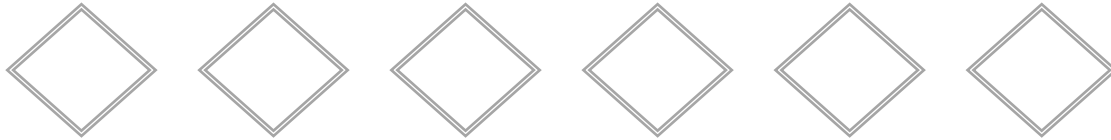


White Paper: The Multilingual Workforce – Productivity Opportunity or Risk?

Why communication, confidence, and understanding matter more than ever in New Zealand workplaces



Introduction: A changing workforce, and a growing opportunity

New Zealand workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse. Across industries such as manufacturing, healthcare, logistics, construction, hospitality, and food production, multilingual teams are now a critical part of how organisations operate and grow.

This shift is creating significant opportunities for businesses. Diverse teams bring valuable perspectives, adaptability, cultural insight, and experience that strengthen organisations and the communities they serve.

But as workplaces become more diverse, communication expectations are also becoming more complex.

Employees are expected to navigate workplace systems, interpret processes, engage with customers, participate in meetings, understand health and safety requirements, and communicate confidently across teams. At the same time, many organisations are still operating with communication practices designed for a far less diverse workforce.

The result is that capable employees do not always contribute as fully or confidently as they could.

In many workplaces, the challenge is not technical capability or willingness to perform. It is whether employees feel sufficiently confident communicating, asking questions, clarifying expectations, and participating fully in workplace conversations.

As New Zealand's workforce continues to evolve, the organisations that succeed will be those that create environments where diverse teams can communicate clearly, contribute confidently, and perform at their best.

Diversity is not the challenge — communication systems are

New Zealand's workforce has changed significantly over the past two decades.

According to Stats NZ, more than one in four people living in New Zealand were born overseas, and the proportion is considerably higher across many urban workforces and key industries [1].

At the same time, organisations are operating in increasingly complex environments:

- more digital systems
- more compliance requirements

- more documentation
- higher customer expectations
- greater health and safety obligations

In many workplaces, communication systems have not evolved at the same pace.

Instructions are still delivered quickly. Assumptions are still made about understanding. Employees are often expected to interpret workplace language, technical terminology, policies, and procedures without structured support.

When this happens, capable people can struggle unnecessarily.

Beyond language: The real issue is confidence and understanding

One of the biggest misconceptions organisations make is assuming communication challenges are purely about vocabulary or grammar.

In reality, workplace communication is much broader.

It includes the confidence to:

- ask questions
- clarify instructions
- contribute ideas
- participate in meetings
- raise concerns
- communicate with customers
- understand workplace expectations
- interpret written information in context

Many multilingual employees understand far more than they confidently express.

As a result, organisations can unintentionally mistake quietness for disengagement, hesitation for lack of capability, or misunderstanding for poor performance.

But often, the issue is not competence.

It is communication confidence within the workplace environment.

What the New Zealand research tells us

New Zealand research consistently highlights the importance of foundational communication and literacy skills in supporting workplace productivity and participation.

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) found that many adults in New Zealand struggle with the literacy demands of modern work, particularly where interpreting documents, processing information, and problem solving are required [2].

The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) also notes that workplace literacy and communication programmes improve employee confidence, participation, and engagement with workplace processes and training [3].

At the same time, the New Zealand Productivity Commission has repeatedly identified workforce capability as a critical factor in lifting productivity and organisational performance [4].

These findings are especially relevant in multilingual workplaces, where communication expectations are often increasing while confidence levels vary significantly across teams.

The issue is not whether employees are capable of learning and contributing.

The issue is whether workplaces are creating the conditions for understanding and participation to occur consistently.

Where communication breakdowns appear in multilingual workplaces

In many organisations, communication gaps do not appear dramatically. They appear quietly and repeatedly in everyday work.

For example:

- staff nodding despite not fully understanding instructions
- employees avoiding questions because they fear embarrassment
- inconsistent interpretation of procedures or processes
- reluctance to participate in meetings or discussions
- safety concerns not being raised early enough
- customer interactions becoming inconsistent
- capable workers staying in lower-level roles because of communication confidence

Managers often experience this as frustration or inconsistency.

But underneath these situations is usually a deeper issue:

people are trying to operate in environments where communication expectations exceed their confidence.

Why this matters for productivity and safety

Small misunderstandings create larger operational impacts over time.

Tasks need to be redone. Errors increase. Supervisors spend additional time clarifying instructions. Teams become less efficient. Miscommunication affects customer experience and workflow consistency.

In higher-risk environments, the implications become even more serious.

WorkSafe New Zealand has consistently emphasised the importance of clear communication and worker participation in maintaining safe workplaces [5]. Employees need to feel confident not only understanding procedures, but also speaking up when something seems unclear or unsafe.

This is particularly important in multilingual environments where employees may hesitate to ask questions or challenge instructions.

Strong workplace communication is therefore not simply a cultural or HR issue.

It is a productivity issue.

A safety issue.

And increasingly, a leadership issue.

What high-performing organisations are doing differently

Organisations seeing the greatest success with diverse workforces are not lowering expectations.

They are improving clarity, support, and communication capability across their teams.

They recognise that:

- understanding should never be assumed
- confidence affects participation
- communication is a skill that can be developed
- inclusion improves operational performance, not just culture

These organisations actively invest in helping employees:

- communicate more confidently at work
- understand workplace systems and expectations
- participate in conversations and meetings
- ask clarifying questions
- engage more fully with customers, colleagues, and managers

Importantly, they view this as capability development rather than remediation.

That distinction matters.

Reframing workplace communication training

For many organisations, programmes supporting multilingual employees have traditionally been viewed narrowly as “ESOL training.”

But this framing can unintentionally limit engagement.

The most effective workplace communication programmes are not simply about improving English in a classroom environment.

They are about improving communication within the realities of work.

That includes:

- workplace vocabulary and terminology
- understanding procedures and documentation
- communicating with customers and colleagues
- building confidence to ask questions and contribute
- navigating workplace culture and expectations

When employees feel more confident communicating at work, organisations often see improvements far beyond language itself.

Confidence grows. Participation increases. Team communication improves. Managers spend less time clarifying instructions. Employees become more engaged and more capable of progressing into leadership or specialist roles.

A simple but powerful insight

Many multilingual employees are highly capable.

But capability is often hidden when confidence and communication barriers exist.

The organisations that thrive in the coming years will not simply be those with diverse workforces.

They will be those that build workplaces where diverse teams can communicate, contribute, and succeed confidently.

What this means for leaders

For leaders, the implications are clear.

As New Zealand's workforce continues to diversify, communication capability can no longer be treated as secondary.

It must become part of how organisations think about:

- productivity
- leadership
- safety
- employee development
- retention
- and workforce performance

The goal is not perfect English.

The goal is shared understanding.

When employees feel confident asking questions, clarifying expectations, and contributing ideas, organisations become safer, more productive, and more connected

Conclusion: Building workplaces where people can contribute fully

New Zealand's multilingual workforce represents one of the country's greatest opportunities.

But diversity alone does not automatically create strong teams.

Organisations need to intentionally build communication environments where people feel able to understand, participate, and contribute fully.

When that happens, the benefits extend well beyond communication itself.

- Productivity improves.
- Engagement grows.
- Safety strengthens.
- Confidence increases.

And organisations unlock more of the capability already sitting within their workforce.

About Aspire2 Workplace Communication

Aspire2 Workplace Communication works with organisations across New Zealand to strengthen workplace communication, literacy, numeracy, and confidence across diverse teams.

Our workplace-focused communication and ESOL programmes are designed to help multilingual employees build the skills and confidence needed to participate fully and succeed at work.

If your organisation is looking to strengthen communication, improve workplace understanding, and better support diverse teams, we would love to talk.

Contact us at workplacecommunication@aspire2.co.nz

Or learn more about our workplace ESOL programmes at:
<https://workplacecommunication.co.nz/esol/>

References

- [1] Stats NZ. 2023 Census: Birthplace and Ethnicity Data. 2024.
- [2] Ministry of Education. PIAAC 2014: Skills and Work in New Zealand. 2016.
- [3] Tertiary Education Commission. Workplace Literacy and Numeracy: Employer and Learner Outcomes. 2020.
- [4] New Zealand Productivity Commission. Frontier Firms: Measuring and Exploring New Zealand's Productivity Performance. 2021.
- [5] WorkSafe New Zealand. Worker Engagement, Participation and Representation Guidelines. 2023.