

How Business Communication Classes Can Unleash the Talent of Your Culturally Diverse Workforce

Key Questions and Answers

Participants*:

- Teresa McGill, President, Gandy Associates (*English communication training providers*)
 - Janet Beecham, Resource Manager, Human Resources & Development, Teranet Inc. and
 - Deborah Bugeja, Manager, Training and Employee Development, Toromont CAT
- * company information listed at the end of the document.*

Background Questions on Language Classes for Gandy (Teresa)

Q: We often hear that language is a barrier for employers who want to hire skilled immigrants or they've hired skilled immigrants and then there are language challenges. Can you give us an overview of the types of challenges employers bring to Gandy?

Our clients are looking for ways to assist highly-valued employees with excellent technical skills. These employees often have a fairly good command of English but may lack the more nuanced communication skills needed for:

- Interacting in teams
- Communicating in a leadership role
- Customer contact

If you think about the soft skills training that any employee needs, the same is true for skilled immigrants. They help with:

- Communicating in meetings
- Giving clear and well-organized presentations
- Negotiating solutions in a project team
- Communicating by email internally and sometimes externally
- Writing informal and formal reports

Our clients are finding that generic soft skills training is not the best match for these employees since extra support is needed for areas related to language and culture:

Core language skills:

- Pronunciation
- Grammar
- Word choice

Higher level communication skills:

- Strategic communication (persuasion, rapport building, active listening, etc.)
- Understanding Canadian business culture (level of formality, directness, etc.)
 - Sometimes in team meetings, newcomers don't want/know how to "jump in" to team/group discussions

Q: When a prospective client approaches Gandy about language challenges of their skilled immigrant employees, how do you evaluate their needs?

- Start by gathering information on needs from HR and/or departmental heads/managers (any stakeholders)

- Follow up by interviewing each candidate and possibly collecting writing samples for diagnostic analysis by phone
 - determine job-related tasks
 - listen to communication style of participants (pronunciation, grammar)
 - taking notes over the phone less intimidating

Q: What options are there for program delivery?

- Length of time depends on client's preferences, but typically each course involves two hours once a week for 10-15 weeks
 - Better to space out; allow for practice time
- Usually on site
- Accommodate clients' scheduling preferences and find most opt for training during work hours

Q: How much time does the employer/staff contact usually need to invest to help you with the assessment and organizing classes? i.e. What's the time commitment?

- Variation in how involved client wants to be. In general, we try to make it as straightforward for the client as possible.
- For the assessment, the client's main role is to provide us with a list of names and permission to contact each person by telephone. Gandy takes it from there and reports back to the client in a week or two with our findings and recommendations.
- For organizing classes, the client provides us with the basic parameters regarding logistics – placement and scheduling restrictions – and then typically leaves it to us to work with the participants to establish the most appropriate timeslots and course selection. In a few cases, the client pre-selects the scheduling and placement and we are happy to accommodate that process as well.

Questions of and Answers from Teranet and Toromont CAT

Q: What were your company's language needs and which solution(s) was proposed?

Teranet:

- Over the past 10 years we've run a full spectrum of programs from technical/advisory training to leadership classes. The programs are an integral part of staff professional development.

Toromont CAT:

- We had a few training needs:
 - Some procedural, such as customer relations and
 - Some more high level, such as sales
- These needs are often more accurate when we can't find talent in Canada and have to recruit from abroad.

Q: What format did classes follow?

Teranet:

- Twice a year, two hours weekly for 10 weeks; now four courses/year, still two hours, but now 20 week period. We've found this format more successful with increased continuous learning.
- Approximately 10 participants/class
- Gandy also offers make-up classes if people can't make sessions

Toromont CAT:

- Classes usually start later in the day since employees have tight schedules (drop off and pick up kids)
- They run for 15 weeks, 1.5 hours

Q: What was the Feedback from participants?

Teranet:

- Built into performance reviews (quarterly objectives; annual review)
- Helps employee retention (90%)
- Enhanced promotion opportunities

Toromont:

- From an employee standpoint, when I follow up (both during and after), they are thrilled. This is such a motivated talent pool. We're investing in them and they see that. Participants are recorded initially and again at the end and there's a huge difference from first day to last day at graduation.
- Participants get to know each other well. Becomes a network for them in a larger organization.

From colleagues/ managers?

Teranet:

- Buy-in from senior management is ongoing and positive. They quickly identify high-performing individuals and their need for language upgrades.
 - Not all people learn the same way, so sometimes one-on-one sessions depending.
- Classes are tied to diversity initiatives/goals.
- Participants have learned respect for each others' backgrounds and they get to know each other a lot more. Brought on more cultural awareness overall.

Toromont:

- The classes are a great indication of ROI. I've been getting phone calls from managers asking when we're running this again!

Have you/would you run them again?

Teranet:

- We've been running the programs over the past 10 years.

Toromont CAT:

- We're rolling out a new program.

Q: How were or can classes be promoted? i.e. How did your company select language class participants?

Gandy:

- Each organization has a different way of promoting.
- One feature is really important: allow some degree of self-identification. Manager can still be the one to bring it up in employee review, but makes a huge difference if the participant ultimately decides to attend.
- Often client sends out mass invitation, which we've found to work since client often worries about offending. Response usually high.
- Also top-down and allow some degree of input from participants as well.

Teranet:

- No issue getting participants.
- Huge retention incentive.
- Key selling feature when doing hiring interviews.

- Managers get mid-term results and final results.

Toromont CAT:

- Very flat organization structure, so easy to get buy-in.
- Have a process for identifying skill training needs.
- Yes, good to get buy-in from managers.
- Look for further learning opportunities once they see results.

Q: What advice would you give to other companies on the line that think their staff could really benefit?

Teranet:

- Always need senior management buy-in
- Managers should always be aware of classes being taken by their reports;
- Get help from Gandy to get internal buy-in, build internal business case

Toromont:

- Selling the business case is essential
- With language classes we are able to better tap into this talent pool

Participant Questions

Q: We have immigrants from E. Europe some from Asia. Would you separate different cultures? Or group them together?

Gandy:

- We're often asked this question. We don't separate along cultural lines, especially since there are so many benefits to mixing cultures We do it more based on skill level,. Now, when our client looks in the cafeteria, employees aren't as segregated! The classes help communication, problem-solving, etc.
- There are so many important insights that come out of these classes. Maybe there is an employee concerned with saving face with another who has a more direct communication style. If these people never have the opportunity to compare, then they lose that chance for insight. Groups of 10 people mimic teams, so they're a good size.

Q2: We're a smaller company and are just starting to subsize training for staff members, so we don't have big budgets and are supporting employees' first choices. I'm not sure if I can get an additional budget if people don't choose language training as their first choice. How do you suggest I work around that?

Gandy:

- We offer a Language for Leadership course designed for managers. That could serve two training purposes: both leadership and soft skills. It's more of a compromise.

But, have you encountered those delicate conversations where people haven't self-identified?

Gandy: Yes. I have found when people reach a certain level they feel they're no longer candidates for ESL. That's when you could try and suggest a course that has a more generic name.

The other thing with technically-skilled people is that they often aren't interested in developing soft skills. But if you offer a structured, methodical course, that will appeal more to their personalities.

Q3: Has there ever been a surprising result from these classes?

Gandy:

- We have designed a course for ESL speakers and were then very surprised that the client asked for same course for ALL employees. Cross over of ESL skills training into cultural/soft skills training

Toromont CAT:

- Had placed participants in training and weren't as sold on the classes (speaking skills), but the writing skills section had much more appeal.

Bios and Company Background:

Teresa McGill, president, Gandy Associates

Provides English communication training.

Teresa McGill, is a graduate of the University of Toronto where she studied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). Teresa has enjoyed more than 20 years experience in the language and communication training field and has led Gandy Associates since 1994, with a drive for relevant, results-focused training.

<http://gandy.ca/index.php>

Janet Beecham, Resource Manager, Human Resources & Development, Teranet Inc.

Provides e-commerce solutions for business-to-government and business-to-business markets; approximately 700 employees.

For the past eight years, Janet Beecham, Resource Manager for Teranet Inc. has been responsible for the IT recruiting and HR support for the Information Services group. Prior to joining Teranet, Janet was a recruiter for an IT consulting company and formerly an executive assistant to the president of a large information technology company.

<http://www.teranet.ca/>

Deborah Bugeja, Manager, Training and Employee Development, Toromont CAT

Toromont CAT is a Caterpillar dealer in Ontario, Manitoba, Nunavut, Newfoundland and Eastern Labrador, supplying new and good quality used equipment; approximately 1,700 employees.

Deborah Bugeja is the Talent Manager, Recruitment & Development, Toromont CAT. She is a graduate of Seneca College Human Resource studies with over 15 years experience in adult learning and development, focusing on leadership training.

<http://www.toromontcat.com/>