The integration of expatriate managers in the Czech Republic:   
the role of language knowledge

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LONG ABSTRACT

In a more open world, where companies are no longer confined to seeking their workforce in the territory of their natural location, more and more workers are prepared to relocate in response to career opportunities. Alongside migrants, whose decision to leave corresponds to crises or difficulties in their country of origin, there is a growing number of individuals who will change the country for career reasons, either by assignment [Assigned Expatriates] or personal choice [Self-Initiated Expatriates] (Przytuła 2015).

At the same time, in the space of a decade, the Czech Republic has become one of Europe's most attractive countries for employment. For several years now, it has had the lowest unemployment rate in Europe, with the number of foreign workers increasing 2.5-fold between December 2015 and December 2023 (<https://www.expats.cz/czech-news/article/number-of-foreign-employees-in-czechia-sees-massive-growth-in-2023> )

Experts(<https://expatriant.com/how-important-is-learning-the-local-language/>) and researchers (McAreyvey 2009) working on migrants and expatriates recommend learning the local language to better integrate into the new society. This also applies to the integration of migrants to the Czech Republic (Vacková and Prokešová 2017). Yet many of the expats we meet in Prague do not speak a word of Czech. Under the system used in the European Union, and in the Czech Republic in particular, European citizens are not obliged to show any knowledge of the local language. Citizens of other countries must demonstrate an A2 level for a long-term residence certificate ([www.foreigners.cz](http://www.foreigners.cz)). Is there a link between this limited obligation and the apparent reduced number of expats learning Czech? Sadly, there is no data neither on the language skills of foreigners living in the Czech Republic, nor on the correlation between such skills and their degree of integration into their company and society.

The decision to learn the local language can be influenced by personal factors which may also be related to the language concerned. A person may decide that a language is too difficult to learn. This may come as no surprise in the case of Czech: The Foreign Service Institute's classification puts it in category IV, meaning that an English speaker has to devote 44 weeks to learning, compared with 30 weeks for German and 24 weeks for French. Expats may also decide not to learn Czech if the investment seems disproportionate to the length of their stay in the country and the perceived interest in the result.

The choice may also be influenced by external factors such as the accessibility of courses, the time available, or the company's language strategy and the language coping mechanism it has planned (Welch and Welch 2019). We should not forget the effect of language as a social practice, which can cause the relationship with the local language to change in response to a social action such as the manager's relationship with his team (Kassis Henderson 2005).

Our research seeks to understand the link that may exist between language and the integration of expatriates in the Czech Republic, to gain a better understanding of the way expatriates view Czech and the factors contributing to their decision to learn it or to do without it, to understand the benefits brought by knowledge of the language and to find out what level of knowledge is necessary and sufficient.

Our article fills a gap in the literature, as to our knowledge there is very little research into the use of the Czech language among expatriates. An early article in 2005 (Neustupný and Nekvapil 2003)noted that the development of foreign-owned companies was upsetting the linguistic balance, notably by imposing the use of English.

To carry out this research, we use a mixed-method approach based on several semi-structured interviews at the start and end of the project, as well as a target survey of expatriates living in the Czech Republic. The first three semi-structured interviews enabled us to define the basis for the interviews, which are based on four possible schemas: individuals who have decided not to learn Czech, people who continue to take lessons on a regular basis, those who stopped after reaching the desired level, and finally those who started taking lessons and then suddenly gave up.

In addition to a traditional quantitative analysis of the responses (Yang, Wang, and Su 2006), we applied an analysis derived from the Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008; https://www.groundedtheoryonline.com/what-is-grounded-theory/) to the data. To this end, the questionnaires were designed to allow respondents to leave numerous comments. We hope to receive over two hundred replies from respondents in various parts of the Czech Republic, covering a wide range of expatriation situations.

The current state of our data, based on 26 responses received, suggests several areas for further investigation. First of all, the desire to learn the language is much more related to factors external to the company job: the desire to stay in the country indefinitely (67% of learners) or the desire to find interesting extra-professional activities (67%). Several factors lead expatriates to decide not to learn the language or to give up learning it. Firstly, apparent or real difficulty (56% of those concerned), but above all the ease of living in English in the capital (64%). What's more, in a free association exercise, many of those questioned (54%) automatically wrote the difficult article opposite the Czech language. Surprisingly, however, a significant number of people (42% of the total) would like to see more encouragement to learn Czech, either from companies or the government.

Our research is not sufficiently advanced to allow us to draw any conclusions. But it does seem that a significant number of expats don't need to know the basics of the local language to feel integrated.

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