

## How Do you Say That in Swahili? Meeting the Challenges of an International Workforce

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### Summary

Over half the employees at Hoffman Nursery come from five different countries and combined, speak seven different languages. We have worked through Church World Services (CWS), which helps refugees and immigrants find security and opportunity in the U.S. With our international workforce, challenges center around communication and cultural differences. Our employees range from those who speak basic English to those who understand almost none. Most of our international employees work in our production department. Improving communication includes

identifying key translators, focusing on basic work language, and using images and visuals. Apart from language, cultural differences can lead to miscommunications and poor performance. Fortunately, we have found ways to manage and work with those differences. Three approaches that have been successful include: 1) support and accommodation, 2) empathy: understanding their perspective, and 3) helping them acclimate and learn the system. Our employees and company benefit by helping them adjust to our workplace and understand our culture.

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### INTRODUCTION

Before Hoffman Nursery opened in 1986, the owners focused on landscaping. They had very little outside help until 1995 when propagating and growing became their priority. During that early era, the labor pool was

made up mostly of Latinos and local workers. Currently, more than half the people who work at Hoffman Nursery were born outside the U.S. We have workers from five foreign

countries who speak seven different languages.

Our international worker pool expanded in the early 2000s when the nursery's growth demanded more help than local labor could supply. We contacted Church World Services (CWS), which helps refugees and immigrants find security and opportunity in their new countries. Through the CWS program, the first group of Montagnards—indigenous peoples from the Central Highlands of Vietnam—came to work at the nursery. We also hired a few workers from Burma, but they only stayed a season or two. Around 2010, CWS connected us with refugees from the Republic of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo who started working in our Production Department.

With our international workforce, it is no surprise our challenges center around communication and cultural differences. Having worked with the production team for almost 18 months, I would like to share what we've learned. I'll discuss practices that have helped improve communication and touch on areas where we've found management strategies that better fit our groups' cultural contexts.

## MAIN CHALLENGES

Most of us have experienced the frustration of giving directions or explaining a concept to an employee only to find they did not understand. It happens when we speak a common language, and when working with non-native English speakers, it is even more likely to happen. Our employees range from those who speak basic English to those who understand almost none. Opportunities for miscommunications happen daily. In addition, each group in our workforce comes from a distinct cultural context. Some are from rural areas with an agrarian lifestyle, while others were professionals or office workers in their home countries. Almost all have adopted the U.S. as their new country - and a way of life

that is profoundly different from what they knew.

Most of our international employees work in our production department. Their main jobs involve splitting and potting plants, with some helping with plant retrieval and delivery. In general, their tasks remain the same from day to day. Their jobs are critical for the nursery, so we must ensure they know how to do their jobs accurately and efficiently.

## IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

### *Identify key translators*

As we began working with each new group, we relied on hired translators. They came to the nursery and explained the job to the new hires. In 2015 we hired the first people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The production supervisor at that time selected one new person for intense training so that the new person could train other employees who spoke the same language (*Kinyarwanda*). With the help of his son, who is fluent in English, and the supervisor, the new employee learned the fine points of splitting and potting. We now have more people who speak *Kinyarwanda*, and they can help train new hires. That first Congolese worker was key to establishing a new cultural group in our workforce.

I have work plans for differing proficiency levels that include a timeline for what they learn and when. Regardless of their English proficiency, we partner all new hires with an experienced team member, especially for the first couple of weeks. Over time I have established a small team of people who help me translate and train new hires. With some languages, I can choose between a couple of people who are proficient in English and very good at their jobs. Sometimes I must work with translators whose skills aren't as sharp but who speak English and their native tongue well. I use that opportunity to help the translator brush up on the basics as well.

### *Focus on basic work language*

During initial training and throughout their early months, we teach new hires key words and phrases. That set includes individual terms for equipment and short sentences that are essential for our workplace. For example, “This needs to be bigger, smaller...”, “Can you please go help this person?”, “Can you move to the potting line...” We use these words and phrases early and often, repeating them and asking the employee to practice saying them back to us. Repetition and active use facilitate the learning process. This practice also signals they’ll be expected to understand and respond to these workplace communications.

Many factors influence language learning, including early experiences, age, frequency of contact with new language, and health. Motivation, economic status, and other circumstances play a role as well. Our groups differ widely in their situations. Many of the Congolese refugees speak multiple languages, while most of the other groups are fluent in one only. Furthermore, the different languages spoken at Hoffman Nursery are from disparate language families. Some spoken languages at the nursery have no written language, making translation even more difficult. We cannot use tools like Google Translate and must use an in-person translator. It is much easier for some employees than others to master the basics. I learned quickly that different methods work with our different groups here at the nursery.

### *Use images and visuals*

In addition to using repetition, we work a lot with images and visuals. Demonstration is a universal language, so one of my earliest strategies was to print pictures, laminate them, and use them to demonstrate concepts. Sometimes images are enough; in other cases, we found a different solution. Here are some examples:

**Work basket:** When someone new starts in the Production Department, we give them a basket with all the equipment they need: scissors, pruners, apron, gloves, and a laundry bag. They also get a sheet of paper that has the words and pictures for those five items. The same information is posted in the production break room. In addition, I ask them to name those items whenever I interact with them. They are responsible for their equipment, and if they need something new, they must ask for it with the English word.

**Workgroup assignments:** Our Production Team is divided into workgroups that rotate through various departments. They all have a written copy of the weekly schedule, and we also have a display board that uses pictures to show who works where on which day. Pictures of individual employees are arranged on the board so everyone can see with whom to go and where they will work.

**Quality control with the board:** When we’re doing divisions, we need the splits to be consistent and appropriately sized. We routinely produce three liner sizes, and with custom projects we have the capacity to produce up to six different sizes. Changing sizes and switching to different plants can be confusing for the team. Our challenge then, is to communicate quality and consistency. Finding the best solution took time and trying several methods. When the nursery adopted “lean” strategies, they began using color-coded trays to indicate different sizes. They showed the team a sample division every time they switched a plant, so the team would know what size to make. However, the size of the divisions began to deviate over the course of a production run. It might move up a little larger or down a little smaller.

They figured having pictures of the target size would provide a reference and help keep the divisions consistent. That sounded like a great idea but was very time consuming.

Every time production switched to a different plant, someone had to print a picture, cut it out, and distribute it to everyone. That took too much time and still didn't achieve the desired quality.

When I started as Production Supervisor, solving this dilemma was a top priority, and we found a solution. Each team member has a board with a wire strung across it and three hanger clips hung on the wire. The wire clips match the colors of the destination trays for the divisions (Fig. 1). Before we switch production runs to a different plant, we quickly make sample divisions for the boards. We clip the samples on the board and then verbally explain what we'll be making. This has two main advantages: (1) they can see the sample throughout the production run, and (2) it is very easy to communicate which size goes into which colored tray and in which flat size it will be planted.



**Figure 1.** To keep quality consistent, visual boards show team members the proper size and corresponding tray color.

## ADAPTING TO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Apart from language, cultural differences can lead to miscommunications and even poor performance. Fortunately, we've found ways to manage and work with those differences. Here are three approaches that have been successful.

### *Support and accommodate*

Many of our team members are refugees and have experienced extreme hardships and traumatic life events. Some have relatives who are still in their home countries where it is not safe, and most cannot return to visit. They deal with situations and pressures that can be extreme. Below is an example of a particularly difficult day and how we dealt with it.

Last April, I came into work early to prepare and be ahead of my team. Several employees were already in the break room eating breakfast. As I passed the room, I saw two women crying, so I stopped to check in with them. On that single day, one's mother had died in Rwanda, the other's nephew had been killed in a war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and another man's grandson had been killed in a motorcycle accident in Vietnam. It suddenly became a very different day than I had planned. Unfortunately, days like this are not rare for us.

In these situations, I listen, and if necessary, ask someone to translate to tell me what has happened. It's important to me to treat them with compassion and caring, but I must balance that with getting the work done. One tactic that's helped me keep that balance is to adopt informal "office hours" in the morning before the workday starts. My team knows I'm there from 6:45am to 7:30am, so that's when they come talk to me about personal matters. We've developed the understanding that personal business happens then, and when we start work, their job becomes the priority.

Hoffman Nursery offers funeral leave, but most production team members choose not to take it. There's not usually a funeral in the U.S., and they prefer coming to work to staying at home. As one would expect, they tend to be distracted, and it's not business as usual. I try to accommodate these special situations by giving them choices. Usually, employees are either in a workgroup rotating through the nursery or with me splitting on a single table. When someone on the team has a death in the family or traumatic event, I let them choose where they want to work and whether they prefer to work alone. I believe if we let them choose the work environment that's most comfortable for them, they can still work efficiently given the situation.

### *Understand their perspective*

Those who grew up in the U.S. and similar Western cultures understand deadlines, schedules, and time pressures. That mindset is very foreign to some of our team. Most of them aren't familiar with our traditional job structure of supervisors and employees—they've mainly worked for themselves or lived in a community where they shared the work. Everyone pitches in, and when it's your turn, everyone comes to your place to work. No supervisors, no compensation, no set schedule.

Some of our African employees had jobs more like ours, but they have a hard time with certain aspects of our work culture. They see Americans as always rushing around, being serious, and not having fun at work. My approach is to explain and help them understand our way of working—why we have deadlines, what our goals are, and how we structure our day. I find it easier to explain our approach if I learn more about their culture and their perspective.

My training has included numerous videos, books, and articles on how to manage people. Many advise managing by the numbers and using performance figures for mini-

games and motivation. At the nursery, we collect employees' splitting and potting records daily, which I use to monitor individual performance and the overall production process. When I started as Production Supervisor, my great idea was to announce the best splitter and the best potter each morning. It took me about three months to realize two things: (1) my best splitter and potter is so good that the announcement never changed, and (2) it was frustrating and boring for everyone else to hear the same name every day.

To get more variety, I changed to announcing the top three performers. About three months later, I realized numbers for the two best splitters were decreasing. During an already scheduled performance review, which included a translator, I figured out what was happening. The best splitter did not understand the purpose of the announcement and did not like being called out every day. I realized she was changing her split rates so she wouldn't be the fastest. After reading and learning more, I discovered that many Southeast Asian cultures view competition negatively, and individuals prefer not to stand out among their peers. I still collect numbers—it is the best way to chart progress—but if their numbers change, I talk with employees individually.

### *Help them acclimate and learn the system*

Many of our Production Team members struggle with life in the United States. Many experiences are new and unfamiliar, they don't yet speak our language, and tasks we find simple are often complicated for them. Thus, we try to simplify as much as possible.

**Performance reviews:** We do reviews with every new hire after their first three months, even with seasonal workers. We use simple illustrations and smiley faces to indicate the level of satisfaction with performance areas. Simplifying the form and using the format repeatedly (their first week, first month, three

months in, and yearly thereafter) helps employees understand performance reviews and gets the message across.

**Workplace changes:** When there's a change that affects the Production Team, I go by a "3-time Rule." For example, we used to clean the production workspace at the end of the workday. We switched to cleaning in the morning so the crew could work up to closing time, and the team leaders and I could prep during the morning cleaning. With the 3-time Rule, I first communicate the change in our daily team meeting. Second, I touch base with "translators" from each cultural group immediately afterward. I make sure they understand enough to communicate it to the rest of the team speaking the same language. Third, if I believe it's necessary, I write a short, informal note that explains the change and send it home with all team members. I make sure during the next few days that everyone grasps the new procedure. As soon as I feel confident, they understand the change, they are responsible for following the new instructions.

**Requesting time off:** We use an online human resources tool for tracking employee paid and unpaid time off. Each full-time employee can request time off through the system using their individual login information. However, no one on my team is computer literate, and many do not read or write English. My solution combines expediency with responsibility. If they bring their login credentials and time off requests to me during my unofficial office hours (6:45am - 7:30am), I help them submit the request online. I help them navigate the system but still hold them responsible for gathering the information and requesting in an appropriate way.

## FINDING WHAT WORKS

Even though we simplify our processes and language and give them extra help, we treat our international team members as adults. Our employees and our company benefit by helping them adjust to our workplace and understand our culture. I view working with them as an investment. Time spent teaching will get them up to speed and working independently. There are fewer misunderstandings, even if they don't learn English. That translates to better performance and a happier workplace. The strategies and practices we've shared will not work for everyone, nor will hiring international workers. But with our labor market and our business, we've found an approach that works. We hope some of our ideas and concepts can transfer to your workforce and help improve your operation.