

# Guide to good corporate language practice

Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France

General Delegation for the French Language and the Languages of France



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## Key

Examples of Quebec-French good practice and French good practice are distinguished by colour coding:

- > Quebec-French good practice in mauve
- > French good practice in black

## Foreword

The international context for corporate activity over the last twenty years has heightened the issue of languages in France, regarding both the role of French and the trend towards “English only”. The increasing use of English can have a very strong impact on staff when companies with different linguistic cultures merge or, to a lesser degree, when companies launch joint ventures. Corporate management decisions on language use can also have a major impact - for instance, when related to reorganisation initiatives, the centralisation of certain departments or the appointment of executives who are not fluent in French. Yet there is much concrete evidence to show that use of the national language is deeply rooted in the social system, so companies can benefit by adapting to this use far more than they can by attempting to change it. Consequently, the pragmatic approach involves efforts to reconcile the goal of competitiveness with the need to preserve social cohesion, by recognising that languages are a valuable resource for a company and not a liability. A certain number of research programmes launched by the European Commission emphasise the link between a coherent language strategy and growth in export sales, and show that language is not only an issue in France, but also in other countries<sup>1</sup>.

Consequently, it seems that companies should be advised to adopt a language strategy that protects the right of employees to use French at work while still meeting corporate needs for international communication. With this in mind, from 2011 to 2013, the General Delegation for the French Language and the Languages of France, and the Quebec Board of the French Language, conducted a survey to compile examples of good practice to optimise the use of French (as well as partner and customer languages)

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<sup>1</sup> ELAN (2006) “Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise” and PIMLICO (2011) “Promoting, Implementing, Mapping Language and Intercultural Communication Strategies in Organisations and Companies.”

by a certain number of French and Quebecois companies<sup>2</sup>. Early in 2013, a reference document entitled “Bonnes pratiques linguistiques dans les entreprises” was published<sup>3</sup>. This is the English translation of the French version: the “Guide to good corporate language practice”. Complete and easy to use, it compiles examples of imaginative and innovative French and Quebec-French good practice. It is intended for mass distribution to companies and employees, employer organisations, trade unions and administrative departments.

The authors hope that it will help to raise awareness of linguistic issues in the work world, and that, in so doing, it will improve corporate competitiveness and social dialogue.

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<sup>2</sup> List provided on the Acknowledgements page.

<sup>3</sup> [www.francaisautravail.org](http://www.francaisautravail.org)

## Reconciling the use of French with the constraints of international communication

*Sooner or later, all companies need to examine the issue of language use, since it impacts on their competitiveness, productivity and good industrial relations. Because of the demands of international communication, there is an increasing tendency to work in English. This can sometimes be seen as a denial of the right to work in French and even cause stress. Therefore many companies have devised concrete solutions to avoid “English only” or a “language war”. In terms of language skills, internal and external communication, IT and communication technology, and translation and language processing tools, many examples of good practice are available.*

### Confirming that French is the language of work and that languages are valuable resources for companies

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French is the shared language of France and the usual language of work there<sup>4</sup>. French staff are most comfortable when using their own language. The French Law of the 4<sup>th</sup> August 1994 officialises the status of French as the working language in France. Yet protecting the right to use French does not rule out compliance with the needs of international communication. It is therefore in the interest of companies to encourage the development of language skills. Employees who are not native French speakers should be able to communicate in French and be given training if necessary.

<sup>4</sup> See *Votre droit au français dans le monde du travail* (Your right to French in the working world): [www.dgjf.culture.gouv.fr/publications/Dtfr\\_MondeW-mars2013\\_CS6.pdf](http://www.dgjf.culture.gouv.fr/publications/Dtfr_MondeW-mars2013_CS6.pdf)



## **Asserting the choice of an explicit management of language issues**

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To ensure proper risk management of any kind, companies must apply a certain number of preventive measures and optimise their decision-making from the start. Whenever a company tackles such issues, the set of principles it applies can ultimately form the basis of an overall corporate strategy, but this strategy must be discussed if staff is to be kept on board.

## **Developing a language strategy**

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Language issues must be viewed as an important aspect of running an international business. This guide presents examples of good practice aiming to define a language strategy. Many French groups with a broad international base have decided on French and English as their group languages, together with others where necessary.

## **Discussing language issues within social dialogue negotiations**

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Obviously, it is far better to examine language issues in consultation with staff than before a court. Language problems that may have been a source of dispute in a company for years can be solved by social dialogue. That, of course, is in the interest of all the parties concerned.

## Setting up a specific structure to deal with language issues

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A joint labour-management body within the company, bringing together management and staff representatives, has the advantage of involving the different players. It provides a forum to raise and discuss all those language problems that would otherwise remain untreated, and the solutions it devises can reconcile economic concerns with social cohesion.

## Providing the structure with the necessary backing and moral authority to deal with language issues

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Experience shows that it is essential for the structure to enjoy the support and legitimacy it needs to find solutions to language problems. So wherever possible, labour agreements should officialise its status, making it a permanent player.

## Appointing a manager responsible for language issues

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The company should appoint a manager identifiable to all as responsible for language issues, since these problems should be handled in a spirit of transparency and dialogue.



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## Managing language skills

*Language skills are a corporate asset and it is important to optimise them to suit the level of responsibility and training of employees - operating staff, middle management and senior management. Constraints regarding productivity, competition and social cohesion can be managed by applying the right principles to develop this asset. As the examples provided by around twenty companies<sup>5</sup> show, this objective can be satisfactorily and even innovatively achieved.*

### Identifying language skills in the recruitment process

Language skills should be regarded as a criterion as important as any other skills essential to doing a job successfully.

### Publishing job offers in French

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Job offers in English may put French workers off because they are not written in their language. For jobs in subsidiaries abroad, it is good practice to publish them also in the language of the country concerned.

<sup>5</sup> List of these companies provided on the Acknowledgements page.



## **Detailing the language skills expected for the job**

Where foreign languages are required, it is very much in the company's interest to detail the tasks for which they will be needed. Good practice consists of determining the level of language needed for the purposes of the job concerned. Staff responsible for hiring and internal mobility must have the necessary skills to do this.

## **Taking language skills into account when recruiting**

An approved assessment tool such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) should always be used to assess knowledge of a foreign language. Phrases such as “English required”, “bilingual in English”, “knowledge of German”, etc. have proved to be vague and subjective.

## **Setting up a language-skills management service**

This service will not only offer recruitment tools (job descriptions, job offers) in the target language, but also maintain a database of the language and intercultural skills of staff (including family-acquired skills: Arabic, Turkish, Portuguese, etc.). This can be used to optimise the mobility and promotion of employees.

## French training and training in French

Ensuring that all employees, whatever their origin, have the level of French they need is a guarantee of coherency and efficiency for the company. Employees who are not native French speakers, as well as those with problems of literacy, should be provided with training in French to improve their skills. It is important for companies to choose training programmes in French, which will vastly improve the trainees' understanding of their content.

### Providing French training to all non-French-speaking staff, including senior management

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When a company hires staff who are not fluent in French, or the management communicates in English, this adversely affects communication as a whole and has an ongoing impact on industrial relations.

### Adapting the training offer to staff needs

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An inappropriate choice of training often compromises the achievement of the goals set. The right approach is to clearly identify your communication needs to gain a clear idea of your training objectives. Companies have everything to gain by adapting training to staff availability: face-to-face, remote or online lessons, tutoring, self-learning, etc.



## **Training staff in customer and partner languages**

Can a company successfully communicate with customers and partners in English alone? Speaking the customer's language is often an advantage in market penetration and international negotiation. Staff members who learn the local language adapt to their new working environment far more quickly and do their job more efficiently.

## **Assessing the individual's language skills before any training**

Carry out diagnosis before training, measure progress during and after the course and, finally, identify the skills required for the trainee's job: knowledge appraisal makes training more efficacious.

## **Giving occupational training in French**

Staff may find themselves baffled by technical vocabulary if training is given in a foreign language. This represents a risk for the company, since occupational training provides access to a range of vocabulary that ensures the reliability of exchanges between specialists in a field.

## Promoting good practice in internal communication

*Today in France, every company is aware of the importance of internal communication in presenting corporate strategy and ensuring corporate dialogue. Corporate competitiveness and internal cohesion are largely dependent on the quality of communication related to internal working relations at every level of a company. Here, we will be examining written texts, oral communication and IT and communication technology.*

### Written internal communication

Written communication means any written text, whatever the chosen medium, used to carry out a task, as well as the company intranet or newsletter. Such communication plays an increasingly significant role today because of the importance of the written word in business activities.

### Communicating in French, since native French-speaking employees work best in that language

Communicating with French-speaking employees in a foreign language can damage productivity and cause stress with an attendant risk of mistakes.



## **Translating any document related to the employee's responsibilities or the arrangements they must be familiar with to do their job**

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Facilitate understanding to avoid mistakes or inaccuracies that may impact on job safety and health.

## **Providing safety instructions and signs on handling and production equipment in French**

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Research has shown that staff most often suffer injuries when carrying out routine tasks. Safety instructions are there to remind users of precautions to be taken, and are needed to ensure compliance with the company's duty of care.

## **When English is used, make sure that texts are also available in French**

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Issuing documents written only in English means that some staff may not fully understand them. It is always preferable to ensure that everyone around the table understands the same thing.

## Writing internal reports in French, or in French and English, for example

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Internal reports are reference documents that have an established impact on communication at work. When the writer is not a French-speaker, good practice requires an internal report to be translated into French.

## Providing French versions of staff job titles and duties, and departmental names and responsibilities, including acronyms

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Using titles and describing responsibilities in English alone gives non-native English speakers and their contacts the impression that English is the company's sole language. If international communication requirements lead a company to publish an English version of its organisational chart for example, why not also issue a French version in France?

## Favouring the local language in locations outside France

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In a spirit of reciprocity, using the local language of the countries in which an international company operates allows it to more effectively produce goods, distribute services and products, and strengthen its ties with partners.



## Oral internal communication

Although oral exchanges are much less formal than written ones, they are crucially important to organisations and strongly contribute to team cohesion. Ensuring that employees can express themselves in the language they are most familiar with (French in France), whatever their level of responsibility, is an achievable aim.

### Using French in work instructions, meetings, training, etc.

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Is it fair for senior management to impose “English only” on all categories of staff? When non-French speakers attend a meeting, discussions frequently drift into English. This obviously favours the most fluent English speakers and prevents non-native English speakers from fully expressing their specialised knowledge.

### Holding the annual appraisal interview in French

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At this often crucial point in the employee’s working life, interviews are sometimes conducted in English to test their skills in that language. This increasingly widespread practice is unfair to the employee and prevents the company from properly assessing their potential.

### Making French the main language at works council meetings if more than one language is used

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This good practice is intended to facilitate exchanges and prevent disputes due to misunderstanding. Every participant should be able to express themselves in the language they are most comfortable with at these meetings, and interpreters should be used if necessary.



## Holding bilingual discussions whenever possible

Some people can understand a foreign language (English) even if they do not speak it fluently. Meetings can be held in French and English with each participant speaking their chosen language. It is common knowledge that most English speakers who have lived in France for a number of years can follow a conversation in French.

## Providing non-French speakers present with interpreters or visual presentations (PowerPoint)

Should English always be used because non-French speakers are present? Accompanying an oral presentation in French with a PowerPoint display in English or another language is a mark of respect and courtesy that can facilitate understanding and improve concentration. Non-French speakers do not feel left out and discussions are optimised since each participant is able to participate to the full extent of their skills.

## Enabling employees' representatives (officials representing the personnel) to express themselves in their own language in European works councils

Obviously, the exclusive use of English gives native English speakers an advantage over everyone else. The European directive on European Works Council Meetings<sup>6</sup> gives staff representatives the right to obtain written and simultaneous translations into the different languages spoken within their group or company.

<sup>6</sup> Council Directive 94/45/EC of 22 September 1994 on "The establishment of a European Works Council or a procedure in Community-scale undertakings and Community-scale groups of undertakings for the purposes of informing and consulting employees"



## Information and communication technologies

Default use of English is often seen as a guarantee of stability and security for digital data. Yet research shows that the different language versions of products are generally identical, that updates for French or multilingual versions are released at the same time as for English versions, and that solutions to common problems can also be found in French on the Internet. So taking account of language from the start when purchasing or building software is good practice in itself. The same applies to internal social networks.

### Using the French version of software

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Groups operating in a number of countries or world regions are keen to ensure the interoperability of their computer systems in English alone. Yet employees who primarily use French (whether as a native or acquired language) tend to use computer resources supplied to them in English in a more limited way and are likelier to make mistakes. Consequently, the advantages of using French software are much greater than those claimed for a single language version in all the countries where a company operates.

## Building French or multilingual intranet sites and internal applications

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As for other written and oral communication, employees should be able to email each other in their own language. Working tools such as business applications and intranet sites specially built for the company should be made available to employees in French or in the language of their country of work. This is also the case for internal social networks.

## Providing computer keyboards allowing accented letters used in French to be typed directly

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In France, it is important to provide keyboards that allow the rapid typing of all the characters in the French language, especially those with accents (é, è, à, ç, etc.), because such keyboards facilitate writing. It should not be necessary to use different keys to type common accented characters.



## Adapting external communication to suit the parties concerned

*Producing and passing on information for customers, suppliers and distribution networks in their usual language is an achievable aim in France. This is shown by the many advertising campaigns developed on that basis. The choice of languages plays an important role for companies that prioritise customer relations in their marketing strategy.*

### Prioritising French in external communication in France

#### **Communicating in French with all stakeholders<sup>7</sup>**

In an increasing number of strongly internationalised sectors, communication is produced directly in English. Yet this practice means that the message is unclear to much of the population, particularly the older generation. So it is very much in the interest of companies to prioritise French in their external communication to consolidate customer relations, particularly in sales advertising (choice of slogan, etc.).

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<sup>7</sup> Employees, customers, suppliers, social partners and the general public.

## Choosing French for retailing, product and service brand names

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Most French consumers believe brands are North American or British when they neglect French and choose English for their brand, product and service names, and their advertising.

## Communicating with consumers and local partners in their own language in foreign markets

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It is in the interest of a French company doing business in a foreign market to communicate in the language of the country concerned. It is perfectly possible to adapt advertising campaigns into different languages. Of course, an appropriate use of French does suggest French quality (well-known cosmetic brands apply this strategy).

## Optimising the use of French in international strategy

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French is linked to an image of prestige and quality in many sectors (luxury industries, cosmetics, table arts, tourism, etc.). French slogans lead consumers to associate this brand image with a product.



## Communicating in French on digital media aimed at a French clientele

### Choosing multilingual digital communication

A multilingual Internet site is accessible to a broader section of the public. English should not be the only alternative to French. Good practice consists of simultaneously updating the different language versions and translating as much content as possible. The languages available should be shown in writing (Deutsch | Français | English | Español | العربية | Italiano) rather than with flags.

### Publishing a French version of the website if it is available in another language

Language choices vary widely according to the size, structure and business of companies, but potential customers should always be provided with information in their own language.

### Using French on social networks aimed at the French general public and consumers

To get your message across to the French-speaking general public where they are to be found, it is a good idea to communicate in a friendly way in French on social networks. This goes for staff recruitment too. For branches located abroad, good practice consists of identifying different areas of dialogue in different languages (an account or a page per language, for instance).

## **For Internet addresses, use .fr for France to identify a branch or subsidiary of the company in France**

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The .fr country code identifies the company as being located in France and the choice of French as the corporate language. It is advisable to use a top-level domain name for each branch or subsidiary of the group (for instance .com for the group and .fr for its subsidiary in France). Since the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2012, it has been possible to use accented characters (é, è, ê, ç, ä, etc.) in domain names with the country code .fr. You have that option!



## Working with translation and language -processing tools

*Translation comes at a cost, but failure to translate is even more expensive. Research has shown that translation costs are more than covered by productivity gains, simply because staff are more efficient in their own language.*

### Viewing translation as a strategic issue

Where companies work in more than one language, it is important to translate texts released by management (including technical texts) into all the official languages used. Many companies have already set up an internal translation department that updates glossaries of specialised vocabulary and handles translation into official languages. This is recommended practice. Other companies will find it useful to maintain an ongoing relationship with a trusted freelance translator who is familiar with their business.

### Having translations done by qualified professionals

Poor quality of translation can obviously be damaging. It is important to use professionals.



## Controlling the quality of translations

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Translation assistance tools cannot replace professional translators, who will necessarily be involved in the process at some point, if only to rewrite texts produced by automatic translation. This is crucial to the company's brand image.

## Dealing with translation internally

This enables standardisation of the company's specific vocabulary, consolidates corporate culture and ensures that information remains secure and confidential.

## Using computer translation and terminological tools wisely

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Many companies acquire translation assistance tools. These tools can provide a rough understanding of texts in foreign languages, especially "rare" languages. They can also be used in combination with the work of translators. Of course, the use of online translation services is sometimes inappropriate, especially when data needs to remain secure and confidential.



## **Providing multi-language glossaries**

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Some companies provide intranet glossaries specific to their business. This is good practice and should be explored.

## **Using simultaneous or consecutive interpretation**

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Why risk negotiating in a language you do not master completely? Simultaneous interpretation is advisable in meetings or negotiations at the group or world-region level. French company heads will always try to speak the local language, but they never negotiate in that language, instead calling on an interpreter. Without interpretation, they would be in a position of inferiority in relation to the native-language speakers, a linguistic vulnerability that would give the other negotiating team an advantage.

# Notes

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