

Tongue tied

The challenge of getting messages across to workers with limited English can be a spur to improve your training, says David Towlson

It can be instructive to place yourself in the position of others. This point became clear to me many years ago, when I worked for a short time in Osaka, Japan. On landing there, I discovered the airport signs were almost entirely in Japanese — I suppose I had arrogantly expected English.

I gravitated towards what must have been an information point, where a woman did speak some English. It was obvious I wasn't a native, since Japan at that time was not what you might call multiethnic. She managed to communicate how to buy tickets and get into the city.

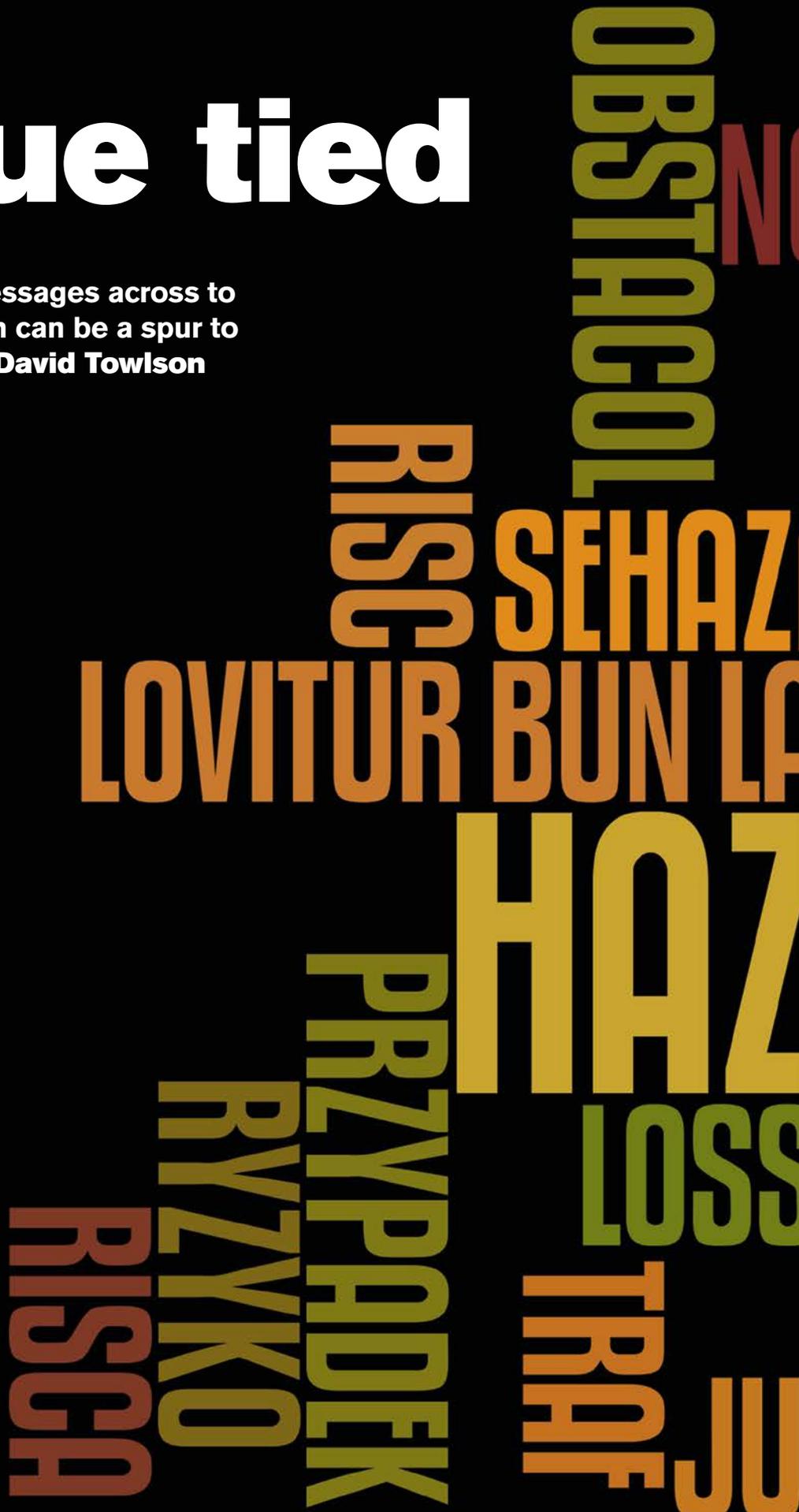
When I went to the factory the next day, I remember having to remove my shoes and wear something like flipflops, except the largest size available was around four sizes too small. I had to give a serious technical presentation, conduct some laboratory analysis and negotiate stairs in this footwear.

But if I had been required to operate machinery, I would not have been as happy muddling through and would have felt the lack of training and support working in a foreign culture.

Lower echelons

According to the government's Labour Force Survey, a high proportion of the most recent migrant workers into the UK have funnelled into lower skilled occupations. More than a quarter of those in "elementary process operations", food preparation, and textile and clothes manufacture were born abroad.

A study for the HSE (www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr502.pdf) found many accidents involving migrant workers reported to the authorities have in common poor communication and lack of training. But it is easy to overstate the problems associated with keeping people safe if their first language is not English. The HSE's research also found employers with experience of high volumes of migrant labour were less likely to see foreign workers as facing greater risks than the rest of their workforces. But the responsibility to make sure all workers understand safety instruction and training means expending a little more effort to discharge your duty of care for those with limited English.



MIGRANT WORKERS

(www.healthandsafetyatwork.com/trojan-horse) or posters (see feature on page 28) where the point is carried primarily by the picture. The HSE's research found that giving the same message in several ways is more effective.

Lingua franca

Where translation seems an easier option than revamping your whole training programme and you have a group of workers of the same nationality, check whether anyone in the group has strong enough English skills to provide simultaneous translation at training sessions. Even if no one volunteers or has strong enough English, one of them may still be able to point you to a community group that could supply a translator.

Whoever you find to interpret training live or to translate written materials is unlikely to be a safety specialist, so it would be worth sitting down with them and going through technical terms, whether it is interlock or near miss, to make sure they will be rendered correctly.

Basic safety vocabulary to help a translator is contained in the HSE's introductory leaflets such as *Working in the UK from Overseas*. There are translations of the literature into 30 languages

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from Albanian to Urdu at www.hse.gov.uk/languages/index.htm but some nationalities are better catered for than others. There is only one leaflet in Latvian, for instance, and three in Bengali but 16 in Polish and 10 in Romanian, mostly on construction hazards.

Similarly the TUC has an explanation of workers' rights, including basic health and safety provision in 20 languages, at www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-issues/health-and-safety/migrant-workers

With a group of workers who share a language but have mixed abilities, you could try a buddy system, pairing stronger English speakers with weaker ones.

Investor in people

The language barrier may not be the only one you have to overcome in training a migrant workforce. Other cultures have differing standards of workplace safety, especially in some of the emerging economies. If you have been brought up with a far more risk taking, laissez-faire attitude, it can be difficult to grasp workplace strictures here immediately. You may have to put in more effort to persuade such people to come round to your way of thinking, but making it clear that safety duties are a condition of work is the starting point.

On the plus side, many migrants are well educated, and sometimes highly qualified in other fields, but are held back by poor language skills or because their qualifications are not recognised in the UK. Seeing them as an investment and training them progressively makes sense if they have the expertise you need.

This is all what professional trainers call “differentiation”, finding out what each individual's educational needs are and planning to meet them. If a migrant has skills you think are worth having, it's an obvious thing to think about how best to ensure they are kept safe and healthy. ■

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