

WATCH YOUR ACCENT!

Katarzyna Richter, Cross Cultural Psychologist discusses language discrimination and other problems at the workplace.



Katarzyna Richter

If you ever missed a promotion or if a dream job was given to a person with a more desirable accent, you are a victim of linguistic discrimination. Identified in the 1980's, this phenomena refers to making judgements and decisions about

someone's character, education, social status, and competencies solely based on language skills.

Discrimination can be pervasive. Even in countries with anti discriminatory laws, hiring a candidate for a job can be affected by his or her accent. For example in the United Kingdom, a cockney or provincial accent is often associated with a lower social class, and as many as 28 per cent of people admit to have been discriminated due to their regional accent. According research by the UK law firm Peninsular, 80 per cent of employers admit to making discriminating decisions based on accents. On the other hand in the USA and the Middle East, any sort of British accent is highly regarded and often desired as it projects competence and status.

A Journal of Applied Psychology recently published a study led by Laura Huang from the University of Pennsylvania which showed that non-native speakers of English are perceived as having fewer social management skills essential for career success. Scientists suspect that this hurts non-native English speakers in obtaining executive jobs and venture

capital for business. Management skills involve confidence, an understanding of what others want and value, and how to build networks based on the context, "knowledge that may be more difficult for immigrants to obtain", they write.

They also suggest that human resource professionals consider training hiring-managers on accent-bias awareness, and encourage executive recruiters and venture capitalists to stop and to consider their own

attitudes when looking for the best talent and most promising business investments.

Linguistic bias behavior can be explained by a psychological phenomenon called **reverse halo effect** or the **devil effect**. This is a tendency to over-generalise and to evaluate an entire personality based on just one undesirable trait. This effect is often exposed in "first impressions" which often are a deal breaker during the job interview or work evaluations. For example when a candidate turns up for a job interview in scruffy clothes he or she leaves an impression of being less competent or knowledgeable.

Similarly, a candidate with a foreign accent may be considered more or less adequate for the job based on a hiring person's stereotype that associates a nationality with particular types of work – for instance, French chefs, German engineers etc.

Stereotyping mostly occurs unconsciously, our mind simply retrieves associations acquired and behaviors seen when growing up. Using stereotypes helps people to categorise the world and make sense of it without spending too much time and effort assessing all facts. Thus we can never completely avoid stereotypes. But it is important to recognise when stereotypes are helpful from when they cause misjudgment of someone's talents. Cultural stereotypes decrease management's ability to assess correctly and utilize the full potential of multinational staff.

Therefore employers and managers of multicultural organisations should make extra efforts when hiring and promoting their staff to look beyond stereotypes.



Share your feedback with Katarzyna Richter via email: katarzynarichter@hotmail.com