



Nicole's Human Resources

SURVIVAL GUIDE

Tips for improving
your HR English

Written by Nicole Tomberg,
bookworm, English teacher and coach



NICOLE'S FRIDAY POSTS

I started writing tips on how to improve your language skills at the onset of Corona and have not stopped since then.

There are lots of things you can do to get better at English:

- Speak English to yourself
- Read articles
- Listen to podcasts
- Watch your favourite TV series
- Watch youtube videos
- Speak English to your spouse/friend

Whatever the input, turn it into something active and speak about it/summarize it/comment on it.

This little booklet is supposed to be a leisurely read, hopefully with some eye-opening moments for you. I see English as a lingua franca - just remember you might encounter different grammar and expressions in the countries you visit or with native speakers you talk to.

Enjoy! Nicole

As you will see, when you learn a language, a lot is about general communication. The technical terms are really not that hard to learn - but you have to get the context and your sentences right.



Nicole Tomberg, Leitung und Trainerin



RECRUITERS IN A JOB INTERVIEW

Here is some important HR topics that HR people deal with. Can you guess the jumbled headlines?

RTCTIUMNREE

The current lack of qualified staff is a massive problem for companies. In the past years employer branding has become more and more important. Companies have to offer competitive salaries and well-adapted benefits packages. Sales people might be more interested in high commissions and bonuses, whereas breadwinners in the family probably prefer a better work-life balance and perks that support the well-being of the employees.

TTNEATMOIRIN

If a company wants to get rid of staff, this is called “to make someone redundant”, “to let someone go” or “to give notice to someone”. If you let somebody go because of their bad behaviour or poor performance, you can say “to fire”. If the staff wants to leave, you can say they want to “quit” or “leave”. When the termination of a contract is difficult, compensation packages (or even golden handshakes) can motivate a person to sign the termination agreement.

BOJIWENVESTRI

Conducting job interviews and doing assessments are a very interesting part of the job. Today it is very important to be authentic – many company use personality assessment tools to make sure that their teams are diverse and that people can work according to their personality and preferred behaviours.

DYSTIREIV and DCNMOIIANI ISR

Companies today make sure that they have a diverse workforce. Diversity means you can share a lot of different perspectives and profit from many different talents and skills. Especially people in HR have to be aware of so-called unconscious bias – shortcuts in our brain that lead to very fast judgement. This used to be an advantage and led to our survival thousand and thousands of years ago. But today we should make sure not to judge too quickly, from a picture, from a name. Discrimination is often mentioned in the company's code of conduct.

Solutions: Recruitment, job interview, termination, diversity, discrimination



CANDIDATES IN A JOB INTERVIEW

Preparing for a job interview in English is not as difficult as you might think. But there is a mix-up of language and content – you need to work on your English as well as on “good” answers.

What are “good” answers? I think HR people might say that being **authentic** is the most important thing today.

Here are my tips for you.

You need the **past tense** to talk about all past jobs:

In my last job I successfully **WORKED** in cross-functional, international teams.

I **WORKED** at Bayer for 20 years. Then I **LEFT** to work as an HR manager at Maier AG.

I **GOT** my university entrance qualifications in 2000, but before I **STUDIED**, I **TOOK** a year off and **TRAVELED** the US.

Point out what you learnt from this or what **skills** this proves:

Because of this I am now fluent in English.

It was a great opportunity to develop my people skills.

During that time, I was able to develop my leadership skills.

When you talk about your current position, the grammar not the past tense. Watch out!

I **HAVE BEEN WORKING** in HR for 20 years (still true now)

I **HAVE** never **WORKED** with a large team. (still true now)

I **HAVE BEEN WORKING** at Bayer for 10 years (still working there now)

I **HAVE** not **HANDED** in my notice yet. (means I still have to observe the full notice period)

I **HAVE** already **HANDED** in my notice, so I can start on 1 December.

Use **enthusiastic language** (I know it feels strange to some Germans):

The project was a **HUGE** success.

My method worked **AMAZINGLY WELL** and we had a **GREAT** result.

I **ABSOLUTELY LOVE** working with people.

I am **REALLY PASSIONATE** about...

Prepare for **tougher** questions such as:

What is your greatest weakness?

What did you not like about your last boss?

Be prepared to give specific examples when you talk about your skills. "I demonstrated my team skills in project x when we..."

DIPLOMACY

I would like to give you examples of how you can turn very direct language into more diplomatic, indirect language. In a lot of cultures, direct language is perceived as impolite (unhöflich).

Direct: I don't agree.

Indirect: I'm sorry, but I'm not quite sure I can agree.

Direct: This is a bad idea!

Indirect: Well, thanks for making that suggestion. I wonder if we have any other/better options...

Direct: We expected a better price.

Indirect: We were expecting a slightly better price.

Direct: We cannot give you a better price.

Indirect: Unfortunately, we are not in the position/unable to give you a better price at this moment.

Direct: Your performance was poor.

Indirect: I'm afraid your performance was not what we had expected. I'm afraid your performance did not come up to the high standards that we are used to here.

Direct: I don't agree.

Indirect: I see what you mean / I get your point. On the other hand...



Some rules:

"Unfortunately / I'm sorry, but / I'm afraid we"... are good beginnings if you have a negative message.

There is a comma after "I'm sorry", but there is no comma after "I'm afraid".

"At this moment" leaves options for the future (even if you don't really see them).

"We are unable to / we are not in the position to" are more diplomatic than "we cannot".

"We had been expecting / we were expecting" is more polite than "we expected".

Use "slightly" or "a little" to make problems sound smaller.

If you need to push someone to do something, it will not help to be more direct if you don't share the same work culture. You will possibly sound impolite to them, but it might not change their priorities or their attitude towards your request.

So, my idea is that we should always try to sound as polite as possible. I also understand that for some Germans this kind of diplomatic language sounds "exaggerated" (übertrieben) or "hypocritical" (scheinheilig).

At the end it is only important to me to show you how you can change your sentences if you want or need to.

MEETING PHRASES

In every conversation, in every meeting, we need typical meeting phrases.

Some people use wrong imaginary phrases such as “I’m agree” or “from my eyes”...so check out the following correct expressions and sentences you can use:

Express your opinion:

I think

(NOTA BENE: Don’t start the conversation with “in my opinion”)

Agreeing:

Yep! Yes! I agree! Totally! That’s true!
You are right!

Disagreeing (we are usually sorry about disagreeing):

Sorry, but I am not sure I can agree.

Sorry, but I can’t agree.

Are you sure?

In my opinion,...(this is usually only used to disagree to something)

I see your point, but...(this is very diplomatic and shows you are friendly)

I know what you mean, but...

Well, shouldn’t we rather...?

On the other hand, ...

Making a suggestion:

We could/can go to the cinema.

Why don’t we go to the Indian restaurant around the corner?

I suggest GOING to the cinema. (means we should all go together)

I suggest THAT YOU STAY in bed. (only the other person should stay in bed)

How about/what about GOING to the cinema?

Interrupting (here we usually need a lot of softeners like “just”):

Excuse me, can I just interrupt you here for a second?

Excuse me, could I just ask something?

Interrupting for clarification:

Sorry, I didn’t catch that.

Excuse me, could you say that again/repeat that?

Excuse me, could you explain that again?

Sorry, that isn’t quite clear to me.

NOTA BENE: “Would you mind...” can be used as follows:

Would you mind CLOSING the window?

Würde es Ihnen etwas ausmachen, das Fenster zu schließen?

Answer: not at all/no problem!

Would you mind if I CLOSED the window? Dürfte ich das Fenster schließen?

Answer: not at all/no problem!

If you wish to reply in the negative, you will have to say:

Actually, it is rather cold in here.

To be honest, I think it is rather cold in here already.

Sorry, but I think it is rather cold in here already.

“Sorry”, “well”, “actually” (eigentlich) and “unfortunately” prepare the other person for a negative message.

But “well” can also buy you time if you are not sure about your answer.



HIGH CONTEXT AND LOW CONTEXT

Have you ever heard of “low-context” and “high-context” cultures?

If the words you use communicate their exact meaning, then this is low context. This means if you say “yes” you mean “Yes, I agree”.

In high-context cultures “yes” might mean “I heard what you said” or “I need to be polite to you”.

So, learning a language also means understanding differences in cultures.

Germany is a low-context culture – we communicate meaning directly with the words we use. *** (please note below what I mean by “we”)

Japan e.g. is a high-context culture – you have to read between the lines and understand the hidden meaning.

So be aware: If a German person says “this is very interesting”, they might mean “this is very interesting – I am interested”

If an English person says “this is very interesting”, they might mean “what a silly idea”.

And next time a person with another cultural background asks you “what do you think?”, make sure they really want your opinion. Maybe they only want you to agree to what has been said?

***PS: when we talk about culture and “the Germans”, we refer to behaviour that the majority of people display and rules that they pass on from generation to generation. It never means that every single person is exactly like that.

It also doesn't mean I am stereotyping. These are just what scientific research has found to be the characteristics of that society/group/nation/people.





SMALLTALK

Germany has a lower level of smalltalk than other countries. A lot of Germans think that in smalltalk they have to share private information, which they try to avoid.

But that's not the case.

FUNCTION

Smalltalk is an icebreaker and a way of showing the other person that you are friendly. It is an internationally recognized skill that is used to build rapport (Beziehungsaufbau, eine gemeinsame Ebene schaffen). If you can have a friendly conversation about sports at the water dispenser, you can do business with that person much more easily afterwards.

TOPICS AND TABOOS

Smalltalk topics are sports, the job, travel, your accommodation, books, films, music, fashion, cars, current trends, your weekend, your last holiday, and of course the weather.

And there are certainly lots of things that you can say that are not private.

Avoid topics such as politics, religion, problems, war, death, sickness – anything that gets you down or might lead to conflict.

HOW DO YOU KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING?

Smile and be interested.

Ask some questions (but do not interview the other person).

When you answer, give a little bit more information so that the conversation can move on.

Active listening: nod your head, say “yeah” and “true”

BE POSITIVE

Try to say things that the other person can agree to easily, with a question tag: “Lovely weather, isn't it?” (Voice goes up)

The other person can agree “Yes, it is, absolutely great”.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

When someone asks you a smalltalk question, you are not required to give an honest answer. “How are you?” really only requires “Fine, and you?”

When someone asks you about your weekend, don't say anything negative.

“What did you do at the weekend?” – AVOID: “nothing” – very negative.

Instead say something like “very relaxing. Fortunately, I didn't have any appointments. And you?”



MISCOMMUNICATION

Sometimes we say things, in our mother tongue or in a foreign language, that might be taken the wrong way.

An example of this is when I recently lost a student in a general English course to a special department course in his own department. He had been part of my course for many years and we have a good relationship. He tried the other English class and decided he was happy to leave my class. I asked him about his trial “and, was it good?” and he answered “the teacher is so polite”.

Which sounds like “and you are not”. It doesn’t matter what language – you have to be careful what you say. He certainly did not want to insult me.

Another person explained something complicated to me and I asked a probably really basic question, to which the response was “you think too simple – this is more complex”.

Which is ok, but you should say that in a more diplomatic way. You might have heard “keine Du-Botschaften“ and this is true for English, too. He could have said “Well, I would like to give you a simple answer, but it is a very complex problem”.

If you think you have offended a person, you can say “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you in any way” or “Sorry, that came out wrong”.

IDIOMS FOR MEETINGS



Next time you are in a meeting, try using these idioms to make your language sound more authentic:

1. You can say: John, could you start the discussion?

The idiomatic way: John, could you get the ball rolling?

2. You can say: I hope they are going to approve soon.

The idiomatic way: I hope we are going to get the green light soon.

3. You can say: I think they are talking about different things.

The idiomatic way: I think they are talking at cross purposes.

4. You can say: So, what are you really trying to say?

The idiomatic way: So, what is your point?

5. You can say: Don't be late. My boss asked us to never be late.

The idiomatic way: Don't be late. My boss really means business.

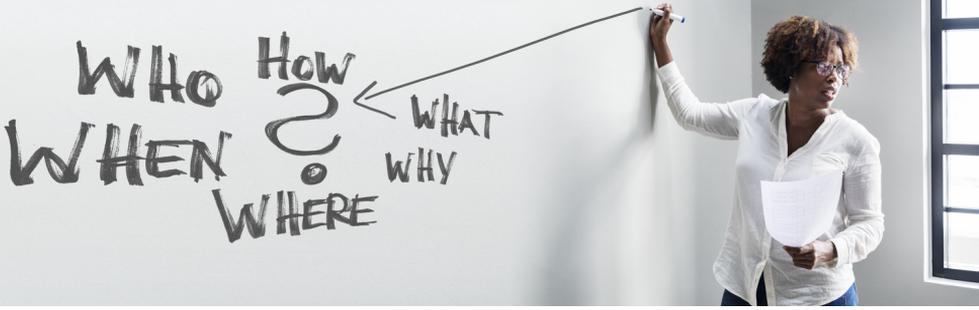
6. You can say: So, my next topic is...

The idiomatic way: Let's move on to my next point.

7. You can say: Can you give me a rough estimate of the cost?

The idiomatic way:

Can you give me a ballpark figure?



PRESENTATIONS

Here are some phrases that people can use to prepare what I call a technically correct presentation.

However, real great presentations work without explicitly announcing an agenda or “moving on the next point”. The structure and direction of the presentation are part of a storyline and therefore more subtle.

Nevertheless, these phrases help the audience follow your presentation better and increase their attention.

When they hear “let me just repeat what we have learnt today”, they are most likely to listen carefully one last time.

But before we proceed, here is a little reminder of what you have to achieve in the first two minutes of your presentation.

ABCD – attention – benefit – credibility – direction

Make sure to say something so intriguing that the audience will want to listen to you for longer.

Why should they listen at all? And why should they listen to you? Where is this presentation going to take them?

Phrases:

Explain the agenda (and make sure it doesn't look boring, and there should be a maximum of five items):

I'll begin by sharing...

Next, we'll talk about...

Finally, I'll show you

(alternatively you can say “I am going to share...”)

Moving to the next item:

Let's move on the next point

...which brings me to the next point.

This brings me to my final point.

Concluding:

Let me summarize..

To conclude..

What I would really like you to remember is...

People usually only remember the beginning and the ending of a presentation, so make sure both are strong.

Find someone to rehearse your presentation with, and also think about questions that might be asked at the end. If you don't know the answer, you can say “That is a very interesting questions, and I will check the answer and come back to you later”.



TELEPHONING

Say the right thing on the telephone.

Address all ladies with Ms, not Mrs or Miss.

In the US or UK, people often address others with their first names.

Say "this is Nicole" instead of "my name is Nicole"

Don't say "this is Ms Tomberg" - always say your first name plus last name.

When you pick up the phone: "This is Nicole"/"This is Nicole speaking" (private people usually just say "hello")

"Am Apparat" is "speaking/this is she/this is her", not "it's me"

When you promise to do something spontaneously, you need to use "will": I'll connect you, I'll just check my diary, I'll call you back in an hour.

When you want somebody to do something, don't start your sentence with "please" - this would be a command. Instead, make a question: Could you check, please?

"Bis Montag" is "BY Monday" in English!!!

When the person wanted is not in: "I'm sorry, he is not in the office today" (don't say "he's out of office")

Say "See you on Tuesday" and not "We'll see us on Tuesday" before you say good-bye.

When you want to make an appointment: "Would Monday afternoon suit you?"/"Could we meet on Monday?"/"How about Monday afternoon/what about Monday?". Don't say "what's about Monday?"

Tricky translations

Dies ist eine gute Nachricht.

Sie hat mir eine Nachricht (SMS) geschickt.

Ich werde Ihre Nachricht weiterleiten.

It is difficult sometimes to find the right word when the dictionary offers you "news", "message" and hopefully "text", but sometimes you don't even find the right word for the context in a dictionary. Always learn vocab in context.

This is good news

She texted me. She sent me a text.

I'll pass on your message.



IHR PARTNER FÜR INHOUSE ENGLISCHTRAINING UND COACHING

Ich bin zuallererst freiberufliche und passionierte Englischtrainerin. Zusätzlich bin ich mit einem kleinen Team von ebenso hochqualifizierten TrainerInnen auch eine Sprachschule und stehe Ihnen als Partner für Englischkurse im Unternehmen (vor Ort oder online) zur Verfügung. Außerdem bin ich Coach.

Ihre Mitarbeitenden haben in meinen TrainerInnen eine Vertrauensperson, die sich komplett auf deren Ziele und Wünsche, Persönlichkeiten und Präferenzen einstellt. Dabei ist uns Ihr Lernerfolg das oberste Gebot!

Ich bin Ihr Ansprechpartner für alles Organisatorische und Konzeptionelles von A bis Z.

Ich bin Ihr Ansprechpartner für alles Organisatorische und Konzeptionelle von A bis Z. Dazu gehören

gemeinsame Überlegungen, wie man die MA am besten schult (Format, Gruppenzusammenstellung)
Einstufungstest/Einstufungstelefonate
Gruppeneinteilung
Beauftragung eines entsprechenden Trainers, möglicherweise mit Sonderwissen im beruflichen Feld der MA
Kommunikation, Feedback
Teilnahmebestätigungen am Ende eines Kurses, Zielabgleich mit Kurserfolg
Monatliche Abrechnung nach Ihren Wünschen (SAP Bestellnummer, Kostenstellen)
Kurzfristiger Bedarf und langfristige Planung

IMPRINT/IMPRESSUM

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