

Talking your way to success: accent bias in the workplace

1 Warmer

bias: an attitude that you have that makes you treat someone in a way that is unfair or different from the way you treat other people

a. Discuss the questions with a partner. Then share your answers with the rest of the class.

1. Are there different accents in your city or country? Can you name any of them?
2. Do you think the way someone speaks influences how successful they are in their career? How?
3. Do you think people are biased towards different accents? Why do you think so?

2 Key words

a. Write the words from the box next to the definitions below. Check your answers and your understanding of the words by using them to complete the example sentence under each definition. Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context.

hierarchy overcome posh prejudice represent tribe

1. someone who talks or behaves in a way that is typical of people from a high social class

Emma has a very _____ accent. She sounds like a duchess.

2. a group of people with its own distinctive tastes, interests, ways of dressing or behaving, etc.

Looking at his suit and tie, he probably belongs to the Wall Street _____.

3. be an example of a particular quality or type or speak or act officially for another person, group, or organisation _____

She _____ her company at the conference last week.

4. a system for organising people according to their status in a society, organisation, or other group

The CEO is at the top of the management _____.

5. an unreasonable opinion or feeling, especially the feeling of not liking a particular group of people

There is a lot of _____ against people over the age of 50, so it's difficult for them to find good jobs.

6. succeed in dealing with or controlling a problem _____

We are prepared to do what it takes to _____ these obstacles.

advance incentive industrial prestige progress social mobility

7. related to the production of goods, especially those made in factories _____

Their neighbourhood is right next to the _____ area, so they can smell all the gases from the factories.

8. continue to develop or move forward _____

The team has _____ with their design of the new electric car.

9. having a high reputation and attracting a lot of respect, because of being of very high quality

Their hotel has gained international _____.

10. the ability to move easily from a lower social class to a higher one _____

In some countries, there is more _____ and there is a chance for everyone who works hard to become successful.

11. help something progress and become more developed or successful _____

I hope that my foreign language skills will help me _____ my career.

12. something that makes you want to do something or to work harder because you know that you will benefit by doing this _____

Some companies try to motivate their employees by offering _____ like extra days of holiday.

Why accent bias is a dirty game

PRINCE HARRY MAY HAVE ADOPTED A TRANSATLANTIC TWANG, BUT A POSH VOICE STILL HELPS YOU GET A TOP JOB

JO ELLISON

- 1 Kirstie Alley, the American actress and comedian who has died at the age of 71, was one of my first voice crushes. Born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1951, Alley looked like a real dame, all big hair and power shoulders. And she had a voice to match, with a cool Midwestern swagger and a throaty rasp.
- 2 I've always had voice crushes but not for grand, stentorian types. I love voices that sound unusual or have a slightly broken crack.
- 3 This year we have been robbed of some especially fine examples: along with Alley, we lost Robbie Coltrane, whose deliciously strong south Glaswegian brogue remained undimmed throughout his acting career; Angela Lansbury, the London-born actress who moved to Hollywood and spoke with a gorgeous warbly, slightly mangled transatlantic poshness; and Queen Elizabeth II, one of the last public figures who actually spoke the Queen's English, a voice so plummy with class privilege she could barely enunciate a vowel.
- 4 All were in possession of fabulously distinctive voices, all represented a different social tribe. In some ways they represented the vestige of an era in which your voice truly announced your past. In the UK, one could be forgiven for thinking that such accents have now been eroded in the drift to glottal drawl.
- 5 "It's a dirty game," says Prince Harry in the second Netflix trailer to promote his tell-all documentary, his "Ts" made carefully more matey lest we remember he was born at the very zenith of the "hierarchy" he seems intent on bringing down.
- 6 But despite the sludge of accents we now hear across the media, it transpires they are still the source of powerful prejudices that most must overcome. In the incredibly depressing BBC documentary *How to Crack the Class Ceiling* this week, the broadcaster Amol Rajan examined how accent bias still contributes hugely, if unwittingly, to our advancement in an employment market where our prospects are still determined by the way we sound.
- 7 Using studies by researchers at Queen Mary's department of linguistics, Rajan revealed that 70 per cent of newsreaders across the UK's main news channels speak in received pronunciation, despite representing only 10 per cent of a population in which 75 per cent have accents he described as "industrial working class". Moreover, he offered further evidence that within the civil service, banking and legal sectors, people who sounded southern and metropolitan were far more likely to progress.
- 8 The show's case studies made for a pitiful exposé of the classism that still exists in the UK: Chris, born into poverty in Hull, was concerned that his northern accent made him sound "stupid" to employers, while barrister Paige worried about getting a pupillage because she didn't sound the part. None of the people interviewed spoke like the people before whom they sat.
- 9 And despite advice and leadership training, none got the jobs they seemingly deserved. Even the extraordinarily sharp Seth, who hoped to become a journalist, concluded that while he had a starred first degree and the dean's prize for being brilliant, his rural Somerset accent would probably be deemed too "local" to break the world of "prestige" news.
- 10 The programme was less about "how to" crack the class ceiling than whether it could actually be done. Meanwhile, a bunch of people in black shoes and wacky socks, who sounded like Young Conservatives, described their corporate efforts to overcome class bias.
- 11 Despite the inclusive rhetoric, class divisions in the UK are still appallingly pronounced. Last month it was reported that only 21 per cent of senior leadership positions in the City are held by staff from a working-class background. And that the UK has one of the poorest rates of social mobility in the developed world. In the UK, we may have softened up our Ts and toned down our outward poshness, but classism remains as pernicious as it was some 50 years ago.

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12 Voices can be a powerful weapon: sometimes they open doors. But it's incredibly sad to think that still, in 2022, the way you speak determines the extent to which you can advance. I only experienced voice shame while working in the south of Ireland, early in my career, where I was uniquely conscious that, every time I spoke, my colleagues heard 400 years of colonial rule. They were always very nice about it – they had the world's best accent, too. But as a consequence I played down my posher inclinations to give myself a more Artful Dodger "alright matey" tone.

13 Along with new Square Mile incentives to raise the number of people with working-class backgrounds to elevated leadership roles, I hope the documentary prompts employers to embrace a broader choir: the constipated tremolo we hear throughout the media sounds just as foreign, peculiar and dissonant as any local accent ever could. A diversity in voices makes the world a greater place. Why work with Harrys when you could have a Hagrid on the desk?

Glossary

classism: unfair treatment of people because of their social class

privilege: a special benefit that is available only to a particular person or group

Received Pronunciation: an accent that is considered to be the standard pronunciation in the UK

the working class: the social class that consists of people who do not have much money, education or power and who work mainly in manual jobs (=jobs that involve physical work)

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Jo Ellison, December 9, 2022.

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3 Understanding the article

a. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article. Correct any that are false.

1. Kirstie Alley, Robbie Coltrane, Angela Lansbury, and Queen Elizabeth II were all from the same social tribe.
2. Prince Harry says 'dirty' in the documentary trailer to sound less posh.
3. Amol Rajan examines how people's accents prevent them from getting better jobs in the documentary *How to Crack the Class Ceiling*.
4. Chris, Paige, and Seth from the show experienced a new form of classism.
5. About half of leadership positions in the UK are held by people from a working-class background.
6. The writer tried not to sound posh when working in Ireland.
7. The writer hopes that the documentary will help employers become less prejudiced.

4 Business language

a. How many syllables are in these words from the article? Identify the stressed syllable in each word.

1. career
2. classism
3. divisions
4. employer
5. inclusive
6. industrial
7. prejudice
8. represent
9. social

b. Now practise reading these sentences. Try reading them again in a different accents and see if the emphasis of the words changes.

1. Out with social divisions and classism!
2. Develop inclusive practices, say goodbye to prejudice.
3. Tell me about the Industrial Revolution and its consequences.
4. What career advancement opportunities does your employer offer?

5 Discussion questions

a. Discuss these questions.

- What different English accents do you know?
- Are you surprised to read about classism in the UK? How does it compare to where you live?
- Do you think people should change their accents to find better opportunities? Why (not)?
- How can companies and governments fight against accent bias?

Extension

Go to www.dialectsarchive.com/ and explore different accents in the UK or other countries.

6 Wider business theme – diversity in the workplace

Situation

The multinational company you work for has found out that only 7 per cent of senior leadership positions in the organisation are held by staff from a working-class background. HR is now looking for ways to fight discrimination and to support all employees to advance in their careers.

Task

You are attending an online meeting to discuss what the first action points should be: i) implement a non-discrimination policy or ii) provide a training programme for employees.

- First, make a list of the pros and cons for each.
Consider: impact (who would benefit and how), cost, duration and how to implement.
- Complete your role card which will provide the baseline for your own personal speaking points during the meeting.
- Hold a meeting in which a decision must be made.

Extension

Write an email to the rest of the staff (the ones who did not attend your meeting) informing them of the decision and the reasons that led to it.

Useful language

Dear all,

I am writing to inform you of recent decisions that were made in our regional HR meeting.

We believe that ...

We have decided that ... in order to / because of ...

We will ...

Please contact HR if you have any questions or comments.

Best regards,

Role cards

A You believe that company policy needs to change first. The company should ...	B Coming from a working-class background, you believe it's necessary to have a policy that ...
C You don't think it's just an HR problem but an issue for everyone. So it's important for all employees to ...	D You think the leaders need to be trained to solve the problem. They can ...
E You believe that employees coming from a working-class background need to receive training to help them ...	F You believe that the company needs to give employees coming from a working-class background ...