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# Communicating Across Cultures

*By Kurt E. Hine*

*Businesses are expanding globally, but their important internal messages don't always reach every employee. It's time to change that.*

Are you willing to stake your life on the accuracy and effectiveness of your company's training methods?

Only a fool would be willing to take such a gamble but, sadly, the book of business history is filled with the names of companies that have made foolish mistakes at some point or another. In some cases, their failure to communicate with a multinational workforce resulted in complete project failure. And in at least one case, well ... let's just say the results were rather *grave*.

We'll spare you the gory details, but we will share this: One of the world's most experienced engineering and project management firms was forced to retreat from a venture in the South Pacific a few years ago because it never got the local workforce to understand what they were expected to do — build an entire mining town, complete with housing, power plants, air strips, roads and hospitals, within three years.

In the native culture, however, there were no such concepts as private property, money, central government or work regulations — concepts at the bedrock of Western capitalism. The leadership team simply couldn't interface with the locals, who didn't believe, for example, in something as basic as a work shift.

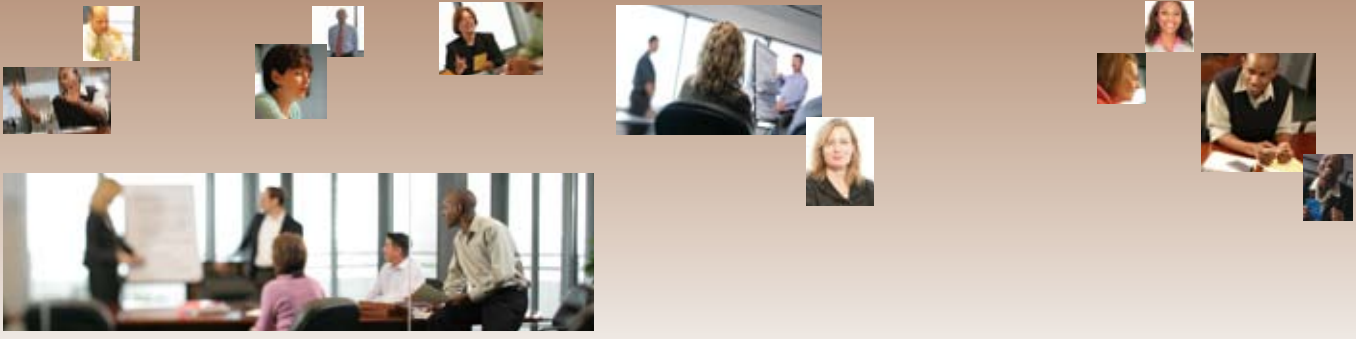
Eventually, the natives took up bows and arrows.

We'll stop the story there.

## **Executive Summary**

In today's rapidly expanding global economy, more and more companies face the challenge of communicating effectively with employees from different cultures. Corporate training departments must introduce learning tools that combine universal concepts of communication — with the result that all employees, regardless of culture, language or country, possess a common understanding of the company's strategic objectives.

This white paper explains why simply translating a training program from one language to another is not enough to ensure a successful communication experience. By using discovery learning methodology, companies can leverage people's universal experiences to accelerate knowledge and skill acquisition and ensure long-term retention. A checklist of what to consider when developing training programs that communicate your corporate goals globally is also included.



For everyone in the communication business, there's one time-tested rule: Know your audience. But while the last decade has seen the rise of international companies spanning countries and continents, one significant challenge has accompanied this rapid globalization: the frustration that companies face when trying to communicate effectively with employees from different cultures.

Behaviors, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs can have a significant impact on successfully working toward a common goal.

Is this really a big consideration?

You bet your life it is.

## The Pitfalls of Translation

Fortunately, many of these “meta-national” companies have realized the power of employee training and communication as they experience the constant flow of change. They recognize the challenge of integrating new people from across the globe into a unified team, and the importance of imparting a common understanding of their business model, objectives and corporate culture. They understand that employees want — and need — to know where their new fast-growing company is headed and where they fit in.

That's the good news. But the methodology and materials need to be adaptable to multiple languages, dialects, cultures and customs. And it's not as simple as merely translating a training program from English into another language. That's the bad news.

Did you know it takes as much as 30 percent more text to translate an English document into the major languages of Europe? For example, consider the organization known around the world as FIFA. In French, the group's official language, it's Le Fédération Internationale de Football Association (six words). In English, it's simply the International Soccer Federation (four words).

Imagine how much complexity would be involved — and how much more it would cost — to increase the size of training

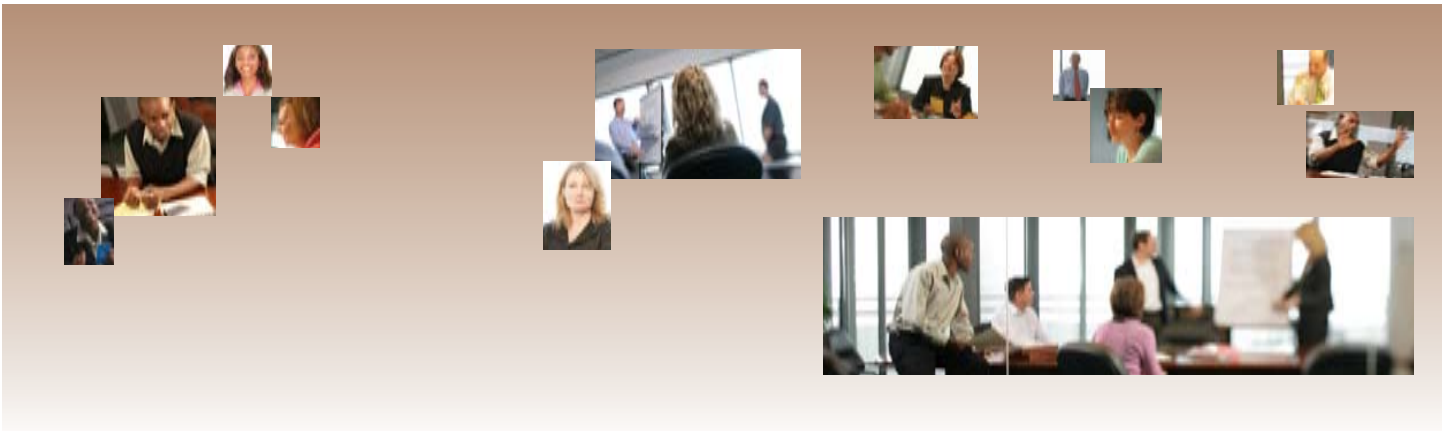
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### SAY WHAT?

- *The legend that Chevrolet's Nova didn't sell well in Latin America because “no va” is Spanish for “it doesn't go” is not true. The car actually met sales goals in Mexico and broke goals in Argentina.*
  - *When Coca-Cola launched in China during the 1920s, its printed name in Chinese characters, when spoken aloud, translated roughly as “bite the wax tadpole.” Luckily for the company, it found similar characters that are pronounced only slightly different but translate to “let the mouth rejoice.”*
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materials by an additional third. Moreover, there are about 6,700 living languages in the world. Even if you just concentrate on the 15 most common — which account for almost 50 percent of the world's population — that's still a massive undertaking.

Here's another challenge: The idiomatic expressions



so prevalent in English — puns, jokes, acronyms — seldom translate at all. This is true even between English-speaking cultures. During a recent meeting between a U.S. company and a British company to discuss a joint venture, negotiators found themselves at a standstill when the Americans proposed tabling discussion of a key point. In the United States, “tabling a motion” means not discussing it. In the United Kingdom, the same phrase means the exact opposite — to bring it to the table for discussion.

Clearly, this much is obvious: Simple translation doesn't always work.

## Universal Concepts of Communication

If a translation approach is so fraught with peril, why rely on it? Good question. Indeed, according to some psychological research, only about 10 percent of interpersonal communication is language-based. Instead, what we learn and remember is really a function of what we see, what we hear and what we experience.

### **SCHEMATA-RAMA**

*Psychologists say some archetypal images have the same meaning across cultures and generations. A few:*

- *Sunrise and sunset*
- *Shadows / fear*
- *Hot and cold*
- *Mother / nurturing*
- *Father / authority*
- *Heroes*
- *Tricksters / mischief makers*

**What We See.** From ancient cave drawings to the Sistine Chapel's frescos, the world's cultures have always conveyed information through visual representation. Today, the old adage about a picture being worth a thousand words has never been truer. Newspaper circulations are plummeting, but television ratings are going up. Why? Pictures. While the average length of a sound bite on network news is only 7.3 seconds, according to TV industry data, stories seldom get air time unless there are pictures to accompany them. Because people love pictures.

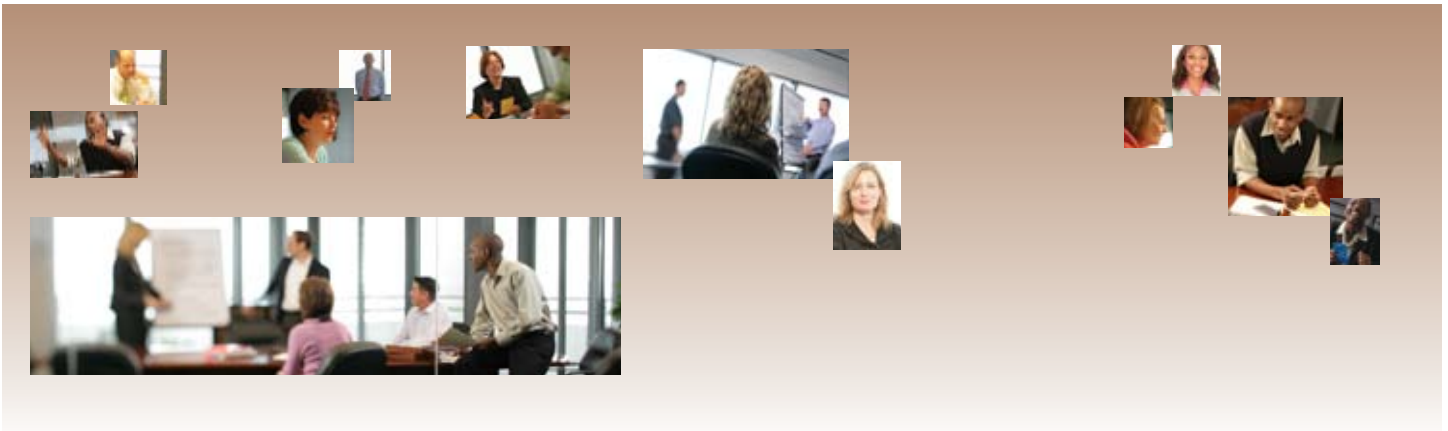
Illustrations can put forth a message, thought or explanation more succinctly, more clearly and with less margin of error than text. Think of the “no smoking” symbol, or disabled-parking signs. These are perfect examples of the power of pictures as well as the clarity that universal icons such as tools, math symbols and musical notations can bring to training presentations. They add a dimension beyond text and

### **ON THE OTHER HAND**

*Think gestures are universal? Think again. Here's a look at how the uniquely American “OK” symbol is perceived in other countries.*

- **Japan:** *Money, sometimes seen as a request for a bribe.*
- **France:** *Worth nothing, zero value.*
- **Russia:** *A certain part of, um, the anatomy.*

*Whatever you do, don't offer a thumb's-up in Eastern Europe, or a “V” for victory in the UK or Australia. You'll get slapped.*



increase comprehension and retention of the main messages. Also, since these symbols are widely recognized, they do not need to be translated.

But not every visual works without context. The red, white, blue Uncle Sam has no particular relevance outside of North America. In the United States, the color red means danger, but in China it means luck. That's why it's important to remember ...

**What We Hear.** Storytelling is a universal form of communication, from the ancient Greek fireside fables of Aesop to Garrison Keillor's radio monologues about modern life in Lake Wobegon. Overwhelmingly, people love to tell and listen to stories, regardless of age, as a way of entering others' life experiences.

Like visuals, stories paint vivid and memorable mental pictures. They can describe situations, make points and teach lessons — the moral of the story — that are absorbed almost automatically, especially if you are able to employ universally understood truths that can personalize and explain your corporation, product or mission.

Stories provide dates, times, places and names, but they simultaneously produce reaction and emotion — including feelings of attachment, sympathy and agreement — by interweaving reason and mystery that draws listeners into the characters' lives. With imagination unleashed, listeners may vicariously explore the storyteller's experiences. That's why

it's important to consider ...

**What We Experience.** Listeners

filter the messages they receive through their own personal lives. It's the way the human brain creates order from sensory input. Children of the 1960s, for example, have a far different reaction to tie-dyed T-shirts and folk music than do the children of the 1980s. It's the difference between living through the Vietnam era vs. merely reading about it. It's why college students who serve internships and skilled laborers who serve apprenticeships are considered more employable than those who don't — they've already experienced what otherwise would be expressed in theoretical terms.

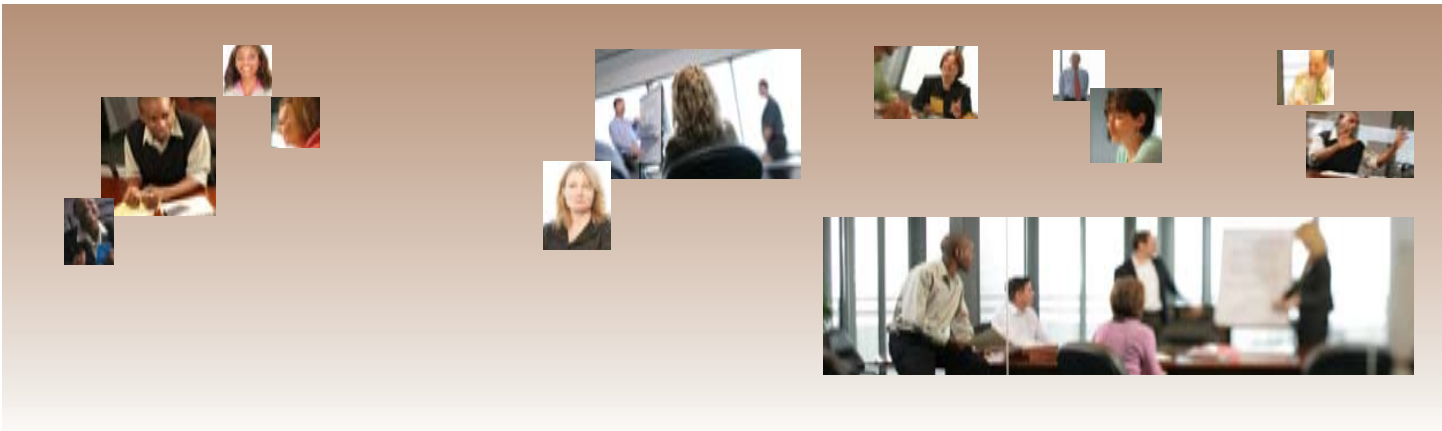
Experience is the guiding principle behind an educational concept called

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### **SEVEN DEADLY SINS**

*Roger E. Axtell is an expert on global business relations. In his book, **Do's and Taboos Around the World** (1993, Wiley), he lists some verbal mistakes that often lead to misunderstandings:*

- **Jargon:** *Often clouds what you should say plainly.*
  - **Officialese:** *Governmental jargon — the worst form.*
  - **Slang:** *Regional expressions and euphemisms.*
  - **Humor:** *Funny is in the eye of the beholder.*
  - **Vocabulary:** *Don't send your audiences running for the dictionary.*
  - **Grammar:** *Bad usage can be distracting.*
  - **Local color:** *Can a Samoan relate to a traffic jam?*
-



“discovery learning,” which holds that people learn and retain information better when they actively participate in the learning process. If they’ve actually undergone an event being described or depicted, they can directly relate to the information being presented. Sometimes, however, listeners do not have that requisite experience to fully appreciate and process information. Fortunately, role-playing situations and controlled simulations often can replicate a lifetime of experience. In many cultures, games are fundamental tools for education. This is particularly the case in China, where games and simulations are being incorporated into employee training as the country rapidly moves toward a global market-oriented economy. “Nontraditional learning methods such as games and simulations are highly sought by Chinese companies,” says Richard Lai, chairman of Intellexis China, a consulting firm working with many of those companies. “They seem to be intrigued by how quickly their employees gain some hands-on experience.”

## What This Means to You

As companies expand internationally, leaders face the unique challenge of interacting with people who are culturally, educationally and often fundamentally different than they are. Indeed, a preponderance of research indicates that more than half of the world’s population can be considered either illiterate or semilliterate.

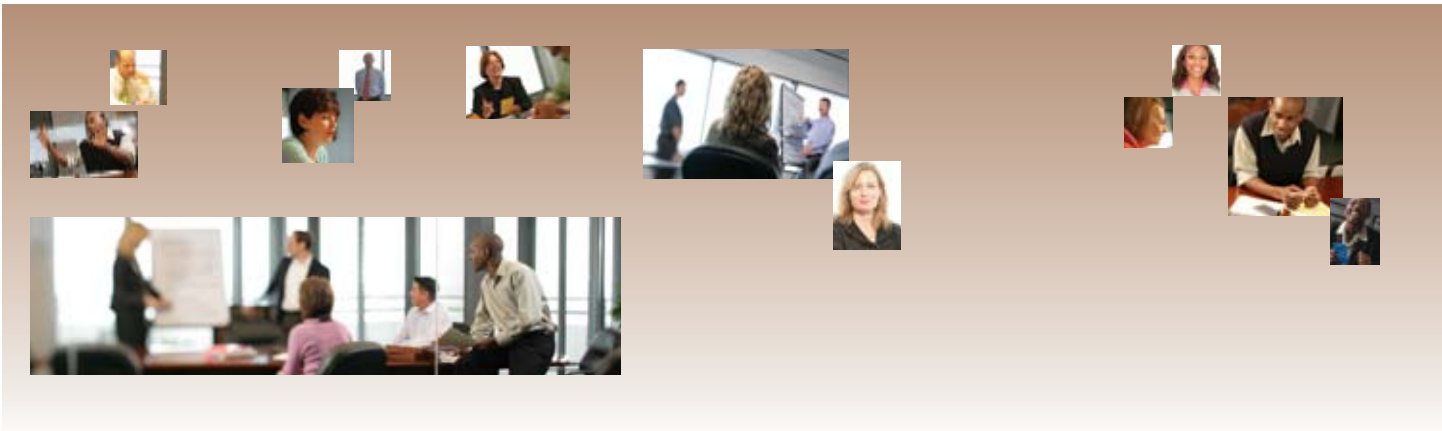
So if your company is crossing borders and entering new

territory, it’s probably time to ask yourself one big question: How will you communicate with and train these people who will be your employees? Memos? Workbooks? PowerPoint?

For companies with offices from Arizona to Azerbaijan, from Mexico to Madagascar, the right move is to look for training tools that combine universal concepts of communication. Beginning with the assumption that today’s training program will be created in English and then adapted for international audiences, here’s a checklist of things to consider during development:

**Language.** Writing should be brief, active, declarative and emphasize clarity over cleverness. The fewer the words that must be translated, the fewer potential mistakes. During the conversion process, be certain your translators have a native grasp of the language and cultural idiosyncrasies. For example, even though Spanish is the primary language of Mexico, Cuba and Spain, there are considerable differences in the words and phrases used in each country. Certain words that are innocuous in, say, Madrid have embarrassing connotations in, say, Cancun.

**Imagery.** Are the pictures and illustrations used in your training program sensitive to international audiences? In Arabic society, for example, people do not use their left hands to interact with others — it’s considered unclean and impolite. Does your artwork take that into consideration? Or will you have to commission more artwork — at additional expense — if you launch your program in Dubai?



**Storytelling.** Audiences want a good story, wherever you go. When you want see a movie, your first question is always, “What’s the movie about?” Does the story capture your attention? Can you relate to the characters? Likewise, in a training program, it’s easy to remember important information that’s presented within the framework of a story, complete with plot exposition and character development. Think of the movie *Casablanca*. What do you remember? The beautiful love story? Or just a laundry list of facts — man runs bar, meets girl, is threatened by bad guys, condones gambling, wears white suits, etc.?

**Interaction.** How will your training program engage your audience? Will you seek active participation in the learning process, or do you want passivity? Under the principles of discovery learning, activity equals memory. Games and simulations are especially effective for stimulating conversations that significantly increase acceptance, understanding and retention beyond what’s possible with traditional lecture-based formats. By immersing participants into a program, letting them assimilate the information with their own frames of reference, it builds a comfort level that leads to confidence and commitment.

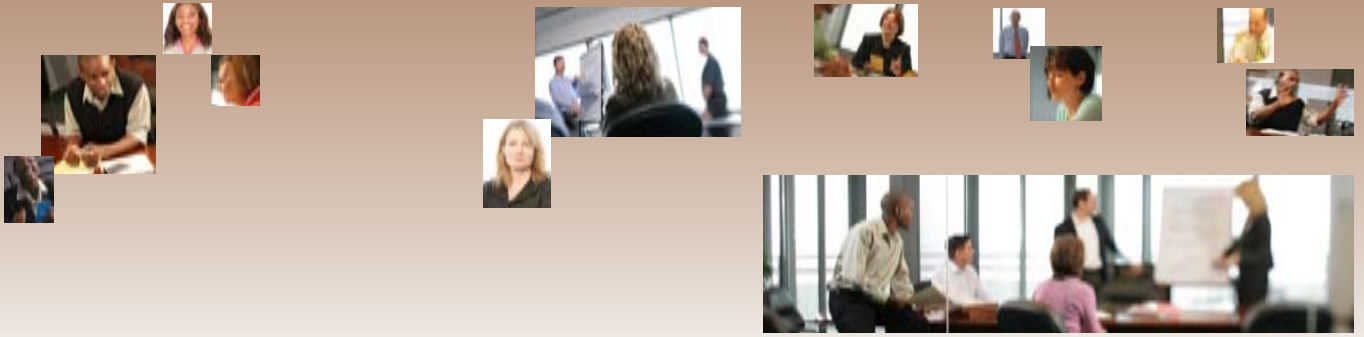
For businesses that want to be successful on a global scale, it’s the surest bet of a lifetime.

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For more information about effective cross-cultural business communication, call Paradigm Learning at (813) 287-9330 or visit [paradigmlearning.com](http://paradigmlearning.com) online.



## What Others Are Saying

*“In an ideal world, you would begin developing each training program knowing in advance the countries where it would be used. This would save significant time and money because you would know ‘what won’t translate’ in advance, and avoid the majority of the linguistic, cultural, and technological challenges that confront the programs that are translated ‘after the fact.’ In worst case scenarios, this can mean essentially starting from scratch with each new translation.”*

— **Stefan Budrich**,  
Owner and Head Translator,  
Budrich Translation Services

*“When you enter the global marketplace, you need to be in a global state of mind. This means giving full consideration to the cultural and technical implications of each market long before you start getting creative with your presentation. Different ethnic, religious and cultural groups have different perspectives on everything from ethics and proper behavior to what is funny and what is not.”*

— **Marcela A. Jenney**,  
Business Manager,  
Contextual Communications

*“Our company has employees in more than 48 countries. So when we decided to create a training program that would explain some major changes, we knew that we would be reaching a worldwide audience. We knew it would need to incorporate aspects of our businesses from around the world so it would be applicable to our entire organization. A key to the success of the program was our decision to include people from local businesses rather than sticking to the corporate staff. They provided a grassroots picture of our business, and alerted us to what would and would not translate.”*

— **Daniela Brakewell**,  
Global Employee Communication Manger,  
APV

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