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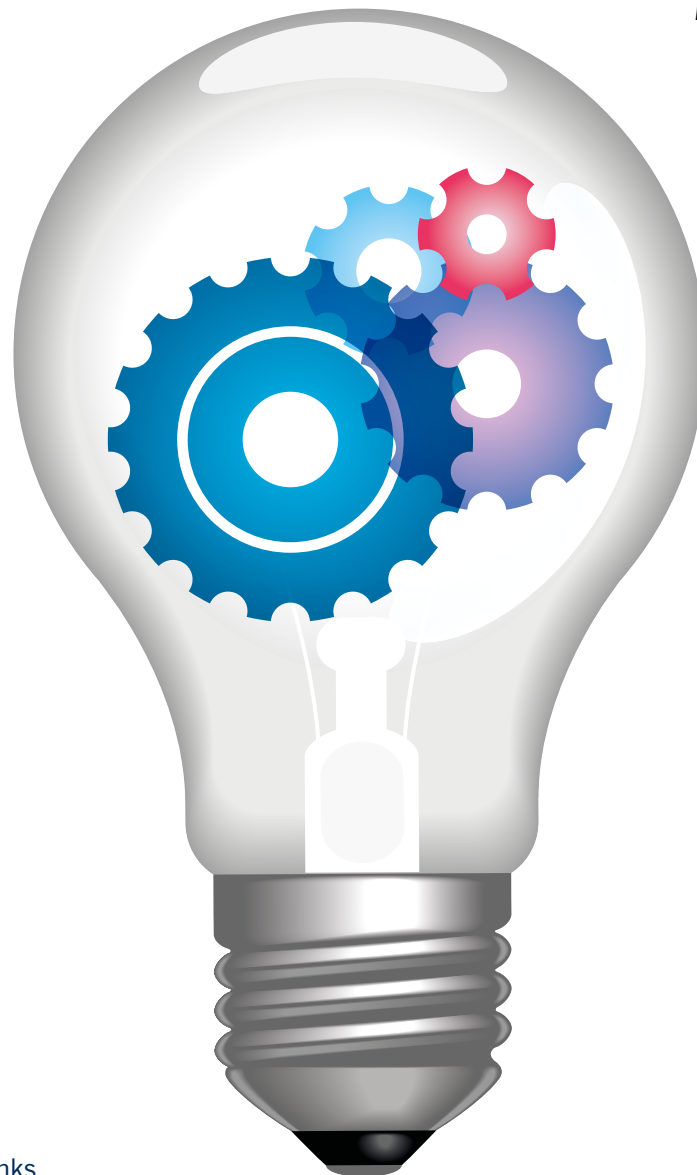
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The business school that thinks and lives in the future

# Post-merger integration and the role of language fluency

By *Joep Cornelissen and David P. Kroon*

**Beware the march of English as the lingua franca of the international commercial world. If handled insensitively, it could damage a potentially successful integration trajectory in a merger or acquisition.**



This is just one of the provocative strands of thinking that emerge from research conducted over the past several years into the aftermath of a high-profile acquisition involving a French company as the buyer and a Dutch company as the target. This research has generated great data that could readily be put to use for further multiple projects; the language element is one of the most interesting aspects to have emerged so far.

Although the French company is clearly the senior partner, actions taken post-acquisition contain the potential to skew future development. Management has claimed that the deal was in fact a merger of equals and dictated the use of English across the company, replacing French and Dutch, even in its domestic locations. This created growing suspicions that employees in the theoretically junior partner in the relationship could in fact turn out to have the

eventual upper hand, largely because of their greater fluency in English.

Rather than only focusing on the senior management level of the merged organisation, we focused on exploring how middle managers and employees on the ground made sense of the merger, both individually and collectively, and how they were to a greater or lesser degree facilitated in this by their command of the English language. We found that tensions between the two companies heightened. This can be especially significant if staff are seen to be promoted on the basis of their perceived greater fluency in English rather than on the basis of their technical knowledge and capabilities.

There are two principal ways of measuring an individual's fluency in a language. The first is subjective, asking people how well they speak a certain language. In this case, the subjective sense of fluency was very high for both Dutch and French speakers alike (although significantly higher for the Dutch side). But when we applied objective measuring techniques to categorise an individual's level of fluency – such as recording the rate of an individual's speech in the English language, the extent of the speaker's vocabulary and the use of idioms in an appropriate context – the results were often very different. People scored much less well on paper than they did in their own head. Many were in fact far less fluent than they thought they were.

## Language environment

Our study highlights several facets of the role of language fluency in the ▶

wake of an acquisition. Initially, individuals with lower levels of English-speaking capability traditionally tend to identify less with the new company in the integration phase. But the use of “Business English as a Lingua Franca” (BELF) can change their outlook. In a BELF environment, the less fluent will tend to bond with others who demon-

strate a similar English-speaking capability. We found that this process – which we label as identity transformation – boosts co-operation and hence corporate productivity.

What this suggests is that marked differences in fluency may lead to fault lines, conflict and power struggles in a company. Senior management therefore needs to be aware of fluency levels in English across the organisation and to test these levels using the process referred to above.

ly in English with one another locally and with their colleagues elsewhere. There is, however, a cut-off point and ultimately a price to be paid by those who just cross that threshold. The least fluent will almost certainly find that fewer job opportunities become available to them.

In sum, language matters, and its importance stretches beyond essential day-to-day communication. It helps in the construction of social and corporate identity. It helps in maintaining hierarchy. It helps in demonstrating class and educational distinction. It helps in delivering individual and corporate success. It deserves to be studied further. ■

**This article draws its inspiration from the paper *Explaining Employees’ Reactions towards a Cross-Border Merger: The Role of English Language Fluency*, written by David P. Kroon, Joep Cornelissen and Eero Vaara. *Management International Review*, December 2015, Volume 55, Issue 6, pp 775-800. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11575-015-0259-2>**

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“...management should reflect on the way in which they formulate their messages and express themselves in English...”

The research suggests that the language environment in which people work on a day-to-day basis matters a good deal too. Paradoxically, senior-level but non-native English speakers operating in a multi-language location – who might be expected to thrive in the new environment and take advantage of the additional opportunities presented by a transformative acquisition – can show clear signs of anxiety. Their desire to achieve unnecessarily high linguistic standards can adversely affect their job performance. They can also struggle with the need to adapt to the different registers of language and tone that might be required in dealing with different levels of staff in a non-native tongue.

### Fluency thresholds

The good news is that the minimum fluency threshold for such a common base is surprisingly low. Even in locations where people demonstrated the lowest levels of fluency, it is clear that they could still communicate adequate-

