

## The ASHA Leader

March 13, 2012 Features

# A Growing Niche in Corporate America

by Marjorie Feinstein-Whittaker, Lynda Katz Wilner & Lorna D. Sikorski

### see also

- [Resources](#)
- [References](#)

Many speech-language pathologists in the United States are discovering a niche market that's been around for more than 40 years but is growing: assisting highly educated non-native English speakers with their English communication skills, including accent modification.

This market takes SLPs out of their traditional work settings—schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, academia—away from clients with speech and language disorders and into the corporate setting where there is great demand for communication services. This arena raises several questions: What skills are required? Are SLPs equipped to work in this area? What are the unique considerations for this group of service-seekers? Where do you get started and how? Read on to learn what we've gleaned from our collective 69 years of experience in this niche.

## Brief History

Several decades ago, non-native English speakers in corporate settings began contacting SLPs for help with their English communication. The corporate setting was very different from traditional private practice and presented new challenges to SLPs (Christensen, 2006; Schwartz, 2003; Wilner, 2007). SLPs were positioned to be natural instructors; however, given the questions and concerns we have received from participants in convention presentations and continuing education courses over the past 25 years, many were not ready to tackle the corporate culture. Doing so requires changes in communication style, appearance, business practices, and most important, our mindset.

In addition, another profession—namely, teachers of English for speakers of other languages (TESOL)—had rich linguistic research, significant practical experience, and a 25-year head start working with non-native English speakers (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Dickerson, 1994). Many SLPs were unaware of the professional organization TESOL. Accent clients in graduate clinics were rare, materials were limited, relevant convention presentations were scarce, and many in the field did not view accent modification as a credible niche.

Diversity increased in the corporate setting and effective communication was seen as a critical component of success in the workplace. An increasing number of SLPs began providing accent

modification training for these skills. Training materials surfaced from SLPs and unique speech-language pathology networking groups, such as Corporate Speech Pathology Network (CORSPAN).

Today, SLPs routinely offer communication services to adults whose native language is not English as well as to native English speakers with regional dialects, often to supplement a traditional caseload or to create an independent business (see [resource box](#)).

## Suited for the Specialty?

SLPs' extensive background in anatomy and physiology, articulation, and language and pragmatics provides the key skills required. "Train the trainer" courses help prospective accent modification practitioners learn the essentials for assessment and instruction in accent modification. The skills honed from clinical work transfer readily to the individual and group human resource training that is typical in corporate America. For example, accent modification clients frequently need work in areas including rate of speech, word and phrase stress, intonation, and sound production.

Of course, you can learn the skills required to provide accent services. But beyond the technical aspects, success in this niche requires a new perspective on the use of your professional training. The following questions may help you decide if you want to try this field:

- Would you enjoy providing services to working adults on nonrehabilitation issues?
- Are you prepared to help adults whose native language is not English and those with regional dialects/accents improve their communication skills?
- Do you like to work independently?
- Do you prefer an entrepreneurial role?
- How are your own communication and public speaking skills?
- Are you organized, self-sufficient, flexible, and motivated?
- Do you have a strong interest in multicultural issues?
- Can you advocate for yourself in the highly competitive business environment?
- Do you have the sales skills that will give you a competitive edge?

## Cultural Shift

Accent modification service providers usually operate as training and development consultants to U.S. companies. The business culture—quite different from that of academia, clinics, and schools—influences the structure of your business and the terminology you use.

For example, your services are not "therapy" or "treatment," and participants do not have "disorders" (Sikorski, 2005a, 2005b). Even use of the term "accent" is variable; some companies avoid it completely in favor of "strategies to improve communicative effectiveness" or a similar phrase, rather than referring to changing something considered "undesirable."

SLPs providing services in this niche need to recognize that adults learn differently from children, and they need to have a thorough understanding of normal second-language acquisition. Learning

theory, which is extensively researched in the human resources field, is perhaps not as extensively taught in our field (Brookfield, 1986; Glaser, 2002). Carryover—helping accent clients transition to less structured environments and more spontaneous communication—can be challenging because first-generation English-speakers often speak in their native language at home or with friends. Also, accent clients may have colleagues who speak languages that are unfamiliar to them, complicating communication.

In collaboration with companies, successful consultants anticipate these difficulties and orchestrate adequate practice to offset them and ensure employees' success:

- Encourage managers and other stakeholders to make the work environment conducive to reinforcing new skills.
- Share strategies, answer questions, and conduct cross-cultural communication training at informal meetings with co-workers and supervisors on how to help the trainee communicate in various situations.
- Offer to facilitate other programs should future training initiatives arise.
- Stay involved; long-term relationships and networking foster business.

## **Logistics**

Anecdotal comments during our professional education programs confirm that SLPs gravitate to individual instruction formats for accent modification. This trend is understandable, as clinical practice with adults is generally one on one, and many SLPs do not have experience with adult groups. However, in corporate training, because of cost benefits, programs primarily take place in groups. The individual, "executive coaching" consulting model is limited to an elite tier of corporate funding. Therefore, based on our experiences in this niche, successful trainers seeking a broad spectrum of corporate clients need to consider the financial and logistical needs of their clients and offer small (three to six participants) or midsize (seven to 12) groups.

Distance learning (via Skype or web conferencing) and blended learning (a combination of technology and in-person training) are methods that have grown in popularity in the last decade for formal academics, networking, sales, professional training and development programs in business, and consulting of all types.

## **Marketing**

It's important to remember that entering this market involves more than providing services—as in any private practice setting, you are establishing or expanding a business, marketing your services, managing finances, and perhaps hiring and training employees, among other responsibilities. The marketing perspective in this environment is different from a traditional speech-language pathology practice. It is important to learn how to identify your marketing target and what venues will promote more business. For example, the private-practice website for accent modification will look different from a traditional speech-language pathology practice website. It will be geared more toward corporate professionals than toward parents of a child with a communication disorder.

Consider hiring a professional web designer to create a polished professional website, or design one for yourself after exploring other websites marketing to similar populations.

In marketing your services, keep in mind that buyers are savvy consumers who want competent instructors and that the end-users of accent modification services are not the only consumers. Some clients may select and pay for services privately, but many companies may pay for the services out of training budgets, sponsor onsite or online training programs for employees, or reimburse employees for non-company programs.

In the corporate world, entities that may arrange for training programs include human resource departments, professional training and development departments, faculty development and training offices, diversity offices, and employee assistance programs. It is critical to identify the appropriate target when preparing to launch and/or send out a marketing tool, such as a flier, brochure, or educational DVD. And just as important: How is that person going to receive your message? It is beneficial to network in business arenas that will offer exposure, such as local small business association and chamber of commerce events. It may also be worthwhile to attend, present, or exhibit at human resource conferences or other corporate conferences where you can connect directly with your audience.

To become more competitive, you may want to expand your areas of expertise to include a broader range of professional communication skills: accent, listening skills, public speaking, writing, small talk, etc. But ensure that you have the knowledge and experience to market these services so that your clients will want to refer you to their colleagues.

## **Legal Considerations**

Companies value excellent communication skills and want employees to contribute to the company's overall success. Effective communication is required to inspire, lead, motivate, and mentor others.

Some employers, however, hesitate to offer accent modification services, fearing potential litigation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination by national origin, including accent and language discrimination. A mandate for across-the-board accent modification training may lead to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or employees filing claims for violation of the Act (Woodward, 2008).

Employers should understand that it is legitimate to critique and intervene if excellent communication skills are key to an employee's job responsibilities and are cited in job descriptions and requirements and performance reviews. If, however, communication is not a key skill set for an employee's position, decisions to terminate employment or prevent promotion may be in violation of the employee's civil rights.

SLPs are in a position to educate decision-makers that communication services are an opportunity for professional development, not an act of discrimination. Employers should not, however, mandate these programs.

## Insurance

SLPs should carry professional liability insurance for negligence. According to a representative at Marsh U.S. Consumer/Seabury & Smith, Inc., SLPs who buy this insurance are covered worldwide as long as their services are within the scope of practice set by individual state guidelines. Independent contractors also should carry general liability insurance for protection from incidental injuries that may occur in or outside their offices.

Homeowner's insurance often has business-in-the-home endorsements to cover home-based liabilities. One insurance agent recommends maintaining a separate business office policy for a home-based business that has substantial foot traffic and income. He advises the same for SLPs renting office space. Some corporations request to see your certificate of insurance before signing a consultant contract.

## Sealing the Deal

Business consultants routinely conduct needs assessments. If you are hired as a communications specialist, you want to understand the stakeholders' expectations—especially the specific skills the company wants its employees to gain—and design a successful course accordingly.

These conversations about expectations often reveal challenges in other critical work skills that could be incorporated into the training program. If you determine that a client exhibits a clinical disorder, address it separately, including making appropriate referrals as necessary.

All parties must understand how success will be determined and evaluated. Use outcome-based objectives to set goals (e.g., positive pronunciation changes, better overall communication between employee and customer, increased customer satisfaction, more active participation in meetings, more confident communication as a requirement for job promotion).

Companies expect a return on their investment—they want to see results of your training translated into the company or individual's benchmarks for success. They may request a client/supervisor survey, pre- and post-assessments, weekly log sheets and assignments, or meetings with senior managers. Required paperwork may include initial and final reports, interim updates, telephone contacts, and certificates of completion. Reports should be concise summaries, not jargon-filled tomes, and should be related to the outcome-based objectives.

## The Paper Trail

Just as documentation and privacy rules are part of an SLP's clinical practice, human resources regulations are part of the corporate workplace. In general, the privacy of clients is paramount. The ASHA *Code of Ethics*, Principle of Ethics I, states, "Individuals shall honor their responsibility to hold paramount the welfare of persons they serve professionally or who are participants in research and scholarly activities, and they shall treat animals involved in research in a humane manner." Under this principle, item M states, "Individuals shall adequately maintain and appropriately secure

records of professional services rendered, research and scholarly activities conducted, and products dispensed, and they shall allow access to these records only when authorized or when required by law."

In this setting, e-mail may be the primary vehicle for transmitting proposals, client documents, invoices, and other paperwork. Electronic signatures are routinely accepted on service agreements. Secure e-mail protocols are essential in protecting client data.

These issues may be most critical when corresponding with individual, self-paying clients, who are not subject to company e-mail protocols that offer some protection to all parties. Any document may be altered, but sending material in pdf format with a descriptive footer including your name and the date ensures that the document you send will arrive in the same condition, regardless of whether it is forwarded or exchanged without your knowledge.

## Peer Support

Outside consultants often work alone, without the professional interactions inherent in other settings. It is wise to stay connected through local and national networking opportunities (see [resources](#)). Join shared interest groups on internet professional networking sites or other organizations that promote the business of doing business.

SLPs are ideal professionals to help non-native English speakers and native English speakers with regional dialects and accents who want to improve communication skills in the workplace. This practice, however, may require expanding one's perspective—from the traditional school, clinic, or academic setting to an understanding of the business environment. Successful consultants will be those who consider new business models, expand their skills sets, and market to decision-makers. SLPs who expand their level of expertise and understanding of the business environment will be better equipped to be competitive in this growing field.

Marjorie Feinstein-Whittaker, MS, CCC-SLP, is the founder and principal of The Whittaker Group, a corporate speech and communication consulting business in Boston, and co-founder and principal of ESL RULES, a company that develops pronunciation and communication training materials and programs for non-native English speakers. Contact her at [wg@prospeech.com](mailto:wg@prospeech.com).

Lynda Katz Wilner, MS, CCC-SLP, is founder and principal of Successfully Speaking, a professional speaking skills and consulting business for individuals and groups in the Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., areas, and co-founder and principal of ESL RULES, a company that develops pronunciation and communication training materials and programs for non-native English speakers. Contact her at [lkwilner@successfully-speaking.com](mailto:lkwilner@successfully-speaking.com).

Lorna D. Sikorski, MA, CCC-SLP, founder of LDS & Associates in Southern California, specializes in the design and implementation of communication programs for foreign-born professionals worldwide. LDS is also an ASHA CE sponsor and publisher of accent and advanced ESL materials. Contact her at [lornasikorski@ldsassoc.com](mailto:lornasikorski@ldsassoc.com).

*cite as: Feinstein-Whittaker, M. , Wilner, L. K. & Sikorski, L. D. (2012, March 13). A Growing Niche in Corporate America. The ASHA Leader.*

## Resources

[American Academy of Private Practice in Speech Pathology and Audiology](#)

[ASHA Special Interest Group 14](#), Communication Disorders and Sciences in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations

[ASHA Special Interest Group 18](#), Telepractice

[American Society for Training and Development](#) (ASTD)

[CORSPAN](#) (Corporate Speech Pathology Network)

[Society of Human Resource Management](#)

[TESOL](#) (Teachers of English for Speakers of Other Languages) International Association

## References

**American Speech-Language-Hearing-Association.** (2011). *The clinical education of students with accents* [Professional Issues Statement]. [www.asha.org/docs/html/PI2011-00324.html](http://www.asha.org/docs/html/PI2011-00324.html).

**Brookfield, S. D.** (1986). *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

**Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Goodwin, M.** (1996). *Teaching Pronunciation: A Reference for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

**Christensen, B.** (2006). Corporate speech-language pathology: Is it right for you? *The ASHA Leader*, 11(1), 14—15, 24—25. [www.asha.org/Publications/leader/2006/060117/f060117b](http://www.asha.org/Publications/leader/2006/060117/f060117b).

**Dickerson, W.** (1994). Empowering students with predictive skills. *Pronunciation Pedagogy and Theory: New Views, New Directions*, 2, 17–35. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English To Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

**Glaser, R.** (2002). *Facilitating Adult Learning in Organizations*. King of Prussia, PA: HRDQ.

**Justia US Law.** (1989). *Fragante v. City and County of Honolulu*. Retrieved Sept. 1, 2011, from <http://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/888/591/204092>.

**Matuson, R. C.** (2011). *Managing Up, Managing Down, Succeeding All Around*. Boston: Nicholas Brealey.

**Schwartz, K.** (2003), SLPs and the world of work: Corporate speech-language pathology. *The ASHA Leader*, 8(12), 4–5. [www.asha.org/Publications/leader/2003/030624/030624a.htm](http://www.asha.org/Publications/leader/2003/030624/030624a.htm).

**Sikorski, L. D.** (2005a). Foreign accents: Suggested competencies for improving communicative pronunciation. *Seminars in Speech and Language*, 26(2), 126–130.

**Sikorski, L. D.** (2005b). Regional accents: A rationale for intervening and competencies required. *Seminars in Speech and Language*, 26(2), 118–125.

**U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission** (1964). *National Origin Discrimination*. Retrieved Sept. 1, 2011, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil\\_Rights\\_Act\\_of\\_1964#Title\\_VII](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_Rights_Act_of_1964#Title_VII).

**Wilner, L. K.** (2007). Communication skills training programs for IMGs. *Academic Internal Medicine Insight*, 5(3), 14–15.

**Woodward, N. H.** (2008). How to address concerns over employees' accents. *HR Compliance Law Bulletin*, 14(14), 1–2

[©1997-2012 American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#)