



# Bridging Communication Gaps

How Inclusive Communication Can Transform  
Multinational, Multicultural Teams

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# Introduction



In today's global business environment, organizations often consist of multinational, culturally diverse teams working in different countries and across multiple time zones. High-speed internet, video technology, and machine translation have made collaboration easier and faster. Yet, despite these advances, individuals from different countries and cultures can struggle to communicate effectively. Regional language nuances can slow comprehension, and nonverbal communication can be difficult to parse through a video screen.

Miscommunication and lack of cultural awareness can have serious financial and reputational consequences—from chronic inefficiency and unhappy clients to poor employee morale and high turnover. According to the [Swiss research firm Slator](#), large global companies experienced **annual losses between €7 to €10 million due to project delays, misunderstood contracts, and failed negotiations**. When communication is unclear, employees can also feel frustrated and disengaged, leading to lower productivity and [higher turnover rates](#).



€7-€10  
Million

Companies with diverse workforces have a competitive advantage, as they can apply a broad range of ideas, approaches, and insights to every challenge and task at hand. However, reaping the benefits of a diverse team requires mutual respect and clear communication. Every message must be delivered and received clearly, without ambiguity or distortion. To succeed in the global economy, organizations and the executives who lead them must ensure employees have the tools to understand their colleagues and to make themselves understood.



Across all industries, leaders of multinational teams must prioritize clear communication, especially when teams include culturally and linguistically diverse individuals. By exploring the origins and intricacies of common communication challenges and the trends that drive them, savvy leaders can identify and apply best practice solutions. Global business success depends on identifying and removing the barriers to communication.

# Macro Trends are Driving Workforce Diversity



In today's robust business environment, shipping routes and supply chains send goods around the world. Global commerce has brought greater prosperity to emerging markets, which have growing middle-class populations and increasing consumer demand. At the same time, technology has made it easier to manage global operations, access new markets, and engage customers worldwide. Organizations usually hire local employees when expanding into a region, allowing the company to better understand its new consumer base. An international workforce, therefore, allows the business to grow and prosper more efficiently.

Demographic trends are also contributing to increased workforce diversity. The combination of [lower birth rates](#) and [retiring baby boomers](#) is shrinking the native-born workforce in many countries, fueling demand for skilled workers to fill jobs. Migrants, [offshore employees](#), and [immigrants](#) are helping fill critical labor gaps, particularly in STEM-related fields.



In Germany, leaders recently passed [immigration reforms](#) to make it easier for skilled workers in healthcare and technology from outside of the European Union to work in the country.



The U.K. aims to address critical labor shortages and long-term societal needs with the [Immigrant Salary List](#), which makes it easier for employers in healthcare, science and engineering, construction, and others to hire skilled workers from abroad.



In the United States, the [American Hospital Association](#) reported that in 2022, there were 500,000 foreign-educated nurses working in the country, many from India and the Philippines.

Whether seeking to add expertise in a new market or fill critical labor needs, hiring from a global talent pool expands opportunities for today's organizations. But to gain the full advantage of a diverse workforce, leaders must address the communication challenges facing international teams.

# The Challenges Facing Global Teams

At a time when companies are recruiting talented workers from around the world, leaders must find ways to improve communication and collaboration. Different cultural norms and accent bias can make it difficult for global workers to perform their duties efficiently and advance their career. Overall team productivity and organizational competitiveness can suffer as well.

## Cultural Disconnects

Obviously, an inability to express themselves clearly can compromise a person's collaboration with colleagues and prevent them from doing their best work. But even when speakers share the same language, cultural differences can cause misunderstandings.

Depending on a person's cultural background, nonverbal cues can be crucial to communication and comprehension. In high-context cultures such as India, Japan, and China, much is communicated indirectly, through gestures, pauses, and facial expressions. In contrast, low-context cultures like Scandinavia, the United States, and Germany tend to express ideas explicitly.

For example, in India, saying "yes" or nodding the head up and down does not always indicate agreement. It can simply mean that the listener has heard what you are saying and understands your point of view. Saying "no" is generally avoided, as it's considered rude to refuse to give someone what they've asked for. Rather than responding directly with a "no," someone might remain silent or offer vague replies like, "I'll try," "I will see what I can do," or "Yes, but it might be difficult."

When working across nationalities, broad descriptions are helpful, but culture is nuanced and complex. It's crucial to keep an open mind, learn as much as possible about your colleagues' communication style, and adapt your behavior to fit the situation.



If the team leader clearly understands how people from varied backgrounds behave, he or she can turn differences into the team's greatest assets.

**Erin Meyer,**  
*author of "The Culture Map"*

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## Idioms, Expressions, Slang, and Jargon

Every language has its own colorful sayings; however, these linguistic shortcuts make comprehension more difficult for someone who isn't a native speaker of the home language. A Russian speaker might say, "when the crayfish whistles on the mountain" to express something is unlikely to happen, or a U.S. professional might use a sports idiom like "hit it out of the park" to say something was successful. Idioms and slang are also difficult for translation programs to decode, making it unnecessarily challenging for international teams who rely on machine translation to share information. Acronyms and industry jargon are also common but should be used sparingly and include an explanation or greater context.

Written communication is easier to monitor for these common expressions, which is why it is crucial to review any text thoroughly to ensure your message is clear. It can be helpful to use generative artificial intelligence (AI) like Chat GPT to highlight phrases that might not be clear and suggest inclusive alternatives. Once you become more aware of these phrases, it becomes easier to replace them in verbal speech as well.

## Accent Bias

Colleagues on a multinational team might be fluent in the same language but still struggle to collaborate because of accent bias. [Research has shown](#) that heavily accented speech makes it more difficult for listeners' brains to process information. Listeners may remember less accurately what the speaker said, make snap judgements, or doubt the speaker's credibility. When people hear an unfamiliar accent, there is also a tendency to "[fill in the blanks](#)" and make inaccurate assumptions.

[Accent bias](#) can also affect hiring decisions and promotion opportunities. Job candidates with accents have received lower job interview scores despite giving identical answers to candidates without accents. For executives who are non-native speakers, accent bias can impede their rise to senior leadership positions – and when the most qualified person isn't given the job, it's a loss for the individual, their team, and the entire organization.



Innovation thrives when different experiences and knowledge mix within diverse teams. However, accent bias can block the benefits of diversity if team members overlook or discount the contributions of their non-native colleagues.

Accents are a natural part of today's global, multicultural workplace, and inclusive communication helps everyone collaborate more easily.

**[Donald Thompson](#),**

*CEO and Founder of [The Diversity Movement](#),  
a Workplace Options company*



## Industry Specifics

The demand for skilled professionals has already surpassed the supply in several fields, including healthcare and information technology. These industries increasingly rely on immigrants to meet staffing needs, and organizations that provide culture-based and inclusive communication training will be better positioned to attract and retain top-tier talent.

### Healthcare

As the population in high-income countries gets older and lives longer, institutions located in those countries aren't able to train enough new workers to fill open roles. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there will likely be [a global shortfall of 10 million health workers](#) of all types by 2030. The increased demand for trained medical professionals has increased migration from lower-income countries like India, Pakistan, and the Philippines to the U.K., the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Australia. **In 2020, more than one in 10 of all nurses globally were working in a country other than that of their birth, according to the WHO.**



As healthcare teams become more multicultural, communication can become more challenging. Patients who don't share the clinician's culture might mistrust the healthcare provider and be hesitant to express health concerns, even when appropriate translation services are available. In addition, [one study](#) revealed that doctors with accents are often perceived as less competent than those without accented speech.

A [review of interventions](#) found that **pronunciation training** can directly improve overall communication quality, improvement in speech production, clarity, intelligibility, listening comprehension, and reduction of speech errors. At the same time, organizations should train the entire team to become more familiar with different styles of speech and communication. Improved listening skills and an awareness of accent bias can help everyone communicate better and collaborate more effectively.





## Information Technology (IT)

Globalization is fundamental to the business strategies of most IT firms and inherent to many of the products and services they produce. Google, Microsoft, Nvidia, and others employ skilled professionals from around the world. Smaller companies outsource their technical support or IT help desks to other countries. Even though these multinational, multicultural teams might understand the same language, cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and conflict.

For example, a team leader might come from a culture where every employee is encouraged to provide direct feedback, especially when the news affects deadlines or deliverables. However, if members of their team come from a culture where feedback tends to be more indirect, the leader may not realize the seriousness of an issue until a deadline is missed.

The technical jargon and specialized language of IT can also hamper effective communication between IT teams and executives without a technology background.

In one survey:



of top-tier managers admitted they don't understand the terms, technology, and arguments used by IT teams.



of non-IT managers reported miscommunications regarding IT security.

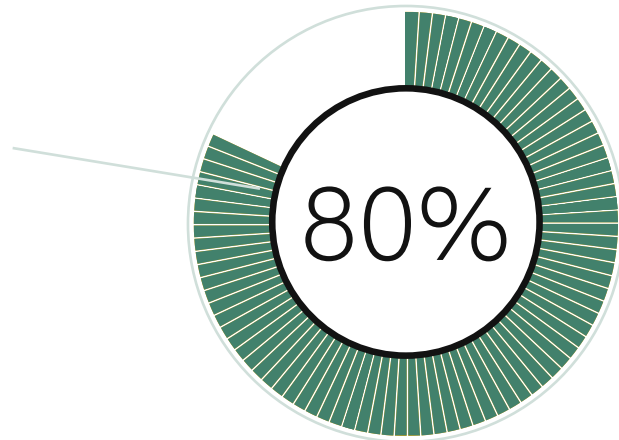
This often results in serious project delays (67%) and cybersecurity incidents (62%).

# Case Study:

## Inclusive Listening and Accent Reduction



In a 2024 [study by Pearson](#) of more than 5,000 international English speakers, **80% of respondents agreed that English proficiency skills are directly linked to earning potential.** Respondents from every country surveyed, including Japan, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Italy, and the United States, viewed strong English language skills as leading to as much as an 80% increase in salary.



English might be the language of global business, but only [a small percentage](#) of the world's population speak it as their first language. According to the Wharton School of Business, communication is [the second most important skill](#) needed to succeed in the C-suite. This poses a unique challenge for executives who speak English as an additional language. Adding to the burden of English learners, the language is [notoriously challenging](#) to master.

Good communication involves both listeners and speakers; everyone has a role to play. To avoid misunderstandings in multinational groups, organizations can provide inclusive listening training for listeners and accent reduction training for speakers. Singling out (or blaming) a single individual won't solve the problem and will likely create animosity when the goal is to bring a team together.

### Inclusive Listening

Inclusive listening training focuses on the act of giving attention to all the voices in a diverse workplace. This training helps 'tune the ear' to unfamiliar speech patterns, so listeners become better able to understand colleagues with regional accents. The most effective training is tailored to the characteristics of a specific industry and the geographic, linguistic, and cultural mix of an organization's workforce. Other crucial skills include listening with compassion and concentration, identifying and tuning out distractions, and taking responsibility for absorbing what the other person is saying.

Inclusive listening training helps to mitigate accent bias, giving everyone on the team a stronger sense of belonging. It demonstrates to the speaker that the listener values their perspective, leading to insightful discussions and greater collaboration. By helping to build better teammate connections and collaboration, inclusive listening training drives higher collaboration, greater productivity, and organizational success.



In a global economy, inclusive listening is a necessary skill set to leverage innovative ideas that come with a diverse talent base.

**Judy Ravin,**

*President and co-founder of [Accents International](#)*

Judy Ravin is a linguistics expert with 25 years of experience helping professionals from all language backgrounds communicate with greater clarity, confidence, and impact.

## Better Pronunciation

Accent reduction training helps people who speak English as an additional language improve their communication with colleagues, customers, and clients, reducing the risk of misunderstandings and errors. The training teaches individuals how to pronounce sounds in English (some that don't exist in other languages) so that listeners can more easily understand them.

It's important to note that accent reduction is not about eliminating accents or cultural identities. It is a method to help individuals express their ideas with clarity, confidence and ease while still maintaining their unique cultural identity.

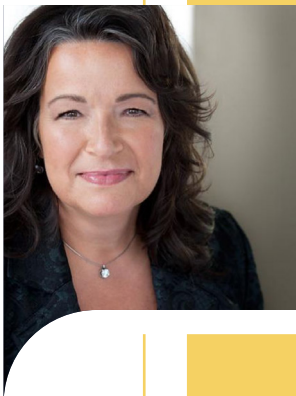
**“We’re trying to make people from all geographies, backgrounds, and ethnicities more effective communicators. Because everyone needs to be a more effective communicator to grow in their career and to build relationships with clients,”** says Ravin, who partners with The Diversity Movement to offer the [Inclusive Listening](#) and [Powerful Pronunciation](#) workshops to help teams minimize communication barriers.

## Proving the Return on Investment

Senior leaders can track and quantify the benefits of accent reduction and inclusive listening training in a variety of ways. Compare results for employees pre- and post-training or the following methods of measurement:

- ◆ Ask about clarity of communication in customer surveys.
- ◆ Make routine management reviews of recorded customer service calls.
- ◆ Encourage managers to evaluate and improve team member skills by providing speaking/listening opportunities and practice sessions. For example, ask team members to lead segments of internal meetings; create sessions to practice customer service calls; and make time for informal conversations.
- ◆ When problems arise or errors occur, ensure managers include communication issues in their post-event analysis.

Ravin has seen how companies can move forward and excel when communication between colleagues is enhanced. For example, [accent reduction](#) and [inclusive listening](#) classes for employees at General Motors helped improve understanding and teamwork.



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The training brought the previously ‘undiscussable’ issue of communication challenges into the discussion for both leaders and non-native English speakers and allowed people to realize pronunciation issues were often communication issues.

Employees who only spoke one language were able to examine their own responsibility and have an opportunity to understand accents of their non-native English-speaking clients and peers. The training leveled the playing field and built relationships where there was previously discomfort with the most basic communication.

**[Karen DeCuir-DiNicola,](#)**

*Former Director of Diversity at General Motors*

# Conclusion

Effective communication drives business results. However, global companies and enterprises with multinational workforces can struggle to overcome cultural differences and accent bias. Misunderstandings and mistakes can cause team members to lose confidence in each other, resulting in less collaboration and lower productivity. Companies might struggle to fill staffing gaps and overlook valuable candidates who bring professional expertise and leadership potential.

Multiple studies prove that effective communication increases the engagement, trust, productivity, and retention of an organization's workforce. Research by the McKinsey Global Institute shows that **well-connected teams are up to 25% more productive.** The same research highlights that **companies with effective communication strategies outperform their competitors by 3.5 times.**

25%

3.5x

When employees can clearly and readily communicate, they are able to collaborate effectively, sharing the full value of their knowledge and skills. They are stronger public speakers and more compelling leaders. Because they can more easily connect with their colleagues, their relationships improve. They feel more included and have a greater sense of belonging. The result is higher engagement, better retention, and higher-quality outcomes for the organization.

Leaders of global companies know that talent is widely spread in every part of the world. Having the capacity to foster their employees' communication skills allows organizations to hire the best talent available, retain them over time, and accelerate the pace at which they grow into leadership roles.



Everyone deserves to be heard. When we can understand each other, it creates a better working environment for everyone—which leads to a more productive workforce overall. **Miscommunication and misunderstandings don't have to be a barrier to success. In today's global economy, every employee should have the tools to communicate effectively across cultures and nationalities.**

# Inclusive Communication

Empowering Global Leaders to Communicate with Impact



Thriving in today's global marketplace means building world-class teams that communicate clearly and work well together. When team members are from different cultures, language barriers can slow down progress and block productivity.

While English is often considered the common language of business, it is not everyone's first language. This dynamic can present unique challenges: people who speak English as an additional language may be at a disadvantage. This not only creates frustration but also reduces team cohesion and performance. Ineffective communication costs organizations up to 18% of annual salaries in lost productivity and limits opportunities to collaborate and innovate.

## Inclusive Communication Outcomes

After completing Inclusive Communication workshops your organization will experience:

- Improved clarity and confidence in communication across global teams.
- Increased productivity and collaboration through better mutual understanding.
- A more inclusive work environment where every voice is valued and understood.

## Overcoming Language Barriers to Build Deeper Connections and Collaboration

Delivered in partnership with linguistics expert and Accents International founder Judy Ravin, we developed Inclusive Communication workshops to help teams minimize communication barriers. Inclusive Communication includes two immersive workshops:

- **Inclusive Listening:** Enables leaders and team members to understand accents better so they can be more effective in a global business environment.
- **Powerful Pronunciation®:** Designed for non-native English speakers to improve pronunciation and clarity without losing their cultural identity.

Our workshops are customizable to meet the unique needs of your organization and can be delivered virtually or in-person.

## Our Unique Approach and Methodology



**Focus on Both Speaker and Listener** - Our approach emphasizes mutual understanding so that native and non-native speakers learn to adapt and communicate more clearly.



**Linguistic Expertise** - Every instructor is a certified linguist with extensive experience in helping global teams communicate more effectively.



**Preserving Cultural Identity** - We enable participants to speak with confidence while preserving the unique aspects of their cultural heritage.



**Client Validation** - We've partnered with global organizations like AbbVie, Boston Scientific, JPMorganChase, Mayo Clinic, NATO and Nestle Purina, enabling their teams to enhance working relationships and increase productivity.

## Start Your Journey Toward Inclusive Communication

Whether you're looking to enhance clarity in communication, reduce accent bias, or build a more inclusive culture, our programs are designed to help you succeed in today's global business environment.

Reach out to [info@thediversitymovement.com](mailto:info@thediversitymovement.com) to get started.

## About The Diversity Movement

The Diversity Movement (TDM), a Workplace Options company, helps organizations drive growth through culture-led initiatives that lead to enhanced well-being, belonging, and trust. By helping leaders and their teams be more productive, collaborative, and innovative, TDM enables organizations to deepen employee engagement and deliver scalable business impact. Our integrated approach empowers leaders to create inclusive culture through the application of data-informed insight, award-winning content, technology, and DEI expertise. The result? Your organization benefits from better business outcomes delivered by high-performing, resilient teams. Learn more at [thediversitymovement.com](https://thediversitymovement.com).