

Communicating Safety to Your Multi-Lingual Workforce

Cal/OSHA requires employers to provide safety training in a language that is understandable to their workers. With today's multilingual workforce, the attempt to comply with this regulation can be a challenge. In order to assure that all workers understand important safety information, employers first must be aware of their workers' native languages. They also need to assess their workers' ability to understand English in written and verbal forms. Then they need to provide instruction in those native languages, provide translators, or translate the safety materials.

In order for employers to identify the best way to communicate to their multi-lingual work force; they can test worker understanding using simple and complex written documents and verbal instructions. Workers may be uncomfortable demonstrating that they don't understand the information presented in English. They may be reluctant to ask for instructions in their own language or for repeated English instructions. A worker may nod their head or say "yes" while you explain something, but may not understand you. Ask the worker to repeat instructions back to you. Ask them to demonstrate the technique, etc. that you just taught them. Encourage workers to ask for help or clarification when they need it.

If an employer translates or offers training in another language, the same materials and amount of detail must be covered as the English language training. Interactive training provides workers with hands-on experience and allows them a chance to ask questions. Give simple, direct verbal instructions such as "wear your hardhat"

instead of "hard hats are required onsite to protect your health and safety" and give directions in the order that they should be performed. For example, "First, open the door. Then, remove the hardware." Don't say, "Remove the hardware after you open the door".

Workplace documents that must be translated include hazard warning signs and lockout-tagout devices and signs. Safety and hazard signs should have pictures and words that everyone can understand. Confirm that all of your employees understand the signs' directions. If the job has many technical terms for material and equipment, teach workers what the words mean.



Translate company safety policies and procedures. Translate equipment manuals and instruction booklets. Provide material safety data sheets (MSDS) in appropriate languages so your workers know how to properly handle, store, and dispose of chemicals. When you have materials translated, ask a bilingual reader to review them for mistakes.

Identify bilingual workers that can serve as interpreters on the job site, during training, or act as resources for reviewing written materials. Make sure workers know who is bilingual on the job and encourage them to use interpreters as a communication resource.

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