65% of UK Firms Identify a Need for Foreign Language Skills

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In the annual CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2014 (to be published in full next month), nearly two-thirds of firms (65%) identified a need for foreign language skills, which is likely to increase as ambitious firms look to break into new fast-growing markets. With the UKâ€™s push to rebalance to a trade and investment-led economy, better foreign language skills could be a major instrument in supporting this.

Many businesses find knowledge of a foreign language can be beneficial to their business (41%) and helpful in building relations with overseas contacts (28%). The foreign languages rated as useful include: French 50%; German 49%; Spanish 44%; Mandarin 31%; Arabic 23%; Polish 19%; Russian 18%; Cantonese 16%; Japanese 15%; Portuguese 11% (and other 16%).

Katja Hall, CBI Deputy Director-General, said:

â€œWith the EU still our largest export market, itâ€™s no surprise to see German, French and Spanish language skills so highly prized by companies. But with China and Latin America seeing solid growth, ambitious firms want the language skills that can smooth the path into new markets.

â€œIt has been a worry to see foreign language study in our schools under pressure with one in five schools having a persistently low-take up of languages. The jury remains out as to whether recent Government initiatives can help spur a resurgence in language learning.

â€œYoung people considering their future subject choices should be made more aware of the benefits to their careers that can come from studying a foreign language.â€•

Mark Anderson, Managing Director, Pearson UK, said:

"English is the international language of business which has clearly been a real benefit to UK business, but as a global company we understand that a company with employees who can communicate with some proficiency in the language of clients, customers and suppliers, has a big advantage in the fast-growing markets across the globe."