

Unlocking the potential of internationally educated professionals

by Marjorie Friesen

It was clearly unsafe for the work crew to be operating in that part of the open-pit mine after dark, thought Jim (not his real name), an engineer recently immigrated from China to Canada.

So although he works in the mine's Technical department and only observes the daily activities of Operations department employees including those in the work crew, Jim "told" the crew that they shouldn't be working there.

They interpreted this as an order, and later the crew's supervisor sent an e-mail to his manager, who in turn sent Jim a message saying Jim should not be giving orders to his (Operations) department's employees.

This may be a typical situation faced by companies who hire internationally-educated professionals (IEPs). They value the technical skills that employees like Jim bring to the team. However, their lack of understanding of both explicit and implicit cultural behavior, values and expectations -- conveyed through verbal and non-verbal communication -- often limits their effectiveness.

It was not just what Jim said to the crew that night, but how he said it that caused the problem. Had he used words like, "I don't think you should work here after dark" and provided a reason -- risk of injury from rock fall -- his message might not have been perceived as an order.

Also, his tone of voice affected how his message was interpreted.

Soon after this incident, Jim wrote to his supervisor to complain that he had been accused of giving the workers an order. His tone was not conciliatory -- he did not concede that what he said, or how it was said, might have been interpreted as an order.

It was later explained to him by a language tutor that while directness in speech and writing are valued in the Canadian workplace, he should have softened his message. He should have begun with an unbiased description of the situation, including the risks of working in the area at night.

Most of the messages we convey are non-verbal, which includes facial expressions, body gestures, posture and eye contact, as well as tone of voice and intonation. "IEPs" may misinterpret or miss these non-verbal cues.

Another internationally-trained engineer was asked in a job interview why he thought the company should hire him. Not only did he not answer the question directly, he went on at great length about how he had worked with high-voltage power lines. He missed the shifts in body posture and disinterested looks on the faces of the others as they checked their watches and smart phones.

Many IEPs are strongly motivated to do good work. They find it frustrating when they think they have said or written the right thing, but it causes misunderstanding and damaged relationships. Employers, too, get frustrated if some of their employees are not as effective as they could be, and so are neither promoted to leadership positions, nor asked to make presentations to senior management or clients.

Sometimes, supervisors and fellow employees will help an IEP understand how to communicate. But they rarely have the skills or patience to do this effectively.

A more practical solution may be to provide IEPs with language and workplace-skills training, through a qualified tutor or teacher. This can be a worthwhile investment that helps them maximize their effectiveness, smooths relationships, and promotes employee retention.

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