



# GLOBALWORKTALK

## 10 things a company has to do to ensure safety at work in a multilingual workplace

Working with a multilingual workforce is an - inevitable - part of the future. So if you don't prepare now, incidents and accidents caused by language differences are bound to happen. But they can be avoided. By being properly prepared, your business will be able to work safely with people who speak all kinds of different languages. Which means you can recruit the best people with the right skills, without having to worry about the language barrier.

### 10 TIPS

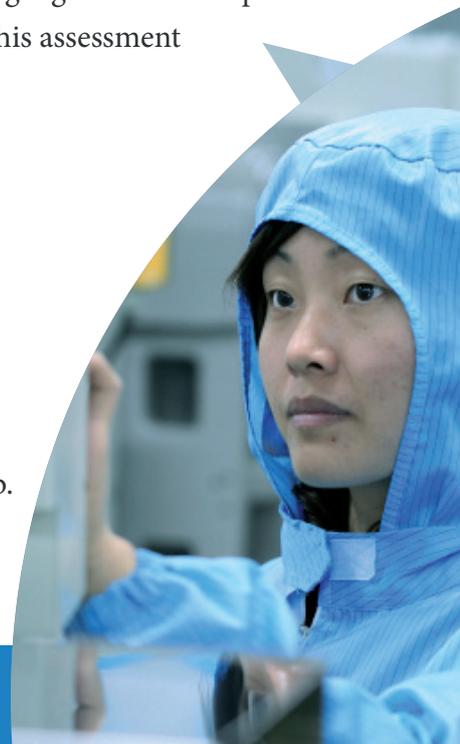
#### 1. Know the **language needs** involved with the work

Make a language profile for the work. Identify specific languages that might be involved in the work. And determine the level of the language skill required. The Common European Framework of References for Languages of the European Union (CEFR) has 6 levels for language skills. Make this assessment for each of the five language skills:

- Comprehension
- Speaking
- Conversation
- Reading
- Writing

The language profile that is compiled in this way will quickly identify the language need for each task or job.

Global Work Talk helps businesses and organisations overcoming language barriers and by doing so contributes to safety at work in a multilingual world.





## 2. Test the **language skills** of the people who will be carrying out the work

Do you know what the language skill level is of the people who will be carrying out the work? It is standard practice to ask for a certificate or diploma for certain tasks or jobs, such as welding or forklift truck driving. But when it comes to language skills, only 1% of companies ask for proof of competency. Nonetheless, it is essential that you know exactly what the language skill level is of your workforce (read point 3). There are basically two options:

- Use a validated language test – these can be found online via specialised agencies.
- Evaluate the language skills yourself - would you like to know how? Read the blog “Map the languages on the shop floor” at [www.global-work-talk.eu](http://www.global-work-talk.eu)

## 3. **Mind the gap**

Compare the language needs for the work with the language skill level of the workforce. Make sure there are no situations where the language needs are greater than the available language skills. What might the consequences be? Think and describe what would happen in different scenarios. Research has shown that in situations where the language skills are not sufficient for the work being carried out, this can lead to misunderstandings, dangerous situations, and incidents.

Then assess the risk level for each scenario, e.g. based on the chance of occurrence and the effect. There are some situations where a “gap” between the language need and the language skill will hardly form any risk at all. But for certain tasks or jobs, the risk could be so great that it would be unacceptable for your company.



## 4. Make clear agreements about the **working language**

Make sure the working language within your company, project, or location is clearly defined. What language will be used for verbal communication and written documents such as work instructions? Which people will have to use the designated languages, and under what circumstances? It is important to make sure the working language is explicitly defined so that any agreements can be made on this basis.



The designation of a working language will also make it easy to identify situations where there might be language difficulties and additional measures will have to be taken. In most cases you can specify the working language yourself. For some companies, professionals or situations, however, the working language is already officially prescribed. For example, the Province of Friesland has two official languages (Dutch and Fries). And train drivers have to be able to speak both Dutch and any other language that is designated by the railway network operator.

### 5. Make language unnecessary where possible

Go back and review the result for tip 1: the language profile for a task or job. Can it be simplified? You quite often get technical manuals in three volumes, or a PDF file with hundreds of pages. Break it down. Try and eliminate the use of language wherever possible. Keep it to the essentials. Over the course of time, we tend to add new sections when the need arises, without bothering to get rid of the sections we don't need any more. Looking for inspiration? Read "Lean for Dummies".

### 6. Give interpretation skills training to bilingual workers

In practice, bilingual workers often act as interpreters for their colleagues in order to overcome any language barriers. This is because it is not always possible to call in a professional interpreter. On the other hand, you have to have certain skills to be able to act as a good interpreter. So it is a good idea to give bilingual workers proper training in interpretation skills.

NB: in some situations the use of a professional interpreter is required under the applicable code of practice. For example, in the healthcare sector in the Netherlands there is the 'De Kwaliteitsnorm tolkgebruik bij anderstaligen in de zorg' ("Quality Norm for the Use of Interpreters for Foreign-language Speakers in the Healthcare Sector"). This means healthcare providers can work out in advance when they need to call in a professional interpreter in order to provide the proper care to foreign-language speakers. It also means they can make arrangements for the use of an informal interpreter, such as a family member.

### 7. Have the number of a telephone interpreter on speed dial

Make sure you have a solution ready if you come up against a language barrier and need help "right here, right now". Find a good telephone interpreter service, make arrangements with them, and put their number on speed dial in your telephone. This means you will always have a good interpreter whenever you need one.





Would you like to use a quote from this white paper “10 things a company has to do to ensure work safety in a multilingual workplace”? Feel free! But remember to include a reference to the paper and the author. Would you like to share it? The best way is to include a link to the homepage of the website of Global Work Talk: [www.global-work-talk.eu](http://www.global-work-talk.eu) so that everyone can download the paper in their preferred language.

### 8. Get the right technical people to **check technical jargon**

Every company, project, and occupation has its own technical jargon. Even if you have your work instructions, tool boxes, and health and safety regulations translated by a professional translator, they don't always know the right way to translate technical jargon; especially if they are working for a company for the first time. You should therefore always have any technical translations checked by an experienced multilingual technical expert. They will quickly spot any errors.

### 9. Communicate with **visual aids**

Visual aids are a good way of communicating a message to foreign-language workers who have difficulty understanding the designated working language. Visual aids can be used in combination with verbal and written instructions, or to replace such. The choices are endless, and depend on the specific situation and the target group.

Visual aids work. This was proven in a scientific study amongst construction workers for whom the designated working language on the construction site was a second language. The researchers compared a toolbox using visual communication with a traditional toolbox primarily based on verbal and written communication. After a month, the construction workers using the new style toolbox had a better understanding of safe working practices than the construction workers using the traditional toolbox.

### 10. Create your own **dictionary**

Every company, department, and project has its own collection of frequently used words and phrases. Sometimes you won't find these words or phrases in any normal dictionary or instruction manual. That is why it is good idea to start building your own customised dictionary. Systematically collect useful words and phrases, for example during language lessons given to foreign-language speakers. And make it a part of work planning meetings: ask workers to bring up any words or phrases they still do not understand. This will help everyone to get involved in the development of good communication in a multilingual workplace.