

FEASIBILITY OF THE INTRODUCTION OF THE LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION AUDIT SCHEME (LCA) INTO TRENCIN-SLOVAKIA, BARCELONA/CATALONIA-SPAIN AND UHERSKE HRADISTE-CZECH REPUBLIC

The Regional Chamber of Commerce in Trencin (Slovakia), the Barcelona Promotion Foundation as part of the Chamber of Commerce (Spain) and the Uherske Hradiste Chamber of Commerce (Czech Republic) have undertaken a feasibility study of adapting the Language Communication Audit (LCA) to local conditions in their three countries and presented the results, which include plans for its localisation, implementation and financial sustainability model.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS FOR THE LCA

The partner countries and their respective scheme managers have analysed the local economic conditions facing international SMEs in the aftermath of the financial crisis and provided a rationale for the introduction of the scheme.

All three European member states and regions depend on their export-driven economies. 42.4% of Slovakian GDP is produced by Small and Medium Sized Enterprises and in Catalonia SMEs contributed to just above 50% of the Catalan GDP in 2010. The main destination for cross-border trade is the European Union:

- Catalonia: France, Germany, Italy;
- Slovakia: Germany, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Austria;
- Czech Republic: Germany, Slovakia, Poland, France

With Germany being the third largest exporter and importer in the world and by far the largest trading nation in Europe, it is also one of the main trading partners for all three countries. With clear signs of a gradual recovery after 2011 figures show an annual increase in cross-border sales. The total number of Catalan sales to European destinations rose and particularly to Germany, which showed an increase of 31.7%. Similar figures are true for Slovakia and the Czech Republic with total export sales increasing by 23% and 22% respectively in 2012. Although the European Union remains the main target market new and emerging markets and languages deserve attention. SMEs in Catalonia need skills in Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic.

With growing economies and higher employment rates language skills are crucial. Companies in the partner countries recognise the need to master new linguistic skills and understand how a successful Language Management Strategy (LMS) can be implemented and operate to assist a company in its communicative approach. The LCA scheme will increase awareness about the opportunities for large and small companies of improved language skills and develop other methods to improve their language strategies and encourage a more multilingual local business environment.

Potential target sectors include the chemical industry, textile manufacturing and clothing for all three project partners. Other possible target sectors are Logistics, Machinery, Electro-technical and service sectors such as ICT.

PURPOSE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHEME

The general and most important objectives of LCA Scheme for Slovakia, Catalonia and the Czech Republic are to help small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to overcome barriers in overseas business communication and multilingualism by the development of specialised, trained

consultancy services and solutions to their communication problems, and to increase their market competitiveness.

Barcelona Chamber of Commerce and more specifically the Promotion Foundation, for example, plans to include the LCA scheme into the product catalogue of a language service, which was launched in 2012, namely IDIOMES Cambra. 70% of its services consist of language training (80% English); 20% linguistic audit, certification and assessment and 10% translation and interpretation. The LCA is an opportunity for IDIOMES Cambra to diversify its range of services whilst simultaneously being able to offer a unique targeted communication audit to exporting SMEs.

In the Czech Republic Uherske Hradiste Chamber of Commerce is expecting the concept to be received well as no other Language Communication Audit for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises is currently in operation in the country. The Chamber wishes to implement an operational LCA scheme in the Czech Republic under its guidance to increase efficiency and market competitiveness in local and regional SMEs. The Chamber intends to incorporate the LCA process into its own vocational training plans.

Trencin Chamber of Commerce in Slovakia belongs to one of the most dynamic regions in the country. The Chamber is set on increasing the effectiveness and market competitiveness of initially Trencin SMEs through implementation of the LCA scheme. It intends to include the LCA process into its own vocational training agenda by acting as the main scheme management and auditing training centre.

As no other similar scheme is in operation in the country, the Chamber's collaboration with other regions, the National Development Agency of SMEs and the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency opens the possibility of improving business communication nationwide thus aiding Slovakia in becoming a competitive trader on the global market.

OPERATION OF THE LCA

The three scheme managers have agreed to provide a training programme for a minimum of 10 selected auditors in each country, setting up the criteria for LCA auditors and selecting the most suitable candidates, adapting the existing training course for local delivery. Each scheme manager will provide support to future auditors to enable them to conduct reviews for a minimum of 20 companies in each country, to manage and organise the Audit Scheme to be extended into a nation-wide consultancy network that will further sustain the LCA's work into the future.

Process: To pilot audit schemes for SMEs in each country

- To identify key national or regional business players;
- To identify communication processes, needs, expectations and barriers of small and medium sized companies when exporting to foreign countries;
- Potential auditors will be identified according to a set of criteria: knowledge of English and another European language, previous experience in business consulting, capacity to understand customer needs, ability to determine the strengths and weaknesses of communication, the ability to provide solutions to customer problems, specific to each country.
- To enable SMEs to overcome the language and cultural barriers by increasing the language and communication skills;
- To undertake a minimum of 20 Language and Communication Audits (LCAs) of international SMEs in each country;

- To prepare a comprehensive report which summarises their strengths and weaknesses in communicating with customers and concludes with recommendations for overcoming their weaknesses, listing appropriate providers and associated costs.

METHODS OF PUBLICITY

In order to ensure a maximum impact of its dissemination, valorisation and exploitation activities, the partners intend to carry out the following actions:

- Publish articles in press and trade magazines;
- Set up a minimum of 2 seminars to business advisers and stakeholders;
- Publish results on their websites;
- Print guide books to promote the auditing service

The LCA will have the possibility of being nationally disseminated and eventually implemented throughout the nation in the Czech Republic thanks to Uherske Hradiste's vast network and cooperation with the regional Chamber of Zlin, Czech Trade and Czech Invest.

In Slovakia the LCA services will be offered through the information services of NADSME (the National agency for Development of SMEs) and SARIO (Slovak Investment and Trade development Agency). In Barcelona the LCA will become part of the ACM (Auditoria de Comunicació Multilingüe) which is available to exporting SMEs in the Barcelona region.

Financial Sustainability

The financial sustainability of the LCA scheme (and associated services) will be ensured by applying fees. Each partner is investigating how a sustainable model can be introduced into their training models and organisations. Trenčín Chamber of Commerce and Uherske Hradiste Chamber of Commerce are considering introducing fees for SMEs ordering an LCA whereas the Promotion Foundation in Barcelona will be including the LCA into its current financing scheme.

The project partners are looking into a certification system, kite marking and standardising in order to ensure the scheme's future in Europe.