

# Corporate chiefs turn multilingual to get global edge

Being fluent in just one's mother tongue is no longer enough, writes **David De Jong**.

**F**acing thousands of Deutsche Bank AG investors, many of them mutinous, Anshu Jain knew a lot was riding on his speech at the annual meeting of Germany's largest bank.

"On this day, every word matters," Jain said in German at the May gathering.

For that reason, he said, he would continue in his mother tongue. The India-born British citizen delivered the rest of the 2000-word address in English.

Less than three weeks later, Jain resigned as co-chief executive after losing the confidence of investors.

Brady Dougan, an American who struggled with German during eight years running Credit Suisse Group AG, left the Zurich-based bank at the end of June.

While their failure to master German didn't cost Jain and Dougan their jobs, it drew criticism in their host countries and

deprived the chief executives of a valuable tool for connecting with local shareholders, customers and colleagues.

At a time when border controls have disappeared in much of Europe, language can still be a barrier.

"You have to be understood by your clients, and your clients in Germany speak German," said Kerstin Altendorf, a spokeswoman at the Berlin-based Association of German Banks.

Though many Europe-based multinationals - including Airbus Group SE, Daimler AG and SAP SE - have adopted English as their corporate language, English alone isn't enough.

As the firm's public face, a chief executive often reflects the local culture, including the language, which is important at a time when the growing dominance of English can breed resentment at home.

Georges Plassat, head of Carrefour SA, the global retailer based



Boardrooms across Europe are increasingly resounding with a range of languages. Photo: Louie Douvis

near Paris, makes a point of speaking French in public appearances in the home country.

Leadership skills stakeholders such as lenders and labour representatives may not speak English. Likewise, local politicians, regulators and media figures aren't necessarily multilingual.

All this helps explain why CEOs without local-language skills are so rare, even at Europe's multinational firms.

"In Germany, it's very important that a CEO who isn't German can communicate with the business," said Bjorn Johansson, Zurich-based executive search consultant.

However, leadership skills, knowledge of the industry and experience with management change should trump multilingualism in the search for a global CEO, he said.

In Switzerland, a non-EU country with German, French and Italian as official languages, executives are expected to speak at least two in addition to English.

Paul Bulcke, the Belgian chief executive of Nestle SA, speaks fluent Dutch, German, French, Spanish and Portuguese, according to the company website.

"Being multilingual creates a stronger connection with peers,

employees and consumers, which is critical for a business like ours," Bulcke said.

Recently Dougan said he regretted not learning more German.

"I speak some French and Japanese and consider myself talented at languages, but I was just too busy," he said.

Jain's successor, Briton John Cryan, speaks German well, according to colleagues, speaks German well.

Dougan's successor, Tidjane Thiam, who was born in Ivory Coast and is also a French citizen, studied German in high school in his homeland. Bloomberg