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9 steps for handling international communication

When HR's audience is a global one

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As more Canadian businesses join the ranks of global competitors, HR professionals will increasingly find themselves communicating to employees from Halifax to Hong Kong. Communicating globally is becoming the norm, but it requires a new set of rules to ensure messages are heard and understood as they're intended. Our English is not necessarily theirs.

You can avoid some of the communication traps if you follow these guidelines.

1. **Start off with the premise that the written word is the best option.** It usually is, since it is the most practical. But it may not be the only way of handling the information. It's best if someone is on hand to answer questions and support the release of the information. The support will be valued by staff.
2. **Ask: Is English their first language?** If not, assume that the audience handles English as a second language (ESL), and keep sentences and paragraphs short. Write in the active voice. Do not break any grammatical rules. Write complete sentences, that is the way ESL'ers were taught. If the message is presented in incomplete sentences, they might think you have made a mistake.
3. **Avoid idiomatic expressions, slang, figures of speech.** They may not translate well or might confuse. They could be taken literally.

The phrase, "See the table attached," might conjure images of dinner tables. Better off to say: "See the spreadsheet attached." Your audience relies on you to model the use of the English language. You are setting an example, which they may imitate in their responses to you. If you have the authority to send out the release, you set the standard.

4. **Do not assume language usage is the same even if English is clearly the audience's first language.** Canadians, Americans, Britons and Australians use linguistic variations and some usages are completely different, if not contradictory. To tell a British audience that you are "off cottaging," might be translated as having a gay lifestyle. Which may not be what you're trying to say.
5. **Test the information release.** Invite members of the prospective audience to review the draft, before it is released. Even the best writers value and receive great feedback from a second opinion.

6. **Handle any illustrative material sensitively.** If you decide to spice up the information with images, be wary. Graphics often present potholes. Avoid using pictures of men or women. (People may count the numbers of pictures to see if you are complying with a diversity balance, and you do not want them distracted from the message.)

We once prepared graphics to illustrate a training manual, and sent the manual out for reading. We were surprised that someone took the trouble to prepare a graph, listing the split between men and women, and also listing ethnic entries. We were not caught off-guard. We had already done the calculation. But we were surprised that someone else bothered. Clearly, diversity does matter.

Choose graphics that portray inanimate objects or animals. That way no issues of gender or diversity balance will come into play. (Currently my personal favourite is dogs, but be conscious of an equal split between male and female.)

7. **Decide on which spelling style to use: British, American or Canadian.** The style chosen may be noticed, and cause irritation. It's better off to choose "international" English and avoid all the obvious words that speak to their country of origin.

Avoid words like "color/colour," "favour/favor," and any words that end in "ize/ise"; that way you also avoid agonizing discussions on which is right? They both are, but international language ideally needs to be non-British, non-American, non-Canadian.

This assumes you have the time as it means editing these words out to avoid the problem. It usually can be done, but it does take effort and wordsmithing.

8. **Once you have opted for a spelling style, stick to it.** Readers value consistency and may note inconsistency.
9. **Use all e-mail transmissions carefully.** The potential for misunderstandings is enormous. In e-mails, stick to content that is based on analysis, and that emphasizes facts, numbers, details, research and information. Try to avoid any content that might create a negative emotional response. If the issue is an emotional one, don't use e-mail. It might be better to deliver the news in person. Remember that e-mail lacks the personal touch. So fall over backwards to be friendly and involve the audience in opinions and discussions over the topic in question.

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