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# TIP SHEET #9

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## COMMUNICATING WITH NEWCOMERS

Refer to Summary of Resources  
Tip Sheet #12 for a listing of  
information sources.

**diversity**

An Employer Advantage

*Alberta* 

# Tip Sheet #9: Communicating with Newcomers

Effective workplace communication is critical in creating a first impression and is a tremendous skill for all employees. Despite good intentions, the lack of cultural awareness, norms, and lingo may lead to some awkward situations. In this Tip Sheet, you will find information that will give you an edge in communicating effectively with Newcomers.

## 1 Try to communicate as best you can:

- Newcomers are often able to understand what is being said before they are able to speak English. The communication between you may not be perfect, but that is ok!
- You may try tactics like writing things down, hand gestures, or using tools such as Google Translate.
- New English learners will appreciate the effort given and welcome the opportunity to practice reading, writing, and speaking.



## 2 Use plain language:

- Get in the habit of using plain language whenever possible. Create a workplace norm of speaking in simple terms and explaining all issues as clearly as possible.
- Use plain language for all of your hiring documents, job descriptions, and tests. Plain language is not just for English as a second language (ESL) - plain language makes understanding instructions easier for all employees.

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## 3 Use visual methods of communication:

- Words often fail us. And when they do, showing can be a lot more effective than telling. Use pictures or diagrams to explain complicated concepts. Visual cues are invaluable for getting everyone on the same page, not to mention, thinking more creatively about new solutions.
- In some instances, a picture might be more beneficial than translating. Use a picture dictionary, have an illustration, or Google "images" that might be helpful.



## 4 Speak at a steady pace:

- Many people tend to speak their first language very quickly without realizing it. When you are speaking with someone that is learning English, find a good pace for their level. By speaking slowly they won't get lost, making it easier to follow along. Look for visual signs of understanding.
- Encourage them to tell you when they don't understand you or, when they need you to slow down. For new learner's, trying to follow a conversation with more than one speaker is often a challenge.

## 5 Use repetition:

- Language barrier or not, people often need to hear something more than once to understand and remember it. Don't expect anyone to remember something you said once. If it's important, make it a consistent part of your conversation.
- Paraphrase a question or ask them to repeat the information back.
- It is natural to keep repeating something when someone doesn't understand. Rather than repeating the same thing over and over again, try using a different word or way of expressing the same idea.

In study conducted by ALLIES Canada (2015) a total of 95% of employers interviewed reported that language and communication skills represent a barrier for Newcomers seeking employment; this compares to just 27% of Newcomers thinking their English language was a barrier for them.

This study illustrates the gap between perceptions of employers and those of potential job seekers. It also shows that Newcomers often are simply not getting an opportunity to demonstrate their talents.

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### 6 Be aware of slang, idioms, and expressions:

- Examples of idioms are: "beats me"; "come rain or shine", "shoot the breeze", "I am in a pickle".
- Idioms can be confusing and don't translate well. When someone is learning the language they tend to take things literally, therefore idioms make no sense. Avoid using idioms and slang all together, or give an explanation to their meaning.
- Avoid phrasal verbs: phrasal verbs are expressions that are not in the dictionary. Examples: "stand up", "sit down", and "lie down". Just be aware when you use them and ensure you have been understood.

### 7 Be respectful and patient:

- Language barriers, like all barriers to communication, can be frustrating. They require patience, understanding, and courtesy. Ensure that when you or your team are struggling to communicate that you never raise your voice or over-enunciate. Talk slower instead of louder, clearly instead of forcefully. The same is true for Newcomers. They may get frustrated when they can't express themselves the way they want to. Don't take it personally.
- When someone is working through a language hurdle, it has nothing to do with their actual intelligence or ability to grasp the concept behind what you're trying to say. Continue to speak proper English as you search for common ground, so they can learn how to communicate correctly.
- Some adult learners may not have had the opportunity to attend or complete school and may not be literate in their own language. These folks will have a harder time navigating a new language because they don't have the experience with learning. More time and understanding may be required. In contrast, you may be speaking to someone who has a PHD in their home country.
- Listen actively for a complete response - try not to become unfocused by a communication style that is less structured or direct than what you are used to.

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## 9 Telephone and virtual communication:

- Speaking on the phone is difficult for most new English learners as there are no visual cues. Speaking over the phone limits an individual's ability to view your facial expressions and read lips. Keep your phone call short, clear, and specific. If a learner calls you for information, keep the conversation brief and clear. It is best to avoid small talk on the phone.
- Utilize a telephone app called "Text Now". It is free and will not show your personal cell phone number. This allows Google Translate to send a text to the learner in their first language and then respond with their text translated to English.
- For virtual meetings, encourage group members to keep their cameras on. This will help Newcomers to associate names with faces and get a sense of the workplace culture.



## 8 Humour

- Humour is often a great way to communicate and laughter is always welcome. Just remember that humour is cultural, and sometimes learners do not understand you are joking. Sarcasm (which Canadians use often) can be difficult to translate or explain to English learners.

**Sometimes we do get it wrong.**

**But that's okay, it's the only way to figure out how to get it right!**

## 10 Avoid asking "Do you understand"?

- If you say "Do you understand?", chances are you will get a yes. Whether you have been understood or not, typically people do not want to admit they don't understand. Instead, ask the learner to repeat the information back to you.
- Example:  
You: Your doctor's appointment is at 4:00 tomorrow. I will pick you up at 3:45.  
Learner: OK.  
You: Just so I understand, what time am I picking you up tomorrow?  
Learner: At 4:45.  
You: I will meet you at your house at 3:45, your doctor's appointment is at 4:00.  
**Ask again if needed.**

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## 11 Find a healthy balance between not correcting and overcorrecting:

- The rule of thumb is to determine if the learner has made themselves understood. It doesn't need to be perfect. If you are constantly correcting every little mistake the learner makes, they could lose confidence. If you don't correct them at all, they could develop bad habits. An easy way to correct is to mimic the sentence back to them but say it correctly, as part of the conversation.
- Example:  
Learner: I go to park yesterday.  
You: Oh, you went to the park yesterday.  
How was it?



## 13 Find a translation service or enlist volunteers:

- Consider translating important documents into the primary language of ESL learner. A trusted interpreter can ensure important information isn't missed due to a language barrier. Many communities have volunteers available for with translating.
- When using an interpreter, address the learner directly. Avoid having the conversation with the interpreter.
- Adults tend to learn a language at a slower pace than children do. Although, convenient, it can change the power dynamics and relationship between parent and child. If the information being relayed is important or is adult subject-matter, find an adult interpreter to assist.
- In Medicine Hat, you may contact Saamis Immigration Services to inquire about volunteers interpreters.
- LINC Home Study and ABLE are local resources that offer additional English practice.

## 12 Use proper grammar and sentences:

- It is not always as helpful as one might think to simplify what you are saying. If you are speaking and writing in broken English, you are modeling and teaching broken English. If a learner hears correct language on a consistent basis, it increases the chances of learning properly.
- The words "a", "an", and "the" are called articles. English is one of the few languages that contain articles in the way that we use them in Canada. The majority of new English learners struggle with them. Although they are not of the utmost importance, they need to be used consistently.

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### 14 Non-verbal Communication:

- Your gestures and the way you hold your body account for as much as 55% of your first impression, speaking represents 38%, and what you are actually saying is 7%.
- **Greetings:** In many countries it is not common to shake hands, especially between men and women. Some shake hands softly or may move quickly. Other cultures kiss on the cheek, hug, or bow to each other. Some cultures may refer to their "superior" formally, even if they've been asked to use first names.
- **Personal Space:** Differences in acceptable levels of personal space may be expressed by the Newcomer, by leaning in closer or by leaving extra distance in between. Sometimes this can result in discomfort without being aware of the cause.
- **Eye Contact:** Some cultures consider direct eye contact with people in higher positions to be a sign of disrespect. Looking away or casting eyes downwards may be a sign of respect, rather than apprehension or lack of interest. In contrast, other countries emphasize continuous eye contact and it may feel aggressive to some.
- **Body Language:** In a meeting we expect to see individuals nod to indicate they understand or agree with what is being said. In other countries, agreement may be indicated by rolling the head to the side.

- **Gestures:** The meaning of gestures varies from country to country. In Canada, people are expected to smile when greeting people. However, in some countries people smile much less and may mean something other than being friendly. In Canada, smiles are often shared to maintain or create a "social bond" and demonstrate friendly attitude.
- **Intonation:** Different intonation may be perceived as lacking interest or confidence. In some cultures, deference to authority is expressed through lowering their voice or speaking softly. Conversely, the intonation of some languages may sound overly direct or aggressive in English.
- It's impossible to learn the nonverbal cues of every culture, but being aware that differences exist is essential. If you find yourself feeling uncomfortable and you're not sure why, consider that differences in non-verbal communication might be the cause. Seek more information before making a judgement.

### 15 Other Considerations:

- It is estimated that it can take between 5 and 10 years for a learner to become fully fluent in a language. Be patient!
- Use easy to understand sentences and vocabulary. Canadian idioms (slang), complex words, and acronyms should be avoided.



## For more tips and strategies to improve diversity in your workplace, check out our other Tip Sheets:

1. Job Descriptions
2. Recruitment and Job Sourcing
3. Assessing Skills and Competencies
4. Interviewing and Selection
5. Orientation
6. Onboarding
7. Creating a Welcoming and Inclusive Work Environment
8. Training and Development
9. Communication
10. Employee Retention
11. Common Terms and Definitions
12. Summary of Resources

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