

# Beyond words: How accent shapes opportunity in professional life

11 August 2025  Victoria Howard

*A diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace culture, supported by clear policies and committed leaders, is key to recruiting and retaining top talent.*

Organisations are increasingly recognising the importance of [social mobility initiatives](#) to ensure that an individual's life chances are not tied to their parents' job or wealth, or the places they were educated.

Accent can be an indicator of a person's socioeconomic background, including their family, heritage, income, occupation and education. However, it is not an indicator of intelligence or competence.

Although deeply tied to culture, background and identity, neither socioeconomic background, nor accent, is currently a "protected characteristic" under the Equality Act 2010. As a result, accent and socioeconomic background bias don't tend to receive the same attention as other forms of discrimination. Yet, negative stereotypes linked to some accents can have real and damaging consequences in the workplace and beyond.

Some accents, particularly those closest to "national" standard forms of English and Received Pronunciation (RP) - a variety associated with southern British English - are often viewed as higher status.

They tend to be associated with authority and professionalism. In contrast, other accents, particularly those linked to industrialised cities and UK ethnic minorities, can be less positively evaluated. [Research indicates](#) that some regional accents are more likely to be linked to negative stereotypes, such as aggression and criminality. Linguists refer to this bias as "profiling", where people make assumptions about intelligence, education and social status based on a person's speech pattern.

In the professional world, accent bias can quietly shape hiring decisions, client relationships and day-to-day interactions. Its effects are difficult to measure but easy to feel. For some, it becomes a persistent, invisible barrier.

## Lived experiences and the scale of the problem

As part of [our Knowledge Transfer Partnership with the University of Nottingham](#), we carried out research to explore how accent bias plays out in the workplace. The research involved a series of 250 in-depth interviews and survey responses with individuals working in professional services roles across the UK. We found that, for many, the experience of accent bias is personal and ongoing.

For example, one participant described how their meeting contributions were ignored:

*"As soon as I say something people are almost like - you can see them rolling their eyes - 'whatever you're going to say about anything isn't important'."*

Accent bias can combine with other forms of discrimination, such as racism and/or sexism, to be additionally damaging. A participant explained how speaking with a European accent had limited her career progression:

*"The fact that I have an accent, and I am female had a double impact on my career progression, without a doubt."*

These experiences are not isolated. According to [research from the Sutton Trust](#), 46% of UK employees have experienced bias, mockery or judgement in social settings based on their accent.

For those who have already faced barriers to entry in their career, the way they speak can become yet another obstacle.

## The legal profession

The regional makeup of the legal profession helps explain why certain accents are often perceived as the “norm”.

In 2022, almost half (49%) of solicitors in England and Wales were based in Greater London and the South East. By comparison, the North West, including cities like Manchester and Liverpool, represented just 9% of solicitors.

Although more solicitors are based in the South East than in any other region, many grew up speaking English, or learnt to speak English, with diverse accents. Nonetheless, standard southern British English accents remain closely linked to stereotypes of how a solicitor is expected to sound. This can inadvertently make it more challenging for those with regional accents to be fully embraced.

Reflecting this reality, Mary Prior KC, chair of the Criminal Bar Association, has highlighted that some aspiring lawyers are advised to drop regional accents in favour of RP or standard accents to improve their chances of success. She argues that the legal profession must recognise that eloquent speech is not linked to accent.

Researchers at Nottingham Trent University and De Montfort University conducted a year-long study into public perceptions of barristers with different accents. Their findings revealed a strong preference to be represented by barristers who spoke with South East or RP accents.

By contrast, speakers with regional accents were more likely to be judged as less intelligent or professional, regardless of their actual capabilities. Fewer than 20% of respondents said they would be comfortable being represented by someone with a West Midlands or South West accent.

This demonstrates how accent bias continues to shape assumptions about competence, credibility and professionalism. RP, and standard varieties of English, sit at the top of what is often referred to as the “accent hierarchy”, while regional, urban and international accents are often undervalued, despite reflecting the UK's rich linguistic diversity.

The result is a professional culture where some voices are assigned more authority and opportunity than others, not because of the substance of what is said – but simply because of how it is said.

## A broader pattern across sectors

This pattern extends well beyond the legal profession. Research by communications agency FleishmanHillard UK found that 89% of professionals in the creative sector felt they had been subconsciously judged based on their accent or manner of speech.

In the same study, 77% of creative industry workers said they felt pressure to change their accent when dealing with clients. These findings demonstrate that biases persist across industries.

## Legal developments

Although accent is not itself a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, accent bias could result in findings of discrimination, including harassment based on a protected characteristic, according to a recent Employment Appeal Tribunal case.

In *Carozzi v University of Hertfordshire* (2024), the Tribunal found that comments about the claimant's accent could be “related to” the protected characteristic of race and so could amount to harassment, even where race didn't motivate the alleged harasser.

This decision is important because it establishes the legal connection between accent and other protected characteristics, such as race (which includes nationality in this context). It also highlights that employers who fail to address accent bias may be exposing themselves, their workforce, and job applicants to legal risk and discrimination.

## Driving change

Accent bias operates quietly, through subconscious assumptions, but also overtly, through attempts at humour, which can be hard to call out. As such, addressing it takes more than awareness. It requires both structural reform and cultural reflection.

Training must explore how accent bias influences perceptions of competence and authority, in turn impacting access to opportunities and workplace inclusion.

Internal policies and development frameworks should also be reviewed to ensure they do not unintentionally favour communication practices linked to higher status accents and socioeconomic groups.

At Browne Jacobson, we are taking proactive steps. As part of our collaboration with the University of Nottingham, we are introducing training focused on accent bias and socioeconomic awareness.

This goes beyond traditional unconscious bias training by addressing how language, accent and socioeconomic background shape workplace experiences, and how assumptions around speech can reinforce exclusion. It equips participants with language strategies to call out negative behaviours and to embed inclusive practices.

## Looking ahead

Although accent bias is often dismissed by those who perpetuate it as harmless or even humorous, its impact can be deeply felt. For many individuals, it undermines confidence, erodes sense of belonging and limits professional progression.

Organisations committed to genuine inclusion must tackle this issue directly. That means recognising links between accents and diverse identities and backgrounds, challenging assumptions about what is considered “professional”, and building cultures where all voices are respected – not just those that sound most familiar.

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