

Managing a Bilingual Workforce

When managing a bilingual workforce, finding ways to ensure proper communication is critical for maintaining a productive and safe workplace. Language and cultural barriers that emerge in a bilingual workplace can contribute to miscommunication and on-the-job accidents and injuries. Because employees who don't speak English generally hesitate to ask for help when they do not understand, it is essential to have resources available to communicate information.

Offering Orientation

Orientation should be offered in the worker's native language, if possible. Bilingual trainers in human resources or senior positions can serve a dual role, acting as translators at orientation, presentations and safety meetings throughout the year.

Language and Workplace Injuries

Employers are required by the Health and Safety Information for Employees Regulations (HSIER) to display an HSE-approved poster or distribute a leaflet that outlines British health and safety law. These posters and leaflets can be found at www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/lawposter.htm.

In addition to printed safety materials, provide information about wages and employee policies. It is beneficial to evaluate employees' level of education, job duties and common injuries, as well as culture and background, and then adapt your safety programmes and communications materials accordingly.

Consider professional translation of your materials. The cost of translation is well worth the expense when weighed against the risk of workplace accidents due to poor communication or understanding.

On-Site Education

To develop and retain skilled workers, you may want to consider offering on-site language classes to help your workers build communication skills. Offering learning opportunities at work is convenient for the worker and encourages learning in a team environment.

Safety Standards

On the safety front, keep in mind that new immigrants may not understand the importance of following UK

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safety standards. If hand tools are not functional, or if they notice a hazard or imminent danger on site, for example, they may hesitate to bring the issue to a supervisor's attention with the worry that their job is on the line. The worker should understand that properly reporting problems is a behaviour to be rewarded, and will not cost them a job.

Stay in Touch

Plan to make regular, frequent visits with your bilingual employees, making sure to touch on safety issues in the workplace, and encouraging them to ask about any doubts or issues they may be encountering on the job. To create a welcoming environment for all employees, work to develop a company culture that promotes and supports diversity as a core value of the organisation.

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