no English. About a month ago, a Hispanic couple came to his office, and though they couldn't understand English, kept repeating the phrase, "We want sell home."

* *stumbling*: unsteady; going up and down * *leveraging*: using; showing off * *sway*: to influence someone's opinion * *host*: a great number of or multitude of people or things

"I looked around, but it was late in the day and everyone was in the field," Mr. Ma said. He ended up paging one of his Spanish-speaking agents and summoning him to the office. 10

In the global economy, American companies increasingly are realizing the benefits of a multilingual work force. Mark Levit, a managing partner at Partners & Levit, a Manhattan advertising agency, says that while the firm has overseas clients and creates ads aimed at specific ethnic groups in the United States, his only requirement for hiring a bookkeeper used to be accounting skills. Then, one day, his bookkeeper, a Russian woman, told him that in her view a Russian translation that she had seen of a Partners & Levit brochure was better than the original. That and other incidents, he says, convinced him that a familiarity with a foreign tongue would be an asset in any employee. "In the future, we are planning to make a second language a hiring criterion because we realized that it is so useful," Mr. Levit said. 11

Mrs. Jaskowski, who immigrated to the United States in 1997 and started as a teacher of Polish at a weekend school in New Jersey, got the job at Brand, Brand & Burke two and a half years ago. Her knowledge of the law was increasing but still deficient, she said, and her new employer started her off slowly, letting her pick up her new duties at her own pace. 12

"They spent a lot of time just showing me how to do things," she said. "At first, my job was sort of like an extension of school." 13

Early on, the pay was low, but the fact that she was gaining experience at a personal-injury law firm at a time when some of her classmates in the paralegal certification program at Montclair had not yet started looking for a job was more important to her than money. During the first few months, she acted more as an intermediary for the lawyers in the office and their Polish-speaking clients than a full-fledged paralegal. Her tasks included informing Polish clients about the status of their cases and translating documents. She even went along with some clients to the doctor's office, serving as a translator. 14

After a year, however, Mrs. Jaskowski's job started gaining new dimensions. Although her main focus remains working with Polish clients, her additional tasks, like making drafts of legal papers, require a greater understanding of the legal system. Mrs. Jaskowski is also responsible for deciding whether a case is good enough for the firm to pursue – and that means she has to make trips to accident sites. "It takes some patience to do this work when I have a crowd of people staring at me and wondering who I am and why I do it," she said. 15

There is other work, too. Mrs. Jaskowski arranges advertising in Polish media and attends events sponsored by her firm in Polish neighborhoods. When the residents see her in a business suit, she says, "It makes them rethink the image of a typical Polish nanny* and a construction worker." 16

* *nanny*: a person hired to take care of the children in a family