Hispanic Worker Safety

Understanding culture improves training and prevents fatalities

By Sarah Sanders-Smith

WORKER UNDERSTANDING is critical to effective training. In the safety field, this can literally have life-or-death implications. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), total Hispanic worker deaths trended up consistently from 1991 to 2002. The first decreases were tallied in 2002 and 2003, but the trend was short lived. Hispanic worker deaths rose again in 2004 to 883—a level comparable to that of 2001. NIOSH data on Hispanic worker fatalities reveal that nearly 80% of all Hispanic worker deaths were caused by five types of incidents.

To develop effective training programs, employers must understand basic cultural differences between Hispanic and Anglo workers. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) published *Working with Hispanics.* Key cultural information revealed in this document is presented here to help employers train a diverse workforce. Beyond cultural understanding, this article presents Spanish/English training techniques used successfully by a Fortune 200 company.

NIOSH—Hispanic Worker Fatality Data

NIOSH's Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) program concentrates on investigations of fatal occupational injuries. Its primary purpose is to provide interested users with access to full texts of hundreds of fatality investigation reports. The FACE website offers input from NIOSH investigators who represent six states. An additional 15 states offer input to the program via state personnel. Thus, some cases are listed under NIOSH and others are listed by state.

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The following statistics represent Hispanic workers over the past 5 years (2001-05):

- A total of 106 death investigations were reported: 78 state and 28 federal.
- General industry cases outnumbered construction cases, 56 to 50.
- The average age of deceased workers is 34 years old, with a range from 9 to 69.
- In general industry, fork truck-related incidents caused 1 of 7 deaths.
- The top five hazards caused 77% of the total Hispanic worker fatalities:

1) multiple trauma;
2) head injury;
3) blunt trauma;
4) crushing incidents;
5) electrocution.

Virgil Casini, senior investigator with NIOSH's Fatality Investigations Team, has published a significant amount of the Hispanic worker fatality information. He explains, "We were asked to gather information for OSHA's Hispanic Task Force. Youth deaths were also a target area and several of the Hispanic worker deaths involved young people." Casini states when he looked over the past 5 years of investigations he noticed many trench cave-ins and electrocutions. When asked for the most frequently recommended Hispanic training issue, Casini replied, "Train in a language and literacy level that will be understood." To further understand how to implement these training recommendations, an explanation of Hispanic worker traits is offered to establish a baseline cultural understanding for industry trainers.

The Spanish Language & Its Dialects

High-school or community-instructed Spanish classes may or may not serve the communication needs of the aspiring bilingual Anglo supervisor. Supervisors who attempt to learn and speak Spanish with Hispanic workers often find unanticipated bar-

riers to communication beyond the words alone. Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos (the Mexican U.S.) is credited with 291 languages (Gordon, 2005). Spanish literacy accounts for 87% to 88%, however, other languages are included. Among the non-Spanish languages in Mexico are American Indian (8%), Basque, Catalan-Valencian-Balear, English, Japanese, Tohono O'odham, Vlax Romani, Arabic and Chinese. Within the continental U.S., challenges have evolved due to an eclectic diversity within Hispanic cultures. In *A Dictionary of New Mexico and Southern Colorado Spanish,* Cobos writes:

> Spanish spoken in this region is a hodgepodge, made up of Archaic Spanish, the Indian dialects of Mexico and the Rio Grande pueblos, Mexican Spanish, English and "regional vocabulary." That's what makes a dialect unique—and confusing. You might know that cola refers to the devil. You might not know that it also refers to a person who leaves the door open when she enters or leaves a room. Same with calabaza: Regulars to the market know that's a pumpkin; only the keen know it also means to turn down a marriage proposal.

Agreement on Terminology

To support the supervisor who strives to become an effective communicator with Spanish-speaking workers, locate industry-specific terminology. For example, in agriculture, many terms may not be listed in standard English-Spanish dictionaries. However, one Fortune 200 company located an agricultural terminology-specific dictionary source—a welcome addition to the production plant's resource library.

Although industry-specific terminology is invaluable, another issue clouds attempts at cross-cultural communication: consensus and use of agreed-upon terms for specific items or activities. An example is the word for forklift. One company had historically relied upon two translators of South American descent. The local workers, primarily from Mexico, did not agree with the corporate office translations and thus found forklift training materials confusing. Focus on specific demographics of the local workforce. Form employee focus groups to ensure that terminology is understandable to local workers. Customize new employee orientation materials, forklift training and other safety-related training materials to the laborers' terminology preferences.

USDA Publishes *Working with Hispanics*

USDA and affiliates funded a document titled *Working with Hispanics* to provide supervisors with an understanding of the similarities and commonalities shared by a very large portion of the Hispanic ethnic group. Culture, perspectives and behaviors differ significantly from non-Hispanics. How do these differences affect the workplace? Views on education, family and time differ between Anglo and Hispanic coworkers. Understanding these nuances enables Anglo supervisors to better relate to Hispanic workforces.

Speaking a Common Language

Many people whose ancestors emigrated to the U.S. from European origins as acculturated Americans struggle with this latest wave of immigration. A primary reason is language pressure created by an ethnically diverse wave of immigrants who largely share a common communication mechanism: Spanish. In the days when European immigrants were woven into the fabric of the country, common groups lived in neighborhoods together (e.g., Polish, Italian, German, Lithuanian). The impetus existed to learn English as a communication tool between ethnic groups. While it is true that some Hispanic immigrants reside in barrios, predominantly reliant upon Spanish, most are willing to learn English. In 2002, The Cheskin Group surveyed 6,000 Hispanic respondents from *People en Español.* The survey found 95% of Hispanic respondents backed bilingual education. Hispanic respondents were focused on routes to success in America and viewed education as a critical component. Eighty-seven percent stated "education is the key to my child's success," and 64% said that they "wish they could have stayed in school longer" (as compared to 31% for non-Hispanic respondents). So perhaps, in contrast to what some believe, many Hispanic immigrants *do* want to learn to speak English.

In *Working with Hispanics,* Holladay (2004) writes:

> Hispanic immigrants, the majority coming from areas just south of the border, have been inescapably exposed to the American Dream since childhood. Thanks to Hollywood and the media, these people come [here] with great images and expectations of the U.S. and what life is like. Unfortunately these preconceptions do not adequately prepare them for living in a foreign land with a different language, strange customs and laws. Trying to adapt to life in the U.S. can be overwhelming, especially for young undereducated Latin Americans, who leave behind all the people that they love and the culture they know to live and work among Americans who are often unappreciative of them.

Hispanic vs. Latino

For many non-Hispanic Americans, cultural confusion seems to surround the terminology of Hispanic versus Latino. "Hispanic" is defined as describing people of Spanish descent; relating to descendents from Spanish or Latin American people or their cultures. In comparison, "Latino" is defined as someone from Latin America and refers to people from or descending from Latin America (Encarta). Broadly, Latin America is defined as the entire western hemisphere south of the U.S., but more specifically refers to those countries of the Americas that developed from the colonies of Spain, Portugal and France. These include Mexico, the Caribbean, and all countries in Central and South America with the exception of Belize, Guyana and Suriname.

A person from Mexico would be considered both Hispanic and Latino. However, someone

Photo 1: A 23-year-old Hispanic laborer died after being crushed between the frame of a skid steer loader and the scraper attachment on the loader lift arms at a rendering plant. The manual and warning signs at the site were available in English only.

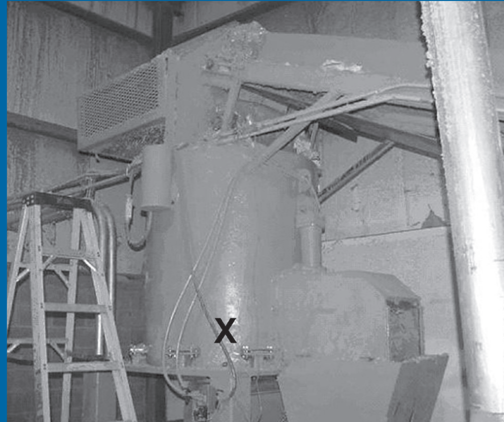


Photo 2 (right): A Hispanic youth died in this densifier at a plastics recycling plant. A sign was observed on the densifier's control panel that read in English, "Only Authorized Personnel Can Operate this Machine." No Spanish translation was provided.

from Brazil would be considered Latino but would not be considered Hispanic because their culture and language derive from Portugal rather than Spain. Though technically having two different meanings, the U.S. government, for reporting purposes, utilizes the two terms synonymously and interchangeably, as do the media and many other sources of information (Holladay, 2004).

The term Hispanic more accurately and specifically describes the people involved in U.S. workforces, and will be used primarily throughout this article. Hispanic Business (2002) surveyed 6,000 Hispanic people and reported 67% of respondents said they preferred to be identified as "Hispanic, Hispanic-American or Hispano/Hispana," rather than Latino/Latina. It is important, however, to remember that individuals have certain sensitivities and preferences about how others refer to them. Some will prefer to be referred to as Hispanic and others Latino. Others still may resent being grouped together and prefer to be referred to by their country of origin.

Because of an overwhelming number of Mexican people living in the U.S., a common error people make is to refer to all Hispanics as Mexicans. Another mistake is to call all Hispanic people Spanish just because they predominantly speak Spanish. These errors, whether out of habit or ignorance, can be offensive to Hispanic people. Therefore, it is important to learn where employees are from and how they personally prefer to be referred to.

Cultural Issues that Impact the Workplace

Education

Within the Hispanic culture, education often refers to how a person acts versus years of schooling or formal education. Supervisors need to understand the meaning when a Hispanic person refers to someone as *bien educado* (well-educated) or *mal educado* (poorly educated). For females, the terms are bien educada or mal educada. Rarely is this an indication of academic achievement but rather a statement of support or disdain as to how the person conducts him/herself in personal and business situations. Villena-Mata (2001) answered this question from a reader by replying:

> It refers to one's heart. How well-educated is the heart in terms of honoring people and helping people to be more of who they are: loving souls and gifts from God? Bien educada means creating a loving, supportive environment for people to unfold the beauty and love that they are. It means providing space for people to adopt behaviors and attitudes that reflect love. It means making space available for a person to reflect if behaviors and attitudes need to be changed, if they are not healthy reflections of the good soul that s/he is.

Family

Effective supervisors must understand the importance of extended family to Hispanic workers. In safety training, when the trainer or supervisor stresses the importance of workplace safety to ensure that workers will return home to their families, Hispanic workers will be more likely to adopt safe work practices (if not for themselves, for the good of *la familia*).

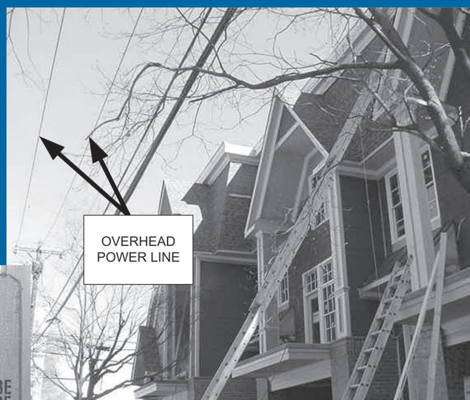
Loyalty to family presents a potential challenge for Anglo supervisors and coworkers who may not understand the cultural expectations of the extended Hispanic family. For example, if a death occurs, Hispanic workers will likely return to Mexico to be with the family. Requests for departure may be made in a manner that supervisors would interpret to be last-minute or haphazard. To the contrary, the Hispanic worker is merely attempting to support his/her extended family in a time of need.

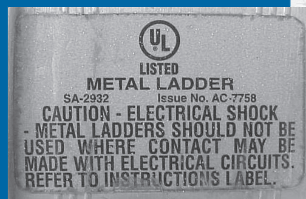
Accommodating such requests may determine whether workers return to the company following the crisis. If a company denies such a request, the worker may lose loyalty to the company, and may risk termination rather than compromise *la familia.* Good employees are costly to replace. There are many hidden costs associated with turnover, including safety training. Thus, supervisors and employers should carefully formulate an approach to consider requests for urgent leave. Naturally, a balancing act is needed between requests from Hispanic and non-Hispanic workers. For legal and ethical reasons, supervisors must strive to be fair when mediating requests for time away from work.

When supervisors include Hispanic family workers in celebrations of workplace success or in social situations, Hispanic workers and their families will participate. Family inclusion builds rapport between the non-Hispanic supervisor and Hispanic workers. A supervisor will also build rapport by asking about the worker's family (Holladay, 2004).

Photo 3 (top): A 24-year-old Hispanic painter was electrocuted when the metal ladder he was repositioning contacted an overhead power line.

Photo 4 (bottom): The ladder label was in English only.





Individualism vs. Collectivism

As a culture, Americans are individualistic and independent, and, therefore, shy away from group reliance. In contrast, Hispanic people are collectivist, taking care of others and the extended family. Table 1 illustrates the contrast (Maloney).

When workers have collectivist cultural characteristics, safety training should focus on the importance of safety and security to the entire work group. Convey how increased knowledge will benefit all workers in the form of job security and profit sharing. Group rewards rather than individual rewards will be more effective in enhancing Hispanic employee motivation to work safely. According to Holladay (2004):

> In the U.S., company rewards are usually based on individual effort as Americans value individual achievement. Because of a collective nature, Hispanics may shy away from lavish praise and personal recognition because it can make them feel uncomfortable to stand out from the group. For this reason . . . supervisors should reward Hispanic [workers] as part of a group or a team for meeting short-term goals, putting more stress on the team's achievements rather than those of the individual. Rewards and incentives should be tangible. If events are promoted as a reward, ensure they will happen in the near future rather than appear as a far off promise. Social events and celebrations that involve employees' families are very well received and will be an effective tool for motivation. . . . Short-term financial bonuses such as gift certificates to local stores such as Wal-Mart [or] grocery stores are much appreciated.

La Confianza: A Sense of Trust

Hispanic people tend to consider extended family and friends as an extension of their "in-group." According to Holladay (2004), group integrity is based on a concept called *la confianza:* a sense of trust and respect that exists between members. Once one has established *la confianza* with a Hispanic person, s/he is devoutly loyal to that person (Metivier, 1999). The results can be seen in the social nature and cohesiveness of Hispanics within the workforce. It is important to understand that trust in the Latin world is not given to just anybody—it must be earned.

Americans tend to use the word "friend" loosely to describe people they interact with on a daily basis. In contrast, Hispanic people tend to be more discriminating as to who they call friend. Gaining *la confianza* of a Hispanic employee is often simply a matter of being friendly and fair, since most Hispanics have a natural sense of respect for those in a position of power. However, once that trust is broken, it may never be mended. Further, once trust is lost with one person, an employer can quickly lose the trust of the entire Hispanic workgroup, which can prove to be devastating to companies that are particularly dependent upon this labor force.

Some companies have been accused of exploiting workers' rights, particularly in more labor-intensive manufacturing industries in which low wages and poor safety conditions are the norm. Parker (2001) states that unions have recruited hundreds of thousands of the unprecedented number of immigrants who have flowed into the country over the last 10 years. Many unions have bilingual representatives and have been reported to employ various techniques to recruit Hispanic employees (Holladay, 2004):

- visiting local churches and talking to Spanish-speaking congregations;
- enlisting support of local Hispanic leaders, including clergy and government officials;
- visiting employees' homes, and speaking with spouses and family members;
- sending representatives undercover to be hired on as employees with the intention of spreading union information internally;
- aggressively recruiting a key bilingual Hispanic employee within the company who other employees look up to and will follow. This employee could be the primary communication link between management and Spanish-speaking workers.

Supervisors should strive to earn and retain the trust of Hispanic workers. A safe work environment and understandable safety training programs encourage worker satisfaction and will help establish *la confianza.*

Training Techniques for Bilingual Workers

In one Fortune 200 company, safety personnel discovered a variety of training tools to enhance worker comprehension and transfer of training. The efforts taken to treat Hispanic workers fairly and inclusively established *la confianza* early in the employment relationship.

Offer Dual-Sided Training Documents

As is the case of anyone who is learning another language, many Hispanic employees pass through stages of understanding. Verbal vocabulary comprehension may come long before reading or writing skills. It is important to work with key employees to help establish the best translations for the local workforce. With collaboration, a worksite can establish a single, understandable bilingual document to assist in employee training. As literacy issues may be present, supervisors should get to know their employees and offer verbal instruction as needed.

Grouping Hispanic workers together for training is an effective strategy. Those who comprehend

Table 1

Individualist vs. Collectivist Characteristics

Individualist (American)	Collectivist (Hispanic)
Individual interests prevail over the group.	Relationships prevail over tasks.
Children are taught to be independent.	Financial support of the family is important and expected.
Individuals tend to take care of themselves.	Interaction at work is important and expected.
Work goals include personal time, freedom and challenge.	People who are not family or close friends are often mistrusted.
People are managed individually.	Sense of belonging is intense, yet limited to family and friends.
Individuals see themselves somewhat independent of the organization.	Employees tend to be dependent upon the organization.

Table 2

Educational Levels in Mexico

Mexican education level	American education equivalent
Primaria Primary school (first 6 years of formal education)	Elementary school
Secundaria Secondary school (next 3 years)	Middle school
Preparatoria Preparatory school (final 3 years)	High school

more English will help those who do not. Offer dual-sided training documents whenever possible. This avoids a trainer's need to ask whether workers prefer to have an English or Spanish document. Dual-sided documents encourage both audiences to learn additional words in the other language and save time. Trainers should carefully explain key concepts and ask trainees for feedback in order to verify comprehension and transfer of training. To ensure comprehension, employees should demonstrate needed safety skills.

Offer Training Materials in Languages Familiar to Workers

Because there are hundreds of dialects of Spanish within Mexico alone, once training documentation is drafted, form an employee focus group. Ask for Hispanic employee input on message clarity. If glitches are found in the translation, ask for the assistance of an experienced, trusted Hispanic worker or focus team member. If the Hispanic workgroup has a bilingual trainer, work collaboratively with this trainer. When involved, Hispanic workers will help company safety trainers to develop the most understandable employee training tools for the local workforce.

Training manuals are available from some suppliers in various languages. If Hispanic workers who read best in Spanish will operate equipment, employers should consider ordering the equipment manual in Spanish. An example of the importance of this concept is outlined in NIOSH FACE Report 2004-01, which offers these recommendations:

- Employers should purchase the manufacturer's operator manuals and safety decals in the primary languages used by their workforce.
- Operator manuals, hazard warnings and illustrations written by manufacturers for safe use of products should be available in the primary languages spoken by workers in the workplace.

The report describes the circumstances of a 23-year-old Hispanic laborer who died after being crushed between the frame of a skid steer loader and the scraper attachment on the loader lift arms at a rendering plant (Photo 1). The distributor for the skid steer loader informed the investigator that the operator manuals and safety decals for the skid steer loader used in the incident were produced in several languages, including Spanish. An operator manual and hazard warning decals written in English were provided with the equipment when it was delivered from the manufacturer. There was a charge for these items when written in other languages. In this incident, six employees were Hispanic and spoke primarily Spanish, yet the hazard warnings and operator manual provided with the skid steer loader were in English only.

Post Events in Spanish & English

When working with employees who have not yet acculturated to the English language, it is imperative to convey inclusion. Events posted in English only may send a message that the Hispanic workers need not attend. Promote social events that involve families to ensure that non-English-speaking employees understand that *la familia* is invited and welcome.

Develop Safety Signage in Spanish & English

In areas where a company employs Spanish-speaking workers, signage should be bilingual. It is not necessary to provide dual signage in all plant areas. However, affected workers must be informed in the appropriate work areas. The NIOSH in-house FACE Report 2005-05 details how an Hispanic youth died in the densifier at a plastics recycling plant (Photo 2). A sign on the densifier's control panel stated in English, "Only Authorized Personnel Can Operate This Machine." No Spanish translation was

provided. Recommendations from NIOSH:

•Post warning signs in a language that all workers can understand at entrances to each permit-required confined space, such as the top opening and the side hatch of the densifier, warning of immediate danger and safety requirements for entry.

•Use workers' primary language(s) and carefully consider literacy levels to maximize worker comprehension.

Guidelines for Working with an Interpreter

For the Supervisor

1) Speak clearly and use short, simple sentences.

2) Look at and speak directly to your employee(s) rather than the interpreter.

3) Listen carefully to the employee(s) and watch for nonverbal clues.

4) Be careful when using technical terminology. Be sure that the interpreter and employee(s) correctly understand.

5) Use clarifying questions such as: "Did I understand correctly?" and "Tell me more about . . ." to avoid miscommunication.

For the Interpreter

1) Avoid inserting or omitting information.

2) Use the supervisors and employees own words whenever possible.

3) Have Hispanic workers repeat important instructions or other aspects of communication to verify thorough understanding.

Include Tildes & Accents as Appropriate

The Spanish alphabet has two characters related to the "n" sound: n and ñ (en-nay and en-yeah). A tilde (~) can be formed and should be included through the use of word processing commands that transform a plain letter n to an ñ. Accenting is important to the meaning of many Spanish words. For example, *esta* is not the same as *ésta* (adjective vs. pronoun form of "this"). And *está* means "he is" or "she is." Once again, the accent can be added over a letter by using word processing commands to transform vowels (e.g., á, ó, í).

Beware of Online Translators

Some of the previously mentioned nuances of the Spanish language make it difficult for companies to only use online translators. Before distributing training documentation or posting signage, the safety coordinator must check Spanish-language accuracy and understanding with native Spanish-speaking employees. Usually within a Hispanic workgroup, leaders with English skills emerge. These employees are excellent candidates to assist with safety program translation, development of signage and proofreading.

Show Employees Critical Skills, Safety Risks & Means of Exit

People learn more by doing than merely seeing, listening or reading. Show a bilingual employee how to perform work safely. Observe to make sure the work is completed safely. During new employee orientation, physically walk employees through evacuation procedures to ensure that everyone will exit safely in the event of an emergency.

Require Supervisors to Frequently Walk Through Work Areas

Once training is complete, a primary responsibility for workers' compliance to safety specifications and safety rules largely rests with the immediate supervisor. All employees should be visually monitored to increase quality, decrease errors and ensure worker safety. Since critical issues may be more easily misunderstood by workers who do not yet have full command of the English language, a supervisor's diligence after training is key to worker success and safety.

Encourage Supervisors to Learn Some Spanish

Bilingual leaders in organizations offer a valuable skill (e.g., direct interpretation, explanation to Spanish-speaking employees). Encourage supervisors to learn a few words and phrases in Spanish. This effort, when sincere, will help establish *la confianza.*

Include Cultural Sensitivity in Training

Anglo supervisors and coworkers should understand Hispanic cultural nuances and vice versa. Language barriers between workers drive misunderstanding and barriers to communication. When answering questions about either demographic group, make the question and answer known in both English and Spanish whenever appropriate.

Use Caution When Choosing an Interpreter

Translation is more than substituting words in one language for another. An ideal interpreter is not only bilingual but also understands the dialects and regional word derivations of the local workforce. If an employee is asked to translate for a coworker with a different regional dialect, problems can include:

•Conveying information inaccurately. Misunderstanding even a small detail can cause problems.

•The employee being spoken to may feel uncomfortable. Giving criticism or counseling an employee through another can cause embarrassment. Submissive "yes, sir; no, sir" answers often result, which can further compromise communication.

•The employee interpreting may feel uncomfortable or under pressure. Interpreters may find themselves mediating a situation in which they would rather not be involved.

Upper-level management must trust the interpreter. Mistrust leads to the conclusion that what is being conveyed in English is not comparably con-

Resources for Employers

NIOSH Fatality Investigation Reports
www.cdc.gov/niosh/face

NIOSH in Español
www.cdc.gov/spanish/niosh

USDA & Affiliates Publication *Working with Hispanics*
www.na.fs.fed.us/wihispanic/Working%20with%20Hispanics.pdf

veyed in Spanish. The sidebar on pg. 39 offers guidelines for working with an interpreter (Smith & Ramos, 2001).

One additional caution: all employees deserve just-in-time (JIT) training. Offer what is needed, when needed and to the extent the information is needed to work safely. Companies should not be so stringently tied to a single interpreter that JIT training cannot occur spontaneously, on the shop floor, as needed during the course of a work shift.

Conclusion

In regard to formal education nomenclature, there is often a disparity in understanding between the Anglo supervisor and Hispanic workers. Terminology that describes years of education sounds different to the Anglo employer than it may be intentioned to describe (Table 2). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 43% of Hispanics living in the U.S. have less than a high-school diploma, and 27% have less than a ninth-grade education. These statistics are affected by large percentages of foreign-born Hispanic people who come from poor regions of Mexico and Central America where education is less available. Most Mexicans have only basic reading and writing skills (Canak and Swanson). High school drop-out rates are significant. Approximately 50% of Mexican children fail to complete primary school; 40.1% go on to secondary school, and only 21.3% enter preparatory school. Most students who drop out come from low-income families and live in rural Mexico. These are the same areas that produce the highest numbers of immigrants to the U.S. Thus, NIOSH recommendations generally suggest training for understanding. NIOSH in-house FACE Report 2003-08 details the death of a 24-year-old Hispanic painter who was electrocuted when the metal ladder he was repositioning contacted an overhead power line (Photo 3).

NIOSH recommends:

- developing, implementing and enforcing a comprehensive safety program and training in language(s) and literacy level(s) of workers which includes training in hazard recognition and the avoidance of unsafe conditions;
- eliminating the use of conductive ladders in proximity to energized overhead power lines;
- that ladder manufacturers consider affixing dual-language labels with graphics to provide hazard warnings and instructions for safe equipment use. In this case, the ladder label was in English only (Photo 4).

Numerous companies employ Hispanic workers. Hispanic employee understanding of English may be limited. BLS estimated that 15.4 million Hispanics were employed in 2000, making up 10.9% of the U.S. workforce. The Hispanic workforce increased 43% between 1990 and 2000, and is expected to increase another 36% by 2010 to nearly 21 million employed Hispanic workers. Certainly, challenges exist when training bilingual workers. With effort, education, acculturation and understanding, the rewards of training a diverse workforce are immense. People grow, businesses flourish and everyone returns home safely after a day's work. ■

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