

# Making the most of your Spanish-speaking workforce

Guest commentary by Nina Colburn

The manager looks out his office window as his workers gather to start the new workday.

His Anglo workers stand at one side in a loose circle, Styrofoam coffee cups in hand, talking loudly about last night's game. A few yards away, his Hispanic workers stand together, talking in Spanish about a recent soccer match in Mexico.

The manager would have no problem walking up to his Anglo workers and joining in on their Monday-morning quarterbacking, but the thought of approaching the Latin American workers is much more daunting.

Yet, as the manager contemplates his evolving workforce, he wonders, again and again, if he's taken the steps he should to get the productivity and returns he needs from his Spanish-speaking workers.

He is not alone in his dilemma.

All over Colorado, managers and business owners are seeing their workforces change as more and more Latino workers join the Colorado labor pool. Hispanics make up the fastest growing segment of the state's workforce and the numbers show no sign of abating.

Language differences and cultural differences create valid questions for the Anglo manager or owner. What motivates the Spanish-speaking workers? Where do their loyalties lie? What builds their trust and participation? How important are specific wages, benefits programs, and opportunities for advancement? What will make the workers a contributing part of the team?

Answering these questions is tough, but, fortunately, it's not impossible.

A little time and a little basic knowledge can put the owner or manager on the path to new relationships with this Spanish-speaking labor force.

To begin with, learning some Spanish is a good first step, but building an awareness of how the employee's culture is different from his own is an even better one.

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To take one example, just look at our differing attitudes towards life itself.

Here in the United States, we Americans live to work. Here, our focus is always on the future; retirement is our reward for working hard today. South of the border, the worker works to live; money is used to meet day-to-day needs of the worker and the worker's immediate family ... and for enjoying life. The future will somehow take care of itself.

Another example is the way we communicate with one another in the workplace.

We like direct, concise communications here, with a focus on facts and figures. We're encouraged — even expected — to speak up without being prodded. Yet, in the Latin American culture, business communication is more indirect. It has a physical, contextual nature. There's not a lot of impromptu input at meetings. Instead, workers are loyal to supervisors and expect them to speak up on their behalf.

Learning about and understanding these cultural differences will lead to many creative changes in the business environment.

An example: Life insurance and health insurance programs are major incentives to U.S.-born workers, but selling them to the Spanish-speaking worker takes much more time and effort. Start with bilingual specialists who can come in and explain the programs in the native tongue. Better yet, train your own bilingual employees, perhaps one or two of your foremen who already have a strong understanding of company goals and production quotas, and who are known and trusted by the workers, to make the presentations.

Just a few little steps like these are ways to begin bridging the culture gap as well as the language gap between the American manager and the Spanish-speaking worker.

These, and others like it, can make a big difference in building better productivity and better profits for businesses all over Colorado.



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