

## **Hispanic Employees: Improving Communication and Safety Training for Spanish-speaking Employees**

*By Carol Hastings, Corte Hispana*

Immigrant Hispanic construction workers often speak little or no English, yet this valuable workforce is known to work hard, accept lower pay, eagerly work overtime and do not complain. They are also injured and killed more on construction sites than any other group.

Worker safety is always a concern. Delays and increased insurance costs can wipe out already slim profit margins for builders or contractors. Language barriers and cultural differences create further concerns for employers in the construction industry.

There are nearly 17.5 million Hispanic workers in the U.S. They comprise less than 13% of the U.S. workforce, according to OSHA statistics, yet 15% of deaths in 2002 were Hispanic workers. Hispanic workers are more likely than the general population to be injured or to become ill on the job. Construction workers are becoming predominately Hispanic throughout the U.S., and this trend is only expected to increase in the coming years, especially with the ongoing worker shortage in the construction industry.

The issue of safety for non-English speaking or limited English speaking Hispanics is considered so important that OSHA hosted its first "Hispanic Safety and Health Summit" in July 2004 to focus on this topic.

In July 2004, the U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao and the Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Mexico signed a Joint Declaration to reaffirm the shared commitment of the U.S. and Mexico to improve compliance with and awareness of workplace laws and regulations protecting Mexican workers in the U.S. OSHA has established partnerships, or working relationships, with the Hispanic Contractors of America, the National Safety Council, the Mexican consulates, the Mexican government, and many other organizations to work together on outreach, education and assistance.

### **Commitment to Safety Starts at the Top**

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The U.S. has created a culture of safety awareness unlike other countries. The expectations in an employee/employer relationship are high regarding the issue. Employees expect a safe work environment while employers expect the same with regard to work habits. Most Foreign-born workers on construction sites are accustomed to far lower expectations, however, and employers should recognize the need to communicate clearly and concisely when providing instruction. This does not simply mean that contractors should shout louder.

“The commitment to safety from management must be consistent. If a supervisor suggests to a Latino employee to do a job quickly, rather than take the extra time to use safety measures, the immigrant employee probably won’t question the boss,” according to Hector Escarcega, a bilingual safety trainer in Los Angeles. “Latino employees won’t question a supervisor if he doesn’t stress the use of safety measures. And these are just the times someone is likely to get hurt. English-speaking employees have no problem speaking up they know OSHA rules and the toll-free number to call to complain,” continues Escarcega.

Americans place more emphasis on, and have the laws to support, safety than in most countries. A good safety record has bottom line implications that foreign-born workers don’t often understand, so it becomes especially important for management to convey this message in a way that is meaningful to Hispanic employees, or more injuries and deaths will occur.

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Marcial Mendez, a bilingual Cuban-American is a Project Manager for Golden Associates Construction in Birmingham, Alabama. Mendez says, “Latino employees are scared not to do what they are told to do, including initiating safety measures. If safety measures aren’t spelled out by a supervisor, they’ll climb up a pole without a safety harness, for example, all with the intention of getting the job done. Contractors need to realize that we hire these guys to work and often for less money. We have a responsibility to give them proper training and to communicate our safety philosophy. Safety training has to be a daily thing.”

Supervisors should lead by example. It is important for workers to see superiors use safety gear around the jobsite; it makes them feel less conspicuous for doing it themselves.

### **Training and Communicating In Spanish**

There are companies who have answered the call for bilingual construction site communication. CommuniCards are passport-sized, laminated and accordion-folded booklets that show pictures depicting various construction jobs and specific tools and tasks necessary to complete the work. Words and phrases in both Spanish and English accompany each illustration.

**Sylvia Acevedo**, a former engineer who is fluent in English and Spanish, created **CommuniCard** to help save time and improve accuracy on the job. When researching the market for her product, Acevedo found that most construction-related mishaps were because of miscommunication regarding simple instructions. She also found that most contractors kept Spanish language learning materials such as compact disks and dictionaries in their trucks. “I designed these to be more practical to carry.” Acevedo adds that workers who come from different countries and regions may use a variety of words for tools and tasks, so referring to dictionaries doesn’t always guarantee a mutual understanding.

CommuniCards, at \$9.95 each, are available for a variety of trades: trenching and irrigation; drywall and sheetrock; cleanup and demolition; painting; and lawn care around on a job site.” The product has been so well-received that CommuniCards has developed similar products for the housekeeping and police use. ([www.thecomunicard.com](http://www.thecomunicard.com))

The BEST Institute, Inc., is a vocational training facility based in the Dallas suburb of Garland, Texas. BEST, an acronym for “Bilingual Employee Skills Training,” is dedicated to industrial education which incorporates cultural and literacy elements. Joseph E. Halcarz, Sr., CHMM, CSE, president, noted that literacy levels vary widely among workers, and he comments, “Many of the workers I have interviewed couldn't read or write in Spanish, let alone English. We use exclusively hands-on training so workers can learn by doing, repeating a task until they master it.” Harcarz furthers, “We’ve found that using an instructor of the same culture as the students is the most effective way to provide training. The program we developed is based on language, literacy and culture. Those three things are inseparable. You have to address all three or you’ve addressed none of them.”

The Texas-based Hispanic Contractors Association de Tejas (HCAT), is an association with six chapters in the state. Its chairman, Javier Arias, is clear when he says that there is a “state of emergency” for Hispanic construction workers in Texas. He furthers, “Our main task is to train and to provide information to the workers in the proper language before they need it.”

Associated Builders and Contractors ([www.abc.org](http://www.abc.org)), co-sponsor of the Hispanic Summit on Occupational Safety and Health, offers a number of multilingual resources to assist contractors in safety and health outreach for Hispanic construction workers.

OSHA is fully aware of the language and a cultural issue involved in the success of safety programs, and is taking steps to provide expanded outreach and education. “There are bilingual coordinators at all regional offices of OSHA,” says John Miles, chair of OSHA’s Hispanic Workers Task Force, which is aimed at pursuing creative solutions to improve OSHA’s outreach to Hispanic workers. Below are a few of these efforts:

- ✓ There is a glossary of 500 construction terms on the OSHA website, Spanish to English and English to Spanish that is free to download.
- ✓ In conjunction with the Mexican Consulate and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, OSHA has hosted day-long safety fairs for Spanish-speaking construction workers and their families. Considering the importance of family time in the Hispanic culture, these fairs are held on Saturdays. Food, games, activities and raffles are provided for the families, and at the same time a series of Spanish, 30 minute safety sessions are held for the construction worker parents. The sessions cover such topics as working with electricity, fall protection and safe lifting. There are 12 sessions in all and by attending 8 of the 12 sessions in a day, the worker receives a card of completion. “Employers are asking for these cards of completion at the worksites around Dallas,” says John Miles of OSHA.

- ✓ OSHA offers a series of 15-20 minute “Tool Box Sessions” that can be provided on-site by bilingual compliance assistants from various OSHA offices. These sessions are free to the employer.

### **Appropriate Safety Gear**

Make sure that safety equipment is available to your workers in a variety of sizes and that it is worn properly.

**Sylvia Acevedo** interviewed over 1,000 Spanish-speaking construction workers when she was developing CommuniCard. Acevedo commented, “I’m 5’4’ and I observed that I am medium to tall among Hispanic workers. It didn’t take long for me to see that Hispanic construction workers are usually too small for standard U.S. tools, safety equipment, gloves and hard hats.” Acevedo furthers, “Workers resist wearing oversized gloves because they don’t feel that they have good control of their tools. They’ll avoid wearing safety glasses that are too large and may slip, impairing the vision.”

A supervisor should not assume that a new worker knows the appropriate and safe techniques for using equipment. Take a few minutes to review the safety procedures and have an experienced worker do a demonstration to convey to the workers that you are serious about safety. Helping your workers to understand the appropriate techniques for operating machinery will remove some of the danger of the ‘trial and error’ method of learning to operate dangerous equipment.

George Hedley owns Hedley Construction and Management and Hard Hat Presentations in Costa Mesa, California and he is dedicated to properly training his employees. Hedley recommends that sharing training duties among your crew allows them to become experts in individual tasks. Each worker can be assigned to training new guys on the crew in individual areas and doesn't take them away from their jobs for long. Hispanics help each other learn on the job naturally and this takes on-the-job-training to a new level; your workers take responsibility and pride and helping others to learn the tasks and the related safety.

The bottom line is that safety is a practical and financial decision. It also involves a commitment that comes from the heart. As you reduce the odds that one or more of your employees will encounter serious job-related injuries – or perhaps even a fatality, you will likely find that you will rest more peacefully at night.

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