

Training Hispanic Workers in Safety: Tips from the Experts

Training Hispanic workers in safety can present both linguistic and cultural challenges. Here are ideas from the experts on how to do it.

"¡Peligroso! ¡No Entrar!"

Imagine you're touring a workplace and notice the sign above on a door. Would you go in? Not if you know, from taking Spanish in school or other experience, that it means "Danger! Do Not Enter!"

But now suppose the situation is reversed. The person reading the sign speaks and reads only Spanish and the sign is in English. It's pretty obvious where that could lead.

This latter situation is one increasingly faced by American business. As reported in our sister publication, *OSHA Compliance Advisor*, the number of Hispanics at work is growing incredibly fast ... 36 times as fast as any other ethnic group on the job. By mid-century, Hispanics are expected to number 1 of every 6 workers.

This situation has put safety professionals in a dilemma: Many workers simply cannot understand the advice and training they get on safety, but OSHA demands that you find ways to train them nonetheless. This requirement is statutory. "Training and instruction means imparting information ... in a manner the recipient is capable of understanding," says the regulation.

Translation of the above OSHA-speak: If workers speak Spanish, training must be in Spanish.

Language is not the only challenge in training Hispanic workers, says Hector Escarcega of Los Angeles-based Bilingual Solutions International, a group that supplies safety and other instruction in languages other than English. There's also dealing with the cultural differences of Hispanic workers. These include:

–**Lack of focus on safety.** Escarcega says this comes from working in nations such as Mexico, where safety standards are, shall we say, casually enforced. "Employers get away with a lot of dangerous situations" in these nations, he says, and that causes workers to get accustomed to working in an unsafe manner.

–**That "machismo" thing.** He also notes that some Hispanics view precautions such as wearing PPE as a sign of personal weakness. "No one wants to be seen [that way]," he explains. Added to that is a belief among some Hispanics that God will protect them from safety hazards. With that kind of help, they feel they need no other.

–**Si no evil.** A third cultural factor Escarcega raises is that, whether to avoid questions on their immigration status or for other reasons, many Hispanic workers are prone to saying "Sí" (Yes) when asked if they understand safety training, even when they don't. "The employer then says, 'I like this worker,'" declares Escarcega, "He is smart. He works hard and doesn't ask a lot of questions.' Disastrous consequences can result."

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