The role of communication in recruitment and selection in Australia

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ABSTRACT

In Australia, unemployment and under-employment continue to be significant issues experi-enced by migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB). Despite these immigrants having relevant qualifications, skills, and work experience, a high proportion have difficulties in obtaining employment in Australian organisations. Communication or language proficiency has been identified as one of the primary causal factors. Moreover, studies have identified the importance of communication as a key competency sought by managers and recruiters in all job applicants. Given the importance of making employment decisions more objective and measurable to meet anti-discrimination requirements, this study examines the perceptions of managers and recruitment specialists about the communication skills that are essential for successful recruitment and selection. Subsequently, areas for intervention are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

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The composition of the Australian population continues to change as a result of declining birth rates and the intake of more migrants, especially those from non-English-speaking back-grounds (Department of Immigration & Multicul-tural Affairs, 1999). Despite Australian immigration policies emphasising the importing of skilled labour, immigrants from non-English-speaking countries are disproportionately represented in the unemployment figures. Although it is recognised that the acceptance of overseas qualifications and work experience represent barriers to career suc-cess, migrants from English-speaking countries do not experience similar difficulties in obtaining employment in Australia as those from non-Eng-lish-speaking countries (Hawthorne, 1992; Mak, 1996; Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1993).

Research investigating unemployment in migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds highlights four causal factors: English-language proficiency, qualifications and work experience, migration status, and length of residence (Hawthorne, 1992; Yuen, 1997).

Mak, Westwood, and Ishiyama (1994) assert that, despite immigrants being fluent speakers of English, many still experience significant difficulties in career search and development because of unfamiliarity with the cultural codes in communication. Therefore, it appears that, when referring to language proficiency, the concept of communicative competence seems more useful when considering cross-cultural interactions between immigrant applicants and employers from the dominant group. Communicative competence is a complex concept, which includes knowledge of social context and culture (Hymes, 1979; James, 1995). Canale and Swain (1980) propose a four-part model of communicative competence. The first part, grammatical competence, reflects the knowledge of the language code (i.e., phonology, syntax, and semantics), as discussed by Chomsky (1965). The second part, sociolinguistic competence, reflects Hymes's (1979) criteria of being able to use language in different social contexts. The third part, discourse competence, considers an individual's ability to link utterances together and maintain a topic. Finally, the fourth part is strategic competence, where a person is able to detect and repair communication breakdown. Difficulties with intercultural interactions may occur within the second, third, and fourth parts of Canale and Swain's (1980) model. That is, a foreign speaker may have developed an understanding of the sound system, grammar, and vocabulary within another language; however, they are not able to use this language knowledge in different situations to create a discourse or to repair communication breakdown. Interestingly, a common measure of competency for migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds is the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating (ASLPR), which, in fact, is a measure of knowledge of the language code and not a migrant's communicative competence (Ingram, 1981).

Considering that the job interview is the most common tool used in the selection process in Australian organisations (Bartol, Martin, Tein, & Matthews, 1998; Patrickson & Haydon, 1988; Vaughan & McLean, 1989), an examination of cross-cultural communication issues in this context is warranted. Different components of communication, such as language skills and interpersonal skills, have been identified as desirable attributes in applicants. Indeed, Kretovics and McCambridge (1998)

extend their definition of communication in the workplace to include team skills, leadership skills, an ability to negotiate with/persuade others, problem-solving skills, organisational skills (e.g., time management), crisis-management skills, and presentation skills. Consequently, although the literature does not always list communication as one of the most important criteria, many aspects such as social competence and cultural adaptation are identified (e.g., Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, & Barker, 1999; West, 1991). For example, in Marx's (cited in Dowling, Welch, & Schuler, 1999) UK-German study, cultural adaptation was ranked as the number-one factor, with social competence and language skills as numbers four and five.

Numerous studies (e.g., Gallois & Callan, 1997; Phillips & Dipboye, 1989; Prickett, Gada-Jain, & Bernieri, 2000) have identified the impact of communication in cross-cultural interview settings. Specifically, Arvey and Campion (1982) identified that using culturally appropriate nonverbal behaviours increases an applicant's ratings during a job interview. Indeed, the nonverbal source of information has been identified as being more important than verbal cues. For example, in Motowidlo and Burnett's (1995) study, participants were shown videotaped interviews without a soundtrack. They found that the interviewers could provide reasonably valid ratings, even when the aural cues were not present. Thus, these findings demonstrate that interviewers rely on nonverbal behaviours such as gesture, eye contact, facial expressions, and appearance, in conjunction with vocal characteristics. These results were confirmed by Prickett et al.'s (2000) study, in which university students and trained recruiters could predict an applicant's likelihood of being hired within the first 15 seconds of the interview, based upon the applicant's nonverbal behaviours.

This paper, which examines the components of communication within the context of recruitment and selection, is part of a larger study investigating the experiences of South-east Asian migrants in recruitment and selection in Australia. The aims of this present study are to determine the communicative requirements necessary for success in recruitment and selection in Australia, and identify areas for intervention and training.

METHODOLOGY

SUBJECTS

Forty-one managers who were enrolled in a Master of Business Admin-istration program completed a questionnaire before a lecture at univer-sity. The majority of these participants were aged 31–40 years (N= 20), with 12 participants aged 25–30 years, and 9 managers aged 41–50 years. Males made up a significant proportion of the sample, 82.9% (N= 34), with only seven female subjects identified. Most respondents were employed in middle management (N=25), with 12 respondents engaged in top management positions, and 4 currently employed as first-line supervisors. There was equal distribution of managers born in Australia (N=20) and overseas. Of those managers born overseas, 70% originated from a non-English-speaking country (N= 14). These coun-tries included India, Belgium, Zimbabwe, Italy, Malaysia, China, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan. The English-speaking countries other than Australia were New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The distrib-ution of respondents across industries was as follows: Construction (N=2), Finance (N=2), Health (N=5), Education (N=3), Retail (N=2), Hospitality (N=4), Sales/Marketing (N=7), Government (N=6), Manu-facturing (N=4), and Other (N=6). 'Other' included non-profit, trans-port, and communications.

Ten recruitment specialists from four recruitment agencies and Job Network agencies completed a survey that was distributed to the partic-ipants at their workplace. Subjects were distributed evenly among the age categories: three were aged 25–30, three were aged 31–40, and four subjects were aged 41–50. Six females and four males participated. Most respondents were born in Australia (N=6), with the remainder born in the United Kingdom (N=2), South Africa (N=1), and Vietnam (N=1).

QUESTIONNAIRE

The managers and recruiters completed a questionnaire that comprised 15 questions. These questions focused on three key areas: (1) recruit-ment and selection processes, and selection criteria; (2) communication in recruitment and selection; and (3) the difficulties experienced by migrants in recruitment and selection.

This paper will present the findings of two open-ended questions, which examined participants' perceptions of what proportion of a message is conveyed by verbal and non-verbal means, and their definition of 'good communication skills' in the context of recruitment and selection.

The responses relating to the question about the verbal and nonverbal proportions of a message were analysed to obtain mean scores. After the definitions of 'good communication skills' from both groups were content-analysed, categories were identified based upon specific similarities of words within responses. Responses were tallied within each category grouping. Due to the fact that an individual may have provided multiple answers to each question, the total number in each category represents the number of responses, not the number of respondents.

RESULTS

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL PROPORTIONS OF A MESSAGE

As revealed in Table 1, there was considerable agreement between managers and recruiters about the proportion of a message that is conveyed verbally, vocally, and by facial expressions. The responses from both groups suggest that managers and recruiters perceived that almost half of a message is conveyed by verbal expression (word content), with vocal aspects and facial expressions together forming the remainder.

Table 1: Mean scores (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) showing the proportion of a message that is conveyed verbally, vocally, and by facial expressions

Aspect of communication	Managers (N=41)		Recruiters (N=10)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Verbal Expression (word content of message)	45.50	17.76	43.33	11.18
Vocal Expression (e.g., intonation, stress)	26.75	10.41	27.78	10.93
Facial Expression (e.g., eye gaze)	27.75	15.40	28.89	7.82
TOTAL	100.00		100.00	

Analysis of the responses of managers and recruiters generated the following eight categories: Articulation, Comprehension, Verbal Expression, Written Skills, Nonverbal Communication, Cultural Knowledge, Technical Language, and Direct and Concise Communication. Several of these categories—Articulation, Comprehension, Verbal Expression, Written Skills, and Nonverbal Communication—were based upon participants' responses and literature in Linguistics.

The category of Articulation relates to the speech dimension of communication, with examples of responses including 'well articulated' and 'someone who can speak clearly and smoothly'. Examples in the category of Comprehension include 'ability to listen reflectively' and 'understands the questions clearly'. Responses such as 'ability to convey the message to the panel of interviewers', 'a fair command of the English language', and 'ability to communicate concepts and ideas' were

Table 2: Frequency of categories based upon managers' and recruiters' perception: good communication skills

Category	Managers (N=41)	Recruiters (N=10)
Verbal Expression	79.3	77.8
Comprehension	17.2	33.3
Articulation	13.8	33.3
Direct and Concise Communication	13.8	33.3
Written Skills	10.3	–
Cultural Knowledge	6.9	–
Technical Language	3.4	–
Nonverbal Communication	3.4	22.2

classed as Verbal Expression. The category of Written Skills incorporated any responses based upon written communication, such as 'fluent use of written English'.

The categories of Nonverbal Communication and Cultural Knowledge contained similar responses. However, a distinction was made between paralinguistics (e.g., stress, intonation, speech rate), facial expressions (e.g., 'good eye contact' and 'articulate empathy'), and culturally oriented behaviours, such as 'be on time for interviews' and 'dress appropriately'.

Responses such as 'use communication relevant to the industry' were categorised as Technical Language. The category of Direct and Concise Communication was derived from responses such as 'remain clear and to the point' and 'communicate in a precise and easy manner'.

As seen in Table 2, the category Verbal Expression comprised the most responses from both groups, with Articulation and Comprehension forming the next largest categories. Interestingly, the responses from the recruiters did not incorporate written aspects of communication, technical language, or cultural knowledge. However, a larger proportion of their responses corresponded with the categories of Nonverbal Communication and Direct and Concise Communication.

Discussion and conclusion

Managers and recruiters believed that approximately half of a message is conveyed by the word content (verbally), with the remainder transmitted through non-linguistic means. Although the literature varies in the extent to which messages are communicated verbally and nonverbally, overall it is agreed that nonverbal communication significantly affects interpretations and impressions. For example, Riddell (1996) argues that as little as 7% of a message is in the word content, with over 50% expressed through facial expressions and body gestures, and 38% expressed vocally.

The proportions of verbal, vocal, and nonverbal aspects of a message identified by the managers and recruiters reflect their definitions of good communication skills. The perceived fundamental components of good communication skills were verbal expression, articulation, and comprehension. Interestingly, the recruiters also identified that good communication includes nonverbal communication. These definitions provide an

interesting insight into what managers and recruiters are seeking in applicants when they indicate that a candidate should have good communication skills (Daly, 2000). Moreover, in Daly, Barker, and McCarthy's (2000) study, communication and culture were perceived by managers and recruiters as central to the difficulties that migrants experience in recruitment and selection.

Although the participants in this study identified spoken language skills as being the prime components of communication skills, proficiency with the English language does not equate to communicative competence. Indeed, Mak and her colleagues (1994) assert that the most significant barrier to Hong Kong immigrants gaining employment in Australia is reduced knowledge of the cultural code, which in turn is conveyed through nonverbal communication. Studies focusing on other cultural backgrounds have presented similar evidence (e.g., Daly, 2000; Hawthorne, 1992; Mak, 1996; Yuen, 1997). Many of Australia's NESB migrants are from countries where a large section of the population has a good command of a variety of English, and where English is used in business, education, and government (O'Grady & Millen, 1994). Hence, there is a need for a different approach to the English-language training courses provided to NESB migrants by the Australian Government. In support of this, a survey examining employment of NESB migrants in the Australian Public Service revealed that training should extend beyond general English classes to focus on specific communicative situations (Australian Public Service, 1990). The study found that courses that were specifically oriented towards language use in the workplace were more beneficial, although often too short.

Programs that more appropriately help NESB migrants to meet the specific requirements of employers are needed. English-language training programs may be modified to focus on language needs within the workforce, and, indeed, be based upon developing socio-cultural competencies for building intercultural relationships. Thus, migrants seeking employment in Australia may achieve more success if training is redirected to focus on socio-cultural competence in behaviours relevant to the workplace, such as participating actively in groups, and expressing disagreement (Mak et al., 1999). One such program is ExcelL (Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership), which is aimed at intercultural social-effectiveness training (Mak & Barker, 2000).

However, while it is important to understand and respect the host

culture, it is not necessary to accept or adopt it (Anderson, 1997). Mead (1998, p. 17) argues that a 'manager cannot expect to force-fit members of another culture into his own culture'. Several authors advocate that Australian managers examine their communication and interpersonal skills, particularly in the context of international business (Burton & Ryall, 1995; Daly et al., 2000; Fitzgerald, 1997; Karpin, 1995). Although able to identify that communication and cultural differences represent barriers to migrants gaining employment in Australia, managers and recruiters have little awareness of the potential limitations in their own cross-cultural communication abilities.

In light of Australia's increasing business with Asian countries, the Karpin report (1995) and Burton and Ryall (1995) argue that it is equally important for managers to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity. Certainly, Fitzgerald's (1997) view is that Australian managers have more potential for problems in cross-cultural communication than migrants. Consequently, there is a strong need for managers and recruiters to seek training in working effectively with clients and employees from diverse backgrounds. This may incorporate cultural-awareness training, particularly as self-awareness is essential to building effective interpersonal relationships (Carlopio, Andrewartha, & Armstrong, 1997). An increased knowledge of one's own culture may lead to greater awareness of cross-cultural issues and thus greater ability to manage clients from diverse backgrounds.

Clearly, further investigation of migrants' experiences of recruitment and selection in Australia needs to be conducted. Examining the impact of socio-cultural competency training on employment outcomes with NESB migrants will provide support agencies with more accurate data about how to better assist migrants to gain employment, and, more importantly, to gain career advancement. Moreover, there is a need for a benchmarking study on best practice in relation to cultural awareness and diversity-management training of recruiters and managers.

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