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Communicating in a multicultural workplace

Dr Moira Cachia, Chartered Psychologist and Senior Lecturer at the University of West London, examines the issues...

The rapid development of technologically-enhanced channels of communication has facilitated the globalisation of business transactions. New challenges have been placed on organisational effectiveness, beyond language barriers which can be resolved through the involvement of an interpreter. Even if we understand the language, misunderstandings can occur as a result of the non-verbal cues accompanying these messages. For instance, how is the use of a formal or informal tone in email communication received? Such interactions have led to the need of expanding our knowledge of different cultural practices.

How we communicate is greatly influenced by our personal experience and cultural background. An assertive tone of voice, directness in speech, loud talk, proximity, eye contact, touch, dealing with silence, and use of emotive expressions are all factors surrounding the spoken or written word. Diverse interpretations of these connotations can serve as noise interference between a sender and receiver of a message. We can therefore no longer assume that communication is an unconscious action. Rather, we need to consider it as a skill to be developed consciously, actively engaging in training for specific protocols of contexts.

Research shows that people using different languages perceive life's experiences differently. This unique worldview needs to be acknowledged in workplace communication to avoid conflict and induce collaboration. An example of such distinctive elements is the focus placed on relationships by some cultures which might mean that communication is vague, to avoid disagreement,

disapproval or confrontation. Communication is key to any functioning organisation so its effectiveness cannot be left to chance. Training is recommended at every level to widen employees' knowledge of the context in which their colleagues' communication takes meaning. Becoming aware of this crucial component in workplace transactions allows for measures and systems to be put in place in order to cultivate the generation of ideas and to prevent damage to potential business.

The best solution for clarity is to maintain open communication: enquire what the preferred method is, and regularly seek confirmation as to whether the intended meaning is being received. If the opportunity to ask is not possible, then try different media such as email, face-to-face and telephone to check what seems to be most effective. Use visual aids to back up written statements: illustrations and figures explain and support understanding. Lastly, use simple and direct language - avoid culture-specific expressions which can throw others in at the deep end as they attempt to build a bridge.

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Recruitment – another market that needs a makeover

Dr Cigdem Gogus, Marketing Lecturer and MBA Course Leader at The Claude Littner Business School comments...

It was only 1994 when Jeff Bezos started Amazon with his parents' life savings. Fast forward 20 years and Amazon is the largest online retailer in the world, with \$62 billion in revenue and 97,000 employees. What is more, hundreds of thousands of small businesses are flourishing by using e-commerce platforms. So it is hardly news that digital platforms have already transformed businesses and consumer environments along with our lives, from the way we acquire knowledge, to the way we find love.

However, one sector that has been slow to respond is the recruitment sector. Millions can't find jobs and employers can't find people they need; soul-destroying for the job seeker and costly for the employer. According to a recent McKinsey report on labour markets, 30-45% of the working age population around the world is unemployed, inactive or working part time. This amounts to 850 million people in the US, UK, Germany, Japan, India, Brazil and China. At the same time 36% of employers said they can't find the talent they need. Enterprises of all sizes, recruitment professionals, providers of technology solutions to the sector and most importantly, jobseekers, all agree the recruitment process is broken and the job market is essentially dysfunctional. The big question is: can technology help reinvent recruitment as it has with other sectors including retail, music, travel and healthcare? Furthermore, can emerging online talent platforms - such as LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Upwork, PayScale - be the answer?

McKinsey believes that by 2025, these platforms could add \$2.7 trillion, or 2%, to global GDP and increase full-time employment by 72 million full-time positions. That is no easy task; online platforms need to be transparent and evolve in scope and capability as the size of their user networks expand, and their powerful search capabilities and algorithms make efficient and targeted matches. They also need to cater for different segments of job seekers and employers – from graduates looking for internships, to freelancers with specialist skills looking for specific tasks, and employers such as retailers, hospitals and small business with no dedicated HR department, looking for local talent. Innovative use of technologies like big data, cloud computing, social networking and mobile apps are already starting to have an impact on the sector. If history is any indication, within a few years the face of recruitment will change forever as a result of online talent platforms. Remember, buying a book online was a novelty only 20 years ago.

