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Communicating with migrants

Guide for staff in job centres and public services



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Communicating with migrants

Guide for managers and customer-facing staff working in job centres and public services

Strategies and practical tips to help staff communicate effectively with migrants

Communication is key to the effective delivery of public services, but it can be challenging for many reasons:

- Clients may come to the service with little understanding of how it works – and/or unrealistic expectations.
- Clients may be stressed – particularly where service decisions will have a significant impact on the client's life.
- Staff may be under pressure from their workloads, with limited time to explain complicated issues.
- The language of the service itself – with its technical terms, its jargon and its formality – may seem difficult, perhaps intimidating, even to clients with good everyday English.

Where clients have limited spoken and/or written skills in English and different cultural perspectives, these challenges are all intensified.

Fortunately, there are concrete things you can do to address these challenges.

This brochure offers:

- strategies and practical tips for managers to help staff support clients with limited language skills;
- help for all staff to reflect on communication styles used in today's increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse working context.

Tips for managers

Ways to support your staff and clients include...



Use of translation services for clients who do not know English

Appropriate use of translation can enhance the quality of your services and minimise friction between staff and clients.

- Find out and document which other language(s) your staff know. Consider how best to make this hidden resource visible, so staff can draw on the language skills of their colleagues to support clients, as and when the need arises, without additional burden.
- Cooperate with other social services that already offer translation services.
- Identify people in your community willing to act as translators on a voluntary basis. Migrant support organisations may be able to help you. It might also be worth contacting your local university.

- Note that digital technology and the internet mean that translators can support staff and clients remotely, via e.g. (smart) phone and video conferencing.
- Create checklists for staff to record which documents are most frequently requested in other languages and what these other languages are.
- Consider translating frequently used forms into other languages to create bi-/multilingual forms. You may find other services already have examples they will share with you.
- Encourage staff to use the many digital translation tools now available to support communication e.g. automatic translation via smart phones, tablets and the internet.



Easy-to-use versions of key documents and forms formulated in clear, simple, user-friendly language

- Contact similar services to find out if they have already produced their own easy-to-use documents and liaise to share products, know-how, and experience.
- Support your staff to create forms in easy and understandable language. Staff know exactly what issues arise for clients around documentation – and have experience trying to resolve those issues. Give them a project to pool that expertise and create user-friendly versions of problematic documentation.



Create digital resources for staff and clients and make these available through your website

- These resources might include not only multilingual documentation, but also guidance. Consider in particular visual aids (including photos of service-related objects, short videos, maps, graphics, flow charts to explain procedures etc.). Often a picture makes things clear in ways that words may not. Offer staff training on e.g. simplified language use, digital technologies and intercultural communication.
- Encourage staff to use digital technology and resources.
- Find out if there is training available on improving communication with a growing culturally and linguistically diverse clientele. If so, make sure such training is available for your staff.
- Most important of all, support your staff by allowing them enough time and space for client-centred communication.





Make your interaction with your clients as stress-free as possible

The less stressed your clients are, the more they are likely to understand. The more your clients understand, the more communication is likely to be successful. Simple ways to help your clients to relax include: smiling at the clients, using a friendly tone of voice, listening to them carefully, not rushing them and checking what they have understood.



Take a moment to get to know your clients

Just a moment of small talk when you begin, will help you tune in to your clients' way of speaking – and give them a chance to tune in to yours. It will give you a chance to reassure them if they seem nervous or afraid. It will also help you to judge their level of English.

Why might a client be nervous or afraid? Some clients may have had bad, even traumatic, experiences at the hands of authorities in other countries. Just the memory of those experiences may make them anxious.



Assess your clients' level of English to help you speak in a way they can understand

Easy ways to do this include:

Asking simple questions that require more than a “yes/no” answer – e.g. who, what, when, where, how questions. How fluently does the client respond? Useful things to ask about might include the individual client's education and work experience in the country of origin.

Ask your clients how long they have been learning English and what they think of their own skills in English.

Remember: how well clients understand the service's processes and procedures will also affect communication – it's not just about language skills!

Tips for customer-facing staff



Explain what's about to happen

Help your clients to understand the interaction you are about to have with them by explaining (in simple, straightforward language) what the purpose of the interaction is, how long it will take, what you are going to do (e.g. 'First I will ask you for information about yourself then I will explain our service to you. '), and what they will have to do (e.g. 'Then you can tell me what help you need. '). Check if they have understood. If not, explain again. Ask them if they have any questions about what is about to happen.



Make yourself as easy to understand as possible

That means choosing simple, standard, correct language. Use short, easy-to-understand sentences. Be as clear and concrete as possible (e.g. 'Write your name and address in this box. Then sign your name at the bottom of the page, here. '). Things that help include:

- Thinking for a moment about what you want the client to understand before you speak.
- Emphasising the meaning of what you say (the way news readers do on TV and radio).
- Breaking things down into easy steps (e.g. step-by-step explanations, 'First... Next... Then... ').
- Sticking to one idea, question or piece of information per sentence.



Speak at a pace to suit your clients, better too slow than too fast

Your clients need time first to understand the words you say then to process what you mean and then to formulate answers. If you worry that you are speaking too slowly, just ask them if they would like you to speak more quickly.

- Try to avoid long, convoluted sentences; acronyms, abbreviations and initials; abstract terms; idiomatic expressions; slang; words that have multiple meanings and complicated jargon and technical language.
- Bear in mind what other language(s) your clients speak and their level of education. That may affect whether they understand international words (often based on English) and scientific terms (often based on Latin or Greek, e.g. 'airport', 'pneumonia').
- If you need to use a technical word, write it down, then explain what it means in plain language.



Check that your clients understand you

Say, 'I want to be sure that I have explained everything in a clear way. Can you tell me what you have understood?'



Make sure that you understand your clients

Say, 'I want to be sure that I understand you. This is what I think you are saying: "...". If you have real difficulty understanding what your clients say, ask them to repeat it, or to say it in different words, or to write it down.'



Do you have another language in common?

Use it! If you and your client both speak e.g. French, or Spanish, or Russian, or Urdu, use that language to help you communicate.



Use writing

If your clients have good literacy, you may find it helps to write things down, including key words, and to use these as checklists.

Tips to help you deal with cultural differences

Show respect for other cultures.

Monitor your own reactions and watch out for false assumptions and prejudice.

When something happens that you don't expect, ask yourself what you were expecting and why.

Don't leap to conclusions about your client's behaviour – be open to other interpretations.

Accept and acknowledge different communication styles.

You may find it helps to ask people from other cultures about the differences they have noticed between the country where they live now and their home country or other countries. Be prepared for some criticism!

Service language

The language of the service is something you have learnt in your training, you work with every day and understand well. Clients however, may find it hard to understand. You can help by explaining things in plain, everyday language.



Use pictures and images

Photos, illustrations, diagrams, graphs, websites, etc. all help you to get across your meaning. Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words!



Use digital technologies / new media like online-dictionaries or translators. (They are getting better all the time.)

A good tip to check whether the translation is right or not is to translate the translation back into the original language. If the back-translation makes sense, the target-translation is probably OK too. But do check that the client has an accurate understanding.



Written communication – keep it short and simple!

That means:

- Short sentences and paragraphs, with plenty of white space between the paragraphs.
- One idea, question or piece of information per sentence.
- Put the most important issue first.
- Use bullets point and sub-headings.
- Use easy-to-read fonts (e.g. Arial, Verdana) in a size that is easy to read (e.g. 12 point).
- Keep things simple on the page (e.g. no more than three font sizes, two typefaces and no more than three colours).
- Avoid BLOCK CAPITALS.

- Use bold font or underlining to emphasize information. (Italic font can be hard to read.)
- Write dates in full.
- Use pictures to help the reader understand key ideas in the text.
- If possible, run the text through a readability testing application on the internet.



Make allowance for different cultural styles of communication

This will help you deal with any misunderstandings or misinterpretations that may arise.

Finally, remember you are a role model!

You may be one of the few English speakers your clients have the opportunity to talk to. Remember, you are a sort of 'ambassador' for your country. You represent the state and the way it treats people. You may also be one of the few people your clients talk to in English. In this case they will also be learning the language from you.



More guidance

More guidance in English

Hobart, Clare (2015), *Lowering language barriers*. Chalmers & Byrne Training Ltd.

More guidance in German

La Mura Flores, Tatiana ; Scheerer-Papp, Johanna (2014): *Sprachsensibel beraten*. passage gGmbH (Hrsg.).

www.deutsch-am-arbeitsplatz.de/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Handreichung_Sprachsensibel_beraten.pdf

Schreibtischaufsteller und Tippkarten für die Beratung (Sprechen und Schreiben).

www.netzwerk-iq-sachsen.de ("Publikationen")

Also available



Language for work – a quick guide

How to help adult migrants develop work-related language skills

Successful integration of adult migrants depends to a considerable extent on two interconnected enablers, language skills and employment. Migrants need language skills to find suitable employment and then progress at work. Employment can help migrants to develop their language skills.

Migrants who arrive with the language skills and qualifications they need to secure quality employment may require little further support. For the many other migrants who arrive with limited language skills and no recognised qualifications, support to develop work-related language skills is crucial.

This short resource offers guidance on how to provide that support.

Available for download here:

www.ecml.at/languageforwork



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