

# How To Boost Performance In High-Tech Talent



Teresa McGill, ACCES' Workplace Communication Advantage

*Ongoing development of employees' English communication and cultural competence maximizes leadership and innovation potential, particularly in the culturally diverse high-tech sector. However, communication development is often given last priority, and this can damage productivity if left unchecked.*

*Below are three common communication issues along with development solutions that proved effective.*

## FIREWORKS IN THE MEETING ROOM

**ISSUE:** Recently promoted to technical project manager in a financial institution, Yuri\* was not achieving leadership results. Team members resisted or ignored his commands, jeopardizing projects. The direct, table-pounding authoritarian leadership style Yuri had developed did not translate well in a Canadian workplace and his booming voice came across as too intense. Nonetheless, Yuri, with his two PhDs and almost 20 years of experience, was considered indispensable to top management.

**SOLUTION:** A cross-cultural communication expert brought clarity to this complicated team dynamic. With coaching, Yuri learned "You're wrong" is more graciously expressed as "Let's look at that from another perspective." He learned to adopt more diplomatic tactics and softer speech patterns when communicating in the office. Without the interpersonal drama, team members co-operated with each other and this leadership-track employee became a top performer.

## THE LONG AND WINDING E-MAIL

**ISSUE:** Kin Fun, a senior software developer, was frustrated with the slow responses to her email messages. Her technical insights and mission-critical questions were often ignored for weeks. Her performance appraisals pointed to project delays caused by written communication challenges.

She front-end loaded her email messages with copious facts to justify her conclusions, which were buried in the middle. She also had English-language issues (she interchanged pronouns and confused past and present tense), which left readers unclear about the timing and staffing of projects.

**SOLUTION:** With language coaching, Kin Fun learned to position a clear purpose statement at the beginning of her written messages so readers could grasp her main points at a glance. She also practised and improved her grammar and punctuation skills. In a relatively short time, these practical adjustments increased the readability of her emails and helped keep projects smoothly.

## OFF-TARGET SOLUTIONS

**ISSUE:** A gifted engineer with 25 years of international experience, Mohsen's first project with a Canadian aerospace firm failed to satisfy the customer. While the solution was technically brilliant, the client felt it didn't meet actual business needs. The required fixes doubled both costs and timelines.

In-depth probing revealed Mohsen felt it was too time-consuming to interact with the client in his second language – English – so he had minimized direct communication with all involved. When concerns were raised, he compensated by immersing his team more deeply into a misguided technical solution rather than meeting with the client to discuss crucial issues.

**SOLUTION:** Mohsen's employer enrolled him in a communication course tailored to technical professionals who speak English as a second language. Since learning how to effectively clarify information and probe for details in English, he can maintain checks and balances on his projects and clients have renewed their contracts as a result.

\* Names have been changed.

Adapted from HR Professional – June/July 2009