

Case study

Community Languages in London

Going underground: European and Community languages meet on London's tube network



Over four million people a day use the London Underground – residents of London, tourists and commuters. London is one of the most multicultural and multilingual cities in the world, which presents a challenge to those who manage and staff the Underground. Thankfully the potential workforce within the population mirrors the communities that use the network, and so London Underground takes advantage to the benefit of all.

Employees' language skills have been recognised for some time through voluntary name badges which describe their ability in the language – for example, "Hablo español". In terms of professional development, London Underground is considering using its e-learning zone as a way of developing language skills, whether refreshing current mother tongue skills or learning new languages.

Simple steps can help with communication

Further initiatives can help London Underground with the challenges ahead. An Ambassadors scheme similar to that run by the Docklands Light Railway is being considered by London Underground. In that scheme, DLR staff visited community centres in Newham and Tower Hamlets to understand how residents who were not using the system at present felt. Language and cultural barriers, whether perceived or real, are often part of the equation. Simple steps can make a difference – for example, plain English and internationally recognised icons are already helping London residents and tourists.

A recent project led by RLN London also drew attention to the many situations in which language and culture can present barriers, and made recommendations to London Underground in order to tackle increasing numbers of tourists and residents needing support on the network. As a result, a phrase book has been published covering nine languages – including



Arabic, Chinese, French and Polish. It is currently being tested at key 'gateway' stations – Kings Cross St Pancras, Liverpool Street and Heathrow.

This comprehensive book also provides vital cultural do's and don'ts, and responds to the needs of both customers and staff at larger stations. Phrases and scenarios are carefully tailored for London Underground staff, translating expressions such as 'Mind the gap'. Ticket machines are also being adapted to help customers, for example – 6 languages are now available (rising to 17 in the summer of 2008).

Native French speakers drafted in

Peter Sanders, who works out of Kings Cross Underground station, has been trialling the new phrase book. "Many of our team members speak languages – Urdu, Bengali and Gujarati in particular. In the main, we've had to learn European languages, especially with the arrival of Eurostar, and even drafted in native French speakers from other stations during the launch period. We've found the phrase book exceptionally useful – only this morning we were able to help a Eurostar ticket inspector resolve a situation with a French-speaking passenger."



Jane Collis, Director of RLN London, commented: "London Underground is going the extra mile in serving its customers – and developing their own staff at the same time. We're pleased to see Community Language skills playing a big part in removing barriers to communication."

Useful links



www.tube.tfl.gov.uk

To see more case studies and information on Community Languages in London, visit www.rln-london.com/multilinguallondon

