

# Bridging Language and Culture Gaps in the Workplace



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## Introduction

Recent shifts in immigration patterns have resulted in a significant number of American residents—roughly 45 million—who speak a language other than English at home, have lower literacy levels and/or have limited English proficiency.<sup>1</sup> According to Census projections, the number of residents with limited English proficiency is expected to increase, particularly within Asian and Latino communities.

In addition, companies increasingly have hired international employees to help meet their workforce needs. Not only does this diversify the workforce, it also has given many companies an international appeal, affording some companies the ability to compete better in the global economy and serve a diverse market.

But although large employers have strong incentives to hire international employees as well as those from the growing pool of immigrants, there are significant language and cultural barriers that warrant attention. Many large employers with significant numbers of employees with limited English proficiency struggle to convey pertinent

**Did you know that about 14% of the people in the United States speak a language other than English at home or have limited English proficiency?**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

written information to employees due to low levels of literacy. These challenges often compromise effective communication—both verbal and written—between non-English speaking employees and those who are proficient only in English. In some cases, this can create tension and reduce productivity in the workplace.

## The Impact on Workers' Health Care

Many large employers are concerned that employees with limited English proficiency may not be able to effectively communicate with health care providers or navigate the health care system. Recent studies and articles have reinforced these concerns and found that language barriers can adversely impact health and health care by—

- Increasing the risk of drug complications,
- Decreasing utilization rates of Pap smears, mammograms and other preventive services,
- Increasing the use of inappropriate diagnostic testing, and
- Increasing the likelihood that the patient will be noncompliant.<sup>2</sup>

### *Using Ad Hoc Interpreters: The Detrimental Impacts on Health and Health Care*

**- Interpretation errors are more likely to have potential clinical consequences versus those by professional interpreters (77% vs. 53%) (Flores et al. 03);**

**- Ad hoc interpreters are less likely to tell patient about medication side effects (David and Rhee, 98); and**

**- Family members misinterpret 23-52% of questions asked by physicians (Ebden et al. 88).**

Source: Flores, G. DHHS/OMH/AIR Consensus Building Meeting, March 24, 2003

Often in health care settings, administrators and providers try to surmount language barriers with people with limited English proficiency by relying on ad hoc interpreters, which include bilingual staff and family members of the patient. While this practice may seem harmless, even sensitive, studies show that using ad hoc interpreters can have a detrimental impact on health and health care. For example, non-medical staff who interpret for patients can distort or exclude key clinical information, and when bilingual children are used as ad hoc interpreters, they tend to ignore questions that focus on women's health issues and bodily functions out of embarrassment.<sup>3,4</sup> Because of such evidence, federal agencies, including the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health, and accrediting organizations, such as the Joint Commission on

Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, have established national standards for cultural and linguistic competence in health care, as well as for health interpretation services.

Therefore, it is important for large companies, particularly their human resource professionals, to gain a better understanding of language and cultural barriers, and implement solutions to surmount these challenges. First, it is useful to identify some of the common language and cultural barriers that impede communication.

### **Language Barriers**

Many large employers can attest to the challenges that arise when non-English speaking employees interact with English-speaking human resource professionals, supervisors, colleagues and health care providers. For example, the following may occur.

- Employees with limited English proficiency may be unaware of pertinent job-related information, health insurance options and crucial information about the company.
- The company's ability to train and prepare employees with limited English proficiency for their job responsibilities may be hindered. This affects job performance and productivity, and in some cases it can be dangerous. (For example, employees with limited English proficiency in the construction industry may be at increased risk for on-the-job injuries and accidents due to a lack of fully understanding crucial safety information and standards.)<sup>4,5</sup>

**Patients with limited English proficiency who could not communicate with health care providers (because they needed but did not get interpreters) were more likely than patients who could communicate with providers to report having a poor or fair understanding of their diagnosis and the treatment plan.**

Source: Baker et al. JAMA 1996

- It is difficult and sometimes frustrating for English-speaking and non-English speaking employees to work together effectively and efficiently on various projects and tasks.
- Employee health outcomes are compromised by an increased likelihood of unclear treatment recommendations, as well as drug and medical complications and misunderstandings.

## **Cultural Barriers**

Cultural barriers often exist in tandem with language barriers, creating greater communication challenges. While the increasing number of nationalities in the U.S. workforce makes it impossible to identify every possible cultural barrier that may arise, there are some common cultural challenges that exist in workforces with significant populations of foreign-born employees.

### Body Language

Body language, a powerful form of non-verbal communication, often is influenced and determined by cultural nuances. When people of different cultures try to communicate in the workplace and health care settings, body language often leads to unintended misunderstandings.<sup>6,7</sup> The following are some examples.

- In American culture, maintaining eye contact is an effective way for a listener to convey both respect and attentiveness. However, in some Asian and Latin cultures, averting the eyes to avoid eye contact demonstrates respect.
- Gestures, expressions and how people carry themselves convey different messages across cultures. In American culture, people are conditioned to interpret shaking the head as meaning “no.” However, in other cultures, the non-verbal gesture for the word “no” involves raising the chin.
- People from some cultures do not shake hands, whereas in American culture, shaking hands is a sign of respect and recognition.

Gaining a better understanding of the cultural influences on body language, then, is an important component in improving communication channels among culturally diverse workers.

### Gender Roles and Status

Cultural influences that determine gender-related roles and status often create barriers in communication between men and women of different cultures. The following are some examples.

- Women from some cultures who work in an American company or seek health care from an American provider may be culturally inclined to avoid eye contact with men or avoid speaking directly to them. In some cultures, women are taught to defer to men altogether. When a male colleague or provider from a different cultural background tries to communicate with such women, the women may feel uncomfortable and awkward.
- Similarly, men from some cultures are conditioned to view women in a different way. As a result, such men sometimes find it difficult to work well with female counterparts and have a female supervisor or health care provider. For example, an American woman supervisor who makes and holds eye contact with a man on her staff who is from a different culture may think that she is demonstrating respect to her employee. However, the man may misunderstand his supervisor's intentions and instead interpret her actions as forward, flirtatious and disrespectful.<sup>8</sup>

Misunderstandings between men and women of different cultural backgrounds would be reduced if there were increased awareness of and sensitivity to the influence that culture plays in determining gender roles.

### Religious Beliefs

Employees from some religious backgrounds may want to observe religious holidays traditionally not recognized in American society by not working or by adhering to certain customs and practices.<sup>9</sup> For example, Muslim employees, in accordance with their religious beliefs, may want to pray three times a day. Recognizing and respecting the important role that religion plays in the lives of some employees is an effective strategy for surmounting some cultural barriers that make communication between members of a diverse workforce challenging.

### Personal Space and Appearance

When communicating, people of different cultural backgrounds prefer different amounts of personal space. For example, most Americans are conditioned to stand about five feet apart when conversing. However, the Japanese and Germans prefer to stand farther away, while people from Hispanic and Arab backgrounds tend to stand closer to one another. Additionally, people from some cultures wear traditional hairstyles or customary headdresses, and may wish to embrace their cultural beliefs in the workplace. In many cases, supervisors and employees outside of that culture may view such appearances or attire as unprofessional or inappropriate, particularly in situations where employees are required to wear uniforms.<sup>10</sup>

### **Low Levels of Literacy**

Low levels of literacy among international employees with limited English proficiency also hinder effective communication. Illiteracy makes it extremely difficult for non-English speaking employees to interpret important printed material posted in the workplace and to complete the forms necessary for enrolling in health insurance and other benefits programs. In some cases, illiteracy jeopardizes employee safety. For example, illiterate employees with limited English proficiency who hold positions that require work with machinery, construction or chemicals may not be able to read hazard and warning signs correctly, which may lead to an increase in dangerous accidents and injuries.<sup>11</sup> They also may not clearly understand the warnings and dosages of prescriptions or recommended treatment regimens given to them by health care providers. An inability to read and write negates the effectiveness of the health education and wellness materials, as well as safety program information many large employers disseminate to their employees.

### **Incentives for Employers to Help Surmount Communication Barriers**

Many large employers have not launched initiatives to bridge the language and cultural gaps among their employees. Instead, many believe that it is the responsibility of the employee to become proficient in English and acclimated to the corporate culture of a company. However, there are strong incentives for helping employees surmount language, culture and literacy barriers. Some studies suggest that the long-term results of companies that have implemented programs to surmount communication barriers include higher cost savings and increased business profits.<sup>12,13</sup> Additionally, these studies indicate that companies that have invested in programs and resources have reported the following benefits:

- Improved employee performance and morale;
- Increased productivity;
- Higher quality of services or products;
- Greater communication and better teamwork between employees of different backgrounds;
- Improved safety; and
- Reduced turnover rates among employees.<sup>14,15</sup>

Because recent studies indicate that language barriers can affect employee health status and health care quality, and often result in a waste of health benefit dollars, large employers have incentives to try to reduce these barriers in health care settings. However, most large employers have not launched efforts to help employees surmount language barriers. Most companies do not have the strategies, tools or necessary information to help their workforces navigate or communicate in health care settings.

### **Innovative Strategies and Solutions**

There are a number of strategies that large employers, particularly human resource professionals, may want to consider to help bridge the language, cultural and literacy gaps among workforces with significant numbers of non-English speaking employees from different cultures. An excellent example is the Informed Care Management Program that Marriott International recently implemented.

#### **Marriott International's Informed Care Management Program**

Marriott International implemented the *Informed Care Management (ICM)* program to help individuals with chronic conditions better manage their health and thwart the proliferation of significant, avoidable and costly adverse health events. These events result from differences in the care some patients receive compared with the care they should be getting. One of the benefits of the ICM program is to reduce disparities in care between groups within a population. The ICM program is provided by ActiveHealth Management for members of Marriott's PPO health plan. The program focuses on the specific clinical issues that have the most impact on improving a patient's care as well as on ensuring consistent application of evidence-based standards of clinical excellence across covered populations. *Additionally, the ICM program upholds several of the culturally and linguistically appropriate standards (CLAS) of health care by incorporating preferred language services for participants.*

Driven by ActiveHealth's clinically sophisticated CareEngine<sup>SM</sup> System, the program includes an analysis of evidence-based standards of clinical care to generate highly specific treatment improvement opportunities called "Care Considerations." The Care Considerations are communicated to the treating physician. **They help treating physicians and individual patients identify opportunities for improving patients' health outcomes.**

Participants who qualify and choose to participate in the program work directly with a Nurse Care Manager who acts as a personal health coach. The Nurse Care Manager **communicates with the patient in his/her preferred language and provides targeted education** including the following:

- Discussing the same Care Considerations already communicated to the patient's treating physician to encourage dialogue between the physician and patient about these important clinical issues;
- Working with the patient to identify potential opportunities to improve their care; and
- Helping to find the best way for the patient to talk with a treating doctor about their care and new treatment options.

Illustrative Example: 56 year-old Spanish-speaking male with diabetes and previous heart attack

*A Care Consideration is identified by the CareEngine System and communicated to a patient's treating physician. This patient's Care Consideration conveys that the patient has evidence of MI (heart attack), no evidence of a beta blocker and citations in the medical literature that define the recommendations for a beta blocker. While a beta blocker, which reduces this patient's risk for another heart attack by about 25 percent, had been prescribed to the patient repeatedly in the past, the physician did not know that the patient had not filled the prescription.*

*Meanwhile, a Spanish-speaking Nurse Care Manager is assigned to be this patient's personal health coach. During the telephone engagement of the patient, the Nurse Care Manager finds that the patient, due to a language barrier, had not understood the purpose of the medication and had not filled the prescription. The Nurse Care Manager subsequently encourages the patient to discuss the use of a beta blocker with his physician. After the call, the nurse sends the patient a letter written in Spanish with a summary of the Care Consideration and a suggestion on how to discuss the issue with his physician. In addition, the letter includes a customized 'HealthSheet' with information on diabetes and coronary artery disease, as well as important clinical targets for blood pressure, LDL cholesterol levels and blood sugar levels.*

*With a better understanding of his health condition, the evidence-based standard of care and tools to help communicate with physicians, the patient discusses his condition again with the physician and spends more time asking about the purpose of his medications. They discuss the clinical targets on the patient's 'HealthSheet' and the patient's diabetes management, and the patient agrees to initiate a cholesterol management program. Later, the patient fills a prescription for a beta blocker and initiates a cholesterol management program.*

*Through its linguistic competence and reliance on evidence-based standards of care, the ICM program takes action to resolve previously unrecognized opportunities to improve care through physician engagement, better patient education, better plans of care and better patient compliance. The resulting outcomes are a reduction in the number of serious and costly adverse events such as hospitalizations, re-hospitalizations or worsening of condition, and corresponding reduction in health care costs.*

*For more information on the ICM program at Marriott International, contact Jill Berger at [jill.berger@marriott.com](mailto:jill.berger@marriott.com).*

**Large employers also may want to consider the following strategies. Most of these require little additional investment.**

Enhance Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity.

- Identify the various cultures that exist within the workforce, and become knowledgeable and aware of the beliefs, customs and nuances that may affect communication.
- Become educated about and sensitive to the broad ethnic diversity that exists among employees of similar cultural backgrounds. For example, there are myriad languages, dialects and cultural beliefs that exist within Latino and Asian populations.
- Ensure that vendors, suppliers and health plans understand the workforce's diversity and incorporate cultural awareness and sensitivity into their processes and policies.
- Incorporate material about language barriers and cultural differences into new employee orientation sessions.

#### Work to Surmount Language and Literacy Barriers.

- When conversing with non-English speaking employees, avoid jargon or slang. Rather than assuming that the employee understands, ask for feedback from the employee that requires answers beyond “yes” and “no.”<sup>16</sup>
- Do not assume to know the literacy levels of employees. When developing written documents such as educational materials or on-site safety regulations, use illustrations. When enrolling employees in health and benefits programs, be available and sensitive to questions employees may ask.

#### Ensure That Health Plans Have Language Interpretation and Translation Services.

- When selecting a health plan, ensure that the plans offer professional language interpretation and translation services to people with limited English proficiency.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, when employees with limited English proficiency enroll in the plan, inform them of the plan’s language services and encourage them to request an interpreter or translator during visits to their health care provider.

### **Steps Large Employers Can Take to Surmount Barriers to Effective Communication**

Offer pertinent written information, such as enrollment and consent forms, emergency contact information and health education materials, in languages other than English, and ensure that they are developed at an appropriate reading level.

Some companies with large numbers of employees with limited English proficiency offer human resource materials such as employee handbooks, consent and emergency contact forms, job-related information and benefits enrollment forms in some of the more common languages spoken by non-English speaking employees. Additionally, many of these companies also ensure that the materials, particularly health education materials, are culturally competent and at an appropriate reading level.<sup>18</sup>

### Create a company “language bank” program.

“Language bank” programs involve soliciting employees who speak English as well as another language to serve, when needed, as on-site interpreters, either on a volunteer basis or for additional bonuses or compensation. Companies that have created successful “language bank” programs have ensured that the program include updated lists of bilingual employees, formal evaluations of language and interpretation skills, and formal interpreter training. These components are important because employees who self-assess their proficiency in speaking and translating a second language may have problems with accuracy. Additionally, effective “language bank” programs enlist the support of supervisors to ensure that they and the volunteers’ colleagues do not resent the volunteers for the time they spend away from their job responsibilities.<sup>19</sup>

### Recruit and hire bilingual staff.

To help enhance communication between English and non-English speaking employees from different cultural backgrounds, some large employers hire bilingual employees. Typically they are proficient in English as well as another language spoken by a significant number of non-English speaking employees. In addition to performing other responsibilities, they serve as on-site interpreters for various company departments. For example, one major retail store with a significant number of non-English speaking employees with Asian and Latino backgrounds hired several bilingual Asian and Latino supervisors to help bridge the language and cultural divide.

Contract with professional interpreters.

There are several approaches that companies may want to consider in retaining the services of professional interpreters.

- Companies with a high demand for language translation services may want to consider hiring a trained interpreter as a full-time employee.
- Companies with intermittent demands for language translation may opt to hire trained interpreters as hourly, on-call employees or contractors who are called upon for specific training sessions or during emergencies.
- Companies with intermittent and specific language translation services may want to consider contracting an interpretation agency. Many agencies offer translation expertise in several languages and across a range of specialties. For example, English-speaking human resource professionals who need to communicate with non-English speaking employees during a company's health insurance renewal periods may want to hire an interpretation agency with expertise in communicating about health benefits.

Offer courses in English literacy and English as a second language, as well as courses in the languages spoken by large numbers of employees with limited English proficiency (LEP).

To help improve the literacy levels of employees and assist non-English speaking employees in becoming proficient in English, some companies offer on-site English literacy and courses in English as a second language. Additionally, some companies offer courses in the languages spoken by large numbers of non-English speaking employees in an effort to help human resource professionals as well as supervisors. For example, one national shipping company with a substantial proportion (22%) of Latino employees offered Spanish courses to human resource professionals and supervisors in order to help bridge the language gap that plagued communication at the worksite.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

An increasing number of foreign-born residents are entering the U.S. workforce. Consequently, employers throughout the nation are facing language and cultural barriers, and varying levels of literacy. This is not only hindering communication in the workplace, but it is also affecting employee performance and productivity, and business profits. While many large employers may find these challenges overwhelming at first, there are innovative solutions and strategies that can be implemented to ensure that communication lines among all employees are strengthened.

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Health  
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### About the Health Disparities Initiative

In response to the research documenting racial and ethnic disparities in health and health care, the Washington Business Group on Health launched the Health Disparities Initiative in 2001. Through multiple components, the Initiative will raise awareness about this critical health issue among large employers, identify the incentives for large employers to leverage their resources as purchasers to affect changes in the way health care services are delivered among diverse populations, and propose practical, innovative solutions that large employers can consider implementing to help reduce health disparities. The Issue Brief series is one of many methods of communicating information to employers for the purpose of addressing these challenges.

For more information, visit <http://www.wbgh.org/programs/cphs/disparities/> or contact Britt Weinstock at [Weinstock@wbgh.org](mailto:Weinstock@wbgh.org).

### About the Washington Business Group on Health

The Washington Business Group on Health is the national voice of large employers dedicated to finding innovative and forward-thinking solutions to the nation's most important health care issues. The Business Group represents its 175 members, primarily Fortune 500 companies and large public sector employers, who provide health coverage for more than 40 million U.S. workers, retirees and their families. The Business Group fosters the development of a quality health care delivery system and treatments based on scientific evidence of effectiveness. The Business Group works with other organizations to promote patient safety and expand the use of technology assessment to ensure access to superior new technology and the elimination of ineffective technology.

For more information on the Business Group, visit <http://www.wbgh.org>.

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