

Power of language

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Opinion

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 5 min read

I have always believed in the importance of foreign languages. In a Europe where linguistic diversity is a fact of life, learning to speak other languages can open many doors. For individuals, it can pave the path to a better career and help them to live, study or work abroad.

For companies, employing multilingual staff can provide ease of access to European and global markets, thereby enhancing business opportunities.

My recent encounter with Elizabeth Linder, Facebook's Politics and Government Specialist for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, helped reinforce my belief.

Linder works with politicians, government officials, diplomats and civil society leaders on how to use Facebook effectively to communicate with citizens. On her recent visit to Malta, she met Maltese government officials and politicians and also gave a talk at the University of Malta on the link between the humanities and the digital world.

I had the pleasure of meeting her in person and discussing the relevance of foreign languages in relation to her career and beyond.

As a young student in California, Linder always loved languages. She pursued this passion as a student at Princeton University on the East Coast, majoring in French and Italian. But as a major in languages, she never thought she would have ended up working in the tech industry.

“It was in my senior year as a student at Princeton University that I went to a career fair and walked by the Google booth. I was not interested in Google at all and I had absolutely no connection to the tech industry per se. Then a fellow handed me this bright green brochure saying ‘We have jobs for you’.

“At first I thought there was no way I could apply to a tech company, that’s not at all what I had set out to do and it wasn’t even remotely on my mind.

“ I look out for an applicant who besides being successful for that particular role has more languages in his portfolio ”

“But then I looked at this brochure which was entitled ‘Global Communications and Public Policy’ and I thought, hold on, here I am a French and Italian major, who loves languages, who loves international cultures who loves to connect with people who are not from my own background or from my own country, so isn’t global communications in a way exactly what I do?”

So she applied for the job, sat for the interview and a year later moved back to California to join the Google international communications team.

ADVERTISING



About 11 months later she received a call from Facebook asking if she was interested in working with them.

At Facebook she was on the international communications team and responsible for answering every single email request which Facebook received from the press outside the US, often responding in French or Italian. That was eight years ago.

“From there we created this division, which is the politics and government division, and moved to London to do this. So I am now based in London and covering the Europe, Middle East and Africa region, which has taken me by now to 41 different countries in a region, which has approximately 140 countries in total.”

Linder spoke about how critical foreign languages are in her job.

For her to have been a language major is important culturally and linguistically, but also to freeze up the opportunities that she has to represent FB well.

She admitted that if she could speak every language in her region she would because she believes in the importance of being able to connect with people in the language and style that is more comfortable for them.

French has been particularly useful to her, given that so many francophone countries are in her region.

She uses French when in North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and of course in the European Union. Italian has been useful as well, even outside Italy. In Spain for instance it's the Italian which helps her understand what the locals are saying.

As a manager growing a team and hiring people, Linder told me about the importance she gives to candidates' abilities to speak foreign languages when reviewing résumés.

“We receive résumés from all over the world. Facebook is an incredible company to work for so it's highly competitive to get a job. Because I do international work and I have an

international team and have so many countries that I need to cover, I look out for an applicant who besides being successful for that particular role has more languages in his portfolio, even if those languages are not widely spoken in the world.

“For me that is one more country that I know we can cover, without friction, without confusion, that I know we can add to the overall expertise of our team. I know that I can send people to these countries and that they can handle them very well, that they can email our constituents back and forth so we can have a better relationship with them.

“I often thought of languages in international business as opening up to the world.

“The difference that you have when you can connect with somebody in their own language versus when you use a translator is huge, especially when you are working as a spokesperson.”

Towards the end of our conversation I mentioned to Linder some recent statistics, regarding the decreasing number of students studying foreign languages in Maltese schools and obtaining a certification in languages at SEC level.

She gave me a resolute reply.

“Foreign languages are power. They are important for anyone who is considering what they’re studying in today’s world.

“We are more global today, it is easier to communicate with people, we have Google translate, we have all kinds of ways that you can figure things out.

“But if you actually understand what’s being spoken in a room, if you actually get the nuance at a conference venue, in the hallways of the European Union, then you are going to find yourself more confident, more aware of what’s going on, and I think more successful long term.”

Strong words, spoken by a very successful woman, which provide food for thought and stress the importance and the need, at a national level, to address issues regarding foreign language teaching, learning and acquisition.

Phyllisienne Vassallo Gauci is helping the Education Ministry to promote the importance of languages.