 INTRODUCTION

If you cannot express your ideas because you lack language skills, the collaboration becomes a nightmare. You lose interest to continue and you feel you are devalued. (Non-native English speaker at a French company)

My coworkers from Germany; they don’t tend to realize that there’s a non-German person and they would just start talking in their own language that you don’t know — excuse me, what are you talking about, you know? It’s like whether it be at the lunch table, be it in a meeting, be it’s like you and me are talking and they would just start off. I felt that was very, very rude. But now I’m used to it. I’m just used to it. (Native English speaker at a German company)

Companies are increasingly stipulating a lingua franca or common language policy to expand their global reach and facilitate employee collaboration across national and linguistic boundaries. English is the common business language of choice in the 21st century, regardless of company origin or headquarters location. Daimler AG, Kone Elevators, SAP, Siemens, Philips, Nokia, Alcatel-Lucent, Nissan, Technicolor, Rakuten and Microsoft in Beijing are examples of global companies that have set English-only policies in recent years. Ironically, although lingua franca mandates are intended to increase efficiencies and enhance coordination of global work, mandates can instead spawn emotions and behaviors, as illustrated in the opening quotes, that introduce inefficiencies and erode collaborative efforts, leading to losses in productivity and performance.

Language-related inefficiencies take numerous forms: loss of information, added work, loss of learning opportunities, and disruption of the collaborative process. Information is lost to native English speakers when non-native English speakers dodge meetings and conversations, switch language mid-meeting, or boil a complex discussion and decision process down into a quick English language summary. Similarly, non-native English speakers lose out on needed information when they avoid meetings for reasons of language-related comprehension and anxiety.

Many of these inefficiencies remain unknown or overlooked, as companies focus on the potential benefits of linguistic integration in responding to a globalizing market. Companies are adopting English for three key reasons. The first is pressure from outside global players. As suppliers, customers, partners, and competitors increasingly use English as the language of business, companies feel pressure to follow suit. The second is the diversification of company tasks among countries. When corporate goals rely on departments in different countries working in harmony with each other, language becomes a primary bottleneck. By reducing the multitude of languages into one, companies can work toward their goals more efficiently. A third reason that drives multinationals to mandate English as a business language is mergers and acquisitions of companies worldwide. For example, Swedish Astra and British Zeneca established English as their corporate language during the course of their merger that formed “AstraZeneca” in 1999. Japanese Nippon Sheet Glass (NSG) made English its official language after buying U.K. glass-maker Pilkington PLS in 2010.

Yet, the implementation of language mandates often does not match the panacean potential that drives companies to implement them. Indeed, the transition from a babel of voices to a common tongue is often not easy, and the experience of working in another language or working with a non-native speaker is, not surprisingly, difficult. For one early adopter of an English language mandate, the Swedish company ABB, only one-third of the workforce spoke English natively, setting the stage for potentially extreme difficulties. The Japanese employees of GlobalMoves, for example, whose chief executive officer (CEO) unexpectedly began speaking English to them and mandated they do so as well,