

MAKING HIRING AND ONBOARDING LANGUAGE INCLUSIVE

Traditional hiring and onboarding practices may not consider the diversity of language and cultural backgrounds in today's labour market. As a result, some processes may create unintentional language and communication barriers that disadvantage newcomers. And, in the case of onboarding programs, there may be missed opportunities to support newcomer employees in overcoming language and communication challenges so they can thrive in the workplace.

HERE ARE A FEW EXAMPLES OF CHALLENGES NEWCOMERS MAY EXPERIENCE.

- 1 Unfamiliar jargon and acronyms in job postings may cause newcomers to hesitate to apply for positions they are otherwise qualified for.
- 2 Some common interview questions can be difficult for candidates to decode because of subtle cultural differences in the interpretations of particular words.
- 3 Some newcomers may experience language barriers during the onboarding process and not know who to turn to for support and guidance.

Employers can reduce barriers like these by updating their processes. This guide identifies steps employers can take to make job descriptions, interviews and onboarding processes more “language inclusive.” In this context, being “language inclusive” means that processes are developed in a way that accounts for diversity in official language proficiency, accents, communication styles, and cultural nuances within language.

For more information on the best practices below, please visit the related resource links.

INCLUSIVE JOB POSTINGS

Updating job postings with a language-diverse audience in mind can reduce barriers for newcomers and expand the talent pool that employers have access to.



Start by making job posting content clear and culturally neutral. Try to avoid jargon (e.g. split shift, swing shift) and acronyms (e.g. BAU for “business as usual”, DOE for “depends on experience”) that newcomers may be unfamiliar with or provide explanations of these terms. Also, limit the use of metaphors because they could be interpreted literally. For example, the sentence, “We are looking for candidates who can turn lemons into lemonade,” may be confusing for some newcomers.

Employers can use TRIEC’s [Immigrant-Inclusive Job Posting Checklist](#) to review and update existing postings. Additional tips can be found in British Columbia’s [The WorkBC Employer’s Tool Kit](#).

Employers can also request feedback from newcomer staff to help determine if job posting language is easy to understand and culturally neutral. These staff can contribute their perspectives based on their lived experience, supplementing the recommendations from employer resources.

Next, be specific about required communication skills. Many job postings seek candidates who can communicate effectively, but this requirement may be interpreted differently by different candidates. It helps to give examples of the communication skills involved in the role (e.g. answering calls, negotiating with vendors, making presentations, writing reports, etc.), so jobseekers can determine if they meet the requirements. Employment and Social Development Canada’s [Occupational and Skills Information System \(OaSIS\)](#) contains multiple competency descriptors on communication and interpersonal skills to help you get started.

Lastly, for positions that require some level of bilingualism in English and French, clearly specify the levels of proficiency needed in each language. For example, candidates may need excellent listening, speaking, and writing skills in English and good listening and speaking skills in French to perform a particular role. Also, if proficiency in a second official language is considered an asset rather than a requirement, that should be clearly communicated. This level of detail will allow jobseekers to make better judgments about whether they possess the necessary language skills to apply for a position.

INCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

Employers can create interview processes that are inclusive for newcomer candidates with diverse language and cultural backgrounds by implementing five key strategies.



- 1 **Keep interview questions simple, specific, and culturally neutral.** Review interview questions and consider how they may be interpreted by candidates with diverse language and cultural backgrounds. You can also consult with existing newcomer staff to gather their feedback.

For ideas about how to update the phrasing of common interview questions, check out Hire Immigrants Ottawa's [Rephrasing Interview Questions - For HR Professionals and Employers](#) resource.

- 2 **Provide all candidates with a copy of the interview questions prior to the meeting.** This strategy is especially useful for newcomers who may feel added anxiety about expressing themselves in their non-native language or in a new cultural setting.
- 3 **Provide hiring managers with training on cross-cultural differences to mitigate unconscious bias in the assessment process.** Ottawa-based employers can contact Hire Immigrants Ottawa to learn about their free [Cross-Cultural Competency Training Program](#) which includes a session on "Culturally Competent Interviewing Skills."

Also, the ImmigrantsWork Coalition's Playbook: Strategies for Immigrant Inclusion in Canadian Workplaces outlines useful points to help hiring managers reflect on potential biases during the interview process.

- 4 **Create diverse hiring panels.** Having different perspectives can lead to more balanced evaluations of candidates. It may also further mitigate unconscious bias related to language and cultural differences.
- 5 **Rate answers based on competencies, rather than language, whenever possible.** Candidates may make grammatical errors or speak with accents. Please be mindful that English or French may be a second or third language for many newcomers, and accents do not indicate a lack of language proficiency.

INCLUSIVE ONBOARDING

Employers can help newcomers more effectively integrate into the workplace by exploring innovative onboarding practices and offering additional language support.



Consider onboarding newcomers in groups. Hiring a cohort of newcomers allows employers to increase the efficiency of the onboarding process, while assisting newcomers with developing peer support networks that can help them overcome integration challenges.

In one interesting case, an employer chose to hire newcomers from the same language background as a group. This allowed the employer to waive English proficiency requirements, while ensuring the team would be able to communicate effectively in situations where safety risks were present. This case is highlighted in [Talent to Win](#), a paper by Deloitte and the Institute of Canadian Citizenship.

Create a buddy system. Pair new hires with colleagues who speak the newcomer's native language to facilitate smoother integration. If a same-language coworker is not available, look for an experienced employee who will be open to answering the new hire's questions.

A buddy can be assigned for the new employee's first 2-3 months in the organization. Buddies can teach new hires organization-specific jargon and answer questions about workplace procedures. They can also help the new hire get acclimated to workplace culture.

This type of program can benefit all employees, but it is especially helpful for newcomers who are experiencing communication barriers. More information about buddy systems can be found in Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia's [Onboarding Newcomers](#) toolkit.

Refer interested newcomers to local language training resources. During onboarding, ask newcomers if their developmental goals include building their official language skills. Newcomers may be eligible for subsidized English and/or French language training, but they may not know how to connect with these resources. Ottawa-based employers can refer interested newcomers to the [YMCA's Language Assessment and Referral Centre](#) for more information.

Make professional development funding available for language training and discuss this benefit during onboarding. Companies that offer professional development allowances can support language skill development by allowing staff the option to have a portion of their individual language training costs paid. This is helpful for newcomers who may not be able to access subsidized language classes.

If there is a group of staff with similar language levels, consider using professional development funding to offer in-house language training.

Make accommodations to support participation in language training. If new employees are interested in taking language courses that overlap with their work schedules, explore opportunities to make accommodations. Allowing flexible work schedules or paid time to attend language training can help employees meet their work responsibilities while building language skills to help them succeed in their roles.

Schedule check-ins. Follow-up with newcomers to ask for feedback on the onboarding process and determine if they need additional support. These meetings create space for better two-way communication and help organizations continually monitor the effectiveness of their onboarding programs.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This guide provides strategies to help employers update their hiring and onboarding processes to make them more inclusive for candidates with diverse language and cultural backgrounds. Updating these processes will help employers expand their talent pools and remove unintentional barriers in the assessment process. Employers can also incorporate inclusive onboarding strategies to help improve the way they integrate and support new employees from diverse backgrounds.

Employers are encouraged to review the additional resource links included throughout this guide to explore the recommendations further. When possible, employers should also gather feedback from newcomer staff and seek external support from local organizations, like [World Skills Employment Centre](#) and [Hire Immigrants Ottawa](#).