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'Let's Talk' helps businesses talk

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Staff photo by Jeff Pouland

Eric Votava, an employee with Johnny's Selected Seeds, left, and Scott Knowlen, a safety officer with Cianbro Corp., right, listen to

substitute teacher Meriwynn Grothe Mansori, center, during a 90 minute intermediate Spanish class at Let's Talk Language School in Waterville on Tuesday evening.



WATERVILLE -- Scott Knowlen, a safety officer for Cianbro Corp., often travels from the construction company's corporate headquarters in Pittsfield to its Mid-Atlantic Region office in Baltimore.

When he goes he draws on the Spanish lessons he takes at Let's Talk Language School in Waterville to help him communicate with a work force in which about 40 percent of the employees are Hispanic.

Cianbro pays the full cost of the lessons.

"My boss supports it," Knowlen said. "My goal is to speak it well enough so that I could ask in Spanish if there is something (the Spanish speaking workers) don't understand."

Cianbro is not the only company in the area that sees the value in helping its employees learn another language.

Johnny's Selected Seeds in Winslow foots the bill for six employees at Let's Talk, one of whom takes both Spanish and Japanese.

Across town at Lohman Animal Health, Allison Hopkins is reimbursed by her employer for the fee she pays to take German at the Waterville language school. German is a wise choice for Hopkins given that her company is German owned.

Steve Buchsbaum, who directs the language school with his wife, Gina Coppens, said he is getting more students whose companies pay their tuition.

"It definitely has become more common at this school," he said. "I think we have eight students whose employers are paying. When we started we had one or two."

Mike Comer, general manager at Johnny's Selected Seeds, sits in an office with a global map above his desk, so that he can keep track of the 50 or so countries with which Johnny's has business dealings.

"The seeds we sell come from all over the world," he said. "As most people realize, Maine is not a good place to produce seeds."

Johnny's, however, does not simply get product from abroad; the seed company also spans the globe for its customers, and Comer said those customers appreciate a company that employs people who speak their language.

"It is very important fundamentally from a selling perspective in that people from any nationality are likely to think positive of you if you speak even some of their language," he said.

Johnny's employee Eric Votava, who takes the same intermediate Spanish class as Knowlen, considers competency in a second language as practically essential in his business.

"It is a valuable tool for anybody," he said, "and in the seed business there is a lot of business in Spain, Mexico and Central and South America."

In the case of Hopkins, picking up German had a social as well as a practical purpose.

“The company I work for is owned by a German company, and we have people from Germany visiting from time to time, and one of those people is sticking around for awhile. Having become friends with this person, I had a little more motivation to learn the language.”

Motivation is a key to becoming competent in a foreign language.

Knowlen said he took two years of Spanish in high school and retained virtually nothing.

“I had no motivation,” he said. “I took it because it was there.”

Nowadays, though, Knowlen has a direct interest in learning the language: He knows it will help him perform his job better.

With that as his catalyst, he is willing to spend two-and-a-half hours in the language school each Tuesday night, split between an informal brown bag conversation hour with fellow students and his 90 minute intermediate Spanish class.

Knowlen also feels an obligation to be multilingual given that so many foreigners have at least rudimentary skills in English.

“I think I should speak another language, and I think it will help me mentally,” he said.

But that mental workout isn't easy.

“By a quarter of 9 my head is pounding from concentrating so hard,” he said.

Buchsbaum said Let's Talk has started to market to companies that might have an interest in having their employees become multilingual.

Along with Spanish and German, Let's Talk offers Japanese, Chinese, Arabic and Italian. The language school, founded two years ago, boasts 12 teachers and about 140 students, a size that Buchsbaum said certainly exceeded his expectations.

While he sees further growth as a possibility, especially if more companies come on board, he is not interested in a huge expansion.

“We are not looking to become a lot bigger at this point,” he said. “We would just like to fill up each of our classes with 10 or 15 students.”

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