

Hispanic Woodworker Training Program

An Innovative Approach to Integrating the Hispanic Workforce into the Wood Products Industry

Phase 1: Assessment Results and Recommendations

*Indiana Hardwood Lumbermen's Association
in Partnership with the
Wood Machinery Manufacturers of America, and the
U.S. Forest Service, Wood Education Resource Center*

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Executive summary:

Between 1990 and 2000 the U.S. Hispanic population expanded by 58% and now account for 12.5% of the U.S. population. For 35.3 million people in the U.S. Spanish is their first language. Hispanics are the biggest 17-and-under minority group in the United States.

In North Carolina, Arkansas and Georgia the percent of population growth over the past ten years has exceeded 300%; in Tennessee, South Carolina, and Alabama over 200%; and in Kentucky and Minnesota over 150%. Most states expect the Hispanic population to double by 2025.

The wood products industry, like many labor-intensive industries, has increasingly turned to hiring Hispanic workers to maintain a competitive edge. The growing Hispanic population in this country has created a workforce that is ideal to the needs of many companies. Most companies that have employed Hispanic workers are pleased with their productivity and hard work; however, with these benefits there are also some challenges. Communication, educational level, and legal issues are typically mentioned as obstacles for optimal worker performance.

To identify these obstacles, current training needs, and optimal delivery methods of information to these workers, an assessment was completed of companies and Hispanic workers in the wood products industry in late 2002 and early 2003. A company survey, developed with the input of industry leaders and experts in survey design, was distributed to members of leading industry associations in the country. Additionally, this group of experts helped develop a focus group protocol that was used in meetings with Hispanic workers to identify training needs from their perspective.

This project did not survey a representative sample. Investigators were not trying to extrapolate information from the assessment to draw conclusions about the entire wood products industry. The analysis does not attempt to infer results to all companies nor all Hispanic workers in the wood products industry. This survey was conducted to determine the needs of companies that belong to a participating association and completed the survey.

Company survey results

More than 1,400 company surveys were distributed and 149 (11%) responded. Of those that responded, 72% completed the survey on the web site, 11% sent the completed survey via e-mail, 9% sent the survey as a fax, and 7% used traditional mail service to return the completed survey.

The survey was statistically analyzed for three separate sub-populations:

- All companies that responded to the survey;
- Respondents in the Hardwood Region (58% of all completed surveys);

- All companies that volunteered to participate in the focus group meetings (almost 30% of all completed surveys).

Additionally, comparisons were made for companies:

- With between one and fifty employees and those with more than fifty employees, to help identify specific needs of large versus small companies;
- With Hispanic workers comprising less than ten percent of their workforce with those that had greater than ten percent Hispanic employees;
- That have been employing Hispanic workers for less than five years with companies with more experience (more than five years).

Researchers discovered few significant differences among the responses in the various comparisons that were tested. This report describes the significant differences that did emerge. Average values were calculated from all responses and these averages were tested for significant differences. All differences identified in the following discussions are significant at the 95% confidence interval for the average response of that question.

Average responses that are identified together and not described as different are not significantly different at the 95% level. For example, when we report “On average, respondents rated the economy, workforce availability, and workforce skills as the most important issues their company faces” there is no statistically significant difference among the average response of these three topics. However, these three may be significantly different than other issues mentioned in this question.

On average, respondents rated the economy, workforce availability, and workforce skills as the most important issues their company faces. Interviews were used significantly more for job placement than other employee evaluation methods. Requiring previous experience was, statistically, the second most common job placement tool. Companies that responded to the survey indicated that, on average, general safety, company orientation, personal protective equipment, and standard company benefits were more frequently included in their training program than were other topics.

On-the-job training and verbal/one-on-one presentation of information were identified as the most common ways companies deliver training. When asked how their training and information programs were evaluated, most responded that they had a “feeling or sense” that they work.

Of all companies that responded to the survey, 68% had Hispanic employees. Most companies indicated that they began hiring Hispanic workers because they were more available and more productive. Companies reported that the primary benefits of employing Hispanic workers were that they are productive, hardworking, cooperative, reliable, and locally available. Communication in English and residency status/legal issues were of the greatest concern for companies completing the survey. There were few statistically significant differences identified by companies on the importance of all other topics of concern with their Hispanic workforce.

A lack of integration into the company was of a greater concern for companies with less than ten percent Hispanic employees than it was for companies with more than ten percent. Providing written material in Spanish, verbal training in Spanish and hosting company “socials” were rated as significantly more effective than were encouraging English classes for workers or Spanish classes for supervisors. The topics of safety, job skills, cross training and English classes were identified as being significantly more useful than other information and training topics.

In general, companies felt there was the need for improved training for all workers. They indicated that training in English communication and immigration and naturalization were the only two topics that should be developed specifically for the Hispanic workforce.

Companies that said they would be interested in participating in the Hispanic focus group meetings more frequently responded that there was the need for specific training for their Hispanic workers than did companies in the Hardwood region.

Companies that responded to the survey significantly identified on-the-job training as the most useful delivery method for training programs. The second most useful delivery methods were written material, local training sessions, and with videotapes. The use of distance learning or video teleconferencing, Internet-based training, and regional training sessions were viewed as the least useful.

On the job training, written material, local training sessions, and videotapes were identified as being the optimal delivery for training for those companies that volunteered to participate in the focus groups.

The vast majority of all companies expect to hire, train, and retain Hispanic workers in the future and would like additional information on training Hispanic workers.

Focus group results

A total of 11 focus group meetings were held with a total of 67 Hispanic workers in the wood products industry. These meetings were held in Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. Approximately ninety percent of the workers were from Mexico, however there were also some from Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Columbia, Guatemala, and Honduras. None of the workers were born in the United States.

Workers reported that they received on-the-job training for almost all aspects of their employment. Communication in English was perceived to be a significant obstacle and issues surrounding legal status were their primary concerns. Orientation and company policies were poorly understood and few workers felt that there were opportunities for advancement within the company. Skilled workers were typically more thoroughly trained and were more inclined to remain with the company even if a better paying job

became available. All workers stated that their primary objective for working at the company was financial and they wanted to either work more hours per week or have an increase in salary.

Participants understood the importance of learning English but described a number of obstacles that prevented them from becoming bilingual. Family obligations and time constraints were a primary reason that many couldn't study English, as was the availability of appropriate courses for individuals with their level of education. Additionally, few perceived that there are rewards, either through advancement or financial, for those who are or have become bilingual.

In general, workers in unskilled positions have short-term plans and expectations for working in the wood products industry and living in the United States. Workers in skilled positions usually are living with family here in the United States and could be described as seeking the "American Dream"— an improved future for themselves and their families.

Improved training is needed throughout the industry. Companies in the wood products industry and many of the focus group participants mentioned the need for more formalized, standardized or frequent training programs. The need for more materials in Spanish and improved communication was also mentioned by many of the companies and focus group participants.

Basic company orientation is usually only provided at the beginning of employment, when Hispanic workers are typically inundated with information. Because of the communication difficulties during this time, workers focus on the information required for their position and retain little of general company policies and worker rights and responsibilities.

Discussion on training and information needs

A company training program template should be developed to assist in the implementation of a well-designed and thorough training program for all workers. This should include topics that are typically only covered at the beginning of employment and areas such as safety training that should be reinforced regularly. A structured planning guide, training content, support, and evaluation material, should be provided both in English and Spanish.

Prior to this Hispanic workforce project the Wood Education and Resource Center (WERC) conducted an effort looking into the safety training needs of the wood industry. This effort examined training needs, delivery modes, and the potential for collaborative efforts. Numerous leading wood products associations were involved in identifying the needs for this issue and efforts are being developed to address the specifics of the wood products industry. This continuing effort will meet the needs of the industry to provide more structured, formal and frequent training of all workers in safety and general job skills.

Efforts should be undertaken to locate and/or develop programs to train Hispanic workers in survival English for the wood products workplace. The objective is not to gain full English proficiency, but to allow supervisors and workers to communicate on a basic, functional level. Similar resources should be developed for Spanish survival/basic communication for English-speaking supervisors and co-workers.

Regularly scheduled training programs should include time for reinforcing the employees' understanding of company policies, regulations, and the production cycle. These training sessions should include tours of the plant with specific presentations on new machines and methodologies being implemented in the company. This training should be for all employees and not restricted to only those involved in the task.

Company management should make concerted efforts to fully explain company decisions or changes in policy that directly affect workers. A quality and reinforced company orientation would make it easier for workers to understand these changes in company procedures.

When possible, workers should have direct access to a member of upper management, perhaps by appointment or during a regularly scheduled time.

Training in teamwork, cultural diversity, and quality control at the company level - for all workers and supervisors - would help open these channels of communication and ultimately increase production efficiency and product quality.

Immigration issues are a serious concern among the Hispanic population and to a lesser extent the company management. Many other industries are struggling with this issue and there has yet to be a well-defined solution. At a minimum, companies must comply with legal requirements; however, beyond the basic I-9 form, immigration procedures and requirements are complex. Information regarding this process should be compiled "in a nutshell" and made available in a user-friendly format to company management and Hispanic workers. A word of caution: there is no band-aid solution to this issue. It is a complex and time-consuming process.

Recommendations and future efforts

Based on the result of this assessment and the continuing efforts of WERC in structured safety training and delivery, the focus of this project will be in the development of resources to help managers and supervisors better integrate and optimize the productivity of the Hispanic workforce. This will be accomplished through the development of a number of resources which, when implemented, will provide a better understanding of the workplace for the Hispanic workers and a greater ability for the manager to fully integrate the Spanish speaking employees into the production environment.

Specifically, a supervisors guide for managing all employees and the Hispanic workforce will be developed. This guide will be user friendly – in a nutshell information directly

applicable to the wood products industry and it will include a description and discussion of the importance, concepts, activities, and resources of the following: company orientation methodologies, employee handbook template, team building and quality control concepts, and cultural diversity training. Additionally, a Hispanic worker employment guide will be written which will include the following topics: generalities vs. stereotyping, geographical variability and implications on management, cultural influences, educational systems in Latin America, communication – overcoming the barriers and Immigration – explain the difficulties Hispanics face and potential solutions.

A manual to assist the Hispanic worker in adapting and understanding the American culture and work place will be developed with the following topics: Legal issues, communication/education, work environment, culture and communities, and an English/Spanish audio resource of common terms in the wood products industry workplace.

These products will be developed with the input of several individuals including experts in Human Resources management, Hispanic culture and training, wood products/manufacturing, and information technology. Once the final products are developed they will be integrated into an electronic template for delivery to WERC, participating associations and their members in the wood products industry.

Many wood products companies already rely on the Hispanic workforce, and it is highly likely that this trend will continue in the future. The productivity and efficiency of these workers is directly related to the quality of training efforts. Expectations that Hispanic workers will quickly become proficient in English should be modest. If companies desire optimum performance from their employees, supervisors should be assured that the workers fully understand their positions and the work environment. Developing training materials and efforts specifically for this audience is the logical solution.