



Bridging the Gap

Safety for Multicultural Workers

By Greg Summerhays

With Utah's increasing diversity, Utah contractors are working with a more diverse workforce than ever before. This brings many advantages, but it also can bring some challenges – particularly with safety. National statistics have shown that Hispanics, in particular, are often injured on the job at higher rates than their counterparts. Language barriers, cultural differences – these all contribute to challenges in maintaining workplace safety. But it can pay to improve safety. Better safety can bring about better productivity, employee morale, and profitability.

With workplace safety, perhaps the biggest challenge can be the language barrier. When conducting safety training, sometimes employers find it difficult to communicate the nuances of safety practices when the trainer and the employee aren't fluent in the same language.

Cultural differences can also compound the language barrier. It's common in Latin cultures to want to be resourceful – to find solutions to problems without bothering authority figures. In the context of workplace safety, if a worker doesn't fully understand the training, he is not likely to ask more questions – that would appear incompetent. Instead, he is more likely to improvise and get the job done in whatever way he can. Further, if safety mechanisms or Personal Protection Equipment isn't available, a worker isn't likely to bring that to his supervisor's attention, because that would be seen as insubordinate. He is more likely to risk his own safety in order to complete the task.

The result? We have seen a significant amount of injuries – many of them severe – among Hispanic construction workers. Employers can work to curb these trends.

About the Author

Greg Summerhays is Director of Hispanic Affairs for Workers Compensation Fund. WCF offers ongoing safety training, and AGC members are eligible for a 5% premium discount through a partnership with WCF. Visit www.wcgroup.com for more information.

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Language Barriers

When it comes to the language barrier, there are several strategies. Some employers provide English language training, or where resources are limited, some employers encourage their employees to pursue English language training through services in the community. Still, others hire or promote bilingual supervisors to manage safety training.

At Workers Compensation Fund, we work with policyholders to support their various efforts in improving safety for multicultural workers. Most recently, we have begun piloting a program where we work one-on-one with employers to develop practical safety and language training geared specifically to the tasks employees perform. We go on-site to deliver the training using pictures, words, and hands-on training. The program is growing in support from employers and employees, and it's exciting to see the positive impact.

Cultural Differences

Employers can also make adjustments when it comes to cultural differences. For example, when it comes to safety training, employers can physically demonstrate the safety practice rather than just talk about it. They can then have the employees go through the same exercise to show they understand the practice. If there are any gaps in understanding, the employer will know and can fix it right away.

Also, more employers can look for opportunities to help develop front-line employees into supervisors and managers. If we tap into the potential of multicultural employees, we can have a greater pool of leaders who communicate well with employees.

I realize that in these tough economic times resources are limited, especially for small business owners. It might seem like a luxury most can't afford to spend extra energy or resources on safety training. But losing a worker to injury can impact your productivity, employee morale, workers' compensation costs, and profitability. It's worthwhile to find cost-effective ways to protect all workers. And always remember, be careful out there.