



**PAUL NOLAN,**  
Managing Director  
Nolan Partners

**IN THE DEBATE** about which skills and abilities can be described as premium in the eyes of an employer in the Sports Sector, our experience is that it depends on the level of the job in question. What is regarded as premium and therefore essential at the end of the market that we operate in i.e. £75k+ with an average salary of just over £100k is very different to those Executives/Managers operating further down the organisation.

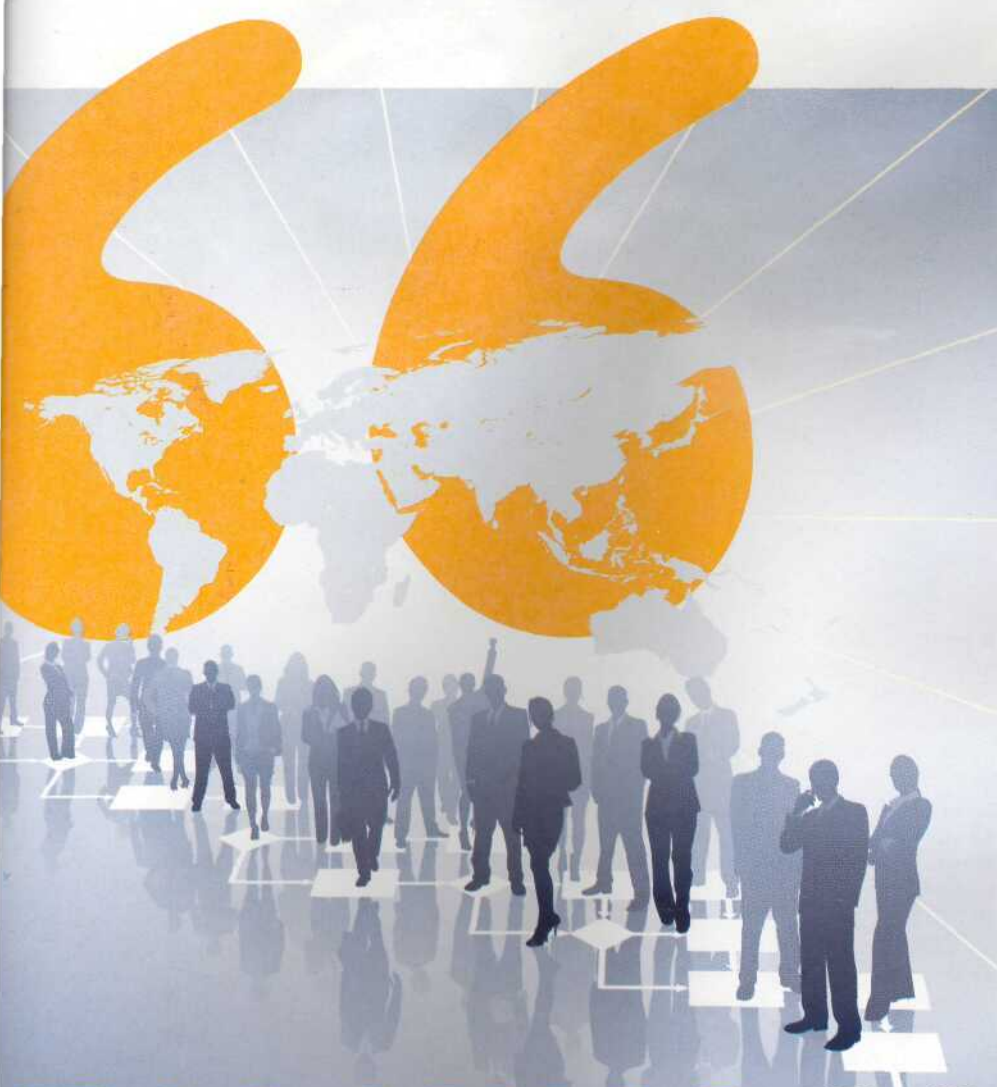
For example we have recently conducted several searches for Executive Chairmen, Chief Executives and Commercial/Marketing Directors in Football, Horseracing, Rugby and Formula 1. The key differentiators at this level were leadership, strategy development, commercial vision and an ability to demonstrate an empathy with the organisational and commercial complexities of the employer in question.

Actually, the fact that there wasn't a headhunting firm focusing in a dedicated way on finding Senior Executives from inside or outside of the Sports Sector with these abilities, was one of the main motivators to us in starting the firm.

Nolan Partners was launched in March 2006 as the first specialist retained Executive Search Firm dedicated to finding Senior Executives (£75k+) and Non Executives (i.e. Chairmen and other Board Directors) for sports organisations.

Having previously spent six years at The FA as Group Human Resources Director, I had first hand experience of just how poorly served this sector had been traditionally. The larger headhunting firms had taken a generic approach to finding Senior Executives for Sport without ever truly understanding the idiosyncrasies and the commercial dynamics that drive the sector.

To us this presents a big opportunity particularly as commercial values continue to rise and therefore the leadership and strategic capability issues continue to be increasingly important.



# TALKING ” THE TALK

In a world dominated by the US, it seems the English language remains the tongue of choice; but could that all be about to change in the sports industry? Chris Britcher reports.

**IF THERE IS ONE THING** the sports industry can rarely be accused of, it is that it is afraid of change.

Over the years it has proved itself to be a flexible friend - changing its methods and manners in pursuit of new markets-and new opportunities.

Except, of course, in one key area. That of language. But as the sports industry accelerates its growth into the fast emerging markets of the East, has the time finally come for the global sector to break free from its reliance on English being the language of business?

After all, with Asia and the Far East being touted as the sporting equivalent of an untapped oil field when it comes to making money, does the candidate able to present in a boardroom in fluent Mandarin and clinch the deal with a

flourish of Cantonese now trump those with the traditional skill sets?

The answer should probably be yes, of course. After all, the ability to communicate is always at the very heart of the ability to do business.

The truth, however, will come as something of a sigh of relief for all those who rely on the tradition of others learning English than vice versa.

"When you contacted me and asked me to do an interview, I asked everyone in my office what they thought," explains Amanda Fone, founder and managing partner of f1 recruitment, "they all just laughed and said don't do the interview."

It was not quite the response I expected - but clearly this is a topic which raises its head time after time; and, according to Fone, is one which never seems to progress beyond the theory.



## RECRUITMENT

She explains: "I've been in recruitment for 25 years and I've heard this theory that everyone is going to speak four languages, and everyone is going to speak Mandarin and Spanish and Italian. And the language we need seems to change every year.

"Of course there is this shift of power from the West to the East at the moment - and yes I have two sons and I probably ought to be telling them to learn Mandarin.

"But the reality is that ever since 1982 I've heard this language thing time and time again. Yet it remains the same to this day. English is the global language."

## EDUCATING

It will surprise few that FI recruitment's offices are buried deep within the centre of London in the UK - an island nation which has, traditionally, always relied on others to learn their tongue rather than the other way around.

It's reflected across the nation most notably in its education where children only get intensive language training by the time they reach high school - and the option to drop it soon after remains a popular option.

Over the Atlantic, the option to learn languages is similar.

But Fone knows her stuff and is far from a stranger to the international marketplace. A former managing director of Pathfinders Media Recruitment and board member of secretarial recruitment firm Angela Mortimer, she has been hunting down specialists for international clients in her new role for the last three years across marketing communication agencies.

And she is adamant it is more than just a laziness on the part of the English-speaking world.

"You look at any of the major multinational organisations," she explains, "Disney, the top management is going to be American. Nike, it's American, Walmart it's American.

"You look at the top 50 brands in the world - whether that's financial services, brands, telcos - and work out what their heritage is and therein you'll have your answer."

It's a pretty compelling argument. And for years has been proven by English's place as the, ahem, numero uno method of communication.

But you only have to take a look at some of the daily headlines on sportbusiness.com to see there is a wave of change washing over the sector. At least online. There appears to be a daily announcement by either a major soccer club or organisation of how their English-language site

is being translated for Chinese marketplace, or how US sport sites are following suit in a bid to get the Big Four sports deep within, say, the Asian psyche

It's all good business sense, of course. But while the need to access the consumer with sites and content in their native tongue is not in doubt, the debate over whether the business men and women driving that change need to be coherent in anything than simply English, continues to rumble on.

CLR Global is a specialist international recruiter in the culture and leisure sectors with the sports industry a major focus of its activities since 2001, acting as a core recruitment vendor to the Doha Asian Games Organising Committee, and operating out of 20 countries.

Managing director Micah John Styles explains: "In the global sports industry there are a variety of skills which can be classed as 'premium' of which language fluency is most definitely one.

"It is important to clarify from the outset that we are referring to advanced, business language skills - not just basic conversational abilities. To illustrate this point, we were recently engaged by a Middle Eastern governmental agency client who whilst having a good standard of English amongst their managers wished to increase their workforce's English business language (EBL) skills.

"We coordinated a series of work related EBL training programmes in conjunction with work-shadow placements at major UK companies in similar fields of endeavour, which proved very successful.

"In a reversal of this scenario, whilst English is indeed often reverted to as the 'common denominator' for many, for an individual, or company, to operate truly on an international basis additional language skills are imperative - and therefore highly desirable from a recruitment perspective."

"It's always useful to have languages, to be bilingual, tri-lingual, quad-lingual," adds Amanda Fone.

"But at the end of the day, what we always get asked by the companies we recruit for is please can we have someone with beautifully written and spoken English because that is the language we communicate in globally.

"There are pockets of the world where it is very useful to have a specific language, especially if you were going to start up an office there. Of course it would be useful if you had lived there or been educated there because you'll know the cultural differences.

"But I would say that for UK-based offices, even in a global role, someone is not going to be discriminated against if they don't have a language.

"When you think about it all these global organisations have territories - they have sponsorship which will have a local agency for the activation stuff and they have locals with the knowledge.

"Obviously it's useful to have languages so you can communicate with them but it is not a necessity.

## LOCAL CULTURE

"I've never had anyone discriminated against because they didn't have a language. It's always the best person for the job. And, to be honest, many big companies would put you on a fast-track language training course. Once you have been submerged in that culture you can learn the language."

The view of useful yet not a necessity is one echoed by others at the cutting edge of recruiting tomorrow's generation of staff in the sector.

Simon Cummins, is partner and head of the sport practice, at global recruitment firm Odgers Ray & Berndtson and has watched with interest at the expansion into markets such as India, Africa, South America and Asia.

"What I noticed quite strongly is that for global organisations trying to expand into South America and Asia - then yes, Mandarin and Spanish definitely has an advantage," he explains.

"Europe, the Middle East, Africa and India not so much as they all speak great English.

"For all others I'd say not particularly as the global language of business remains English.



"I think we have all tended to rely on other parts of the world speaking English rather than us learning their language and that leads to complacency.

"Yes, people with languages can have an advantage, but it certainly doesn't mean that if they were up against someone else for the same job who was better than them they would get selected. I think companies are still prepared to overlook the language barrier if the person is right for the job - certainly in Europe."

So if language skills are not a deal breaker, exactly what premium skill sets are?

Dominic Quantrill, director of executive search at international search firm United Media Entertainment Group (UME), believes there is more than just a grasp of the language involved.

He said: "The interesting thing to note is that there has been an increased demand for really top talent that can bring a more international dimension to their business.

"Direct local market experience of regions such as the Middle East and Asia feature highly in role briefs from not just our sports clients but also brands, entertainment and media businesses.

#### MARKET KNOWLEDGE

"Our office in Dubai has been delivering on some significant remits that have needed a fine balance of skills and market knowledge which is increasingly becoming the status quo.

"Each year, we spend time with our existing clients to try to understand the strategy for the next phase of growth in terms of recruiting plans.

"What the general consensus of all the key businesses in the sports market is that investment in offices and key personnel in new markets is high on the agenda. The majority of those with strong platforms in Europe are looking East and committing more resources and investment to take advantage of the expanding markets therein.

"This then means there is higher demand for executives with specific local knowledge of that region or indeed high level contacts that can be utilised for gaining an advantage in those regions"

Micah John Styles of CLR Global agrees it is more about the type of person and their ability to adapt.

He explains: "In our experience, the most effective way to achieve this is with a view to improving and tempering such skills in the living and working environment — in other words on the ground. This, of course, requires commitment, but the benefits will pay dividends in the long term. Not everybody though is ideally suited to working in a foreign country. There is a specific type of individual that will relish the challenge and stick to it. We learnt very early on that language skills without a 'can-do' attitude are useless.

"This is what I would say is a premium skill of higher value than language efficiency - cultural awareness. Our clients will stipulate language skills in a job description and will evaluate candidates on a like-for-like basis - in other words can they or can't they? Given this as a prerequisite, of greater importance is the demonstrable cultural skills they possess. Often these will be transferable i.e. not specific to one country or region but a general work/life approach that is compatible with working in 'foreign' territories, often in a challenging emerging market.

"Such individuals have moved on from the stereotypical 'seasoned ex-pat' and are now usually 'bright young things' with a willingness to adopt new cultures and methods of working. Our experience shows that attitude rather than pure linguistic capabilities is what our clients look for."

Amanda Fone of recruitment, believes those coming into the sector as a whole may be being over-sold on the requirements of having languages.

She adds: "We have a real problem with graduates with languages who want to get into sports marketing and expect to use their languages straight away. It just doesn't happen like that.

"How many people do you meet at 18 want to go into sports marketing? They don't. They don't know it exists as a job. So they're not thinking of the job when they make their learning decisions about what to study.

"Are people being advised to keep a language on? In the same way they are being advised against PR or marketing degrees rather than a history or language degree which is more robust and understood by employers.

"Are people being misinformed about languages? No. But there are a lot of conflicting messages out there.

"I would say I don't think youngsters know about the careers in sports marketing. And if anything, we should - as an industry - be educating youngsters about careers in it.

"Languages are always useful. But if you asked me is it useful to be numerate, I'd say of course. If you're going into sports marketing you must be able to add up and read a balance sheet. Be able to measure - show your finance director a return on investment.

"The key skills to be really successful - I'd say would be to be numerate and have a robust understanding of financial management."

Odgers' Simon Cummins agrees. He says: "If recruiting at a senior level employers like to see early responsibility for leaderships. You need to really understand the finances and have international experience too. They are the three generic criteria which remain the most sought after.

#### EMERGING EUROPE

"But internationally, I think the people of Asia appreciate those who have tried to embrace their culture so I think it adds a lot to your credibility and ambition if you can present people with a language such as Mandarin or Cantonese.

"It may sound obvious, but perhaps it isn't, but if you're looking for, say, a head of communications for AI GP - so a global sport - of a PR and media person, then clearly they need to speak the language. But it does depend on the function of the role.

"But I can't really see that changing dramatically over the years. I think, if anything, they'll start getting better at English.

"Emerging Europe may prove a little bit different. For example, I did some work for a company wanting someone for Moscow. And they asked that the person who ticked all the boxes would be able to speak Russian too. But if you limit your field to Russian speakers you diminish your chance of finding a world class candidate."

So while the general consensus is that a grasp of languages is useful yet not essential, for the right candidate with the right balance of skills, it would appear the ever expanding sports marketing world continues to hold some truly mouthwatering potential.

"The ability to combine experience of sponsorship, brand marketing with local market expertise is rare enough," adds Dominic Quantrill of UME, "and good people with such attributes are therefore harder to attract out from their existing roles.

"This increased demand is now outstripping supply. There has to be a compromise somewhere and our experience shows that if we can find the right blend of culture, expertise and a willingness to relocate to these regions then that's a step in the right direction. As the market matures then so will the level of expertise in much the same way as it has done in Europe, the only difference being the pace at which it moves. In the example of the Middle East, it's moving very, very fast indeed."