Information Management

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Je ne comprends pas!

The language we use defines our national identity and culture. In the UK most of the people living in Wales can speak English but under the 1993 Welsh Language Act, all public-sector websites that contain information relevant to Wales have to be in English and Welsh. Certainly English is a very useful default language for multi-national organisations, and it is fairly easy to work with around 850 words. The other 1 million are just there to confuse everyone, including many native speakers. In the USA if you are asked to slate a meeting you know that you will need to set a date and perhaps the attendees and agenda. In the UK if you asked me to slate a meeting I'd ask you which meeting you wanted me to criticise. How can the same word have totally different meanings? The US usage is derived from a French word meaning 'to splinter', which is what slate does when it is mined. The UK social usage is derived from an Old Norse word 'sletta' meaning 'to slap'.

Working out the semantics of any language is far more complex than most realise. Take these two sentences:

John loads the van with packages.

John loads packages into the van.

In the first sentence, the inference is that the van is totally full of packages, whereas in the second sentence the van may only be loaded with two packages by John. Even when we are writing in English to people who speak English fluently do we look carefully at the email or meeting note to consider whether we are getting the message across in an unambiguous way?

Social language

Things get far more complicated with social language. A social intranet has been defined by Prescient Digital Media as "Offering multiple social media tools for most or all employees to use as collaboration vehicles for sharing knowledge with other employees. A social intranet may feature blogs, wikis, discussion forums, social networking, or a combination of these or any other social media tool with at least some or limited exposure on the main intranet or portal home page."

Most of the surveys I have seen about the use of social media assume that all the respondents speak good social English, and so will have no problems in sharing their knowledge. One survey that does indicate that there is a problem is the Digital Workplace Trends 2012 report, which indicates that 10% of organisations have culture and language issues in collaborative work. My guess is that the problems are understated because at a local/national level employees find ways around the problems caused by language.

I would go so far as to suggest that few managers are aware of the significance of the level of understanding of English in their organisations. In the USA there is a five-level categorisation of language skills (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ILR_scale) and a six-level categorisation in the European Union (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_European_Framework_of_Reference_for_Languages).

What these categories take account of is that the variation in skills and experience needed to read, write, speak and understand speech are different. In my own case I can read French language documents fairly fluently and can get by in French as I travel around. However I could not conduct a meeting in French and my written French is appalling. This variation in language skills might well be a significant problem with social media where the language can be highly conversational, and writing even something as short as a blog entry in English could be a substantial challenge to a non-native speaker.

Keyboard challenges

Another aspect that I suspect is overlooked is the challenge of using a non-English keyboard to contribute content in English. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keyboard_layout). Every language has a unique letter frequency and often requires diacritic marks to be added to letters (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diacritic). Writing English on a non-English keyboard can be very time-consuming, because most of us touch-type to some extent and our fingers go fairly automatically to certain keys. As a result there could be a substantial barrier to the easy contribution of content assumed by the people in corporate headquarters who set up the social intranet and expect regular contributions to discussion lists.

Finding people to be sociable with

Another assumption that is explicit in discussions about the benefits of social media is that you can easily find the people that it would be useful to be sociable with. The problem is that most countries have well-established ways of present-ing given and family names. If you are looking for Karl van den Berg will they be listed under V or B? It will be different in the Netherlands compared to Belgium. "Have a word with Christian in the Stockholm office" but will you find him under C or K? Basis Technologies have a good paper on the challenges of listing Arabic names, where transliteration becomes a challenge (http://www.basistech.com/knowledge-center/arabic/behind-the-arabic-name.pdf).

Much depends on whether the country-level directories have been set up by local HR staff or

have been homogenised by a corporate HR group who are probably not familiar with the nuances of local naming conventions. I'm still getting a birthday email from a hotel in Kuwait that is addressed to Mr White Martin and wishes White a very happy birthday.

Enterprise mobility

Although staff in corporate and national headquarters offices will have a reasonable command of English staff working outside the office in sales, purchasing and customer support roles will be using local language all the time, and it will be even more difficult for them to start sharing their knowledge on an English language corporate wiki.

Look beneath the surface

My experience from working on nearly 40 countries is that local employees find ways around the 'corporate English' mandate that are almost certainly not visible to headquarters. These employees have to work in their native language for anything that resembles a contract or a compliance requirement. They may be able to converse on the telephone in English because the feedback they get enables ambiguities to be sorted out in real time. The last thing they want to do is look silly when they use written English, and moreover in many countries they would not feel comfortable responding at all without the permission of their manager.

I appreciate that most UKeiG members work for organisations that are based only in the UK, but there are many that do have a wider geographic coverage. As we move into the widespread adoption of social media it is well worth thinking carefully about whether the use of social media and social language creates more barriers than it removes. These are complex information management issues and need to be addressed with sensitivity.

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