

## 3 Reasons Attys Should Learn A Foreign Language

By Jack Karp

*Law360 (August 17, 2018, 12:33 PM EDT)* -- Just 10 days into his first job after college as a paralegal in WilmerHale's Washington, D.C., office, Matthew Syrkin found himself bound for Tokyo with a former general counsel to the FBI and a former director of enforcement of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, with work on a high-profile investigation waiting for them when they landed.

What earned Syrkin, now chair of the media, technology and commercial transactions practice at Hughes Hubbard & Reed LLP, a seat on that trip? Someone at WilmerHale got wind that he was fluent in Japanese.

"As a guy who just graduated college who wanted to get some experience in the law, already I was in a room with high-level executives and former FBI and SEC guys," Syrkin said.

"It just immediately showed me it's a real difference maker, all things being equal," he added about his fluency in Japanese, Mandarin and Spanish.

Like Syrkin, attorneys who have mastered foreign languages quickly realize that their unique talent makes them stand out in their profession, and the skill is something that helps them across practice areas and industries.

That pool of multilingual attorneys includes Suzanne Levy Friedman, an associate in Hogan Lovells' U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulatory practice. She said her proficiency with French, Spanish and Hebrew has given her an advantage on matters such as helping a French company get a medical device approved for use in the U.S.

"It saved them a lot of time, a lot of money, and it also allowed them to feel a lot more comfortable that they were getting their needs accomplished because I was someone who spoke their language — but was more than just some translator off the street who didn't understand the context," she said.

Both Syrkin and Levy Friedman pointed out, though, that the level of fluency required to practice law in a foreign tongue is a step above mere cocktail party conversation and, according to Syrkin, takes "a commitment and a dedication to immersion ... you can't learn Chinese or Japanese on the weekends." So is the time and effort really worth it for attorneys?

Here, Law360 looks at three reasons to learn a language other than your own.

## Make Yourself More Marketable

Multilingual attorneys are currently "superhot candidates" and legal staffing agencies "absolutely have seen an increase in demand for candidates with multilingual skill sets," said Stephanie Newman, vice president of search for Parker + Lynch Legal, the attorney search division of Special Counsel.

Newman said she's even seen some firms relax their hiring criteria for attorneys with necessary language skills.

### Interested in learning a foreign language?

*Check out these resources:*

- » **Brooklyn Law School's** Legal Language Institute offers courses for lawyers in the legal terms and concepts of German, Spanish, French, Russian and Chinese.
- » **American University Washington College of Law's** Spanish for Lawyers program introduces lawyers and students with Spanish-speaking skills to legal Spanish concepts.
- » **Seattle University School of Law's** Lawyering in Spanish program is a one-year course that helps attorneys learn to communicate with Spanish-speaking clients.
- » **University of Denver Sturm College of Law's** Lawyering in Spanish program trains students to use Spanish language skills in various legal contexts.
- » **PittLaw Language for Lawyers** courses are open to practicing attorneys and students who want to improve their ability to communicate in Arabic, French, German and Spanish.
- » **Dallas Bar Association's** Spanish for Lawyers program enables attorneys to learn how to read, write and speak Spanish at an adult continuing education level.
- » **The ABA Spanish Legal Phrasebook** identifies common American legal phrases and concepts and provides accurate Spanish translations.
- » **The Foreign Service Institute's** website offers free text and audio aids for more than 45 languages designed by linguists for the U.S. government.

"If a big law firm ... might not otherwise consider an associate based on their grades or previous experience ... most firms, particularly in New York City, would take a second look at that candidate based on the fact that they have that multilingual capability alone," she said.

That's especially true for attorneys fluent in Spanish and Asian languages, said Jamy Sullivan, executive director of Robert Half Legal, which surveyed attorneys about the demand for language skills in 2013.

According to Sullivan, 88 percent of those surveyed identified Spanish as the language seeing the greatest demand from law firms, especially in California, Texas, New York and Florida, while attorneys who speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese and Korean are sought after in metropolitan centers like the

Bay Area, Los Angeles, New York City and Chicago. She's also seen demand for French and German.

And she pointed out that prowess in a foreign patois not only helps attorneys get in the door at a coveted firm, but also can nudge them a few rungs up the earnings ladder once they're inside.

"Candidates that are fluent in English and any of those in-demand foreign languages will stand out from the competition and often find that firms will offer them above-market salaries to attract them," she said.

### **Win More Clients — and Their Trust**

Recruiters attributed the uptick in law firms' demand for multilingual attorneys to the globalization of the economy and the trend of law firms merging and expanding internationally, both of which mean attorneys increasingly have to communicate with international clients.

"Being a multilingual lawyer gives me an exponentially larger potential client base, and allows me to advise on business issues for a more geographically diverse set of clients," Syrkin said of his own work. "So my client base is tremendous out of the gate ... it includes all of South America, part of Europe and most of East Asia."

That includes, for instance, Colombia, where Syrkin represented Colombian bank Banco Davivienda SA in its \$801 million purchase of HSBC Bank's operations in Latin America.

Syrkin said his ability to be "on the ground in Colombia, working and traveling with his counterparts, and to do it all in Spanish, was "fundamental to a) us getting the deal and b) them continuing to be our client."

But language abilities don't just help attorneys win overseas clients, they also help attorneys gain those clients' trust, Levy Friedman pointed out.

She specifically remembered a client for whom she helped win asylum in the U.S. in the course of her pro bono work. The woman had joined a political party that opposed Congo's dictatorship and, as a result, had been arrested and spent several days being tortured and raped.

"My being able to talk to her in French, I think ... helped her open up because she didn't speak English," Levy Friedman said, adding that the fact that she "was not just a translator," but could also explain to her client, "I'm trying to get what you need, and here's why I need you to be frank with me," helped her play "both roles more effectively."

Syrkin, who has spent time living in Beijing, Tokyo and Panama, said the cultural knowledge he gained living abroad is almost more important than the language itself.

"What people are really looking for is someone who understands them and can operate on the same wavelength," he said. "Those hiring outside lawyers want people who they can relate to, that understand the pressures they're under, the culture, and will do right by them."

### **Expand Your Practice Areas**

Litigation, immigration, mergers and acquisitions, and patent and intellectual property are some of the

legal practice areas seeing the most call for multilingual attorneys, Sullivan said.

Syrkin is quick to include one of his own practice areas, technology, on that list.

"What is more cross-border ... than tech-based transactions or, frankly, any deal involving internet or IP-connected products or services?" he said.

And project finance and international arbitration make the list as well, according to Newman.

But she said that with all the cross-border deals taking place, the practice area in which multilingual attorneys are most in-demand is "far and away" corporate mergers and acquisitions.

No matter the practice area, though, she doesn't see the demand for multilingual attorneys diminishing any time soon.

"I think for candidates who are looking for positions who do have that fluency in a particular foreign language, now is the time," she said.

Levy Friedman pointed to her success winning FDA approval for her French client's medical device as just one example of why it can pay for attorneys to become fluent in a foreign language. But she said the real reward for her has been the personal satisfaction.

"Being able to cross that divide is something that I think is really highly valued," she said. "It's been exciting to be able to play that role because you get to both relate to the people who you're serving, be it pro bono client or a corporation, and you get to have this huge victory."

--Editing by Katherine Rautenberg.