



Ask a consultant

Dear Diversity@Work:

I am a woman who has been living in Canada now for 3 years. I am gaining practical experience to obtain my license. I have met a woman at work who I would consider to be a friend. One day I sent her an e-mail indicating that I got a ride back to the office with one of our male co-workers after a training workshop that we had attended out-of-town. Because English is not my first language, I always try to spell check and grammar check my work before I send it out. Anyhow, after doing my regular checks, I sent her the e-mail. When I returned to my desk, I reread my e-mail and noticed that what I had written could have been mistaken for unintended innuendoes. So, I recalled the e-mail, although I already knew that she had received it. I was so embarrassed because I am a modest person, and I would never make jokes like that about my male co-worker and myself. Although no one has told me this directly, I have every reason to believe that my friend e-mailed this e-mail to the male co-worker who has since shared this with others. Whenever I get on the elevator, he has a strange smile on his face and his boss has made some remarks about never letting me get a ride with this co-worker again. I feel so much shame and embarrassment that I want to quit. I will never trust anyone in the workplace again.

Shameful

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Dear Shameful:

Thank you for your letter. I think that we can all relate to a time when we made a mistake and felt humiliated and wanted to forget that it ever happened. Before you jump to any more conclusions, I would suggest speaking to your friend. Then you can relay your concerns to her about having passed or shared an e-mail that was intended for her only. If you do indeed establish that she passed on this e-mail, it is a good opportunity for you to let her know the effect it had on you.

Humour is a great stress reliever in the workplace; however, what is humorous to one person is not necessarily humorous to another. In this situation, I would have to say that your friend could have gently pointed out the humour in the mistaken innuendo in your e-mail and it would have given you both an opportunity to have a laugh and teach you the various meanings of the word that you have chosen.

This situation has obviously created a lot of pain for you; in fact, in your letter, you used the word "shame". When you speak to your friend, use it as an opportunity to educate her as well about how you see this situation from your cultural perspective. She will then, hopefully, have a better understanding of its impact.

This doesn't mean that you don't have a sense of humour, it is just that you feel that your modesty and public image were under attack. Remind her of the many times that you have shared a laugh together.

However, I would have to say that her reaction to your e-mail could have been handled with more cultural sensitivity. You have obviously made some incredible gains in the Canadian workforce to be working as a professional, and it should be expected that occasionally you are going to make mistakes with your grammar, pronunciation, etc. To pass on your error to others will likely make you feel more self-conscious about writing or speaking, which could hinder your progress in the workplace.

Cultivating positive workplace relationships can have their challenges in a diverse workplace. But, as long as people are willing to listen to one another's points of view, we stand a better chance of making it work through education. **D!**

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If you have a question for Ask a Consultant, email it to evelina@diversityatworkinlondon.com.

Evelina Silveira is the founder of Diversity@Work in London, www.diversityatworkinlondon.com, a business dedicated to diversity management training and consulting.