

# Language Barrier or Management Issue?

The dependence of U.S. dairies on foreign labor is growing significantly. According to a survey published in 2014 by the National Milk Producers Federation, 51.2% of the 150,418 dairy employees were immigrants, and dairies that employ immigrant labor produced 79% of the U.S. milk supply. A similar survey published by National Milk in 2009 showed 62% of milk was produced by farms employing immigrant labor.

Researchers from Michigan State University evaluated potential barriers to employee management in dairy farms. The study included management teams of 12 dairies located in Michigan (size between 185 and 3,400 cows) and 75 English- and Spanish-speaking workers. The findings, published in the *Journal of Dairy Science*, showed Spanish-speaking workers were less aware of the dairy performance goals, and they received less attention from managers and owners than English-speaking workers.

For example, when employees were asked “Do you know the somatic cell count goals for this dairy farm?” the proportion of employees who correctly stated the SCC goals for each farm was greater in English-speaking (87%) than in Spanish-speaking employees (41%). Moreover, when workers were asked, “Who trains new employees how to milk cows?” 42% of English speaking workers said they learned the milking protocols from managers or owners, while only 14% of Hispanic workers received training from managers or owners. Most (86%) were learning from other employees or they just “learned on the job.” Interestingly, when the dairy owners and

managers were asked the same question, 11 of the 12 management teams responded that they perform the training.

How do we overcome this challenge?

- **Set expectations.** Even before starting to work, offer an orientation session to new employees in which bilingual job descriptions, protocols and SOPs of the position, as well as the policies of the dairy are shared to help improve worker performance. Receiving this information first-hand from managers and owners is better than being told by co-workers.

- **Provide ongoing training.** This improves morale and job satisfaction. Adult learners need to understand why things are done in a certain way to understand the importance of the protocols. As the businessman Henry Ford stated, “The only thing worse than training your employees and having them leave, is not training them and having them stay.”

- **Manage every day.** It has been shown that sharing data with employees is one of the best intrinsic motivators. This can be done with a bilingual Milking Center Daily Report (see below for a link to an example). This includes the main key performance indicators (KPI) of four areas related with milking (cow stimulation, milking center efficiency, production performance and cow health) of each milking shift. When a KPI is not accomplished, this is highlighted in the report and approached immediately.

Language might be a barrier on dairy farms; however, this can be removed with continuous performance management. **M**



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**“Only 14% of Hispanic workers received training from managers or owners.”**

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