

Now I understand

Multilingual employees help build and sustain Boeing's presence as a global enterprise

BY KATHRINE BECK

Here's your Boeing trivia question of the day: Who was the company's first multilingual employee?

Here's a hint: He spoke French and German as well as English. At a visit to a 1910 California air show, he had the chance to chat with the star of the event, French flying ace Louis Palhaun.

The answer: Bill Boeing. That talk with Palhaun inspired him to get into the airplane business.

The tradition of global awareness and knowledge at Boeing literally was established at the company's founding, and it remains essential to Boeing's worldwide success today. This knowledge manifests itself in various ways. Among the most fundamental of them: multilingualism. The language skills of both U.S. and non-U.S. Boeing employees, including those based in the United States, continue to strengthen the company's global presence and help to build its knowledge and relationships to support growth and productivity objectives.

Today, the company has employees in 70 countries and customers in 90. Even the company's products speak many languages. Boeing jetliners sport interior cabin signs in 21 languages, including multiple dialects of Arabic, Chinese, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

Around the globe, non-U.S. Boeing employees use both English and their native languages to further the Boeing business and to provide cultural know-how to Boeing business-unit representatives.

Antoine Bois, the Boeing office manager in Paris, is a 25-year Boeing employee. He uses his native French to manage the office



Lawson Robinson studied Korean as a teenager. Today, he uses his knowledge of this language to support the F-15K program. PETER GEORGE PHOTO

When he worked for Boeing China, Tom McLean, International Corporate Communications director, learned when were the right times to speak in English or Chinese. FRED TROILO PHOTO



and uses English to ensure his U.S.-based business partners and his home organization, Shared Services Group, support the local business needs. “Mornings are in French. At about 2 p.m. every day, I switch to English, when our U.S. contacts begin their day,” he said. Bois lived in London from the ages of 5 to 12, and said that as a child he learned a lot of English from watching cartoons on television. Bois also speaks Spanish because he loves to travel in South America.

Brussels employee Fabienne Jacob, HR staffing specialist for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, uses four languages on the job. Her father is a Flemish-speaking Belgian, and her mother is German, so she learned both those languages in the family. She learned French growing up in a French-speaking area of Brussels and attending a French school. She learned English at school and improved it during a previous job at a multinational company that often communicated in English. Jacob speaks Flemish, French and English in the office, and English with colleagues in other European countries, Russia and the Middle East. After a lifetime of multiple languages, she has no problem switching from one to another many times a day.

AN EAR FOR LANGUAGE?

How easy is it to learn a new language? Elaine Tarone, director of the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition

at the University of Minnesota, said research shows that when we are born, our brains are wired for us to be multilingual. “So those who are exposed to a second language in early childhood seem to learn two languages quite easily,” she said.

When puberty hits, certain aspects of language acquisition—most notably pronunciation—become harder. Tarone cited Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Austrian-born governor of California, as an example. “If you didn’t hear his accent, you’d think he’s native,” she said. Tarone added that grammar and vocabulary are “more than achievable by adult learners,” but that a realistic pronunciation goal is to be “clear and intelligible.”

Lawson Robinson, F-15K offset manager in St. Louis, agreed with this statement. “It’s easier for a young person, but anyone willing to make the commitment can learn just about any language,” he said. Robinson learned Korean as a teenager when his family moved to Korea for two years. Later, he served as a linguist with the U.S. Army. As an aerospace engineer, he continued his study of Korean because he loved the language.

Robinson was working in the Apache helicopter program when he learned that poor translation during F-15 aircraft negotiations with the Republic of Korea Air Force had led to a misunderstanding of the Boeing position. A week later, he was working as an interpreter and a negotiator on technical matters. He said

the toughest part is getting English-speaking colleagues “not to talk for a half hour straight,” but to pause for translation.

Brian DeLuca, currently a Puget Sound systems engineer in F-22 training development, heard Italian spoken while growing up in Clifton, N.J. When doing business with the Italian airline Alitalia in the 1980s, he found that using an Italian phrase here and there in a social context made a big difference. And, when the customers spoke Italian to each other to seek clarification of an English technical term, he could understand and help. “They knew I wasn’t fluent, but they still appreciated my attention to their concerns,” he said.

Knowing when to speak a second language is important. Chinese speaker Tom McLean, director of International Corporate Communications in Washington, D.C., previously served as director of communications for Boeing China. “Many Chinese officials spoke wonderful English, but the minute they spoke on official business they went right to Mandarin, because they wanted to be very accurate and wanted to make sure their Chinese colleagues knew what was being said,” McLean recalled. For anything unofficial—entertaining or building relationships—McLean used Chinese. He welcomed press conference attendees in Chinese, then switched straight to English to ensure that the company position was being reflected as accurately as possible.

Susan Miller, a web developer project lead in Seattle, calls herself a “language freak”

and has studied a handful of languages. She's used her skills to help produce Boeing web sites in Arabic, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Chinese and Korean.

Miller's family was skeptical when she majored in Spanish but didn't want to teach. Now, she's using those skills on the job. "It's interesting that the computer languages I studied back when I studied Spanish and

French are now deader than Latin will ever be," she said. "But the real satisfaction comes from exchanges with employees and contractors in whatever non-English language we have in common. It creates a personal bond that otherwise wouldn't exist." ■

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English vs. *English*: Barriers within a language

It's British English that's taught around the world to non-native English speakers. American English speakers need to realize that can cause some confusion.

In UK English, for example, the term "local hire" for a Boeing employee serving outside the United States can sound disrespectful to non-American ears. "Hire" has a connotation of temporary work, like hiring casual day labor to perform home repairs.

Some American terms are simply confusing. When an Ethics training scenario mentioned a Slurpee, Boeing employees in the Berlin office were stumped. Their English was terrific, but unless they'd been to a 7-Eleven convenience store in the United States, they had no way of knowing that Slurpee was the brand name of a slushy iced drink.

Jan Graham, Customer Relations manager in the UK for the Commercial Airplanes Sales organization, also takes care when writing English words that are spelled differently. "For words like 'centre' and 'programme,' I change the spelling depending on who's receiving the e-mail—someone here in the UK or in the U.S.," she said. Nevertheless, Graham said she's found that the language of aerospace has become universal.

That's a hopeful sign, but then there are all those acronyms, which can challenge even the most seasoned Boeing employee. The best advice: Visit the online acronym site, <http://termbank.web.boeing.com>, hosted by Library and Learning Center Services.

And of course, as at any large organization, there are words that exist only at Boeing. If there's a squiggly red line in a Microsoft Word document when you type the word "focal" for a designated employee advancing a new program or initiative within a work group, that's because it's not a real noun, but a Boeing noun. It started out as the term "focal point," and eventually got shortened.

—Kathrine Beck

As a UK-based employee, Jan Graham speaks the same language as her U.S.-based Boeing colleagues. But she takes care to adjust the spelling of words that are written differently in the United Kingdom and the United States.

ADRIAN BROOKS PHOTO

Want to boost your language skills?

As Boeing's global enterprise grows, so do the opportunities for employees to experience and learn other cultures and languages.

Learning, Training and Hashimnikka Together Program (LTP) have partnered with Fontbonne University of St. Louis and Berlitz Languages to bring language courses to Boeing employees. Boeing employees can choose from eight languages—Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian and Spanish.

Berlitz instructors teach the courses, and college credit is awarded through Fontbonne. The courses are available to all Boeing employees through interactive, online sessions with a live instructor. International employees can participate but need to make sure classes will work for their time zone. Employees in St. Louis also have the option of attending classes at either Fontbonne or the Berlitz Learning Center. Each language curriculum consists of four progressive levels, each lasting 10 weeks. Students earn three college credits for each level. Classes meet for two hours, once or twice per week. Students can enroll at any time, with new classes forming throughout the year.

Registration information is available on the LTP Web site at <http://learningtogether.web.boeing.com> on the Boeing intranet. Non-U.S.-based employees should access the LTP International Web site at <http://ltp-intl.web.boeing.com> on the Boeing intranet. For more information on the Fontbonne program, visit www.fontbonne.edu/berlitz on the school's Web site.

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