



# THE DIPLOMATE

*News From the Academy of Industrial Hygiene*



## Communicating With Your Latino Work Force

*By Hector M. Escarcega, CSP, ARM, MIH*

Today's American workplace is changing rapidly. Not only is the work force getting older, but workers are increasingly multilingual. Both of these

factors benefit employers because of positive attitudes, good work ethics and lower wages. On the other hand, these changes are proving to be a challenge for business owners, managers and health and safety professionals. The challenges of working with a multilingual work force arise from language and cultural barriers. Unless you speak a foreign language or understand the particular culture of your work force, losses from down time, accidents and injuries will occur as a result of the communication gap and the culture barrier.

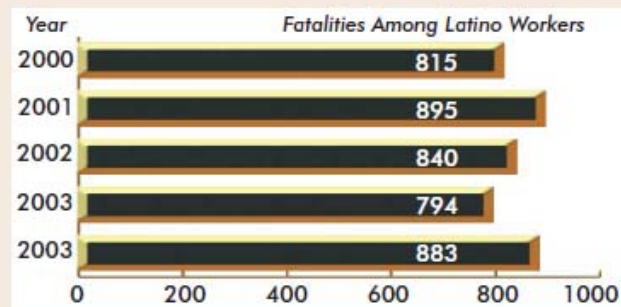
### WORKPLACE STATISTICS

According to the most recent U.S. census, Spanish-speaking workers account for 38.3 million, or about 14 percent, of the total population of the United States. Today's Latino workers are a big part of the nation's work force. In states such as California, Florida, Texas, Illinois, Colorado and Kentucky, Hispanic/Latino workers make up more than 50 percent of the work force. Estimates show that by the year 2050, Latinos will be 25 percent (96 million) of the total population.

Many Latino workers are found in the following industries:

- Household services, 31 percent
- Construction, 21 percent
- Agriculture, 21 percent
- Manufacturing, 20 percent
- Hospitality/food and lodging services, 7 percent

As you can see in the table below, the number of fatally injured Latino workers increased from 794 in 2003 to 883 in 2004 (an 11 percent increase). Of those, injuries that occurred from falls or transportation were up 27 percent, and those from contact with objects or equipment rose 14 percent.



### FACTORS CREATING ACCIDENTS AND FATALITIES

Some reasons for these alarming statistics can be attributed to

- Lack of employer understanding of Latino culture, values and traditions
- Inappropriate and ineffective training
- Some organizations taking advantage of immigrants' desperation
- Language barriers (English vs. Spanish) and workers' illiteracy in their own language

Federal and state organizations such as OSHA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are making efforts to address these issues by creating Web sites and distributing information in different languages, including Spanish, Chinese and Tagalog among others. In addition, other organizations such as ASSE and NSC are steadily increasing the number of presentations conducted in Spanish at their annual conferences.



*Author Hector Escarcega addresses the audience during an ASSE PDC held June 8, 2005, in Las Vegas.*

### TRANSLATING INTO SPANISH

Frustrated with the communication barrier and the cultural gap that exists between them and their multilingual work force, some employers try the obvious and common-sense solution of translating policies, procedures and training into Spanish; then they hand out the translated documents to their Spanish-speaking work force expecting them to understand what they say. Other employers feel they have the panacea by utilizing co-workers who speak Spanish and some English.

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The problem is that many translation companies don't understand Latino culture and the jargon used in specific industries. It is not uncommon for employers to spend thousands of dollars for translations, procedures and training programs only to find out that their Spanish-speaking work force doesn't understand the translation. This happens not because they don't know how to read Spanish but because the translation may be grammatically incorrect, using Spanish from Spain (Castellano) or trying to translate English words that do not have a Spanish equivalent.

### TIPS ON TRAINING AND TRANSLATIONS

When training Spanish-speaking workers make sure to

- Use few words and more pictures.
- Customize the training, if possible, by using pictures of the company's employees, equipment, resources, etc.
- Use props and allow employees to practice what you are showing them.
- Use show-and-tell and hand gestures in training.

When translating materials, remember to

- Keep in mind that the average Spanish-speaking blue collar worker who comes from another country has a fifth- to seventh-grade education. Make sure you know the audience and that the material is at their appropriate comprehension level.
- Use correct Spanish and be aware that there are some Spanish words that can mean different things in different Latin American countries. It is OK to use slang as well as the correct Spanish word if it exists.
- Find a reputable translation company that knows the industry and the Latino culture. Ask about the native language and education level of its employees and if they have an understanding of the culture. Also ask where they learned to speak, read and write Spanish and what methods they use to translate from English to Spanish.

### OTHER CONCERNS

Other issues that may come up when working with a Spanish-speaking work force include

- Latino workers sabotaging each other from personal growth.
- Some Latinos saying their country is better than other Latin American countries.
- Workers saying "yes" when they really don't understand the question.
- Machismo or a male's ego and exaggerated pride.
- Women in leadership roles communicating with the Latino work force.

While this valuable ethnic group will continue to grow, dealing with language and cultural barriers and resultant health and safety issues will have a major effect on a company's bottom line. It will take management's understanding and commitment to address these issues effectively.

Some suggestions to keep in mind are to

- Understand workers' culture and language; make an effort to communicate.
- Use body language and provide training in Spanish.
- Use fewer words and more pictures.
- Use correct translations, slang and jargon.
- Integrate the Latino work force into the company team.
- Provide communication and training in their native language.
- Provide hands-on, show-and-tell training.
- Create an environment conducive to learning.

To benefit from working with a multilingual work force, organizations must create an open environment with a win/win strategy. This means that while employers receive the benefits associated with a multilingual work force, they also will have to make an investment in providing appropriate training along with other needed resources, including cultural training for their managers.

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### 10 Tips for Working Effectively With Your Latino Work Force

- Treat your Spanish-speaking employees like you would want to be treated if you were a new immigrant in a foreign country.
- Make effort to understand the Latino culture and traditions.
- Teach your American workers about Latino culture and your Latino workers about American culture.
- Make simple efforts to greet your Latino employees, use their first names, smile and offer a gentle pat on the back for a "good job." Such little gestures will go a long way in closing the communication and cultural gap.
- Train your Spanish-speaking workforce in their native language. English can come later.
- Hire an effective Spanish-speaking trainer. Avoid using bilingual employees as interpreters. You will lose key words and communication.
- Provide Spanish-language training materials that are written at an appropriate comprehension level.
- Use plenty of pictures, diagrams and charts. Avoid technical words in presentations and printed materials.
- When implementing an incentive plan, try to incorporate group rewards rather than recognizing individuals. Latinos enjoy the cohesiveness of the family.
- Be politically correct. Remember that many different cultures make up the Latino population. Referring to your workforce as "Mexicans" may be offensive to Guatemalans and Salvadorians. Use "Spanish-speaking" or "Latino" instead.