

# **Much more than languages differences**

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## ***Keys to understanding your Spanish-speaking workforce***

As we all know, the most recent census data confirm that the number of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States has increased tremendously during the last decade. According to this data, the number of Hispanics grew by 58 percent in the last decade to over 35 million. This figure represents 12.5 percent of the total population in the United States.

Recently conducted studies also indicate that we can expect to see one million immigrants come into the United States annually in the next decade. Most of these immigrants will come from Latin American countries. As employers, we need to realize that these immigrants are filling jobs in basically every industry, particularly in positions that require unskilled labor.

Indisputably, this group of immigrants, like other previous immigrant groups, has cultural values, behavioral patterns, and ways of thinking that affect communication in the workplace. As employers, concentrating our training efforts only on improving their language skills without paying close attention to cultural differences can lead our organizations to create training programs that prove ineffective in the long run. Even more seriously, the disregard of cultural differences can end up being very costly to our organizations. Not only can this block minority involvement in communication and decision-making, but it can also give way to tension among workers, lower productivity, increased costs due to absenteeism, employee turnover, equal employment opportunity and harassment suits, and lowered morale among workers.

## ***Cultural differences matter***

Incoming foreign-born Spanish-speaking workers not only have to face the language barrier, but also cultural differences. For instance, the concept of personal space is quite different in the United States than in Spanish-speaking countries, where physical proximity is not only acceptable, but also expected. Being overly expressive or complimentary, as well as affectionate and demonstrative are normal individual characteristics in most Spanish-speaking countries; however, in the United States displaying these types of behavior at work can be misconstrued and can lead to claims of workplace harassment.

## ***Business is run differently***

Most administrative aspects of United States business practices and policies are usually unfamiliar to newly arrived Spanish-speaking workers. It takes extra time and effort to introduce them to these practices and policies, and most importantly to help them understand the reason why they are in place, as well as the role they play in preserving the overall financial health of the organization.

For instance, the concept of business necessity is not clearly understood by most of these workers, who once promoted into supervisory positions would do anything in their power to help counterparts in need of financial assistance. Most foreign-born Spanish-speaking workers come from collectivist societies that place a lot of value on helping one another in time of crisis. Therefore, if a Spanish-speaking worker is going through a difficult time financially, a Hispanic or Latino supervisor may provide overtime pay to help alleviate his or her employee's financial situation, without fully understanding the impact of such a decision on the organization's budget and especially, the long-term implications for the overall financial health of the organization.

### ***The aspiration difference***

In most cases the culture in Spanish-speaking countries tends to be more hierarchical than the one in the United States. For instance, in some Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, unskilled workers are generally not taught that they have the opportunity to grow within the organization. Another critical variable is that the Hispanic culture encourages respect for authority, thus an employee may not challenge a boss for fear of causing him or her to “lose face.” In corporate America, attitudes like the one just mentioned discourage innovative thinking and initiative. As a result of this, American supervisors and managers may incorrectly conclude the Hispanic employees do not have good ideas or lack initiative.

### ***The participation difference***

The majority of Spanish-speaking workers feel uncomfortable admitting that sometimes they do not understand instructions. Spanish-speaking people have a tremendous level of self-pride and that, coupled with the fear of being criticized or even getting fired may encourage them to say that they understand what they are being told, when in fact they truly do not. The consequences could be poor performance or work being performed in an unsafe manner.

Another factor that impedes Spanish-speaking workers' participatory behaviors in the workplace is the fact that in the United States, workplace communication is expected to be a lot more direct and objective. In the Hispanic culture, communication is diplomatic. In addition, most companies in the United States encourage constructive criticism; however, most Hispanic employees have a very difficult time with this and may even take the feedback as a personal attack. Focused training can help Hispanic employees understand the value of feedback as a tool to improve performance.

These are just some of the basic hurdles newly arrived Hispanic workers face in the United States on a daily basis. This is why effective training for Hispanic employees, especially those who have recently arrived in the United States, has to be provided in a context that addresses cultural differences in order to enhance learning for these individuals. To date, Hispanic employees attend regular employee training sessions in the workplace and take away very little from these sessions because of the lack of overall understanding they possess of the American culture and value system. Before we attempt to develop business and organizational skills, we need to provide cultural, as well as language training to ensure that these individuals are on the same page as the rest of the organization. Cross-cultural training for Anglo management and for Hispanic workers has been proven to be tremendously beneficial to communication within the organization. Recently collected census data indicate that currently, one in nine Americans is foreign-born and that by the year 2030, one in four Americans will be either Hispanic or Asian. Therefore, developing the necessary skills to work with these employees will be critical to the future success of organizations.