

Getting the Message Across

One aspect of safety training that is often overlooked is the training of workers who are unable to read English or speak it fluently. If workers can't read and understand instructions, they may be missing your safety message and end up performing a job unsafely. This could be caused by handling dangerous chemicals or operating machinery incorrectly and putting themselves or other workers in danger. As an employer or supervisor, you must make certain that all your workers understand any safety information or training that's given.

Illiteracy can also affect work production or compliance. It may not be readily noticed because workers may not want to admit any difficulties or they may be so eager to work that they'll bluff their way through training sessions in order to please the boss.

When you review your organization's training material, try doing it without reading a word. You may find that your training programs are causing your workers who cannot read or speak the language to completely miss your safety message. Don't assume because workers attended training and were nodding their heads that the hazards, safety rules or practices presented were understood. Expand your training methods so that they satisfy the learning needs of all of your workers.

- Present the material to match the steps they'll take on the job. Make sure workers understand why the training material is important to their health and safety.
- Workers should be able to immediately practice and apply new knowledge and skills. If workers don't understand safety training information well enough to use it on the job, the training has not been effective.
- Vary your training program using different methods. Along with any written material, show pictures and include demonstrations, role-playing, repeat-back or show-me techniques.
- Workers who are not English-literate, may learn by visuals so use videos, drawings or graphics. However, make sure the visual demonstrates the correct action you want them to take. You don't want workers to mimic an incorrect visual.
- When speaking, use short, simple words and sentences or have someone available to translate into the workers' native language.
- Insist on questions from trainees after a session to let you know what should be reviewed.

Supervisors should observe workers after any training has been given and identify if further training is necessary. There should be immediate feedback if workers are doing their job safely or incorrectly.

These tips are relatively simple and inexpensive solutions, but the safety payoff can be invaluable. It is important to remember that training is only effective when workers understand and use what they have learned.