

Does it matter if you have an accent?

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Not getting the jobs you want after years of hard yakka?

Some say it is the elephant in the (board) room: are our accents quietly deciding who gets to ascend the corporate ladder?

Sydney speech pathologist Esther Bruhl of Speak More Clearly works with adults who want to reduce their native accents.

Bruhl has more than 35 years' experience, including running adult accent reduction training.

"A large percentage are motivated to do this because their accent is getting in the way of them acquiring a job, or it is affecting their ability to blend in at work, relationships at work, or ability to progress in their jobs," Bruhl says.

"I have worked with people from all over the world and they all have similar concerns.

"Many are highly skilled but are clearly being discriminated against because of their accents and on the other side, it is hard for bosses too, because the first point of contact often requires people to phone so immediately the boss has to make judgments – Can I understand you? Will this person fit into our work culture?"

According to Sarah Lobegeiger De Rodriguez, of Sarah Geiger Speech Pathology, 95 per cent of her accent modification clients do so because they think they're missing out on career opportunities.

Career coach Sally-Anne Blanshard of Nourish Coaching agrees it is often difficult for workers with accents to get face-to-face meetings with bosses because they are asked to call in the first instance.

"Nowadays employers are telephone screening applicants in order to gauge their communication skills at the outset," Blanshard says.

"People can be highly skilled but if they cannot explain their experience clearly it really can make an impact in the recruitment process."

Iranian-born Reza Ramjerdi moved to Australia in 2011 via the Australian Skilled Migrant program.

"It's run by the government to invite skilled professionals to fill up the positions. I came to earn more money."

In June, Ramjerdi finally got his first job as a civil project engineer after four years of knockbacks and speech training to soften his accent.

"I have had the worst experience of my life in Australia. I am a civil project engineer with more than nine years' experience but I kept encountering this accent issue," he says.

"In the interviews one of the criteria is accent as they are concerned about your workplace communications, which is not fair.

"Imagine if a company interviewed 10 people and all of them are from non-English countries, then all might have the same chance to get the job.

"But if one of the 10 has no accent that one has a 99 per cent chance of getting the job; that's my experience."

Others from non-English speaking backgrounds have had different experiences and are using their accents to gain a commercial edge.

Chiu Lau arrived in South Australia from Malaysia to study and work in 2003 and despite copping initial accent bias while job hunting and studying to become a psychologist, in 2012 she founded Possibilities Psychological Services and today has nine staff including two with Russian Jewish and Malaysian Chinese backgrounds.

Lau says this mix of accents has proven a boon for her Sutherland Shire business because it reflects her local multicultural market.

"It has definitely become our unique selling point," Lau says.

Since 2010 she's only had one client write a complaint because she couldn't understand her accent.

"I was anxious about that and took myself to some articulation training, which gave me my confidence back again ... but in five years my accent has really been a non-issue."

Singaporean Gabriel Wong also immigrated to Australia in 2003, hoping to remain in the PR industry.

Today he works as a contractor for companies including Espresso Communications and Pergamon Strategists.

When he first arrived in Sydney, he was conscious he did not have an Aussie accent. He took a course at the University of Sydney on how to neutralise his accent.

"Some bosses can see it as a negative and I may still sound different on the phone but over the years I've learnt to embrace this because it opens up conversations with clients and journalists.

"My advice to others is make a point of adopting Australian cultural speech habits like 'hey' because it relaxes people, don't be embarrassed about clarifying key points when talking to clients or colleagues and always follow up phone calls with emails as it helps people build trust."

Glasgow-born Gary Watson arrived in Australia on a sponsored work visa in 2011 after years of working for a £30 million recruitment company in the UK.

Today he is general manager of Reddin Partners based in Sydney.

He still has a Scottish accent but says he secured his first job Down Under via a phone interview and his accent has posed no problem in his working life. It has, in fact, become a talking point.

"Accent is not the core issue; the real issue is whether an employee can be clearly understood," Watson says with his boss's hat on.

"I have never found it a barrier, and I am very happy if I can employ people who can do the job and have the required skills.

"People can use it [their accent] as a crux or as an opportunity to standout."

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/small-business/trends/does-it-matter-if-you-have-an-accent-20150728-ghyft.html>