

## **TSEDAL NEELEY:** Why Everyone at Your Company Should Speak a Little English

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Ready or not, English is now the global language of business. More and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language—Airbus, Daimler-Chrysler, Fast Retailing, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, SAP, Technicolor, and Microsoft in Beijing, to name a few—in an attempt to facilitate communication and performance across geographically diverse functions and business endeavors.

Adopting a common mode of speech isn't just a good idea; it's a must, even for an American company with operations overseas, for instance, or a French company focused on domestic customers. Imagine that a group of salespeople from a company's Paris headquarters get together for a meeting. Why would you care whether they all could speak English? Now consider that the same group goes on a sales call to a company also based in Paris, not realizing that the potential customer would be bringing in employees from other locations who didn't speak French. This happened at one company I worked with. Sitting together in Paris, employees of those two French companies couldn't close a deal because the people in the room couldn't communicate. It was a shocking wake-up call, and the company soon adopted an English corporate language strategy.

Similar concerns drove Hiroshi Mikitani, the CEO of Rakuten—Japan's largest online marketplace—to mandate in March 2010 that English would be the company's official language of business. The company's goal was to become the number one internet services company in the world, and Mikitani believed that the new policy—which would affect some 7,100 Japanese employees—was vital to achieving that end, especially as expansion plans were concentrated outside Japan. He also felt responsible for contributing to an expanded worldview for his country, a conservative island nation.

The multibillion-dollar company—a cross between Amazon.com and eBay—was on a growth spree: It had acquired PriceMinister.com in France, Buy.com and FreeCause in the U.S., Play.com in the UK, Tradoria in Germany, Kobo eBooks in Canada, and established joint ventures with major companies in China, Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand, and Brazil. Serious about the language change, Mikitani announced the plan to employees not in Japanese but in English. Overnight, the Japanese language cafeteria menus were replaced, as were elevator directories. And he stated that employees would have to demonstrate competence on an international English scoring system within two years—or risk demotion or even dismissal.

The media instantly picked up the story, and corporate Japan reacted with fascination and disdain. Honda's CEO, Takanobu Ito, publicly asserted, "It's stupid for a Japanese company to only use English in Japan when the workforce is mainly Japanese." But Mikitani was confident that it was the right move, and the policy is bearing fruit. The English mandate has allowed Mikitani to create a remarkably diverse and powerful organization. Today, three out of six senior executives in his engineering organization aren't Japanese; they don't even speak Japanese. The company continues to aggressively seek the best talent from around the globe. Half of Rakuten's Japanese employees now can adequately engage in internal communication in English, and 25% communicate in English with partners and coworkers in foreign subsidiaries on a regular basis.

Adopting a global language policy is not easy, and companies invariably stumble along the way. It's radical, and it's almost certain to meet with staunch resistance from employees. Many may feel at a disadvantage if their English isn't as good as others', team dynamics and performance can suffer, and national pride can get in the way. But to survive and thrive in a global economy, companies must overcome language barriers—and English will almost always be the common ground, at least for now.

The fastest-spreading language in human history, English is spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide—that's one in every four of us. There are close to 385 million native speakers in countries like the U.S. and Australia, about a billion fluent speakers in formerly colonized nations such as India and Nigeria, and millions of people around the world who've studied it as a second language. An estimated 565 million people use it on the internet.

The benefits of "Englishnization," as Mikitani calls it, are significant; however, relatively few companies have systematically implemented an English-language policy with sustained results. Through my research and work over the past decade with companies, I've developed an adoption framework to guide companies in their language efforts. There's still a lot to learn, but success stories do exist. Adopters will find significant advantages.