

The first question hiring managers should ask ESL candidates

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It's up to recruiters and hiring managers to ensure the language barrier doesn't become an employment barrier for ESL candidates, according to an expert who says that unless spoken language skills are a key component of a role, an interview might not even be necessary.

"If you work in a publishing company and you are hiring someone to be a book editor for literary manuscripts, then go for your life with complicated English language; that's a requirement of the job," says [Diversity Council Australia](#) CEO **Lisa Annese**.

If it *doesn't* matter, however, recruiters should speak as plainly as possible when interviewing candidates with limited English skills.

"It's really important for recruiting managers to offer potential candidates different options for interviews," Annese adds, and to pay attention to *how* they ask.

"If you frame it as, 'At this organisation, diversity and inclusion are really important to us; in the spirit of this, are there any adjustments you require for the interview?' that sets the tone that 'this is a safe place for me to [make a request]'," she explains

This is different to providing no context so the candidate thinks, "well, I don't want to be seen to be difficult so I'm not going to say anything".

Because the most helpful adjustment might be one the manager would never have thought to offer, it's important to make the question open-ended, enabling the candidate to make suggestions of their own.

"Usually these adjustments that people ask for are very simple," says Annese, who is yet to encounter an unreasonable request.

As for how many employers are offering at all, "I think the capability's being built," she says, "but I think it's early days".

If they don't understand the question

If an ESL candidate doesn't seem to understand a question, simply repeating the same words or speaking louder is poor manners and poor form, Annese says.

"If someone says, 'I don't understand that', then it's up to you, it's your responsibility to make yourself understood."

The problem might be that the language the manager used to phrase the question is overly complex, or that they used a synonym the candidate hasn't yet come across. First, they should try rephrasing the question. If the candidate still doesn't understand, the interviewer can ask them for more information to better understand what exactly is confusing them.

"Organisations need to take responsibility to recognise that recruitments are an important process that they have to work on to get right," Annese says. "If an interview fails the interviewee because of the competency of the interviewer, that's very unfair.

"This is really serious work and it isn't about building friendship and just having a chat with someone, or instincts, it's actually about following a scientific process."

A failure to mitigate the risk of excluding diverse talent due to overly standardised, inflexible hiring processes or bias might be indicative that an organisation's approach to D&I more broadly is lacking, she adds.

"You can't really have the tail wagging the dog," she says. For equitable and inclusive practices to be consistent and cohesive, it's got to be an organisation-wide commitment.



Lisa Annese, DCA

Employers that are actively seeking to mitigate the risk that certain candidates will be unfairly disadvantaged by an interview process might – depending on the role – give those candidates the questions in advance, or interview them in their native tongue, or make use of a translator. They might even be able to run a work trial for a person in place of an interview.

To view such adjustments as creating an unfair advantage would be a gross misconception, Annese says. In fact, a differentiated approach leads towards a *more* level playing field.

From the outset

Levelling the playing field starts before the interview process, Annese adds. "At the very beginning it starts with how are you designing the job?

"Who have you got in mind as the ideal candidate? Because if you're actually thinking of a person rather than a skillset, then you're already excluding people.

"You've got to have that really open view about the skillset, and make sure that that's reflected in how you've written the job, and how you're advertising for that role; what messages that sends out."

While flexibility can help to level the playing field, so can consistency, in the form of asking all the candidates roughly the same questions.

"[Try] to make sure that you approach every interview in as standard a way as possible so that the environment you're creating is as equitable as possible," Annese says.

In the evaluation process, the goal should be to assess candidates against each criterion rather than against each other, as it will make the manager less likely to factor in irrelevant characteristics and more likely to focus on skills and genuine merit, she says.

DCA has also recently launched a set of [inclusive recruitment tools](#) to help recruiters reflect on how to make their hiring processes more accessible.

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