

Managing Latino Labor in the Pork Industry

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Introduction

The pork industry contributes \$15.5 billion to the United States agriculture economy and farmers in this industry spent \$840 million in hired labor in 2007 [1]. Management of human resources, however, competes with many other on-farm demands and situations forcing farmers to divide their time and energy among many responsibilities [2]. An additional complication is that many workers hired by farmers in this industry are first generation immigrants with a Latino/Hispanic background. They lack familiarity with the U.S. agriculture labor system, speak little English (much less writing) skills, and often are by themselves in the U.S. Working with these employees is a significant challenge for most farmers. Misunderstandings and a deficiency in cross-cultural skills can quickly exacerbate potential labor-related issues on the farm. These workers, on the other side, provide the labor force that otherwise would make hog farms more difficult to operate efficiently. Further, they are known for their strong work ethics and loyalty if paid fairly and treated with respect.

Objectives

The main objective of this fact sheet is to assist hog farmers to increase the productivity of their immigrant labor force. Additionally, this publication will:

- Present brief demographic information about Latino labor in farming
- Provide a summarized overview of the Latino/Hispanic labor force's cultural approaches to working on the farm
- Increase the reader's understanding about unique challenges when working with immigrant Latino agricultural labor force
- Provide best practices ideas to working with Latino/Hispanic employees in agriculture

"Latino Culture" and labor management

The U.S. has been a country of immigrants since its foundation as a nation. Immigrants have arrived and adjusted to their new home and at the same time their presence has challenged receiving communities to adjust to new demographics. The changing demographics in rural America is shifting how communities see themselves and agricultural labor. Further, farm owners today are employee managers more than animal caretakers [3]. I discuss below a few important demographic facts to help the reader better grasp the type of population farm workers are. Further, the information I provide here attempts to convey insights into the "Latino Culture" being fully cognitive that there are countless variations and differences within the Latino population.

- There are about 50 million Latinos in the country and the vast majority are US citizens or permanent residents
- The Latino population is young with an average age of 26 years old compared to 35 years old for the White population [4]
- The vast majority of the 500,000+ Latino labor force in agriculture is of Mexican background [5]
- Many farmworkers have limited English language skills
- The majority are foreign-born
- In general they have less schooling than other wage workers in farming
- In general they have lower earnings than most other wage laborers [6]

So, is recruiting and retaining Latino farm labor in the hog industry similar as with White workers? The answers may vary but the aspects described below will help farmers and farm managers with the process of recruiting and managing Latino farm labor.

Communication

Fluent and efficient communication on the farm is vital for production and productivity and communicating cross culturally with Latino farmworkers requires a unique set of skills in terms of cultural clues and interpretations as well as spoken language. Written communication is rarely an effective way to communicate with non-English speaking farmworkers.

Using simple language is important, for example if you say: "I just wanted to see if it would be possible for you to try to come to the work a little bit earlier tomorrow so that we get a good jump at the work we have to do to complete this delivery"; it would be very hard for a non-English speaker with little command of the language to make any sense of it. You would be better off by saying: "Could you please come to work at 7 AM tomorrow to finish our delivery on time"? In addition to simple and short statements, a calm and respectful tone makes a worker feels he/she is respected and makes sure your point is getting across (you can always emphasize and repeat key words). Remember that nodding does not necessarily mean understanding as well as a verbal "ok" or "yes" since it may just be a sign of trying to please more than anything else.

Farmers need to check frequently if workers understand their instructions. One suggestion is to check your worker's performance right after he/she receives your instructions to determine if there is need of clarifications. This may mean closer supervision and extra time to do it, but this investment will help finishing a job properly and will improve your relationship with your employees.

Additionally, give your employees the opportunity to talk to you in private and with plenty of time to formulate their ideas/questions. You might be surprised about their skills and experience in the field. If your instructions did not work the first time, share responsibility and do not blame. Blaming and pointing fingers at your Latino labor force will be less effective than making sure they understand what went wrong and how to rectify next time.

Relationships

Building a respectful and trusting relationship is key to ensure worker productivity. Although the relationship for you may be defined as employer/employee; your Latino employee could also see the "patron" (or boss/you) as a person who can help him/her with their individual and family situations. In other words, your role for them may be more than just their employer but an advisor/coach. Recognizing the multiple roles as employer is important to engage in productive ways with your worker. Latino workers put much importance in building the relationship with the farmer (out of a cultural trait more than a conscious effort) and that includes sharing family and personal situations and asking for advice. As I discuss elsewhere, as the employer you can provide assistance and information on common "life" aspects in the U.S. In fact, depending on how distant or close you allow this relationship to be, you may be even asked to intervene if they face a challenging situation and have no one to turn to. These requests/situations do not happen always, but if they happen you as the "patron" should be prepared.

Authority and Hierarchy

The relationship and approaches to people with authority at work might be quite different between a Latino and a White worker. For instance when the farm manager/owner provides instructions to the workers, asking questions might be a natural thing for White laborers but for some people from a Latino culture, lower education and socio-economic status it may mean a lack of respect for the authority. That means that silence does not necessarily mean the worker understands the task needed to be completed and it may not even mean that they agree with the job they are supposed to do [7].

Collectivism and Individualism

Because collectivism is a core value for many Latinos, individualism – which is encouraged and valued in main stream America – can be perceived as a negative characteristic by your Latino worker. The mindset toward communal relationships of a Latino worker will make him/her to consult with co-workers, friends and family members on many aspects and decisions (including work-related) that main stream, individualistic employers may see as unnecessary. Therefore, employer expectations for quick and individual decisions may not be met.

At right is a summarized table contrasting Latino and Anglo values regarding work and time shared by an animal science professor and colleague in a presentation in the Midwest.

Table 1: Anglo-American vs. Latino-American approaches to work

ANGLO-AMERICAN approach	LATINO-AMERICAN approach
Be on-time	Take time to be happy
Live to work	Work to live
Control my future	In the hands of God
Value accomplishments	Value who you are
Identify with my job	Identify with my organization
Let's get down to business (task)	Let's get to know each other (relationship)

Ethnocentrism

Be aware that many White farmers/managers have an unnoticed/natural tendency to ethnocentrism (the presumption that everybody shares [or should share] your own cultural values and perspectives). If ethnocentrism is strong the tendency to judge different cultural behaviors can also be strong. Assess how well you know your Latino workers and make an effort to understand their communication styles, their approach to work, their family values, their country of origin, their needs. This will help in keeping “ethnocentrism” in check and ensure good relationships and productivity.

Other cultural characteristics

Below is a list of additional characteristics that many Latino agricultural workers may show in varying degrees.

- Family oriented
- Eat as a group and share food
- Physical proximity and touch (no notion of personal space)
- Live for today
- Strong work ethics
- Avoid confrontation
- Will not take initiative
- Macho
- Avoid taking leadership

Training

Your interest/desire to train one of your Latino workers and making him/her a supervisor (or crew leader) may interfere with his/her cultural value or desire to just be part of the group without taking a leadership role. If a Latino worker has the potential and is open to the idea, your training should be culturally and linguistic appropriate.

Motivating your Latino worker

Perceptions are powerful and wrong perceptions can lead to decisions and actions detrimental to the productivity and good relationships. Some farmers/employers may think that their Latino workers lack motivation; but many may not realize that the Latino (particularly first generation immigrant) workers had to be extremely motivated to move to the US and look for economic opportunities; sometimes at great risk of his/her personal safety. Further, many Latino farmworkers have a high work ethics since they need a job to support their families back in their home countries. The goal would then be to stimulate and increase Latino workers motivation to do their best at work. Stup and Maloney [8] identified some key aspects for managers of agricultural firms to manage Latino employees. Those are:

Basic life needs: As mentioned, Latino agricultural workers who are first generation immigrants face great challenges to adjust to the US in almost any possible aspect of their daily life including housing, transportation, access to (ethnic) food, education for their children, clothing for a different climate, and access to health services. If you want a worker focused on the job and the production of the farm, those basic life essentials need to be met. As an employer you could either provide or help find housing and if possible a meal service or access to a grocery store (if possible with food they are used to prepare and eat). This is one way in which farmers/employers involvement help with their basic daily needs.

Communication and language: As mentioned in previous paragraphs simple and respectful communication is key as well as making sure your Latino workers understand the task of the day. Further, when language is a barrier, using an interpreter should be considered. I do not recommend, however, using a worker from the same crew as interpreter since there might be a risk to create jealousy and issues between the workers. Also, providing opportunities to learn English at work or the farmer learning some key words and sentences in Spanish would increase communication but also improve the relationship between the employer and the workers.

Approach to work: Because of the tendency to please and avoid disagreements, Latino employees might not be up front when in doubt or when a mistake was made. Further, lack of initiative or self-confidence may be apparent for employers. Keep in mind that many have a high work ethics and will work hard to please the "patron" (boss) but initiative and assertiveness may not necessarily be seen as positive values by them. Many may come from tight communities in which mavericks and rebels may not be appreciated.

Feedback and rewards: One way to keep the motivation high is to provide positive reinforcement when a job was completed successfully and on time. Praising is most of the time good; be careful to not embarrass the worker in front of others; it's preferable to praise and appreciate the worker in private first and make sure it is alright for him/her to be congratulated in front of his co-workers. Rewards can also be used for individual or group performance, however, the best reward is fair pay. Some informal rewards include providing lunch for free, holding a pizza (or taco) party for your workers and their families, and giving away promotional products like hats or T-shirts or school materials for the worker's children. Praising the worker for a job well done or hard working attitude in front of the family members is in general positive.

Legal issues and immigration

This is a highly complex matter that I do not have the qualification to address. Present and future federal policies and legislation may affect agricultural labor. If documentation issues arise with your Latino worker; it is very important to consult with qualified professional services. As of the date I am writing this fact sheet, immigration reform and the future of the H-2A visa program (the most directly related visa program to agriculture) are on the table. The H-2A program allows U.S. employers or U.S. agents who meet specific regulatory requirements to bring foreign nationals to the United States to fill temporary agricultural jobs. A U.S. employer, a U.S. agent as described in the regulations, or an association of U.S. agricultural pro-

ducers named as a joint employer must file a petition for Nonimmigrant Worker, on a prospective worker's behalf [9]. This program, frequently used by larger companies and farms, has several requirements and specific criteria for qualification. Given the complexity and potential for changing regulations and laws governing immigrant farmworkers, it is encouraged that you seek legal advice from an attorney with expertise in this area who is familiar with your state and federal regulations and the needs of your business.

Summary and Conclusions

Managing Latino labor in hog farms requires unique skills and unconventional approaches. Farm owners are challenged by the different culture of Latino workers but also are rewarded by their hard work and loyalty. Understanding the issues and needs of the workers and their families and some basic communication strategies will go long ways to maintain the desired levels of productivity of the farm. Many farmers see Latino workers as hard working people who do not complain; however that does not make them dummies and they realize quickly when they are not being treated fairly. Their cultural approach to labor may be different but both sides, farm owner and employees, need to make a deliberate effort to bridge their cultural and language differences for mutual benefit. Latino farm workers are an important part of the production process on the farm and managing them with respect and dignity and giving a fair pay will help ensure high productivity and the success of the farm.

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