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Multilingual workplace adds 46 billion francs to economy

By Jeremy Allen

Lausanne - 19 November 2008 | 08:29

The multilingual nature of communication among companies in Switzerland generates 46 billion francs for Swiss GDP, according to researchers at the University of Geneva. They are assessing the macroeconomic impact of multilingual communication in the workplace for a report that is due to be released in December. According to one of the senior researchers, French or German deliver a greater economic return on an individual level than English.

The ongoing project called LEAP, which, in French, stands for Foreign Languages in Professional Life, looks at the macroeconomic impact of languages in the industrial sector. Initial results from a report that will be published on December 16 reveal that the multilingual nature of many businesses in this country contributes nine percent to Switzerland's Gross Domestic Product. The report will contain a more detailed analysis of how individual languages can have an impact on the economy.

Two hundred companies in the industrial sector in French- and German-speaking Switzerland were surveyed. LEAP's research found that foreign or non-local languages represent a quarter of the total communication within a firm found in the two regions. English was more prevalent in firms in German-speaking Switzerland.

Larger companies, of 200 employees or more, resorted more to multilingual communication. Far less people communicated in English in smaller companies in Switzerland. In addition, contrary to a common belief that English is the most useful language for a business to stay ahead of competition, François Grin, a member of the research team, said that knowledge of another local language such as French or German plays a more important role.

" One perception is that English is the Alpha and the Omega for all, but what has been found in other studies is that, in Switzerland, what companies most need are skills in the other national languages" Grin, one of the project's leaders told Swisster.

In terms of individual rates of economic return, in French-speaking Switzerland, the benefits of English and German, depending on the competence in the languages, was equivalent.

" Competence in English is becoming usual, even banal, so you need to set yourself apart from your competitors by knowing other things, such as the national languages in Switzerland which play a major role," he added.

