



Overcoming Language Barriers in the Workplace

By Sharlene Vichness

“I didn’t understand a word he said.” “I had to replay her voicemail message four times to get her extension, department and name in order to return the call.” “We don’t have a bi-lingual manager...how can we communicate with our Spanish-speaking employees?” “She’s a good accountant but her supervisor and our clients have trouble understanding her.”

The diversity today’s workforce offers many challenges to the human resources professional in a multi-ethnic company or institution. One challenge that is not often articulated is the one that involves oral communication with workers for whom English is a second language. On one hand, many highly-skilled and valuable employees have difficulty with the pronunciation challenges that American English puts before them. Many sounds in our language do not exist in their native languages, resulting in pronunciations that are unintelligible to the average listener. The idioms, expressions, and acronyms that we use on a daily basis are often incomprehensible to the foreign-born employee. Mastery of English verb tenses is often incomplete and timetables and deadlines can be impacted. On the other hand, native speakers of English in the workforce have great difficulty de-coding the pronunciation, syllable stress, and cadence of the English spoken by their foreign-born co-workers and contractors.

Fortunately, there are practical solutions to these challenges. Language skills training by skilled professionals can build communication bridges that enable foreign-born employees to rise to their full potential. Oral communication can be improved 50-60% with a targeted, systematic approach to working on problem sounds, pacing and voice projection. Intensive focus on specific sound issues and oral presentation skills can bring about significant results in a short period of time. On-site programs can be structured to be non-intrusive yet highly effective.

A different challenge can be presented when management and the workforce do not speak the same language. Essential safety and procedural information can become difficult or impossible to transmit to the non-English-speaking worker. Written translations of expectations and regulations are helpful, but not always successful with employees who may have little reading knowledge in their own language.

The challenge for supervisors lies not in learning Spanish, but in learning to communicate with people who speak Spanish. In the absence of qualified bi-lingual supervisors, successful bridges can be built with short-term, industry-specific training. In as few as 20 training hours, managers can learn to communicate directly with Spanish-speakers. Targeted, short-term training like this, also available in other languages, is helpful for customer service and sales personnel in contact with customers who speak limited or no English.

Most language training, including English as a Second Language, is available to eligible companies and institutions at no cost. The NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development offers customized training grants to provide for this specialized training. There are also special initiatives now in place for certain industries, such as bio-technology/pharmaceutical, finance, information technology, and hospitality/tourism. Many other states have similar programs.