

## The fine art of Canadian conversation

More firms are offering on-site language classes for immigrant staff

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When Malcolm Oliver moved his family to Canada from Bombay last fall, he knew landing work would be tough.

But he didn't count on finding a culturally diverse workplace full of other newcomers also struggling to adjust to new jobs and lives.

"I thought I'd be working with Canadians but I was surprised," says Mr. Oliver, 46, a production technician for Toronto-based Dalton Chemical Laboratories. About 70 of its 100 employees are newcomers to Canada.

Working with other cultures and with people for whom English is a second language is a fact of life in this country. The latest census figures indicate that immigrants account for almost one-fifth of the work force. Recent immigrants -- those arriving in the past 10 years -- represent almost 70 per cent of labour force growth.

Yet this influx of people has led to an array of communication hurdles on the job, and workplace experts say organizations with strategies and programs that address these issues are best equipped to deal with the evolving face of the Canadian work force.

Dalton, a pharmaceutical and biotech research company, is a prime example. The company offers on-site classes, on company time, in English as a second language, and accommodates employees' various religious needs and holiday requests. Dalton also has multicultural potluck lunches to encourage cultural

curiosity and to celebrate holidays such as the Chinese New Year or Indian festivals. Thirty cultures are represented by its work force.

Paying for immigrants to learn proper tonality and the nuances of English improves work morale and gives newcomers a chance to bond with other employees in a positive learning environment, says Peter Pekos, Dalton's president and chief executive officer. Even though they cost "quite a lot," Mr. Pekos says the on-site ESL classes are a worthwhile investment because building a cohesive work team is an organizational plus.

"We're always getting more in return because as a business, we need strong people who work together to meet the needs of the workplace," he says. "If we can provide the tools with which to improve their skills, it's a virtuous cycle."

About 30 per cent of Dalton's employees have participated in the language classes to brush up on pronunciation and Canadian colloquialisms. The classes are so popular that Mr. Pekos is revamping them to teach soft skills such as social etiquette as well.

Rensia Melles, director of clinical products and global services for FGI, a large Toronto-based employee assistance provider, says companies need more emphasis on sensitivity training and cross-cultural effectiveness -- both within Canada and abroad.

She says companies seeking specific expertise in manufacturing, engineering and high tech, for example, will often go abroad and hire a whole fleet of people with that knowledge. Often, these immigrants come to Canada unfamiliar with the Canadian workplace, and their Canadian co-workers are no better prepared for the cultural differences that may arise.

Culture can account for misunderstood actions and miscommunication, she explains, citing the case of a Japanese man who landed a job at an international manufacturing company in Canada.

He would often sit too close to female co-workers, and fail to look them in the eye while talking to them, not realizing that they regarded his behaviour suspiciously. No one had briefed him on how to interact with co-workers here, nor were the workers taught anything about Japanese ways of communicating.

The problem came to a head when, during a conversation with a female superior, the man pointed his index finger at her and pulled his thumb like a trigger, as if to say "gotcha." The woman found the gesture threatening, and complained to the occupational health nurse, who thought the man needed a mental health assessment.

Ms. Melles was called in and immediately arranged for a Japanese therapist to meet the new employee; the therapist discerned that the man was not dangerous and explained the context of his actions to his colleagues. It turns out the man was using a gesture common in Japan, that signified a positive understanding between two people. The employee learned some common Canadian interactions and his co-workers, in turn, became less suspicious and more helpful.

Some companies are turning to cross-cultural specialists, such as Ottawa-based Malkam Consultants Inc., to ease the transition for newcomers and equip them with the language skills necessary to their profession.

Malkam's "language-for-work" training sessions help people who have technical expertise sell their ideas in the competitive Canadian business climate and speak up in meetings. Clients have included Nortel Networks Corp., PricewaterhouseCoopers and the federal government.

Quite often, well-educated professionals from countries such as India and China possess excellent reading and writing skills but lack familiarity with spoken Canadian English, says Laraine Kaminsky, Malkam's president and founder.

What they need is training not in English as second language, but rather English as a second dialect, she says. They learn this by practising "natural communication" in such situations as boardroom meetings and corporate social

functions. This also introduces them to industry-specific terminology and North American idioms.

Malkam acculturation and orientation sessions last one to three days, and are run by moderators who were born in the same country as the foreign recruits attending the session, but who have lived in Canada for 10 or more years.

A smattering of knowledge about sports also helps newcomers, Ms. Kaminsky half-jokes, noting that it's common at a business meeting to hear talk of someone being "out in left field" or an idea that "hit a home run." A person with perfect English but no knowledge of baseball would be lost, she says.