



Book HR and the New Hispanic Workforce

A Comprehensive Guide to Cultivating and Leveraging Employee Success

Louis E. V. Nevaer and Vaso Perimenis Ekstein
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Recommendation

Louis Nevaer and Vaso Perimenis Ekstein advocate accommodating Hispanic culture and workers in your workplace. They argue that you should make changes in that direction and explain how to make them. While the authors sometimes blur the difficult line between separating out a group as “minorities” or, instead, being culturally sensitive, their advice makes sense to the extent that your company has Hispanic employees and job applicants. The authors’ counsel on how to check for hidden bias in your workplace is quite good, although their mandate for bilingualism may apply only in places where that is already an expected element of the local culture. Employers will benefit from the book’s discussion of the cultural significance of work and extended family for Hispanics. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to human resource managers working with Hispanic employees, with the note that the applicability and practicality of some of its suggestions may depend on the individual needs of your particular company.

Take-Aways

- America’s largest minority, Hispanics are its fastest growing workplace segment.
- The Hispanic community is not uniform in its skills and education in all localities.
- Hispanic workers want jobs that help them support their extended families.
- Most Hispanics appreciate classes that improve their English-language skills.
- Do not mistake Hispanic deference to authority for passivity or shiftlessness.
- Dignity and respect are vitally important values in the Hispanic cultures.
- Unions are popular among Hispanics because of their emphasis on collective action.
- Avoid “Spanglish.” Use Spanish in business as you would use English.
- Strengthen the loyalty of Hispanic workers by supporting affinity groups and mentoring programs.
- Help defuse the brown-black tension in your workforce by fostering dialogue.

Summary

Selecting Great Hispanic Employees

You want a diverse workplace and you want to hire Hispanic workers in a proportion that reflects their population in your community. However, traditional recruiting methods aren’t working because the Hispanic population is more educationally and occupationally diverse than other ethnic groups. For example, if you are looking for Hispanic workers with college degrees, you will find most of them in and around Miami, Florida. If your community has Hispanic workers from Mexico, you will find generally low educational attainment among them, not because they aren’t hungry to learn, but because they suffer from Mexico’s pitiful education system. Another problem is the subtle, almost unconscious, forms of bias most native English speakers have toward English spoken with a strong Spanish accent. In many cases, the English speakers need to make extra efforts to learn from and relate to their Hispanic co-workers, who were born and raised in Latin countries, and have had far different life experiences.

“The increase of Hispanics in the workforce and the emergence of HRM [human resources management] as a management tool constitute two of the most significant changes facing corporate America.”

When you interview Hispanic candidates, take the time to understand their cultural norms. For example, Hispanics show respect in ways that many “Anglophone” managers will regard as passive and timid. Hispanic job applicants from working-class backgrounds may seem passive or even shiftless in the way they defer to authority. If you judge them this way, you will forfeit opportunities to hire loyal, hard-working employees. If you use pre-employment assessments to screen applicants, take the relevant cross-cultural effects into account. Consider using a probationary period in place of culturally mismatched assessments.

“The emergence of the United States as a bilingual consumer economy requires HRM to focus on how it can encourage Hispanic, or at least bilingual, candidates to apply.”

Family concerns and personal values matter a great deal in most Hispanic cultures. Hispanic people do not see their work as separate from the rest of their lives, and they appreciate jobs that are congruent with their values. Hispanic workers tend to view their bosses as respected members of their extended families. Managers open to playing this role can increase worker loyalty. In fact, these social relationships often matter to Hispanic workers more than their pay (and pay matters a great deal). Employers can expect hard work and gratitude from Hispanic employees in exchange for benefits that fit their particular needs. These include flexible holidays that allow them to take their important national and cultural holidays off, perhaps in place of standard American holidays.

HR Policies and Your Hispanic Employees

With the rapid growth of the Hispanic workforce, companies are finding it impossible to enforce English-only rules; and it is actually harmful to do so. Having manuals and signs in English and Spanish supports the use of both languages. Apply a bilingual standard to unacceptable speech in the workplace: What is forbidden in English should also be forbidden in Spanish.

“Hispanic immigration to the United States has proved a tremendous benefit to the nation’s economy.”

Hispanics have a collectivist culture that favors labor unions. Their values are compatible with a communal method of working, negotiating and establishing equality. Hispanic workers who are insecure speaking English are often comfortable having their union speak for them. Because they are less confrontational than other members of organized labor, Hispanic union members often prefer working with management rather than against it. Respect and dignity matter a great deal in Hispanic cultures, but that priority can be confusing to employers who place more emphasis on financial results.

“As has been the case with women, African Americans, and Asian Americans, Hispanics operate under the pressure of having to prove themselves, working doubly hard to dispel misgivings about what they lack.”

Hispanic workforce growth has created workplace-based friction in race relations. The old focus was on black and white race relations; now black and brown social problems demand attention as Hispanics displace African-Americans as the largest American minority, and vie for greater political and economic recognition. This issue is just as important as the racial discrimination and gender issues that led to existing laws, regulations and policies protecting minorities and women in the workplace.

“Where Hispanics are concerned, their anxiety and self-doubt about education levels lead them to place a premium on education as a benefit.”

Unfortunately, as Hispanics embrace American culture, they often develop negative attitudes toward African-Americans. Understand the dynamics of this tension, and provide mechanisms such as workshops and seminars to help your employees work together smoothly in an environment of increasing diversity. Developing and teaching a conflict resolution process is vital to maintaining an integrated and united workforce.

“Hispanics with college degrees, for instance, are not randomly distributed throughout the country: they are concentrated in one specific region – Miami, Florida.”

Reassure your Hispanic staff members about their position in your organization by promulgating policies relevant to and supportive of them. Review printed material and communications to ensure the absence of even subtle bias against Hispanics.

Evaluation and Your Hispanic Employees

Of course, your company needs to manage the performance of all its employees, and your HR professionals have long experience in conducting constructive performance evaluations. With the increasing number of Hispanics in your workforce, you have probably noticed how much they care about their jobs. However, if you want to help them improve, be careful about saying anything that can be taken as criticism, even constructive criticism. Hispanics hear critical comments as affronts rather than as helpful suggestions. Many Hispanics tend to be perfectionists, but they are not used to American notions of time management and “good enough” standards. Help them understand their tasks in discrete portions with clear timeframes for each piece. Evaluators should come across more as supportive peers than as judge, jury and executioner.

“HR professionals cannot do anything about the nation’s changing workplace demographics, but they must be aware of emerging issues that can create a hostile work environment for the Hispanic employee.”

Learning a few cultural subtleties can help you a great deal in conducting performance reviews. Hispanics do not approach life with the same sense of individualism that pervades American culture. They are more group-oriented and think of work as a cooperative enterprise. Hispanic workers tend to avoid citing their individual achievements because they would consider such claims insulting to their co-workers. As you conduct each evaluation, be sure to preserve your Hispanic worker’s sense of dignity. One approach is to break the evaluation into three parts:

1. **The preinterview** – This is a personal meeting to review goals. The employee prepares an oral or written self-appraisal for discussion in this private, uninterrupted session.
2. **The interview** – Conduct this meeting in a relaxed, private setting where you can discuss the differences in your appraisal of the employee and his or her self-appraisal. Commend the employee for goals met or exceeded, work together to list ways the employee can improve job performance and agree on goals for the coming year.

3. **The postinterview** – In this meeting, complete a written statement related to the interview and any monetary issues. Ask the employee to add comments and sign off. Provide the employee with a copy, and let him or her know when the next review will be (for example, next quarter or next year).

“In the Hispanic experience, unions are a way to engage management in constructive conversation and reciprocal dialogue.”

The key is to avoid major surprises in any of these meetings. Manage the employee evaluation process in an unbiased way that makes expectations clear and supports excellent job performance.

Why Training Matters to Your Hispanic Employees

Most Hispanic employees value training and development. Begin on the first day with a solid, clear orientation to your company, the trainees' jobs and exactly what you expect of them. They need to know how they can make their concerns known to the company and who their immediate supervisors are. Prepare your front line managers to work well with Hispanic employees. If you are an HR professional, offer to help counsel new staff members as they phase into the general workforce.

“While ‘English only’ policies have historically been enforced, Hispanics now have a share of the workforce that makes such language rules impossible to enforce.”

Training programs for all workers will provide dividends that far outweigh the costs. Be sure your Hispanic employees know what training programs are available. Offer some topics that will contribute to their success at work and to their lives outside work. For example, many blue collar Hispanics are very enthusiastic about learning English and crave truly helpful classes. They also seek accent-elimination courses and workshops about cross-culture communication.

“The question of who needs to learn English, or Spanish, and of the limits (if any) on Spanglish is a matter of consequence [for] HR professionals.”

Spanish is an inevitable part of the American economy and your workplace. Therefore, encourage your Spanish-speaking employees to learn English, but also actively support English speakers who want to learn Spanish to help them interact with their fellow employees, customers and suppliers. If you have English-only policies, you may want to reconsider them because they will harm you as America's Hispanic minority grows. Talented Hispanic employees will hesitate to become part of a culture that rejects their heritage. Discourage “Spanglish” as you would discourage any slang in business discourse. Make sure Spanish is used as correctly and as formally as English in your company.

“HRM can go a long way toward ensuring that Hispanic employees stay with the organization.”

Diversity generates many destructive myths. For example, affirmative action and diversity are not synonyms. Help your employees understand that a diverse workforce can be even more productive and successful than a homogenous one. Your top executives must clearly state your company's goals for diversity through training, HR policies and communication. Teach employees that working in a multicultural environment will help them to reach more people, spark more ideas and enrich each other's personal lives. How many Americans ate sushi 50 years ago? Have you noticed how many do today? You have also probably noticed the rise of authentic Hispanic cuisine. Americans no longer equate Mexican food with the menu at Taco Bell.

How to Retain Your Hispanic Employees

Hispanics are the fastest growing segment in the American workforce. Because most of them are also immigrants, Hispanics need programs to help them integrate into your corporate culture, and to help your current employees understand and accept them as co-workers. Make this process as seamless and as welcoming as possible. Assess bilingualism when hiring new employees and when promoting employees to supervisory positions. English as a Second Language and accent-reduction courses are solid units of your diversity-building program. They will help your Hispanic employees communicate more effectively at work and during their leisure time.

“When conducting performance appraisals, HRM should incorporate the principles of the ‘new approach,’ which emphasizes the preinterview, interview and postinterview.”

Recognizing employee accomplishments is a cost effective, powerful way to encourage the behavior you want. Hispanics value education, so as you provide the benefits of continuing learning, praise those who use these benefits and apply their new information on the job. At Ford and Citigroup, such programs help Hispanic employees by encouraging them to socialize, and to share information and ideas. Mentoring programs are a highly regarded mechanism for helping employees mature and learn the skills they need. Mentors also help employees connect with key people at their firms and develop their social networks.

“Exit interviews represent a prime opportunity to gain candid information on employment conditions within the organization.”

Many HR departments are wrestling with the concept of work-life balance. Hispanic employees make that wrestling match even tougher because they value family so strongly and have an expansive view of what constitutes a family. Hispanic employees often want to extend their health-care benefits to those they support, such as elderly parents and grandparents. If your company cannot help them do this, Hispanic workers will continue to seek other employment where the company can help them meet these serious personal responsibilities.

Encourage your workforce, particularly Hispanic employees, to participate in relevant professional organizations, because it will help them develop useful skills. Non-salaried Hispanic workers often participate in social organizations, such as home town associations, that matter a great deal to them. If you encourage and support their participation in such groups you signal your concern for them and their families, and you demonstrate your respect for their culture.

Of course, you cannot keep every employee forever. Conduct proper exit interviews with everyone. While HR professionals can conduct these conversations, you might consider using a neutral third party with whom your employee can speak freely. If your Hispanic employees are leaving because of bias and conflicts you know nothing of, you will certainly want to learn about these issues so you can address them. The information you glean from exit interviews can help you build a stronger, more enthusiastic workforce.

About the Authors

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