

# 75% FACE EXCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

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## DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MAKES GOOD BUSINESS SENSE

Most organizations have policies to include people of diverse backgrounds. Companies work hard to avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to human resources management. It's unacceptable to say that "wheelchair users must climb the stairs like everybody else", "pregnant employees are not allowed maternity leave", "LGBT workers must keep their sexuality a secret."

Including people of diverse backgrounds is not just morally correct; it also makes good business sense.

And yet millions of employees around the world are overlooked ..... non-native English speakers.

## EVERYBODY MUST DO BUSINESS IN ENGLISH

English is the language of global business, science and the internet. For those like me who have English as our first language, that's great news; for everyone else there's a need to learn 'our' language.

There are approximately 1.5 billion English speakers in the world but 75% of these are English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers. As a native-English speaker (I was born and educated in the UK) I am very much in the minority.

Little or no thought is given to the imposition of English as the working language of business; often employees are expected to work in English, with no adjustments made to accommodate ESL speakers. The onus is on the ESL speakers to ensure that their English skills meet the requirements of the workplace.

## ESL SPEAKERS ARE EXCLUDED

English as the world's Lingua Franca is presented as a great opportunity for the global workforce. Acquiring English language skills is promoted as a passport to success, a means of accessing employment in an interconnected world. But this view is often the comfortable assumption of native speakers like me, not necessarily the perception of ESL speakers.

Mary Yoko Brannen from the University of Victoria, Australia observes that "having English as a second or third language is mostly seen and felt (by ESL speakers) as a handicap, something to be overcome, rather than as a potential resource". Research has found that ESL employees believe that their career aspirations are overlooked just because English is their second language.

The exclusion of ESL from Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies has major consequences. It's rather like saying:

"Speakers of other languages must speak English whether they like it or not. And there's no need for us to alter **our** English to make it easier for them."

## NATIVE-ENGLISH SPEAKERS - BLISSFULLY IGNORANT

Few of us native-English speakers realize we may need to adjust our English to include our ESL colleagues. And even if we do see the need to alter our language, most of us don't know **how** to do it.

Native speakers find it hard to empathize with the challenges faced by ESL speakers, having a particularly poor record of speaking foreign languages ourselves. According to a survey by the European Commission, the British are the worst language learners in Europe. The USA is also behind much of the world when it comes to foreign language learning - a Gallup poll shows that only 26 percent of American adults are capable of holding a conversation in another language.

When the British, Americans, Canadians and Australians travel overseas most of us expect that we'll be able to communicate in English.

Ben Anderson, a portfolio manager based in London, UK, says: "If I travel to China knowing no more than 10 words of Chinese it doesn't frighten me ... I know I'll be able to get by. Compare that with the German who speaks no English and takes his family to London for a vacation or the Japanese businessman with no English who has a meeting in America."

As we have little experience of learning other languages, our assumptions about ESL speakers are often misguided. Studies show that many native-English speaking managers have unrealistic expectations of the English levels of their

global colleagues. Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen (Hanken School of Economics, Finland) argues that this is “unproductive – perhaps even dangerous”. It means that we make no allowances for the challenges faced by our ESL colleagues and unintentionally discriminate against them if their language is not ‘good enough’.

We risk creating an 'us and them' situation, where our perception of English language ability is given disproportionate weighting when evaluating an employee's effectiveness and opportunities for career progression.

## NATIVE SPEAKERS DON'T KNOW HOW TO LISTEN TO ESL SPEAKERS

Native-English speakers are unintentionally biased against people who speak English as second language.

Research conducted by Shiri Lev-Ari of the University of London, found that ESL speakers are regarded as less trustworthy by native speakers. "Native speakers are less likely to believe something if it's said with a foreign accent".

Jairo Fuertes (Adelphi University) and others have found that native-English speakers tend to think that people who speak English with a foreign accent are less competent and less intelligent than native speakers. The stronger the foreign accent, the more negatively the speaker is perceived.

Magdalena Robertson, a US citizen originally from Poland: “It makes me feel uncomfortable when people make a comment like “wow, you've lived here for 6 years and you still have such a strong accent”.

The research shows that this is not a matter of racism or deliberate bias. The human brain finds it difficult to process unfamiliar sounds or speech. Negative judgments of ESL speakers arise because of the extra effort that we have to make to process unfamiliar foreign accents.

The good news is that research shows this problem can be solved: by giving native speakers more exposure to foreign accents. As we become more familiar with different ESL accents, we become more positive towards ESL speakers.

## NATIVE SPEAKERS DON'T KNOW HOW TO TALK TO ESL SPEAKERS

We expect our international colleagues to speak English but we make little effort to adjust our use of language to help them. A survey conducted by Mayflower College, UK of 1000 ESL speakers found that 88% find it more difficult to communicate with native speakers than with other ESL speakers. It seems we speak too fast and use complicated grammar and idiomatic language.

Also, many of us native speakers come from educational backgrounds which **reward** complicated language. It's seen as a sign of intelligence and status. Few of us realize that what's required in global communication is simplicity, not sophistication.

## LANGUAGE– “THE MOST NEGLECTED FIELD IN MANAGEMENT”

Language is part of our individual and group identity. It facilitates communication, trust building, and coordination within teams - exactly the qualities that organizations seek to achieve through their D&I policies. And yet, the crucial role that language plays in the workforce is overlooked. For good reason, it has been called “The most neglected field in management”.

The failure to manage the use of English in an organization, especially the use of English by native speakers, “has the potential to make [ESL] employees feel isolated and undermined and render them ineffective in workplace communication.” (Sarbari Bordia, Australian National University). We are silencing our international colleagues and customers, a phenomenon referred to as ‘language ostracism’.

Without a D&I policy for ESL speakers, trust breaks down, communication falters, motivation and productivity are harmed.

A study conducted by Tsdal Neely of Harvard Business School considered a \$25 billion multinational headquartered in France. Even though only 30% of the 210,000 worldwide employees were native-English speakers (70% were ESL speakers), English was imposed as the official corporate language. However, no consideration was given to the inclusion of the ESL speakers in the organization. “This led to non-native speakers of English within the organization experiencing a loss of status. Non-native speaking employees experienced anxiety in relation to English language performance and harbored feelings of distrust and resentment toward their native-English speaking colleagues.”

It's hard to imagine this situation arising in any other area of HR management. If a company were to impose any other policy which caused 70% of its workforce to feel excluded, the D&I policy would be rewritten as a matter of urgency.

## BENEFITS OF INCLUDING ESL IN D&I POLICIES

SHRM estimates that communication breakdowns cost large organizations \$26,000 **per employee** per year in lost productivity.

With 75% of the English-speaking population being ESL speakers, the failure to include them in D&I policies jeopardizes recruitment, retention rates and team spirit. Good employees are overlooked and good ideas go unheard.

## WHAT NEEDS TO BE INCLUDED IN AN ESL D&I POLICY

The starting point is to make people aware of any unintentional or unconscious biases they may have towards ESL speakers. Do I prefer my airline pilot to have a British accent rather than a Russian accent? Do I prefer my doctor to have an American accent rather than an Arabic accent? If so, why?

We need to become more familiar with the foreign accents we're likely to encounter. For example, the first time you hear a Japanese person speaking English you may find it particularly difficult. The more exposure you have though, the more you learn about Japanese speakers' particular challenges when they speak English, the easier it becomes.

We also need to have more empathy for our ESL-speaking colleagues and customers. We need to understand the challenges of communicating in a second language. Those of us who speak a foreign language will be better at this; all of us, at some point, will have been in situations where we've struggled to make sense of what is going on and been fearful of making a complete fool of ourselves. It's definitely not easy.

We need to learn how to filter and simplify our English when communicating with ESL speakers - shorter sentences, a slower rate of speech, avoiding idiomatic language and expressions.

Finally, perhaps the most important point of all. We must realize that our opinions do not matter more just because we can express them in 'perfect' English. We need to 'hear' the opinions of our international colleagues and customers if we are to have a more diverse and inclusive workplace and if we are serious about making better decisions.