

## Title:

Managing Millions of "Invisible" Workers: Employing Spanish-Speaking Immigrants (Part I)

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## Summary:

Looking at the soul of the immigrant worker and organizational culture: How US companies employing native Spanish-speaking workers may increase employee commitment, productivity, and their bottom line.

## Keywords:

immigrant, workforce, productivity, culture, diversity, spanish, mexican

## Article Body:

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Recent events have highlighted challenges related to the illegal immigrant workforce in the United States. Many of the immigrants at the center of the debate are from Mexico in numbers well above 10 million. This discussion focuses expressly on the reality that Spanish-speaking immigrants, whether legalized or not, are a significant presence in the U.S. workforce, especially in certain industries. The fact that these immigrants are associated with low paying, physically demanding jobs is a given. For many in the United States the protests, boycotts, and debates have brought a population to the forefront of American discourse that, for all intents and purposes, has been operating in the background of our economy as a relatively invisible class.

## 10 COMMON CHALLENGES

1. Effective written communication of policies and procedures that Spanish-speaking employees can relate to and understand
2. Identifying professional or trade-related development opportunities
3. Recognizing the value and individuality of the workers
4. Aligning the workforce with the company's vision, mission and values
5. Encouraging and incorporating employee innovations and suggestions

6. Handling chronic absenteeism and/or tardiness
7. Instilling employee commitment that mirrors their loyalty to one another
8. Lack of participation in company sponsored English as Second Language courses
9. Explaining the importance of each worker's contribution to the company's success so they become more confident and creative
10. Understanding how divisions among language groups and/or geographic country of origin impact teamwork

There are no easy solutions and the answer is not to throw blame on one party, country, group or one another. Employers can benefit from learning about cultural differences to improve their organizational culture through processes that build on the strengths and values of their employees. Before an organization can clearly see the potential of Spanish-speaking employees, it is important to understand certain key cultural reference points.

All generalizations by definition have exceptions and this discussion does not pretend to accurately describe every person who speaks only or primarily Spanish. But there is value in considering common cultural phenomena influencing work behavior. It is important to understand that the separation between religion and individual identity, collective culture and government do not exist or are much fuzzier for Spanish-speakers than for mainstream Americans. The great majority of Spanish-speakers are Catholic and the values of the Church are woven through every aspect of society. Immigrant Spanish speakers in the United States are going to experience ongoing culture shock due to this.

This is not to say that everything Latin American Governments or citizens do is in line with Catholic values. However, it does provide a societal frame of reference that, while not always practiced, underlies all communication and action. Employers might be mindful of religious holidays and ceremonies that may disrupt production schedules. As members of a collectivist culture, Spanish speakers value not only immediate family but also extended family and related activities. Thus, employers might consider the importance of family commitments when examining leave policies and other benefits.

Spanish-speaking people are not homogenous and are, in fact, very sensitive to divisions based on skin color, heritage, education, and socio-economic status. North American values that have evolved through the course of U.S. history, such

as gender equality, freedom of religion, and a "pull yourself up by your bootstraps, you can be anything you set your mind to be" mentality are not instantly understood by Spanish-speaking workers. It is much more common for such individuals to see themselves as members of a certain class with parameters that limit educational attainment, employment opportunities, and earning potential. Some Spanish-speaking workers have distrust of official institutions and policies due to more overt ethical issues pervading law enforcement, government and businesses in their countries of origin. This can result in employees that would be much more likely to simply walk off the job and disappear than to report harassment or suggest ideas that would improve productivity and reduce frustration. Sharing strong clear organizational values, building trust and fostering open communication in the workplace can all function to increase employee trust and participation.

Immigrant Spanish speakers tend to have a very strong collective sense of humor. They are masters at idiomatic expressions, sayings, wordplay, stories, and jokes. They often make time pass much more quickly, whether doing a boring task or taking a long car trip, through verbal repartee. This implies a tacit preference for social contact and verbal face-to-face communication over individual work and other communication methods like email or memos. For instance, a great deal of cultural knowledge has been transferred via oral traditions such as corridos or folk songs that used to convey news and events, but now more often have political undertones. Also, everyone in Mexico knows a great number of rancheras or other traditional songs that provide a unifying sense of identity. There is no such phenomenon in the US today.

The above list of challenges and the cultural reference points shared here are meant to illustrate the complexity of the Spanish-speaking workforce. In Part II of this article we delve more deeply into business strategies to further maximize the contribution and development of immigrant workers.