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COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AT WORK

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Abstract: *The world has become a one big village and with the movement of people to different countries, English has become a vital form of communication. So much emphasis is given on speaking English very well but is mastering the language enough to be accepted at your work in another country? This study reflects on a group of professional migrants with a university degree moving to Australia in 2007 to start a new life. Upon arrival, these migrants realise that English alone is not satisfactory in search of a new job or create a harmonious existence in a new culture and new environment. They find out that often their problems are related to the social aspects of communication in the workplace. Migrant workers often blame their accents but there are many underlying causes for the fact that they end up eating lunch alone. Interview data from L2 immigrants will be shared, as well as a description of some Innovative Communication in the Workplace programs that have been designed not only for immigrant staff but for employer awareness as well. The presentation will finish with a short video taped at migrants' workplaces.*

Keywords: *workplace communication, cultural barriers, migrants.*

1. Introduction

Australia is competitive internationally in attracting skilled migrants and over the last sixty years there have been several changes to Australia's migration program. Initially migrants were brought in to build up the population for defense purposes. In the 1950s the program aimed to support Australia's manufacturing industries and by the early 1990s family reunion, refugee and humanitarian migration and skilled migration became features of the program (Phillips, 2006). Over the last ten years the emphasis has been on skilled migration with a focus on attracting migrants with the necessary skills to complement labour market needs and skill shortages. Numbers of skilled migrants have increased significantly so that by 2005, 97,500 places were allocated for skilled migration, accounting for around 60% of migrants being granted visas (Phillips, 2006).

This paper will examine the kind of obstacles non-English speaking background migrants face upon arrival to Australia. There will be an analysis of the challenge migrants' face of breaking into the job market as well as an analysis of the industry perspective on overseas skilled professionals. The presentation will conclude by showing participants having followed English for the Workplace programs videotaped at their workplaces.

* ProfELT, Professional English Language Training, the Netherlands.

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2. Obstacles Migrants Face

Although the most significant proportion of migrants enter Australia under the skilled migration scheme, they are often prevented from full participation in the workforce and therefore fail to be a part of the migrant" success story." According to Ho (2004) highly skilled migrants are being under utilized in their new environment. This problem is further exacerbated if the migrant is from a non English speaking background as many encounter initial difficulties having their qualifications recognized. Ho (2004) claims that on average, after having lived in Australia for three years, only 30% of skilled migrants from non English speaking backgrounds work in occupations where they are fully utilizing their qualifications and skills. She exemplifies migrants from mainland China who have tertiary education rates of double the Australian average yet are over-represented in unskilled occupations, referring to the "brain drain from China" becoming a "brain waste" in Australia.

Research by Ho (2004) identifies a variety of obstacles to finding appropriate employment for this group. Firstly their overseas skills are often devalued by employers who prefer local experience. Secondly, she claims that it is not necessarily English skills that present obstacles for skilled migrants in finding work, but rather a lack of: "Australian English", together with employers' views that they don't culturally fit into the workplace. Underemployment in their area of expertise results in many migrants opting for self employment or low skilled jobs and a consequent feeling of low self worth (Ho, 2004).

2.1. Industry Expectations

Australian employers have had to make judgments about the value of prospective employees with credentials they know little about. For this reason, they are reluctant to employ skilled migrants from NESB countries without local work experience. Credential recognition problems are far more serious with registrable professions such as accountants and engineers. There is uncertainty about the standards of training received and its relevance to the Australian job market. The assumption, therefore, is that Australian authorities are too tough, perhaps because of local prejudice towards those with foreign credentials. Employers, furthermore, advised that cultural / social interaction was almost non-existent and that they tend to stick to their own as finding a common topic to talk about was difficult for the migrants. Employers find it time-consuming having to educate workers on issues such as; OH&S, superannuation and other workplace related issues and would rather employ a local person with local knowledge.

Nonetheless, it is a fact that workplace culture in offices have changed in the past 20 years and that it is now more open to people from other language backgrounds. Technical skills, on the other hand, are generally noted to be less of a barrier to employment and that it is mainly inability to create social interaction which is withholding both parties.

3. English for Professionals Course

It is in this context of an increasing number of skilled migrants entering Australia that a program tailored to meet the needs of overseas qualified professionals, aiming to increase their

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employment prospects has been set up. The course is designed for skilled migrants actively seeking employment in Australia. As the majority has migrated under the skilled migration scheme, an English level equivalent to IELTS band 6 is understood. For those who have migrated under different schemes the language requirement is 3 on the International Second Language Proficiency Rating (ISLPR) score. Applicants are required to have had their qualifications assessed by the OQU prior to application for the course. In addition they sit an entry reading and writing assessment and are interviewed to assess their suitability for the course. A common feature of the student cohort is that they all have qualified as a professional in their country and have worked in their profession so have overseas experience in their professional skill area. In addition they are all actively seeking work in their professional area.

The course caters for four streams - accountants, IT/Business professionals, teachers and engineers. As part of the course participants gain knowledge, skills and experience that will enhance their possibility of gaining future employment in Australia. The course consists of a fifteen week classroom based course followed by a five week practical placement in the appropriate industry. Currently the four streams function as independent groups with apart from the generic skills very little planned interaction across the streams.

The target group often finds difficulty in securing employment and several obstacles have been noted. According to research done an initial barrier is inexperience with employment application techniques and strategies. There also tends to be frustration due to lack of response from job applications. (OTTE, 2006) Additional barriers, noted anecdotally by industry involved with the group include lack of knowledge of the work environment, (legislative knowledge, OH&S) lack of ability to be socially cohesive with colleagues and lack of understanding of the importance of team work in the industry environment. Another issue of note was the previous experience in overseas companies, often very different from the Australian business culture and structure, did not necessarily equip the skilled professionals with the appropriate employability skills necessary for Australian industry. For example, those in management roles often had very different views of the roles and responsibilities associated with such leadership positions.

Finally overcoming prejudice and the sometimes negative attitude of employers has been noted in particular with the practical placement aspect of the course. Strategies to encourage the skilled migrant to positively present themselves so initially sceptical company managers realize the potential contribution the skilled migrant may make have been somewhat helpful.

Currently the course operates as classroom based instruction and a video has been developed during the occasional industry visit to exemplify students' performance before and after the course. An interview with industry is also conducted and shown in this video.

Bearing in mind that Australian industry is operating in a globalized environment and with further likely strong economy and mining resources boom, current migration numbers are aimed at addressing further skills shortage in Australia. This is being addressed by government by increasing skilled migrant intake. However, with

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already so many underutilized migrant workforce out there, there is a need for a system to be put into place whereby permanent arrivals can access 'an integration course into the Australian society and workplace' to help make this transition smooth. Most often than not, employers' feedback suggested it is not always the language barrier which hinders them from entry into the job market, it is more so the lack of understanding the Australian culture and workplace.

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