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## Languages cited as key competition issue

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11.07.2008

### Poor language skills are hurting business and adding to the rigidity of the European labour market, a report finds

**BRUSSELS** - European companies need to do more to encourage their employees to learn new languages – or else lose their competitive edge, according to a report delivered to the European Commission on 11 July by the Business Forum for Multilingualism.

The Forum, which was established by the Commission in 2007 to explore the role of language skills on trade and jobs in the EU, found that a lack of language skills is the single greatest barrier to cross-border mobility in the EU's labour market. Additionally, up to 11% of small and medium-sized businesses reported losing contracts each year because of their inability to communicate in one or more foreign languages.

Recent research shows that companies that do enhance their language skills can benefit greatly from the business opportunities that the EU's internal market offers. A 2007 survey carried out by the Confederation of Danish Industries among its member companies showed that 40% experienced serious communication problems with trade partners in other countries due to linguistic deficits.

The Business Forum's report showed a need for a range of other languages to build successful relationships, even though English is widely perceived to be the only language necessary for international business.

Among the languages cited as valuable were the largest European languages, such as German, French and Spanish, but, increasingly, other world languages – such as Mandarin, Arabic and Russian – were mentioned in the report, which was prepared for the European commissioner for multilingualism, Leonard Orban.

In 2002, the EU's leaders agreed that that every citizen should learn two languages in addition to the mother tongue. However, the report found that member states are far from reaching this objective and that multilingualism is not addressed often or explicitly enough in development programmes at the EU level.

To reap the greatest economic benefits, the report suggests that both governments and companies should encourage the formal and non-formal study of a wide range of

languages; that these efforts be supported by national, regional and local bodies; and that a European platform be created to exchange best practices involving languages for businesses.

Orban described the report as an “excellent contribution” to a communication on multilingualism that he intends to present this September.