

2011

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# Insights from Spanish-Speaking Employees in the Iowa Horticultural Industry

## **Abstract**

Addressing the needs of Latino workers can help improve working conditions, job satisfaction, and productivity of both employees and the companies hiring Latino workers. The study reported here assessed educational needs, communication gaps, and technical skills of Latino workers working in the horticultural industry in Iowa—an ethnic group that is relatively new to Iowa. Focus groups were conducted with Latino workers and produced topics for educational programming and suggestions that could improve communications between predominantly English-speaking managers and Spanish-speaking Latino employees, and the horticultural knowledge of the Latino employees.

## **Keywords**

focus groups in Spanish, communicating with Latinos, Spanish-speaking workforce

## **Disciplines**

Agricultural Education | Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Horticulture

## **Comments**

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**December 2011**  
**Volume 49 Number 6**  
**Article Number 6RIB8**

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# **Insights from Spanish-Speaking Employees in the Iowa Horticultural Industry**

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**Abstract:** Addressing the needs of Latino workers can help improve working conditions, job satisfaction, and productivity of both employees and the companies hiring Latino workers. The study reported here assessed educational needs, communication gaps, and technical skills of Latino workers working in the horticultural industry in Iowa—an ethnic group that is relatively new to Iowa. Focus groups were conducted with Latino workers and produced topics for educational programming and suggestions that could improve communications between predominantly English-speaking managers and Spanish-speaking Latino employees, and the horticultural knowledge of the Latino employees.

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## **Introduction**

Communication, job satisfaction, safety, and quality of work are a challenge when horticultural employees who speak little English are hired by predominantly non-Spanish speaking, non-Latino managers and owners (Bitsch & Harsh, 2004; Waliczek, O'Rourke, & Bradley, 2002). Addressing the needs of both managers and Latino employees could improve the working conditions, job satisfaction, and productivity of both

employees and the companies that hire Latino workers (Behnke, 2008; Quigley, 1998; Yancura, 2008).

Latinos in the U.S. comprise historically well established and diverse, albeit underserved, ethnic and language groups. Producing and delivering horticultural products and services involves many labor-intensive tasks. Many factors, including seasonal positions, low wages, and a decreasing supply of domestic labor willing to perform farm work, have led managers across the United States to recruit foreign-born workers (Bitsch, 2004; Boucher, Smith, Taylor, & Y nez-Naude, 2007; Waliczek et al., 2002 ). Approximately 75% of hired farm workers in the United States were born in Mexico (United States Department of Labor, 2005).

The domestic labor shortage in agriculture is evident in the state of Iowa, which has experienced an influx of employees from Latin America (Norman, 2008). Spanish-speaking, or Latino, workers typically fill seasonal positions in the horticulture industry. While previous studies have been conducted to examine issues for Latino and other new and underserved employees in other states (Behnke, 2008, in North Carolina and Yancura, 2008, in Hawai'i) little information is available about the Spanish-speaking employees in the horticulture industry in Iowa. The objective of the study reported here was to determine the educational and training needs of Spanish-speaking horticultural workers in Iowa.

## Methods

Focus group methodology was applied to gain knowledge about the perspectives of Latino workers in Iowa's horticulture industry. Focus groups enable researchers to explore the specific and also less-obvious needs of individuals (Allen, Grudens-Schuck, & Larson, 2004; Morgan, 1997). Information gathered from focus groups helps educators design effective educational programming (Pearce, 1998; Quigley, 1998; Yancura, 2008). Within Extension, focus groups have been used with Spanish-speaking community members to learn about challenges faced by newcomers to Midwestern states (Malek, 2002; Farner, Rhoads, Cutz, & Farner, 2005).

Iowa State University experts in focus group methodology, together with individuals familiar with Latino communities, developed and revised the 14-item question guide for discussion (Morgan, 1997). Participants in the study were Spanish-speaking employees from the golf course, nursery production, and landscaping sectors of the horticulture industry in Iowa. Individuals recruited for the study were contacted through their supervisors or managers who participated in a previous focus group (Justen, Haynes, VanDerZanden, & Grudens-Schuck, 2009). The three focus groups consisted of 22 participants, representing golf-course maintenance (n = 12), landscape design and installation (n = 3), and nursery production (n = 7).

Focus groups were conducted during the summer of 2008 at three locations (Sioux City, Des Moines, and Charles City) in Iowa. A moderator and an assistant moderator, both fluent in English and Spanish, were present at each focus group. Discussion questions were designed to determine training and resource needs of employees and to specifically elucidate how Extension programming can help employees to improve working relationships, as well as provide relevant industry-related technical material. We anticipated that the issues of relationships, communications, and job-specific information and skill needs would be inter-twined (Allen et al., 2004). Questions were sequenced from general to specific to maximize insight. The fourteen questions that were asked at each focus group are listed below.

- How did you become involved in horticulture?
- Do you have gardening experience?

- What is your agriculture history or background?
- What dreams or aspirations do you have for the future?
- What position do you hold in your company?
- What are your duties in this position?
- Do you hold a seasonal position?
- What do you enjoy about your position?
- What are your frustrations about your position?
- How much English do you speak?
- What training and information resources are available to you?
- How do you access these resources?
- Are you aware of Extension and Extension programs?
- How can Extension help make you more successful at your job?

Probing questions, or follow-up questions, were asked by the moderator during the discussions to clarify comments that may have been unclear. Focus-group sessions lasted 60-90 minutes. The moderator led and facilitated the discussion questions, and the assistant moderator documented comments from the participants in the form of field notes. The responses of focus group participants were recorded with digital and tape recorders. Each participant was aware of the recording and asked to sign an informed consent document (written in Spanish and English) prior to participation in the focus group session. The recordings were transcribed and coded by attaching labels to ideas or themes that emerged from the discussions. The long-table approach was used for coding and analyzing the focus group transcriptions (Krueger, 1998).

## Results

### Demographics and Background

Of the 22 participants, three were female and 19 were male. Fifteen of the 22 participants held seasonal positions from March to October or November. Five reported having previous farming experience in their

home countries and had participated in raising corn, black beans, tomatoes, and cattle. Ten participants reported having worked in United States agriculture before holding their current position, with many working in fruit and vegetable fields in California. Eleven participants reported that they came to their current position by recommendation of a friend or family member. Ninety percent of participants stated that they liked their current job and were content in their positions. Participants spoke about their future goals, and the majority stated that they wanted to help their families. Half of the participants also indicated that they desired to earn more money, own a house or business, or receive more education, such as taking English classes or courses in a health services-related field.

All participants reported being responsible for a wide variety of tasks associated with their jobs. At the wholesale production nursery, participants were in charge of growing and maintaining potliners, containers, and trees. They were responsible for pulling orders, spacing and consolidating containers, pruning, planting, watering, and fixing irrigation pipes. The participants from the golf course were responsible for cutting the greens and reconstructing damage on the golf course. Plant installation was the primary responsibility of the participants from the landscaping company.

Almost all participants reported enjoying the variety of their tasks. Six participants reported that working outdoors allowed them to appreciate the beauty of the plants, flowers, and details of the golf course. Many felt the work tasks were easy rather than burdensome. The participants from the golf course enjoyed using the machinery and cutting the grass. Four participants also reported finding satisfaction when working as a team and when a job was successfully completed.

In addition to talking about what they liked about their jobs, participants discussed their frustrations and concerns. Some of their frustrations included other workers whom they believed did not want to work and supervisors who were paid more for doing the same job. Three participants also expressed aggravation with co-workers and managers who brought problems from home to work. One participant reported that she did not enjoy working outdoors during rain or cold weather. Another dissatisfaction participants expressed was the need to purchase items from their own funds, such as goggles and gloves for safety protection. Only three participants reported satisfaction with the job pay. Two participants expressed anxiety related to impending job termination at the end of the season and uncertainty about returning to the same job the next year. Participants followed such comments by stating that they recognized that supervisors tried to find ways to help Latino workers improve working conditions.

## **Communication, Training, and Resources**

Learning and speaking English were key desires but also a frustration for almost all (86%) of participants. This was anticipated. Only three participants of 22 reported understanding and speaking English fluently. Not being able to speak English was a frustration because participants were unable to express or explain what they needed or wanted. Inability to speak English made participants feel uncomfortable or "feel like a mute," as stated by one participant. Outside of the job, three participants reported that not knowing English affected their daily lives while shopping and communicating with doctors and teachers. Although participants were aware of the existence of no-cost English classes, some expressed concerns about not having enough time, not having a car to drive to class, or being too tired after working to attend classes. Quigley (1998) proposed that basic education literacy and second language courses are typically under-enrolled because there is a poor match of learners' needs and the structure of such programs.

Almost all (95%) of the participants stated that horticultural training was provided on-the-job from supervisors or co-workers and felt that they successfully learned the job from experience. Non-formal education was wholly missing from the discussion, affirming the need for Extension to be more active with this industry in regard to the changing workforce. The 12 participants from the golf course industry reported

that supervisors provided information through videos and Digital Video Discs (DVD) in Spanish regarding machinery operation and safety, about care of the greens of the golf course, and safety related to other aspects of the work. They also reported that having pictures instead of words to label tools helped the workers keep the tools in order. The seven participants from nursery production also said they received information from the parent company and have on occasion been sent outside the company for training. Often, however, the responsibility for training new Latino workers fell on the Latino crew leaders, who explained the job to the new workers. This situation appeared to be less than satisfactory.

However, we learned that all participants were aware of training and resources available in the community. In addition to free English classes, they were aware of classes that would enable them to become a welder or a health services worker. Enrollment again seemed slim. Nonetheless, when asked if they were familiar with Extension programs and services, only one participant had heard of such programs, but had not attended any because all programs appeared to be delivered solely in English.

## Participant Recommendations

Focus group participants provided suggestions and recommendations for Extension. Three participants suggested that Extension could work with companies to sponsor classes and workshops in Spanish for employees. Seven participants were interested in classes about landscape maintenance and nursery production and in learning about plant names, growing requirements, watering, fertilizing, and chemical application. Two participants remarked that classes should have more detail and hands-on activities than videos or DVDs, allowing for more interaction between participants and educators. Other suggestions mentioned by at least one focus group participant for Extension and community service partners included:

- Printed and online resources written in Spanish on implementation of horticultural tasks
- Provision of child care to encourage more people to attend training or workshops
- Flyers/bulletins in Spanish that explain extension classes posted at grocery stores, community centers, and churches with services in Spanish
- Working with companies to send employees to classes pertaining to job responsibilities and safety
- Publications in English about Latin American culture and customs for supervisors of Latino workers
- Suggestions for horticultural firms from at least one focus group participant included:
  - Provide magazines and pamphlets in Spanish about landscaping or other relevant work material
  - Use pictures instead of words to organize tools and equipment
  - Encourage people who supervise Latino workers to learn basic Spanish phrases/words

- Provide opportunities for both supervisors and employees to learn how to better manage and work with people

## Conclusions and Implications

The findings provide insights that could lead to stronger ties among all employees in the horticulture industry and particularly improve communication with members of underrepresented groups.

We also learned some things about conducting focus groups with Latino workers in Iowa. Recruitment was more difficult than for an earlier study involving managers, who were predominately English speaking. Latino participants appeared to feel more comfortable sharing information with people they knew; therefore, researchers may want to consider planning a pre-visit with potential study participants. A pre-visit may help participants better understand the purpose of the study and result in participants being more forthcoming in answering questions and giving suggestions for educational programming, as well as having more time to think about the topic. It is not an error in focus group methodology to foreshadow the topic (Morgan, 1998).

Our focus group discussions showed that Latino employees gained some horticultural knowledge from on-the-job training. These findings are similar to those from Mathers (2003), who showed that Latino workers received horticultural information from on-the-job training and from bilingual supervisors. Respondents to the survey conducted by Mathers (2003) indicated that plant identification and pest control were educational topics Latino workers were most interested in learning. Our research also showed that Latino workers lacked horticultural knowledge and were interested in educational materials to increase their knowledge in this area. Although Mathers (2003) found, in Oregon, that many respondents had a considerable grasp of English, our Iowa study indicated that most participants did not speak fluent English, and they were interested in taking English classes.

Results from focus group discussions suggest that Extension could have an impact by developing programs and materials that address language and training issues simultaneously. There is value in teaching English in context, and this appears true for the Iowa situation. Publications and trainings should be available in Spanish; however, we do not know the level of Spanish literacy present in the population, and this should be addressed prior to design (Ingram, Dorsey, & Smith, 2004). Providing publications in Spanish or translating English publication into Spanish that explain horticultural tasks such as use of fertilizers and pesticides, how to install plants, prune a tree, or mow greens, and classes in Spanish about growing requirements of landscape plants would help Latino employees improve their job performance.

Our results also showed that Latino horticulture workers in Iowa had little to no knowledge of Iowa State University Extension services, suggesting an opportunity to market our services to this group. The results also provide insight into potential delivery methods for Latino audiences, such as face-to-face classes, hands-on activities, and on-farm trainings, as well as written publications in native language(s)— all longstanding practices of Extension educators when meeting the needs of under-represented audiences (Ingram et al, 2004; Yancura, 2008).

Past research involving the horticulture workforce supports the need for educational programming for horticultural industry workers (Behnke, 2008; Bitsch & Harsh, 2004; Haynes, VanDerZanden, & Iles, 2007; Justen, Haynes, VanDerZanden, & Grudens-Schuck, 2009; Mathers, 2003; Ricard, Legrand, Hirsch, Gabany-Guerrero, & Guerrero-Murillo, 2008). If implemented, the suggestions of focus group participants for future programming could improve communication between managers and Latino employees, and job performance of Latino employees. A dual approach to second language learning, plus technology learning, would appear to be recommended for this era in the Iowa horticultural industry.

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