

Can technology help facilities management attract more foreign workers?

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Jess O'Dwyer, [Pocketalk](#) general manager for Europe, discusses why embracing language diversity and improving communication could help close the resource gap

Over the past few years the UK facilities management sector has had to face some serious staffing pressures. The industry has always been heavily reliant on a foreign workforce, which has been hugely impacted by three major factors – Brexit, the COVID pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

By September 2022, [reports](#) suggested there was a shortfall of around half a million EU-origin workers in the UK.

As a result, the pool of talent that remained settled here was in demand and commanded higher than average wages. This supply versus demand problem has led to even more financial pressure on UK businesses who are already trying to navigate a period of financial uncertainty.

The need for people is even greater for the UK's facilities management sector which has experienced [4.8% growth in 2022 and has a predicted growth of 5.1% this year](#). The sector needs people now, more than ever.

According to [ONS](#), about one in 10 people in the UK do not speak English as their first language, while in large urban areas like London more than 20% of the population speak English as a second language. Businesses must see this pool as an opportunity and consider how they attract these workers into vacant roles. With increased competition from other sectors, leaders must think about how it sets itself apart from

the rest.

Addressing language barriers and embracing language diversity is key. Here's how to do it:

1. Adopt digital technology

With facilities management firms having to work harder to attract and retain more foreign workers, investing in greater adoption of digital technology that can help overcome language barriers, could be an advantageous move to put facilities management above the rest.

Recent [research by the UK health and safety executive](#) shows that overseas workers may be more at risk in companies that don't invest in helping to address language diversity for a variety of reasons, such as misunderstanding directions and briefs. In those cases staff turnover can be high, and morale can be low. Offering prospective employees the ability to work in an environment where a supervisor or co-worker can communicate directly in the foreign worker's first language will integrate them into a team more effectively and help them to understand rules and regulations better, resulting in less mistakes, which in turn will boost morale.

Being able to communicate more fluidly with colleagues and management will also build loyalty, foster better relationships and improve productivity.

- Embrace non-English speaking workers

Outside of English, [Romanian and Polish](#) are now the two most common languages spoken in the UK. The other languages spoken in the UK, excluding English, are Panjabi, Urdu, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Bengali, Gujarati and Italian.

Introducing cost effective communications solutions that translate these languages could unlock this massive pool of workers to the facilities management sector.

- Choose the solution that works

Introducing translation services could be perceived as a solution with significant costs – not ideal when businesses are already facing increasing costs. Translation services are also not always quick and easy to implement.

For on-site facilities management workers, having an interpreter present is a handy solution but it comes with a relatively high cost. This option doesn't help to foster a relationship between employees who speak EAL and their colleagues who don't, as there is always a middle person each communication must pass through.

Employing bilingual staff is always helpful, but of course isn't guaranteed long-term if that person moves on.

Software solutions such as, online translations are relatively quick and low-cost, but many of them aren't GDPR compliant, lack accuracy and rely on users having access to a smart device. This isn't possible in many workplace settings, especially when security is a major issue such as airports.

Real-time, GDPR compliant, language digital translation devices can be instant and include many

languages, including minority languages, but they will require WiFi, mobile data or a hotspot.