



Called the wrong name at work? Awkward...

By Dhruvi Shah BBC News
10 December 2018

When a colleague told me my name autocorrected to Dorito and they were seconds away from calling me a tortilla chip in an email, I honestly didn't know what to say.

Our names are a key part of our identity so it can be incredibly frustrating when someone gets it wrong at work.

At least this occasion was better than when people have mispronounced my name as "Dirty" or misspelt it as "Druhti", but not knowing what to reply bothered me for days.

That's because getting a name wrong makes for somewhat awkward conversation for all involved. Do you tell them or do you let it slide? What if they're someone who still doesn't get it right after several months and several corrections? Do you now need to change your name by deed poll?

I'm clearly not the only one who's facing challenges.

When Nana Marfo worked in the civil service, he unwillingly became the subject of an informal name change. He said he already stood out as he has a tracheostomy and while some colleagues were able to call him by the right name, others called him "Nandos". He tried to correct the misnomer for three years.

"But one day a client came to our department and started calling me 'Nandos'. When I asked why he called me that, he said that's how my colleague had pronounced my name on the initial visit. At that point I was beyond the point of trying to correct people, and since then have been nicknamed 'Nandos'," he says.

Nana felt he had to let it go. "I didn't feel this situation was something higher management could correct."

Say my name, say my name

Emails are also dangerous territory.

Nefra Germain used to work in the corporate world. She said people would continually get her first name and surname mixed up in emails despite the fact she would sign off with her given name.

"It's like people's brains can't process a name that is unusual so they have to find a way to normalize it and even correct you," she says.

- **'I'm Bilal, so please don't call me Billy'**
- **'That is not how you say my name'**

So how should you deal with these professional mishaps?

Binna Kandola is an author and business psychologist who's had his own fair share of mix-ups. "I was speaking recently at a conference in Las Vegas and the person who introduced me called me Pina Colada.

"I got up and said: 'My name's Binna Kandola. Pina Colada's my father.' I like to think it made a point to the guy who introduced me. Sometimes humour is the best approach."

He suggests that the minute someone gets your name wrong, correct them straight away and also get teammates to reinforce and support you when in meetings by saying your name correctly each time it is mispronounced.

He also says that one-off mistakes should be apologized for, corrections made and everyone should attempt to move on.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Sorrel Shalet is the head of people at Smart Energy GB. "When I introduce myself I often get 'that's OK' as a response. They think I've said that 'I'm sorry'.

"Usually it doesn't bother me too much, but sometimes I tell the person, to help pronounce it correctly, 'My name rhymes with coral.' Using a familiar rhyming word usually does the trick.

"If someone keeps getting your name wrong in the workplace, I would speak to them about it. It's likely they haven't realized their mistake."

And although Nana didn't feel comfortable doing so, Sorrel adds that you could also "ask your manager or someone from the HR team to raise it informally with them on your behalf".

Montserrat Peidro-Insa's name may be common in Catalonia but that hasn't stopped her from being called some peculiar aberrations. "The worst example of that confusion was when a customer in the US thought my name was Monster Rat. He still calls me that without even blinking.

"For some reason Japanese people have no issue with my name. I must admit the funniest ones always come from English-speaking nationalities, especially Americans and Brits."

That's certainly my experience too. What's also frustrating is it's often British or American people who get my name wrong or will mix me up with other Asian women in the office.

As well as being annoying, **a recent poll by The Guardian** investigating racial bias in the UK suggested that 57% of people from an ethnic minority background felt they had to work harder to succeed in Britain because of their ethnicity, while **various global studies** reveal that some ethnic minorities have had to "whiten" their CVs, using techniques such as anglicizing their names, in a bid to succeed.

- **Adam or Mohamed - who gets the job?**

The direct approach

Whether your name is easy to pronounce or not, or not particularly unusual in your country, it seems everyone has a story of being called the wrong name at some point.

But how do you reclaim your name, when, let's face it, it could lead to mortal embarrassment?

Toronto-based Simon Hewett went for the direct approach. "I had a colleague call me Steve for five years. One day I got in the elevator and it was just the two of us. She said, 'Morning Steve' and I just looked around.

"I then said, 'You know my name is Simon right?' She looked stunned, laughed it off and got off at the next floor. She proceeded to avoid me after that."

Practical solutions

- Correct someone the moment they get your name wrong
- Get teammates to reinforce and support you when in meetings by saying your name correctly
- Ask people how their name should be pronounced - let them guide you
- Apologize when you get it wrong

Binna Kandola admits it's not an easy subject to broach.

"People think [this naming issue] is trivial. If you complain about it, people think the problem is you - that you don't have a sense of humour... you are seen as a troublemaker."

But he says when people consistently get your name wrong, they are "robbing you of a key part of your identity".

"That's them saying to you that you don't matter in my world and I can't even be bothered to give you the attention to spell your name right."

He says that how organizations deal with such situations shows what the culture of that organization is like. "People need to understand the impact these issues have. There's an education that needs to take place."

*Follow Dhruvi Shah (female, pronounced Dhroo-thee) on Twitter: **@dhrutishah***