**[Sorry STEM, Google just made the case for more foreign language education](https://blogs.transparent.com/language-news/2018/01/01/sorry-stem-google-just-made-the-case-for-more-foreign-language-education/)**

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***Science, technology, engineering, and math are not the only (or even the most) valuable 21st century skills. Even Google says so.***

In the last decade, American education has been increasingly concerned with promoting STEM subjects. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of students enrolled in STEM degree programs [increased 36%](https://www.nsf.gov/nsb/sei/edTool/data/college-02.html). Then-President Obama asked Congress for a [$4 billion investment](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/obamas-push-for-computer-science-education/459276/) in computer science in K-12 schools. States like [Michigan](http://www.mlive.com/news/index.ssf/2017/03/state_house_approves_changes_t.html) now allow high school students to fulfill foreign language credit requirements by learning to code. Government officials in [North Carolina](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/30/north-carolina-governor-joins-chorus-republicans-critical-liberal-arts) and [Kentucky](https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2016-01-29/in-kentucky-a-push-for-engineers-over-french-lit-scholars) have proposed defunding non-technical majors in state universities, on the basis that they “don’t get someone a job”.

**But Google—of all sources—may have just blown the lid of the entire STEM-phasis.**

The Washington Post recently reported on [a 2013 Google study of its hiring, firing, and promotion data](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/12/20/the-surprising-thing-google-learned-about-its-employees-and-what-it-means-for-todays-students/?utm_term=.6e483985a152&wpisrc=nl_sb_smartbrief) since 1998. **The study, called Project Oxygen, shockingly concluded that “among the eight most important qualities of Google’s top employees, STEM expertise comes in dead last.”**

So, what came out on top? “The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one’s colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas.”

**The soft skills valued by employers are byproducts of foreign language acquisition.**

The majority of these soft skills are byproducts of the hard skill that continues to be put on the back burner or brushed aside entirely: learning a foreign language.

* **Communicating and listening well:** Here’s an obvious one—bilinguals are better communicators. When learning another language, understanding others and making yourself understood is always front of mind.
* **Possessing different values and points of view:** You may have heard that learning a new language provides a new perspective on the world; that statement isn’t just a feel-good catchphrase. Studies out of Chicago show that even young children exposed to multiple languages are [better at understanding other people’s perspectives](https://www.npr.org/2016/03/21/471316384/studies-suggest-multilingual-exposure-boosts-childrens-communication-skills).
* **Having empathy toward others:** A 2015 study from University of Chicago indicated bilingual children are [more likely to be empathetic](https://www.bustle.com/articles/87489-bilingual-children-are-more-likely-to-be-empathetic-study-shows-so-start-brushing-up-on-that). Struggling your way through a second language can be humbling, making it much easier to put yourself in others’ shoes and understand those who are different or whose beliefs differ from yours.
* **Being a good critical thinker:**[Studies from the University of Chicago](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/10126883/Why-learn-a-foreign-language-Benefits-of-bilingualism.html) show that bilinguals are better able to pick up on nuances and subtleties. This leads to more informed decision making, rather than emotional decision making.
* **Making connections across complex ideas:** Bilinguals possess [many cognitive skills](https://blogs.transparent.com/language-news/2013/12/02/5-cognitive-benefits-of-bilingualism/) that heighten awareness of complexities in a given situation. Studies show bilinguals have more control over their attention, make more rational decisions, and are more perceptive and observant.

**The benefits of foreign language learning isn’t limited to soft skills and cognitive function.**

Of course, the benefits and advantages afforded by foreign language study are not limited to those soft skills valued by Google and other high-tech employers. Parents, educators, and employers have many reasons to emphasize languages with the same intensity as STEM:

* Language learning supports academic achievement in [myriad ways](https://www.actfl.org/advocacy/what-the-research-shows#academic_achievement), including higher standardized test scores (especially in math and science!), increased ability to hypothesize, and improved reading abilities.
* Studying a language may take time away from studying STEM subjects, but it doesn’t detract from performance in those areas. A 2007 [study](http://www.newsminer.com/business/the-benefits-of-learning-a-foreign-language/article_d189bc9c-b7e0-11e3-b994-0017a43b2370.html) by the University of Massachusetts showed that “children who study a foreign language, even when this second language study takes time away from the study of mathematics, outperform students who do not study a foreign language and have more mathematical instruction during the school day.” The same study indicated this benefit applies to other subjects as well.
* Learning a foreign language can improve your native language. As you ingest the grammar rules, syntax, and other complexities of a new language, your knowledge of the mechanics of language improve. This awareness can carry over to your first language, making you a better speaker and writer—skills whose utility cannot be denied.
* Learning a language, even at lower proficiency levels, can stave off dementia by up to 4 years (almost 4 times as long as the leading medical treatment for the disease).

**STEM is but one part of a well-rounded, preparatory education.**

As a tech company, we do not deny the necessity of STEM skills in the modern world. But offering scholarships or distributing state education funds based on which degrees earn money or guarantee employment (debunked by Google itself, as you now know) only narrows our tunnel vision. CNN host Fareed Zakaria agrees, arguing:

“This dismissal of broad-based learning, however, comes from a fundamental misreading of the facts — and puts America on a dangerously narrow path for the future. The United States has led the world in economic dynamism, innovation and entrepreneurship thanks to exactly the kind of teaching we are now told to defenestrate. **A broad general education helps foster critical thinking and creativity. Exposure to a variety of fields produces synergy and cross fertilization. Yes, science and technology are crucial components of this education, but so are English and philosophy.”**

Particularly at younger ages—at least through high school—an introduction to the full spectrum of technical and social sciences develops the soft skills that can be harder to learn later on. Languages in particular are [best started as early as possible](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/11151726/Children-should-start-learning-languages-at-age-three.html) to develop the skills and qualities so highly desired by Google. You can train coders on-the-job, but teaching empathy? Not so much.

**What does this mean for employers?**

**Lest you think the title of this post is using Google’s name as nothing more than a buzzword, it’s not just the internet behemoth who feels this way.**  According to [NACE’s Job Outlook 2016 survey](http://www.naceweb.org/store/2016/job-outlook-2016/) and the 260 employers it surveyed, important hirable attributes include “written communication skills, problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills, and a strong work ethic”. In fact, “respondents to the current survey gave slightly greater weight to verbal communication skills than was the case last year, and slightly less weight to analytical/quantitative skills.”

The increased value placed on STEM degrees, unfortunately, has resulted in a decrease in value for other majors. While they value attributes associated with the social sciences and humanities, survey respondents also indicated that academic major has the most significant influence on hiring decisions. Foreign language abilities and study abroad experiences, on the other hand, wield “not much influence”.

This inconsistency is massively important for educators, law makers, parents, and employers to realize. It’s time for employers to see the value of degrees in languages, philosophy, history, the arts, and beyond. Some have already noticed; billionaire investor Mark Cuban [predicts](http://www.businessinsider.com/mark-cuban-liberal-arts-is-the-future-2017-2) “a greater demand in 10 years for liberal arts majors than […] for programming majors and maybe even engineering”.

Emphasizing foreign languages and other social sciences is still relevant – critical, even – in the 21st century. As the Washington Post points out, **even Steve Jobs infamously insisted STEM wouldn’t be enough. The future will require experts in “the human, cultural, and social as well as the computational.”**