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Can Poor Spelling Derail a Career?

By [TODDI GUTNER](#)

Q: *I'm mentoring a young, ambitious engineer in our company. He's competent and demonstrates his energetic drive every day. However, he constantly makes spelling and grammatical errors in his writings. I've asked him to utilize spell-checking and re-read his emails. But mistakes such as confusing "our" with "are" and "there" and "their" aren't picked up with the computer tools. It's been over a year and he's still making these mistakes. What would you suggest as an appropriate next course of action? I am not sure if there are any additional classes he can take to improve his grammar/spell-checking skills.*

A: While it is clear you have casually mentioned to your mentee about his spelling and grammatical errors, it sounds like it is time you have a more formal, direct discussion with him about his mistakes. It may be that he doesn't fully understand the gravity of the problem and the impact it can have on his career. "He needs to know that these mistakes are getting in the way of his success and that his lack of professionalism and inaccuracy is unacceptable," says Brad Karsh, president of JobBound, a career consulting firm.

To be sure, in this world of online communications, hastily written texts and emails filled with spelling and grammatical mistakes are easily accepted in an individual's personal world. But they are still unacceptable in the business world, says Beth N. Carvin, chief executive of Nobscot Corp., a human-resources consulting firm.

In your discussion, you'll want to stress the importance of being detail-oriented in written communication. "Tell him if he is serious about his ambitions, he can't risk being perceived by senior leaders as immature, illiterate or lacking attention to detail," says Ms. Carvin. It is possible his communications may end in the office of a C-suite executive who may not know he is great engineer. "The C-leader's impression may be immediately (and permanently) soured," she says.

When you open up the conversation, "ask him if his manager has mentioned the spelling and grammatical mistakes to him, and whether it's impacting his performance," says Rabia de Lande Long, consultant and executive coach at Chartwell Advisors. If your mentee doesn't know, ask him if he would like you to discuss this issue with his boss to find out. If it turns out that it is a problem, then your mentee might be more motivated to improve his work.

Once you've established the importance of well-written and accurate communications, you'll need to lay out strategies for him to follow. One suggestion is for him to print out all important communications before he sends them. He should slowly proofread them and make corrections on the paper copy. He can also ask a peer or teammate to double-check his work, says Ms. de Lande Long.

Ms. Carvin suggests two books to help with spelling and grammar rules: "The Art of Spelling: The Madness and the Method" by Marilyn vos Savant and Strunk and White's "The Elements of Style." Another option is to enroll

him in a nearby community college or continuing-education grammar course. This will give him a chance to improve and perfect his skills, says Mr. Karsh.

Be aware, however, that your mentee may share that he has a learning disability, like dyslexia. If he chooses to share his diagnosis with the company, then he has the right to ask for a reasonable accommodation from the company. Learning disabilities like dyslexia are considered an impairment for American Disability Act purposes. "Unless the company can show that reasonable accommodation would cause undue hardship on the operation of its business, it will engage in an 'interactive' process with the engineer to establish a reasonable accommodation," says Ms. de Lande Long. For example, the company might offer him more time to prepare his work and establish a quiet location to aid concentration, she says.

Whether your mentee's grammatical and spelling issues are the result of hasty work processes or a learning disability, he is lucky to have someone who has taken the time to notice a potential career derailer and work with him.

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