

## THE FRENCH LANGUAGE AND BUSINESS

*The following is the text of a letter received from Serge Bellanger, President of the French-American Chamber of Commerce.*

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to you as part of an effort to make educators, parents, and students aware of the growing importance of the French language and its vital role in today's global economy. I am sure that you are familiar with the importance of the French language in literature and culture. But as economic activity has become increasingly international, a knowledge of French has become ever more valuable in such fields as international banking and finance, as well as law, science, and industry. Consequently, knowing French may well play an important role in shaping and advancing the career of your students.

France, which ranks fourth in the world in terms of Gross National Product, is a significant factor in international politics, economic life, and social issues. But in addition, French is the first or second official language in more than 40 countries on five continents. French is spoken by more than 200 million people, and *Language Today*, a publication for language professionals, ranks French as the second most influential language in the world, trailing only English.

For those seeking a career in business or finance these days, French may prove to be very important in their careers. France is one of the leading host countries for American investment in Europe. Many leading U.S. companies have extensive investments in France, including IBM, Microsoft, Coca Cola, and Merck, to name just a few. Many Americans working for these companies find themselves becoming involved in the company's French operations.

Meanwhile, some 1200 French companies have investments in the U.S. and employ more than 400,000 Americans throughout the country. Today there are more than 270 French or French-Canadian companies operating in New York City, and over 350 in New York State. These companies, which are drawn from a number of industries, include Alcatel, Axa Equitable, Vivendi-Seagram-Universal, L'Oréal/Lancôme, BNP-Paribas, Alstom, Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy and L'Occitane.

Reflecting the international role of French, a few years ago, the U.S. State Department published a study of international jobs which indicated that 53% required or preferred candidates to speak French, while 33% wanted Spanish, 11 %

were interested in Russian, and 3% sought those with a knowledge of German. New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani recognized the importance of French when he proclaimed French Language Week in November 2000. As the mayor said in his proclamation, "The ability to speak and read French is invaluable to travelers, to business people, to diplomats, to people in a wide variety of professions, and to users of the Internet."

In short, these days, knowledge of the French language is not only critically important in cultural matters, but also for business and technical endeavors as well. Today, French is a key element in commerce and industry throughout the world. Consequently, students should be urged to start learning French in school and to continue through college. Developing a strong knowledge of French will help many young people obtain attractive jobs and build their careers in an increasingly globalized economy.

Sincerely,  
Serge Bellanger

Serge Bellanger is President of the French-American Chamber of Commerce, and President and CEO of the Association of French Chambers of Commerce and Industry Abroad which is composed of 84 Chambers worldwide with 25,000 corporate members and a staff of 600.