
Are You Ruling Yourself Out of the Top Job by Being Too British

British English has many virtues. It is measured, often dry, usually restrained and sometimes charmingly indirect. It oils the wheels of domestic business life. Yet these same habits can quietly damage a senior executive's prospects when a foreign owned employer is reading their CV, cover letter or LinkedIn profile. Being too British is effective British English, although in multinational hiring it can send signals that were never intended.

Cultural communication styles have been studied for decades and one of the clearest frameworks is the *Lewis Model*. It groups global communication into three broad patterns: linear active cultures that value structure, logic and directness; multi active cultures that favour conversational warmth and relationship building; and reactive cultures that prize listening, reflection and diplomatic restraint. It is not a stereotype but a research-based model used widely in international negotiations and cross border leadership programmes. It explains why the same sentence can be interpreted quite differently in London, Madrid or Tokyo, and why tone is never neutral in a global market.

Many British executives do not realise how sharply communication styles diverge across cultures. They also do not realise how easily a hiring board interprets those differences as indicators of confidence, influence, leadership style and readiness for global responsibility. What reads as professional understatement in London can look like evasiveness in Frankfurt, uncertainty in New York or muted ambition in Tokyo. Conversely, a direct American turn of phrase may feel blunt or overcooked to a British reader. The problem is not the language. It is the mismatch between tone and expectations.

A senior executive who has not applied for a role in years often falls into this trap. Their writing becomes a curious mixture of British understatement, Americanised business jargon and sector cliché. The result is a tone that satisfies no one. British panels find it forced. American or European decision makers find it timid. Asian boards struggle to place it culturally. Senior appointments are decided in these small gaps.

Consider the examples that typify everyday British understatement. When a British applicant writes that they "supported" a major transformation, a Dutch or American reader may assume they played a minor role. When they say "I contributed to improvements in operational efficiency," an Australian investor may wonder why the applicant is circling the achievement rather than stating it plainly. A UK applicant describing a £500 million portfolio as "substantial" appears cautious next to the American style of "strategically managed a half billion dollar portfolio and delivered a 20 per cent return." Neither is right or wrong. They are simply understood differently.

Sector differences amplify the problem. A fashion executive using lively, creative phrasing may be well matched with a European brand owner but at odds with a Japanese parent company that values calm, reflective tone. A mining executive using robust, safety focused language may resonate with

Australian boards but feel overly brusque to French or Middle Eastern shareholders. Tone is not decoration. It is evidence of cultural fluency.

British applicants often imagine that neutral British English will be interpreted as neutral worldwide. It will not. A foreign owned employer reads tone as closely as content. A German board expects explicit logic, clear sequencing and firm conclusions. A Spanish led consortium may expect warmth and open dialogue. A Japanese investor may place weight on politeness, balanced phrasing and quiet authority. A global private equity partner in New York may want clarity, brevity and visible impact. When a British candidate applies in the same tone they would use for a domestic employer, they signal fit with the wrong audience.

None of this requires abandoning British English. It requires understanding how its natural tendencies are read elsewhere. The British instinct is to soften, to hedge and to avoid appearing arrogant. This is why British professionals say “I had the opportunity to lead” rather than “I led,” or “I helped deliver savings” rather than “I delivered them.” That instinct plays well with UK colleagues. It plays less well with boards that expect certainty and directness.

Foreign owned companies often look for two things: relevance to the role and evidence that the leader can operate confidently across borders. Tone provides clues on both counts. A CV that reflects the employer’s expectations without losing authenticity sends a reassuring signal that the applicant can work with international colleagues, manage cultural expectations and represent the business credibly abroad. A cover letter that blends British tact with global clarity signals judgement and adaptability. A LinkedIn profile that avoids exaggerated bravado yet states results plainly strikes the right balance.

The point is not to imitate foreign phrasing. It is to avoid the trap of writing for *oneself* or for a British audience when the hiring decision sits elsewhere. Being too British is effective British English, although it becomes limiting when a multinational board is reading between the lines. A senior executive’s style can advance or weaken their candidacy before a single interview is offered. Words are read through cultural filters long before they are judged on merit.

The safest approach is to keep the structure British, keep the clarity British and keep the professionalism British, while trimming the cultural markers that weaken impact abroad. Say what you achieved. State outcomes without hedging. Provide context without circling the point. Maintain warmth and humanity when appropriate, although do not assume British understatement carries across borders.

In a global market, tone is strategy. Senior executives who adjust it thoughtfully do not lose their voice. They simply ensure it is understood by those who decide whether they progress to the shortlist.