

IMMIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES WITH JOB INTERVIEWS IN AUSTRALIA

The ethnic composition of the Australian population is predicted to change over the next fifty years, with the proportion of Asian immigrants expected to rise significantly. Despite an increased awareness of diversity issues in the workplace, many of these immigrants are faced with invisible barriers when seeking employment commensurate with their experience and qualifications. This paper discusses the qualitative findings of a study, which examined the experiences during employment interviews of twelve immigrants from Southeast Asia. In general, participants expressed positive experiences in interviews. However, intercultural differences were reported to affect success in job seeking. Recommendations are made for further investigation of all stages of recruitment and selection, with a particular focus on the impact of intercultural differences upon immigrants' successes in job seeking in Australia.

It is commonly acknowledged that Australia's population is one of the most culturally and linguistic diverse in the world (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills^{1[1]}, 1995). Through changing immigration policies and industrial demands for labour, today, approximately one quarter of the total population was born overseas, with 14% originating from a non-English speaking country (Department of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs^{2[2]}, 1999). Over the next forty years, the proportion of Asian immigrants will continue to increase to a level of 7.5% of the total population (DIMA, 2000).

Job-seeking experiences of NESB immigrants

Numerous studies have clearly identified that immigrants from a Non-English speaking background (NESB) have greater difficulty in obtaining employment than Australian born people (Hawthorne, 1992; Mak, Westwood & Ishiyama, 1994; Yuen, 1997). Contrastingly, immigrants from an English speaking background appear to have the same opportunities as local Australians, and thus, they do not experience any greater difficulty in gaining employment or promotion (DIMA, 1999; Mak, et al, 1994; Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1993). As a result, immigrants from non-English speaking countries are more likely to be unemployed, employed in positions which are not commensurate with their skills and qualifications (underemployed), or face employment only within their own ethnic community (Hawthorne, 1992; Lever-Tracy, Kitay, Phillips & Tracy, 1991; Mak, 1996; Mak et al, 1994; Yuen, 1997).

^{1[1]} Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills is known as the Karpin report (1995)

^{2[2]} Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs is also known as DIMA

Studies investigating unemployment amongst migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds have identified four causal factors: communication competence, qualifications and work experience, migration status, and length of residence, (Yuen, 1997; Hawthorne, 1992). Communicative competence is a complex concept, which includes knowledge of social context and culture. According to Canale and Swain's (1980) four-part model of communicative competence, a foreign speaker may have developed an understanding of the sound system, grammar and vocabulary, within another language, however she is not able to use this language knowledge in different situations, to create a discourse, or to repair communication breakdown. A reduced knowledge of the cultural code, conveyed through nonverbal communication, acts as a significant barrier to gaining employment in Australia (Mak et al, 1994). Since cultural aspects of communication are learnt through observation and imitation, through increasing length of residence and interacting with natural speakers, an immigrant's ability to communicate effectively within another language and culture may improve, (Khoo, 1993).

Over half of all immigrants possess educational or occupational skills and qualities, which will contribute to Australia's economic growth (DIMA, 2000). Indeed, of the 84,413 immigrants arriving in Australia in 1998-1999, 55.2% were in the workplace prior to migration and 62.5% of all immigrants were skilled (DIMA, 1999). In 1993, 12.2% of unemployed NESB migrants had University degrees, compared to 4.6% Australians and 5.1% of migrants from English speaking countries (Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1993). Compared to 78.5% of Australians and 80.4% of migrants from English speaking backgrounds, only 43.5% of NESB migrants who obtained their qualifications from their own country worked in occupations that were commensurate with their training (DIMA, 1999). In a 1993 study of Chinese and Indian small business owners, Ip found that after migrating to Australia, less than half of these qualified participants were able to continue working within their previous field of employment. Non-recognition of overseas qualifications by employers and professional bodies, and employer resistance to hire these migrants are identified as the primary obstacles.

The job interview as a selection technique

Despite a recent increase in published literature discussing recruitment and selection practices, there has been little change in the use of methods, with the interview used most frequently in Australian organizations (Di Milia & Smith, 1997; Wood & Payne, 1998). Yet, researchers have identified that face-to-face interviews are detrimental to NESB immigrants' success in job seeking (Luvy-Leboyer, 1994; Wood & Payne, 1998; Yuen, 1997). Since these practices are contingent upon an applicant's oral and written language competencies, cultural differences will impact upon the way she is perceived by the organization (Mak, 1996). For example, using Hall and Hall's (1990) cultural framework, an immigrant from Southeast Asia may provide brief responses to questions during a job interview, leaving out many of the details of the explanation, as would have been culturally appropriate in their own country. Yet, an Australian manager's preference for low-context communication, in which the speaker needs to provide all of the details in a discussion, will result in the applicant being perceived as a poor communicator, or lacking the appropriate skills and knowledge for the position (Daly, Barker & Mc Carthy, 2000; Yuen, 1997). Thus, the problems that migrants experience with recruitment and selection may not be related to having difficulties understanding the processes, but rather misinterpretations of the cultural expectations of the employer-applicant roles within job interviews (Hodge, 1997).

Given the continuing difficulties faced by Southeast Asian immigrants when seeking employment commensurate with their qualifications and experience, it is important to examine their experiences and interpretations of selection practices in Australian organizations. The study presented here is part of a larger research project that examines the experiences of immigrants from Southeast Asia when seeking employment in Australia, and the perceptions of managers and recruitment specialists about NESB immigrants' experiences in recruitment and selection.

Methodology

Participants

Six males and six females from four Southeast Asian countries (Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam) participated in a face-to-face interview. While it would have been ideal to utilize a larger sample, it was felt that a case study approach would provide a deeper understanding of intercultural selection issues as perceived by immigrant applicants. Essential criteria for inclusion in the sample were that participants had to have lived in Australia for a minimum of two years, had been speaking English for a minimum of five years and, had applied for a job and had been employed in at least one position within Australia.

TABLE 1 Details of Participants

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Years speaking English	Years in Australia
1	30	Female	Malaysia	25	12
2	42	Male	Singapore	30	4
3	49	Male	Philippines	37	5
4	34	Male	Vietnam	14	14
5	43	Female	Philippines	38	2
6	43	Male	Philippines	38	2
7	46	Male	Singapore	40	26
8	45	Female	Malaysia	40	11
9	41	Male	Malaysia	35	11
10	22	Female	Vietnam	13	13
11	26	Female	Malaysia	20	4
12	25	Female	Malaysia	14	5

All participants were tertiary qualified with the highest levels attained including Diploma (N=2), Bachelor degree (N=7), Postgraduate diploma (N=2) and Masters degree (N=1). Over half of the respondents gained these qualifications in Australia (N=6). All participants have held at

least one position within Australia with respondents indicating that they have been employed in one job (N=5); two jobs (N=2); three jobs (N=3); five jobs (N=1), and one person indicated that she had been employed in eight different jobs.

Interview

Since English was not the first language of the migrant participants, interviews were chosen instead of questionnaires because they offered better opportunities for the exchange of information. Additionally, this method was seen as the best way to elicit personal information about each respondent's experiences in recruitment and selection (Moore, 2000). An interview provided the opportunity to establish a relationship with participants. This was seen to be important when working with people from Southeast Asian cultures as studies have shown that Asian participants are more favourable to personal communication. (e.g. Gundling, 1999; Triandis, 1990). Furthermore, an interpersonal interaction was deemed to be necessary as it allowed the researcher to monitor the respondents' reactions to ensure that questions were not too personal (Hughes, 1996).

Participants were initially contacted by telephone to seek their involvement in the study, and then to establish rapport, all were contacted again by telephone at home one week prior to the interview. Each respondent chose the interview setting, with settings including the respondents' home or workplace, or a café. Each interview was conducted over a 30-45 minute period.

The interview consisted of three key sections, with the first two sections replicating questions asked of managers and recruitment specialists as reported in Daly (2000). Firstly, the migrant participants responded to questions about what characteristics they believe are ideal in an applicant, and they were asked to identify their most favoured recruitment and selection processes. Secondly, participants were asked about their specific attitudes and beliefs about recruitment and selection techniques and processes, and their perceptions of five communicative behaviours relevant to interview situations. Finally, questions were aimed at identifying participants' specific experiences with recruitment and selection. The themes examined through these questions included specific experiences relating to recruitment processes (e.g. finding out about a job, the application process), the face-to-face interview as a selection process (e.g. interview style, conditions, interviewer techniques), and awareness of employment assistance schemes available for immigrants. The findings from the questions about participants' experiences with employment interviews will be presented in this paper.

Results

In this section of the paper, each person's story shall be briefly discussed, with these findings to be interwoven in the Discussion.

Participant 1. She is currently employed as a Guidance Officer, after having completed secondary and tertiary studies in Australia. She has applied for many positions in Australia, has

attended five interviews, and held two positions. She recalled mostly positive experiences with most interview settings having been quite formal. Her most recent interview utilized a panel of Australian interviewers, and she reported to feel very comfortable with this method. The interviewers used culturally-appropriate behaviours and were supportive and encouraging during the interview. She reports she has always been able to follow the conversation.

Participant 2. He is currently employed as a General Manager of the Queensland business operations of a multinational corporation. He was originally transferred to Australia by another company, however while here applied for two other positions. He has attended only one job interview in Australia, in which he met with other Australian managers from interstate operations and the Singaporean manager of the Asia-Pacific region. He felt comfortable with this interview panel, though reported that he interacted more extensively and he felt, more successfully with the Singaporean interviewer. Although, in general he reported that he was able to follow the conversations in the interview, he did note that at times it was difficult talking with the Australian interviewers as, *“I’m not used to the slang”*.

Participant 3. After gaining his tertiary qualifications in his home country, Participant 3 immigrated to Australia. He is employed as an Accountant, which is the area of his training. He has attended three interviews and has held only one position. He reports preferring to work with people from his own culture, and so chooses companies, which he knows to have a high proportion of staff from Asian cultures. As such, all interviews have been conducted with an Asian manager and thus he does not report any differences from home-country experiences, or difficulties in the interview setting.

Participant 4. Participant 4 immigrated to Australia to complete tertiary qualifications. He has attended many interviews. He has held five positions, with only two of these being in the area in which he has his qualifications. He is now employed as a primary school teacher, however this position is not permanent. The most recent interview he attended was perceived as a positive experience, and he describes the setting; *“I would(n’t) say it’s great; everyone sit in a circle; quite easy to talk to everyone”*. In this interview, he felt that the interviewers’ behaviours were moderately culturally appropriate. He also found it was moderately difficult to understand and participate in the conversation, but the interviewers were helpful and used clarification techniques when necessary.

Participant 5. She has only recently moved to Australia with her husband, after working in administrative roles for a multinational company located in Saudi Arabia. She applies for *“many jobs every week”*, but has attended only three interviews. She has obtained business qualifications in Australia, and after gaining a temporary position as an administrative assistant, she is now employed as a hotel cleaner/ housekeeper. Although the interview settings are similar to her previous experiences in other countries, she described her experiences in Australian job interviews as *‘quite bad’*, as she feels unsure of what she should say. In her most recent interview, she felt the interviewer’s behaviours were *“culturally inappropriate. He was quite rude”*. She reported *“some problems”* understanding the conversation in an interview.

Participant 6. Participant 6 reported an extensive career working as an Engineer for a several American companies in the Middle East and Asia. He obtained his qualifications in his home country. Since moving to Australia, he has had a lot of difficulty gaining employment

commensurate with his qualifications and experience, and he now works as a hotel cleaner. He described feeling discriminated against during interviews, *“Being Asian, people automatically assume that spoken and written English is not up to scratch and so (you) can’t compete with Australians. They disregard everything else”*. He stated that he could follow the conversation in an interview.

Participant 7. He obtained qualifications overseas and in Australia, and is now employed in his third job in Australia as a Production Manager, in a multinational corporation. In his most recent interview, the interviewer was from the same cultural background, and he described this as a very positive experience. He reported feeling that he has been prejudiced against in previous interviews; *“Being from Asia(n), it has an impact, a negative impact. Interviewers are prejudiced regarding my colour, and I have been told that accent is a problem”*. However, overall, he describes his experiences with job interviews as positive, stating that in general he was able to follow the conversation and the interviewers used culturally appropriate behaviours.

Participant 8. Participant 8 is currently employed as an Administration Manager, and has held two other positions in Australia. She obtained her qualifications in Malaysia, and worked in several jobs there before immigrating. She reports very positive experiences in job interviews in Australia and noted little difference to interviews in Malaysia. Although, she did perceive that her most recent interview was a bit different as it *“was just like a chat”*, in an informal setting, sitting in *“lounge chairs”*.

Participant 9. He has obtained qualifications overseas and in Australia, and is now employed in his third job as an Engineer. Participant 9 discussed that he perceives his job interview experiences in Australia as very similar to those in Malaysia, and he feels quite confident in his performance and ability. In previous interviews, he was not aware of any form of prejudice or discrimination; *“I don’t think they saw me as different from other applicants even though there was a colour difference”*.

Participant 10. Since immigrating to Australia as a teenage, Participant 10 has held many positions. She is now employed in her eighth job as an Accountant, which is in the area of her training. Previously while studying, she has been employed in part-time and temporary positions. Overall, she reports all interview experiences have been positive, with only three unsuccessful occasions. She had never worked in Vietnam so is unaware of any cultural differences in the interview setting and structure. Participant 10 reported feeling confident in interviews and that she is always able to actively participate in the conversations.

Participant 11. Participant 11 has recently completed tertiary qualifications in Australia and is now employed in her first job as a Pharmacist. The interview for this position was her third interview experience, with the first two interviews being very formal, structured and with selection panels. In this most recent job interview, the conversation was aimed at a more social level, conducted in a café and the topics centred on her describing herself, rather than directly related to the position. She enjoyed this technique, as she was able to feel relaxed and focused on establishing a relationship with the manager.

Participant 12. She also recently obtained her tertiary qualifications in Australia and is employed as a Pharmacist, in her first job. She has attended three other interviews all in Australia,

including one in which the interviewer simply discussed the position and company, without asking any questions. In another interview, the experience was quite daunting as there were “*eight people on the panel*”. She felt that the interviewers used moderately culturally-appropriate behaviours, and she was able to follow the conversations quite well.

Discussion

Overall, most participants reported positive experiences with job interviews in Australia, with some finding interviews somewhat different to those in their home culture, and four respondents having no awareness of any other style of interviewing. In general, the participants felt that a face-to-face interview is a useful technique to see how they would ‘fit’ with the organization. Although Smither, et al (1993) found that applicants favour unstructured interviews and perceived them as having high validity, the participants in this study did not make any clear distinction in their preferences for the level of structure in a job interview. Supporting Di Milia and Smith’s findings (1997) that 92.4% of Australian organizations use two to three interviewers on a selection panel, many of the participants reported having experienced this type of interview. Most of these respondents reported feeling comfortable and confident in situations with interview panels, however further research should be conducted to determine the ideal number of interviewers. It would be anticipated that, Participant 12’s experience of having eight people on the interview panel would have been overwhelming to any applicant, regardless of cultural background.

Content analysis of the immigrants’ responses revealed that five respondents perceive that communication and cultural differences impact upon their success in gaining employment. However, further analysis reveals that there are other underlying factors, which may affect performance in job interviews. The first factor is the age at which the respondent started using English. All participants who reported that they have spoken English for more than ten years, have had good experiences in interviews and achieved greater success in gaining suitable employment. Secondly, the age at which the respondent immigrated to Australia must be considered. Participants who arrived in Australia as teenagers or young adults, described positive experiences with job interviews more often, than those who arrived when they were aged over 30 years. In turn, this factor relates to the length of time that each respondent has been in Australia. Those immigrants who had been in Australia for more than five years, seem more likely to have good experiences with interviews, and feel more confident about their performance. Thus, an increasing length of residence and time spent interacting with native speakers, may have developed the participants’ ability to communicate effectively within another language and culture (Khoo, 1993).

However, as intercultural communication competence may be improved with increased length of residence, these participants’ experiences may not be truly reflective of the impact of cultural differences on the success of Southeast Asian applicants gaining employment in Australia. Several respondents reported that in their previous job interviews, the interviewers seemed to be aware of cultural differences and used behaviours that were appropriate to their culture. However, this should be interpreted with some caution. Since the participants have been exposed to Australian culture for an average of nine years, their interpretations of culturally appropriate behaviours may be influenced by this time in Australia. Thus, it would be interesting to compare

the experiences of migrants who have recently settled in Australia with those who immigrated over ten years ago. Similarly, it would be beneficial to expand the current study to examine the experiences of other NESB migrant groups.

Anderson (1997) argues that while it is important to understand and respect the host culture, it is not necessary to accept or adopt it. Indeed, Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama and Barker (1999) recognize that migrants may resist learning and adopting the social norms in a new country. Such pressure to lose one's identity may result in feeling resentful and devalued (Mak et al, 1999). Indeed, Participant 3 has chosen to continue working within his own community. This may allow him to be more comfortable with the recruitment and selection processes, and the day-to-day expectations of a company's operations. It is worth considering that perhaps he has not adjusted to the Australian culture, and rather has responded by separation in which he has maintained his own culture and avoids contact with the new culture (Berry, 1990).

Two participants reported significant dissatisfaction with the interview procedures used by Australian organizations. They reported feeling discriminated against and felt that Australian interviewers used culturally inappropriate behaviours. It is interesting to note that both respondents have previously worked for American organizations, and their interpretations of Australian job interviews are based upon comparisons to experiences with the American firms. Training programs such as 'Excellence in Experiential Learning and Leadership' (Excell) (Mak et al, 1998), would allow immigrants such as Participants 5 and 6, to develop a greater understanding of their own culture, and the differences between that and the cultures of America and Australia. These respondents are attending interviews in Australia, not with expectations based on their own culture, but rather based on the American culture, the only other experience they have in job seeking.

Additionally, Participants 5 and 6 have experienced problems gaining employment in positions commensurate with their qualifications and experience possibly due to non-recognition of overseas qualifications. Participant 5 has attempted to rectify this problem by gaining qualifications in Australia, with little gain so far. Other researchers have identified that recognition of overseas training is a significant barrier to many NESB immigrants (Mak, 1996; Mak, et al, 1994; Wood & Payne, 1998; Yuen, 1997), with Australian employers reluctant to value the skills of overseas-trained applicants (Burton & Ryall, 1995; Iredale & Newell, 1991). However in contrast, five other respondents in this study reported that they have been successful in gaining satisfactory employment that is equivalent to the qualifications and experiences they gained prior to immigrating. Therefore, this finding highlights the need for further investigation as to the extent to which recognition of prior qualifications and skills impacts upon success in job-seeking. Perhaps in this instance, the experiences of Participants 5 and 6 relate more to intercultural communication difficulties rather than acceptance of overseas qualifications.

While Participant 10 clearly indicated that he was unaware of any form of prejudice or discrimination, Participants 6 and 7 reported overt experiences in which they perceived themselves to be discriminated because of their appearance. Research in Britain and Australia has shown that systematic racial discrimination continues despite legislation being implemented years earlier (Roberts, Davies & Jupp, 1992). Riach and Rich (1991) found that in Victorian organizations, discrimination was greater for people who were culturally more distant from the in-group. In contrast, Evans and Kelly (1991) concluded that when all variables such as education,

work experience and language skills had been considered, there was no evidence of discrimination. Discrimination would be difficult to determine, particularly when factors such as communication competency are considered. An applicant's success at interview is strongly related to the interviewer's perceptions and interpretations of verbal and nonverbal communication. The research shows that judgements regarding suitability for a position are based upon an applicant's ability to describe her experiences, skills and knowledge through a range of media (Hawthorne, 1992; Yuen, 1997). For example, a NESB migrant's success in job-seeking depends on language ability, and in particular, her ability to use appropriate cross-cultural interview strategies (Hawthorne, 1992). Yuen (1997) found that the recruiters demonstrated a tendency to make judgements about a candidate's personality and ability to work on the basis of her communicative behaviour. Numerous studies have identified that using culturally appropriate nonverbal behaviours increases an applicant's ratings (see Motowidlow & Burnett, 1995; Prickett, Gada-Jain & Bernieri, 2000).

This study was limited as it focused on gaining an understanding of the immigrant applicants' perceptions of their interview experiences. Moreover, as the sample consisted only of immigrants from Southeast Asia, we can not be sure as to whether other immigrant groups, or indeed, Australian job applicants would perceive similar experiences. Clearly, further investigation of immigrants' experiences in Australia recruitment and selection processes needs to be conducted, to gain a better understanding of how intercultural communication competence impacts on job-seeking success, and to what extent.

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