The Silent Threat to Workplace Satisfaction

for Software Engineers

lingo live

Introduction

Innovation sits at the core of every growing tech company. To outpace the competition, companies need to constantly add new features, fix bugs in current technology and create brand new, never before seen ideas. At the core of groundbreaking product is a team of developers and engineers turning these ideas into a reality. Without a talented tech team, Uber wouldn't be able to connect drivers to riders, AirBnB couldn't connect hosts to travelers and eBay couldn't connect buyers to sellers. And if your team isn't quick enough, creative enough or talented enough, the public will move on to the next great product.

With 74% of computer and mathematical workers in Silicon Valley born outside the United States, English is not the native language for a significant portion of the qualified engineering talent. Requiring native-level English speaking abilities at the time of hiring would considerably reduce the talent pool and exclude some of the top innovators, problem solvers and coders from your team. As a result, English training is becoming increasingly important for growing tech companies.

Lingo Live spoke with and surveyed Engineers in our communication coaching program and their managers to understand the implications of language barriers on the individual engineers and the company as a whole. The results illustrate the importance of offering communication training for engineers who speak English as a second language to improve collaboration and productivity within teams and throughout companies.

"I don't have a problem with ideas,
I have a problem with expression."
— ESL Course Student

01

Creativity Left Unheard

Great ideas can only be implemented if they
are heard and understood. Engineers who
struggle with English often experience challenges
when expressing their proposed solutions and
providing constructive feedback. These same
engineers who were hired for their superior
problem solving skills are not able to make
their full impact on the organization due to
language barriers.

77%

of learners have had ideas
dismissed due to language issues

Expression and Persuasion

Convincing a superior, colleague or a room full of people to implement an idea often takes more than impressive creativity and data. The art of persuasion is difficult for many people, regardless of their language skills. However, a limited vocabulary and an inability to fully articulate an idea only exacerbates the issue. Non-native speakers struggle to explain their ideas in clear and concise ways that make sense to others.

Engineers report that this issue intensifies when speaking to those outside of the engineering team. Technical terms are often the same in English as in other languages, but explaining complex ideas in layman's terms requires a larger vocabulary. Impressive ideas fail to sound great if the message is not delivered clearly.

Non-native speakers tend to use fewer typical persuasion techniques such as analogies, metaphors and inflection changes when speaking in their second language. Even advanced speakers are less comfortable using idioms or expressive speech, choosing to be more direct and letting the data speak for itself. In group settings, brilliant ideas often lose out to mediocre ones, simply because one person presented their idea in a more interesting or clear way.

Cultural differences can be a challenge here as well. In China, for example, people form arguments differently than they do in the United States. Foreign engineers would often benefit from guidance on how to form a persuasive argument to Americans, even if they do not struggle with English vocabulary and grammar.

80.5%

of learners are afraid to speak up in meetings

Speaking Up in Meetings

Meetings are a regular, often daily, occurence for most engineers. For non-native English speakers specifically, these reunions can be a struggle. Meetings are where ideas and solutions are brainstormed, decisions are made and updates are given. Failure to speak up means your opinion is never heard.

Comprehension & Expression Take Longer

Meetings can be very fast paced, especially during brainstorming sessions when people are consistently shouting out ideas. For many non-native speakers, comprehension takes slightly longer, shortening the window of opportunity to speak. By the time they have processed what was just said, someone else has already begun speaking. Similar to the challenge with comprehension, it often takes non-native speakers longer to express their ideas in English. While they may have the idea quickly, it takes time to craft a comprehensible English statement, and by then the window of opportunity has often closed.

Lack of Self-Confidence

Often the greatest challenge for non-native speakers is confidence in their speech. Many engineers feel self-conscious of their limited proficiency and do not feel comfortable speaking in group settings. These feelings are often intensified in meetings with clients or other departments when the engineer is less familiar with the other members present.

Cultural Differences

Meeting etiquette varies from country to country. For some, it is impolite to express an opinion without being asked. For others, it is expected that each person speak up and participate. These differences can prevent talented individuals from understanding how to appropriately express opinions and get ideas implemented. Cultural training can help non-Americans understand American meeting practices.

“Software innovation, like almost every other kind of innovation, requires the ability to collaborate and share ideas with other people.”

-Bill Gates

Collaboration

In 1999, Steve Jobs famously designed the layout of Pixar's headquarters with one set of restrooms in the center atrium, forcing employees in various departments to interact. Tech offices have been following his lead ever since, creating office spaces that encourage collaboration between departments.

Some of the greatest ideas come from casual interactions in the hallway or over drinks. For non-native English speakers, these interactions can be difficult and nerve-wracking. Those who do choose to socialize with their peers often remain quiet without fully contributing to the conversations. These employees and their peers lose the chance to have that brilliant spark from a casual conversation.

57%
of learners say speaking English prevents them from socializing

"I speak with too many pauses and can't always express what I'm thinking about."

— ESL Course Student

02

Communication Barriers Slow Productivity

In a world where technology changes every day, it is critical that projects are implemented and finished quickly to remain relevant in the ever-changing landscape. Limited English can directly and indirectly affect your teams' ability to complete projects on time. In-person meetings as well as written communication can be less productive due to the language barrier.

96%

of learners spend more time on emails in English than in their native language

Communication Takes Longer

More Time in Meetings

Meetings are important for collaboration within a team and with other stakeholders in a project, but they also take valuable time away from the workday. As a result, it is often important to keep time in meetings to a minimum. This implies the sharing of a large amount of information in a short period. Those with limited English proficiency often take longer to ask questions or make a statement, pausing and clarifying often. This slows meetings down, either forcing the meeting to run over time or taking time away from other important topics.

Often engineers who struggle with English struggle to understand what is discussed during these meetings and must spend additional time speaking to each other afterwards to fully grasp the task at hand.

Written Communication

Written communication also poses a challenge. Whether it's email, Slack, gchat, coding notes or any other format, translating thoughts into writing can be time consuming for non-native speakers.

Miscommunications Are Costly

A larger problem occurs when team members do not properly clarify the task at hand. Even advanced speakers face challenges when it comes to miscommunications. Idioms and cultural differences or an inability to pick up on nuances and subtleties can cause an advanced speaker to misinterpret what's being asked of them.

These communication errors can cause engineers to waste days or weeks working on the wrong project. Even worse, work may be done incorrectly and require extra hours, days or sometimes weeks fixing the issues. This can often require the help of additional team members, wasting even more of the company's time and valuable resources.

The Domino Effect

Miscommunications can cause a domino effect, causing other departments and stakeholders to work off incorrect information causing misaligned expectations and delaying the project even further.

03
Losing Great Talent

High employee turnover is one of the greatest risks to any collaborative team. Sources commonly estimate the average cost of an employee voluntarily leaving to be about 150% of their annual salary. Turnover has the obvious costs of recruiting (advertising, interviewing) and onboarding (training etc.) There are also a number of hidden costs including lost productivity during the gap before the position is filled, loss of that employee's knowledge, and drops in morale of other workers. Once the position is filled, it takes an average of 8 months – 2 years for the new employee to get completely up to speed and understand the inner workings of the team and the company as a whole. Trust that had been forged between team members takes a long time to build and company culture can suffer.
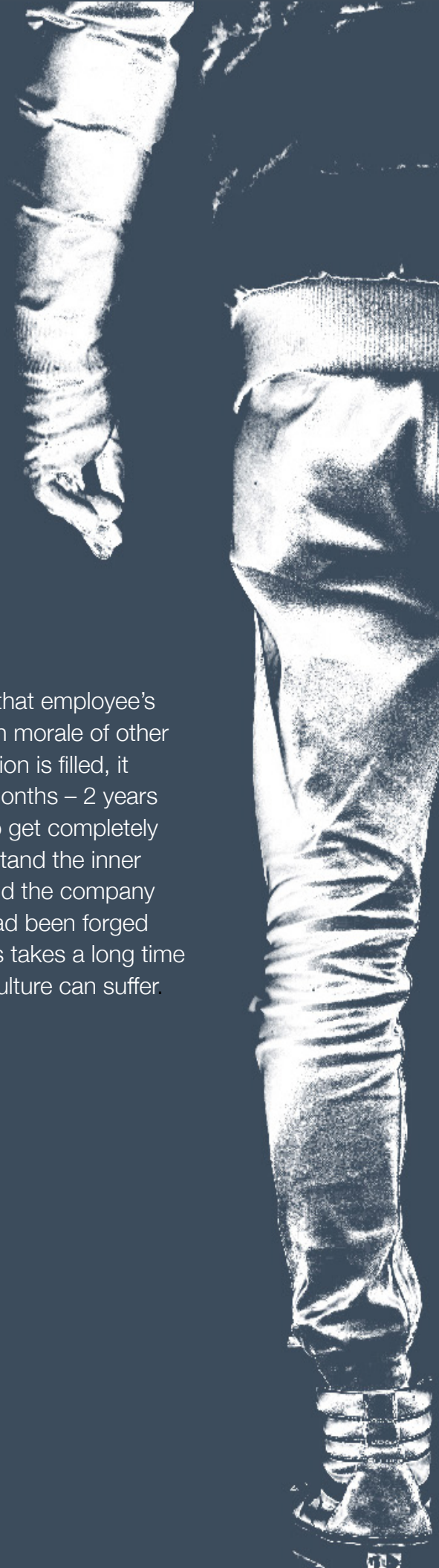
"I feel excluded from group conversations because I find it hard to *strike up* a conversation. Most of my teammates are natives, so I have fear of embarrassing myself."

- Lingo Live Learner

Employee Engagement

According to CustomInsight, employee engagement is the extent to which employees feel passionate about their jobs, are committed to the organization, and put discretionary effort into their work. Low employee engagement leads to high turnover and loss of productivity.

In fact, lack of employee engagement is such a large threat to company growth that there are now companies like CultureAmp and CustomInsight dedicated to helping organizations survey their employees to find out where they stand.

96%

of learners would enjoy work more if they spoke better English, even the advanced ones

Three Key Factors in Employee Engagement

01
FEELING ONE'S IMPACT

As previously outlined, engineers who struggle with English face more obstacles to seeing their ideas implemented. Engineers who find they cannot express themselves in meetings or who repeatedly fail to persuade others that their ideas are valuable often feel dejected and withdrawn. They feel they are not having the same impact on the organization as their peers and that they are not receiving the necessary validation and recognition from their managers. Over time, engineers lose their initial passion for the job, which lowers their productivity and eventually motivates them to look for new employment elsewhere.

02
RECEIVING RECOGNITION

According to researchers at Gallup, the number-one reason people leave their jobs is that they don't feel appreciated. When engineers work in teams, often the person most confident with speaking will present the project in meetings to other stakeholders, either informally or in a formal presentation. This person often receives more acknowledgement and praise for the idea, simply because they presented it to others. The person struggling with English does not receive adequate recognition for his or her contribution and may withdraw or look for other employment.

03
SOCIALIZING

Socializing with coworkers in and out of the office has a significant impact on employee happiness and engagement. A study by Gallup reports that close work friendships boost employee satisfaction by 50%.

ESL Engineers often feel left out of the community in which they work. They lack the knowledge and confidence to enter the English-speaking community as a fully legitimate member. They feel they are frequently perceived as shy or disinterested due to their lack of participation and they need to develop their own authentic English voice via linguistic and cultural training.

93%

of learners feel their English capabilities hold them back from promotions

Upward Mobility

The inability to promote employees from within significantly reduces employee tenure at a company and limits the talent pipeline, requiring more outside hires.

Lack of English proficiency reduces an employee's ability to move up the company ladder for two main reasons.

01

GREAT LEADERSHIP REQUIRES GREAT COMMUNICATION

Communication skills are often cited as the single most important indicator of successful leadership. Whether it is sounding less harsh when providing constructive feedback, using humor to improve morale or articulating the goals for the quarter, first-rate communication is a must for managers. This level of effective communication is difficult for most native English speakers and using one's non-native language makes it just that much more difficult. Companies often require a high level of English proficiency to be considered for a management role, eliminating a large portion of otherwise highly qualified candidates.

02

POOR COMMUNICATORS ARE OFTEN OVERLOOKED

Many companies such as AirBnB now allow engineers to move up within the company without moving into management. However, this does not fully solve the upward mobility challenges for those with language difficulty.

All of the previously mentioned factors (inability to speak up in meetings, others accepting credit for ideas, difficulties socializing and networking, trouble with persuasion) prevent engineers with English communication challenges from getting chosen for a promotion, simply because they are less likely to stand out.

Conclusion

Countries like China, Korea and India are continuing to outperform the United States in STEM education. As a result, more and more of the engineering workforce, both in the US and around the world, will be using English as a second language.

Our conversations with engineers have shown how language barriers threaten innovation in your organization. While this may be troubling, there is a solution.

In order to attract, retain and empower the most talented software engineerings globally, English training is becoming a must. Engineers in our English training programs report feeling more engaged at work, more productive and more likely to remain at the company long term. Don't let communication barriers hinder your team and your organization's ability to innovate.

Improve your team's communication with customized Lingo Live coaching.

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Lingo Live solves communication challenges for engineering and product team members domestically and across the globe with live one-on-one personalized online coaching.

For more information on how Lingo Live can help your team reach its potential, go to **LingoLive.com** or **contact our sales team**.