



## MANAGING THE HISPANIC WORKER

By Phil Perry MA

**F**inding good workers has always been a problem. Today, though, employers have reached a tipping point: Anyone needing more help is faced with a labor pool that's almost exhausted.

"Many employers now find they can't hire a sufficient number of capable people, or they can't get anyone at all," reports Tom Maloney, a human resources educator specializing in the Hispanic workforce at Cornell University's Department of Applied Economics and Management. Interest in Hispanic workers has only grown as they've proven themselves capable and enthusiastic. "Hispanic workers have a positive attitude and a strong work ethic," says Maloney. "Because their whole idea in coming to the United States is to get a job to support their families, they are highly motivated to perform well."

**Interest in Hispanic workers has only grown as they've proven themselves capable and enthusiastic**

### Meeting Demand

There's another reason for the new interest in Hispanics in the workforce: Employers need to better serve a changing consumer including more and more Hispanic *patients*. With some 40 million residents

accounting for 14 percent of the population, Latinos now comprise the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States according to the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington D.C..

"The nation is seeing a tremendous increase in the number of Hispanic consumers," says Myelita Melton, president of Speakeasy Communications, a Mooresville, NC, - based training organization specializing in occupational Spanish programs. "Hispanics have \$700 billion of disposal income, and that figure's expected to grow to one trillion by 2009." Further, because Latinos have birth rates twice as high as the average American they are expected to become an even larger consumer force in the near future.

Bottom line: Latinos, who now make up some 13 percent of the nation's workforce, are expected to account for half the growth of the U.S. labor force between now and 2020, according to estimates from Pew.

No progress, though, comes without cost. In many cases organizations hiring more Hispanics are confronted with a new round of communications problems. Says Melton: "If I had to isolate the major issues faced by the employer with a rapidly grow-

ing Hispanic workforce, the first would be the language barrier and the second would be the safety problems that result from poor communications."

### Let's take those one at a time.

"Taking steps to overcome the language barrier shows respect and helps your organization function better," advises Maloney. A growing number of managers are learning some rudimentary Spanish, such as phrases useful in a work setting.

While the idea of managers learning another language strikes many as unusual, times are changing. "Up until the mid-1990's the majority of Americans held a distaste for learning another language," says Melton. "The common view was that everyone should learn English to speak with us. Today, though, we find that employers are open to learning a little Spanish to direct their employees more efficiently and safely."

Communication, of course, is a two-way affair: Hispanic workers need to increase their mastery of English. "Only 53 percent of Hispanics say they speak English well," says Melton. "We need to concentrate on the others: They need our patience and encouragement to help create a safer and more dynamic workplace." In some cases, says Melton, employers may find it worth their while to invest in programs teaching VESL, or "Vocational English as a Second Language."

"I don't think many people realize how difficult English is to learn as a second language," says Melton, "It takes the average Hispanic seven years to become completely comfortable with the language."

If it takes time for many Hispanics to become comfortable with English, what can you do in the short term to assure your instructions are understood?

Use short sentences; speak slowly; enunciate properly. All those things help the Hispanic individual keep up with your conversation. "Put yourself in the other person's position," advises Poisl. "Then consider this: How would you like to be treated if you were not that knowledgeable about a language?"

As you speak, stay alert for responses that indicate understanding or puzzlement. Don't become irritated if you have to restate a sentence in different words. "When your employees look at you dumbfounded after you say something, it's not because they are stupid," says Poisl. "It's because they are trying to translate what you are saying into their native language, or they are shy and afraid to ask for clarification."

**Let 'er RIP!**

**GOING THE EXTRA MILE FOR YOU**  
SleepSense Plug & Play RIP Technology.

Easy to use. Cost effective. Patient Compliant.

The SleepSense RIP Technology offers you multiple-use, machine washable belts which are available in 5 different sizes as well as interface cables which last for over 700 nights.

With no need for additional software and an easy plug and play design you can rest assured your sleep study will run smoothly.

**Providing you with the best sensors.**  
FOR WIDE AWAKE SOLUTIONS CALL US, 888 - 757 - 7367

**SleepSense®**  
Better sensors. Better sense.  
www.sleepsense.com

**CIRCLE READER ACTION CARD # 7**

*Managing... continued from page 10*

Given this language barrier, it's important to reinforce verbal instructions with visual cues. "To effectively train Hispanic employees, demonstrate what you want them to do," advises Carlos Conejo, president of Multicultural Associates, a Thousand Oaks, Calif.-based consulting organization specializing in the Hispanic workforce. That last part is important, Conejo stresses. "You want employees to make mistakes in front of you because you can turn the situation into a coaching session." That can obviate performance and safety problems down the road.

### **Communicate Safety**

The language barrier becomes particularly dangerous when it increases the risk of injury. "Employers need to communicate good safety practices to employees who may not be proficient in English," warns attorney Sara Goldsmith Schwartz, president of Andover, Mass.-based Schwartz Hannum, a law firm which defends business clients and non-profit organizations in employment-related litigation. Failure to provide adequate instruction can lead to costly litigation for negligence if someone gets hurt on the job. Provide safety manuals in the employees' native languages, advises Schwartz. "Hire an expert to assure the accurate translation of your safety manual."

Not all employers have been successful in this risky area. "The injury rate is high for Hispanic employees, and we suspect it has to do with the language barrier," reports Conejo, who recommends employers assure workers can read and understand safety words encountered in signs such as "Danger, High Voltage" or "Keep Hands Away."

### **Speak up**

"As an employer, you will be respected from square one because Hispanic workers come from a hierarchical society where authority is not questioned," says Maloney. "Part of their cultural value system is to be very dedicated to pleasing the boss."

Respect for authority, though, is a two-edged sword. On the positive side, it means workers are eager to perform as directed. On the negative, they may fail to communicate critical information which they fear will upset the boss. "Many times workers will hesitate to be entirely forthcoming when they perceive doing so may result in their supervisor hearing something he or she doesn't want to hear," explains Maloney.

This communications failure results from experience in a Hispanic culture where workers are often terminated for events beyond their control. Fearing for their jobs, workers may continue to use a faulty tool, for example, rather than admit something broke on their watch. And they may fail to report injuries, since in their native lands, which often lack disability and health insurance, employees are often terminated and replaced following accidents.

Finally, Hispanic employees may try to please the boss by affirming non-existent knowledge of certain work procedures. That often results in performance issues.

### **Appreciate the culture**

All these problems can be reduced if the manager takes pains to encourage two-way dialog. Just how? "You can start by understanding that family is incredibly important to Hispanic workers," suggests Maloney. "Indeed, a main reason why they come to the United States to send money home to their families."

Establish workplace policies and resources, that recognize and assist a family mentality. Here are some things you can do:

- \* Provide easy/affordable access to long distance phone calls home.
- \* Give phone cards as incentives and gifts.
- \* Express personal interest by asking about their relatives.
- \* Arrange for easy and affordable transmission of money home.

These steps show you understand and support the Hispanic love for family. They go a long way toward building loyalty and assuring a smoothly functioning workforce. To return to our topic of safety, it's worth adding that many Hispanic workers will often take unnecessary risks to get their tasks done quickly. To avoid this, advises Melton, tie in the need for safe work practices with the individual's love for family. He advises saying something like this: "Don't do it this way, because it is not safe. Think about your family. We want to send you home in the same condition you came here with."

### **Here to stay**

As these comments suggest, it's possible for employers to reduce conflicts and improve performance as more Hispanic employees join the workforce. The secret lies in improving communication skills, placing more emphasis on safety, and respecting different values. "If you reduce the language barrier and learn more about the Hispanic culture, you will go a long way to create a relationship based on respect," says Maloney. "Then your human relations posture will not be much different for Hispanic workers than for local ones." In many cases employers will need to develop new skills to meet the challenge of a changing workforce. The alternative is unacceptable, for no organization can stay in the black with a dysfunctional organization that fails to meet the needs of its patients.

*Phillip Perry is a syndicated management expert who appears regularly in FOCUS writing on management, workplace psychology and employment law issues. He can be reached at phil@pmperry.com.*