

## Safety Scene

### Safety? Seguridad?: No Matter How You Say It, It's the Law by Molly E. Butz

*It's no secret that the component industry employs Spanish-speaking laborers. How can you bridge the gap between language and safety?*

Throughout the United States, Spanish-speaking workers are becoming a bigger and bigger percentage of the workforce. In fact, Spanish-speaking workers comprise the largest one-language immigrant group, and the number of Hispanics grew by 60 percent in the last decade making up 12.5 percent of the population. To confirm that the structural building components industry is also experiencing an influx of Spanish-speaking employees, SBC staff asked component manufacturers the following questions in a recent One Minute Poll (OMP).

- What percentage of your current workforce is Spanish-speaking?
- What percentage of your workforce was Spanish-speaking five years ago?

Confirmed. Nearly half of the OMP respondents estimated that they have more Spanish-speaking employees today than they did five years ago. Moreover, several companies listed a Spanish-speaking workforce that makes up 80 percent or more of their total employee base.

From many angles, this growing pool of Spanish-speaking workers has been of tremendous benefit to many industries, including the building components industry. Many managers report significantly fewer turnovers within their Spanish-speaking workforce and overall are extremely satisfied with their enthusiastic work ethic, adding that their Spanish-speaking employees have excellent, on-time attendance records and take a great deal of pride in their work.

So how does this affect a company from a safety standpoint? The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 requires employers to provide a workplace that is free from recognized hazards and to comply with occupational safety and health standards. (OSHA is anything but vague about an employer's responsibility to train its employees in the safety and health aspects of their jobs.) OSHA considers training to be an essential part of every employer's safety and health program. An effective program can provide numerous benefits, including fewer injuries and illnesses, better worker morale, and lower insurance premiums. Unfortunately, some companies are finding that the language barrier can be an obstacle when it comes to training of any kind, including safety and health.

In 2000, the total workforce consisted of 10.7 percent Spanish-speaking employees. This same group incurred a disproportionate number of workplace fatalities at more than 13.8 percent.

This can be attributed, in part, to the fact that Spanish-speaking workers are employed in higher-risk occupations, such as construction and manufacturing, where proper training is necessary to maintain a safe workplace.

Here are some tips on ensuring your Spanish-speaking employees know and understand the safety rules implemented in your facility:

- Utilize a comprehensive safety program that provides training for your employees in both English and Spanish. (Looking for a recommendation? WTCA's Operation Safety Program now offers employee training in both languages.)
- Post all of your warning posters and signs in both English and Spanish.
- Provide incentives to employees that are interested in learning another language, either English or Spanish.
- Invest in a good English-Spanish dictionary to keep in the office and take the time to learn some basic Spanish words and phrases. (See the [Support Docs](#) for basics Spanish words and OSHA Links.)
- Access other English-Spanish resources on the web through OSHA and NIOSH.

It's become a habit in our "short on time" lives to hurry through everything we do, including tasks on the job. Making sure employees, English and Spanish-speaking alike, know that "si usted no entiende, no diga que entiendo," is critical. Translated, that means "If you don't understand, don't say that you do." It's a simple policy to implement and it's worth it. Taking those few extra moments to make sure an employee really understands a task can save time, money or even a life.

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To pose a question for this column or to learn more about WTCA's Operation Safety Program, contact WTCA Staff at 608/274-4849, email [wtca@woodtruss.com](mailto:wtca@woodtruss.com), or view the Operation Safety demonstration online at [www.wtcatko.com](http://www.wtcatko.com).

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