

Recruiting

The New Look Workforce: How Will Changing Demographics Affect the Practice of Occupational Safety and Health

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In the United States, demographics of the workplace are more diverse now than ever. The makeup of the workplace is ever changing, from a wider age range of workers to an increase in the numbers of disabled persons represented in the workplace because of the enforcement of the American Disabilities Act. The workplace is also a more diverse place because of the continual influx of immigrants to the United States.

For centuries, immigrants have come to the United States for various reasons, from looking to provide their children with better educational opportunities to seeking more job opportunities.ⁱ According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), there are 26.3 million foreign-born persons in the United States labor force, comprising 16.7 percent of the total. Foreign-born workers are more likely than native-born workers to be employed in economic sectors such as service, construction, and maintenance industries. Workers from all backgrounds are essential to the growth, development, and success of the United States economy.

The continuous inflow of immigrants is largely responsible for the sustaining increase in racial and ethnic diversity in the workforce.ⁱⁱ The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 48.8 percent of the foreign-born labor workforce identifies Hispanic or Latino, and 24.1 percent of the foreign-born labor workforce identifies as Asian. Predictions indicate that immigrants and their children will make up 83 percent of the working age population of the United States by 2050.ⁱⁱⁱ Foreign-born workers are more likely to suffer workplace injuries and fatalities.

For example, Latino workers suffer significantly higher workplace fatality injuries, with a rate of 5.9 per 100,000. This is almost 50 percent higher than the rate for all workers (4.0). In 2013, two-thirds of work-related deaths amongst Latino workers were among foreign-born individuals.ⁱⁱⁱ With more diverse workplaces than ever before, it is essential that workplaces adapt to ethnically diverse work environments.

To ensure the workplace remains safe, companies must adapt to an increasingly diverse racial and ethnic workforce. It is critical that the workplace understands the diversity of its workforce and how workers of different backgrounds approach, comprehend, and practice on-the-job safety.

Providing on-the-job training is an essential practice of employers. Historically, there have been concerns that training have been English-centric trainings or not properly translated into the native language of all employees. Having comprehensible training materials is crucial in ensuring the health and well-being of the workforce. Employees are often unfamiliar with the procedures, regulations, machines, chemicals, and materials present or the hazards associated with them.ⁱⁱⁱ Multilingual and multicultural infrastructure must become an integral component of onboarding new employees and supporting their safety and success in the workplace.

A common challenge in the workplace is language differences between foreign-born workers and their supervisors. Linguistic differences often present significant challenges to communicating health and safety information, discussing occupational health and safety issues, and ensuring safe and inclusive workplace practices.

In order to maintain a safe work environment, employers must establish an ongoing dialogue on health and safety inclusive of all of the languages of its workforce. Oftentimes, there is a heavy reliance on bilingual employees. This can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding in the workplace. Developing a bilingual or multilingual capacity within an organization is becoming increasingly important.

Companies could also implement language classes in English and the other native languages represented in their workforce. This would allow all workers to have the opportunity to improve their communication skills and help break down barriers within the workforce to see each other work through the challenges of learning another language.ⁱⁱⁱ

Linguistic understand is one important form of communication in the workplace. Understanding the different cultures in the workplace is important to understand how groups of workers perceive, understand, adapt to, and address work-related safety concerns.ⁱⁱⁱ Culture is the customary beliefs, shared attitudes, values, goals, practices, and material traits of a racial or social group.^v Several cultural factors can affect safety at work, including coworker-employer relationships and perception of dangers in the workplace.ⁱⁱⁱ

To create a safe work environment, employers must address and adapt to cultural differences in trainings, one-on-one communication, and in hazard communications. It is important that employers encourage their employees, especially foreign-born employees, to express health, safety, and cultural concerns in the workplace.^{iv}

While there may be cultural differences in this encouragement, it will give employees greater security and pride in their jobs.

The United States workforce is an ethnically diverse workplace that celebrates American fundamentals. Employers must take steps to ensure the workplace is safe and healthy for all to adapt to the increase in foreign-born workers.

Previously featured on *3M's Worker Health & Safety site*.

¹ Nuñez, Christina. "Why People Migrate: 11 Surprising Reasons." Global Citizen. 4 Dec. 2014. Web. 30 Apr. 2017.

² "The Future at Work — Trends and Implications ." RAND Corporation. Web. 30 Apr. 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Flynn, Michael A. "Safety & the Diverse Workforce: Lessons from NIOSH's Work With Latino Immigrants." Prof. Saf. 59.6 (2014): 52-57. Print.

^{iv} "Communicating Occupational Health And Safety Across Languages – Compliance Code." Work Safe Victoria. Support Centre, 2008. Web. 30 Apr. 2017.

^v "Culture." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, Web. 30 Apr. 2017.