

A Mosaic of Cultures: Understanding Latin Americans

This is a summary version of the paper written to support a presentation on Latinos in the U.S. conducted in June 2002 for the American Society of Training and Development.

Session Objectives:

- Understand the diversity of the Latin American people
- Identify the main Latino groups in the U.S.
- Learn about recent demographic trends
- Dispel common myths and stereotypes related to Latinos
- Identify some commonalities and differences between the various groups
- Come up with at least 3 strategies to deal with language barriers in the workplace
- Decide on at least 3 hiring, training, and managerial implications

A few important disclaimers before we start our program:

- Our primary objective is to discuss Latinos in the U.S.. There are significant differences between Latin Americans in Latin America and Latin Americans in the U.S..
- While generalizations give us a starting point, they cannot account for every *individual*. As human beings we have the inalienable right to be diverse, distinct, and unique.
- It is not possible to compare / contrast *all* Latin American cultures in a presentation. They are *very* diverse. Whatever we say is bound *not* to apply to certain groups. Even within the same country, regional differences and differences between various ethnic groups or even social classes abound.
- Variations between Latinos also occur based on (a) cultural groups surrounding / influencing them and (b) the immigrant generation they belong to (are they first, second, or third generation? Have their families always lived in the U.S.?)

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Hispanics, Latinos, Chicanos, or Latin Americans?

- There is not "one" term that will be preferable to all Latinos. Research conducted at the University of Kansas found that 85% of the respondents disliked generic terms such as "Latino" or "Hispanic". They preferred terms specifically related to the country where their roots are found.
- In this presentation, I chose the term "Latino" for three reasons:
 - The term "Hispanic" is more controversial, considered by some Latinos to be an imposed government label. In the previously mentioned University of Kansas research "Latino" was preferred to other generic labels.
 - While Brazilians can be considered "Latinos", they can't really be considered Hispanics (Brazilian roots are in Portugal, not in Spain).
 - "Latino", therefore, is a more all-encompassing term.

Who are the Latinos?

- The 2000 census revealed that there are 35.3 million Latinos in the U.S. They represent 12.5% of the total U.S. population and are now the largest U.S. minority group. African-Americans are the second largest, with 34.7 million people.
- The Latino population grew 58% between 1990 and 2000.
- Latinos can be of any race – the term refers to ethnic origin, not to race.
- The majority of the Latinos in this country have their roots in Mexico (66%) followed by Central and South America (15%), Puerto Rico (9%), and Cuba (4%).
- The Selig Center for Economic Growth's recent report on economic trends stated that the Latino buying power increased by 118% between 1990 and 2001, contrasting with the 67.9% increase experienced by non-Latino consumers and 70.4% increase in buying power by all consumer groups.

Where do they live?

- Three out of four Latinos live in 7 states: California, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Illinois, and Arizona.
- 60% of the Latinos live in major cities. The cities of New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and San Antonio are the residence for 500 thousand Latinos each.

What are some of the main Latino concerns?

A recent Latino Coalition / Hispanic Business Roundtable poll of 1,000 Latino adults identified the following as major areas of concern amongst Latinos:

- Discrimination (15.5% of respondents)
- Education (12.9% of respondents)
- Unemployment (9.4% of respondents)
- Immigration (9.4% of respondents)

1. Discrimination

- The Heldrich report on perceptions on workplace discrimination (January 2002) found that 22% of the Latino workers believe that Latinos are the minority group most likely to experience unfair treatment at work.
- The same report indicated that the issue is not necessarily *whether there is discrimination against Latino workers or other minority groups.* Regardless of whether the perception is real or not, the findings are still significant. "A person's belief that he or she is more likely than others to be singled out for unfair treatment because of race, ethnicity, or other characteristics can have a negative impact on a worker's morale and productivity, as well as engender a discordant working environment for all."
- According to the Department of Labor, when similar resumes were sent to the same firms, Latinos received 25% fewer job interviews and 34% fewer job offers. Possible reasons include a perception that universities in Latin American countries are less rigorous than American universities and the equation of poor English-language skills (or even a Latino accent) with less education or lower intelligence.
- Even though 81% of the minority workers polled stated that their companies took incidents of discrimination seriously and 79% indicated that their companies had clearly defined anti-discrimination policies, that doesn't mean companies have solved the discrimination riddle.
- Amongst minority workers who believed they were treated unfairly, 63% stated the companies ignored their complaints and took no action to solve the problem.
- 57% of those who felt unfairly treated felt the employer had not responded in a prompt and satisfactory manner.
- Only 7% of those respondents indicated that the company reprimanded the person who engaged in discriminatory practices, and only 2% said the employee in question was fired or demoted.

2. Education

- SHRM's HR Magazine reports that Latino problems with education start at pre-school level. Latino children under 5 are less likely to be enrolled in early education programs than white or African-American children. Once in high school, Latino students are less likely to take college prep courses.
- Latinos, as a result, graduate in lower numbers from college than non-Latinos.

Why can't immigrants learn English faster?

- A human language is a highly complex set of symbols. Ideally, children should be exposed to the sounds of a second language during their pre-school years. For teenagers and adults, it takes *a long time* to conquer the intricacies of a foreign code.
- When an adult Latino immigrant arrives in the U.S. without speaking English, a vicious circle may easily be developed: Language barriers prevent him/her from making non-Latino friends and the resulting ethnic isolation makes learning English harder. A similar scenario is likely to be encountered at the immigrant's place of work.
- Jobs that do not require English skills are not likely to be highly compensated. The immigrant may need to work more than one shift – which would make regular "school-based" language studies very difficult.
- Additional problems caused by language barriers:
 - Professional isolation / fewer opportunities of advancement
 - Exacerbation of ethnic tensions (non-Spanish speakers may believe that the Spanish-speakers are "talking about them behind their backs")
 - Safety concerns: The fatality rate for Latinos in the workplace is about 20% higher than that of other groups.
 - Management problems: non-Spanish speaking managers may find it hard to communicate with their Spanish-speaking employees.
- Possible solutions:
 - A North Carolina hospital translated all orientation materials into Spanish, arranged for Spanish and English classes on-site, hired part- and full-time interpreters to help employees and patients, and even offered classes on Latino cultures.
 - The Texadelphia restaurant in Dallas, TX, offered long-distance English as a second language classes on-site. Employees paid for half the costs and were allowed to take the classes on company time.
- Tips for dealing with foreign language barriers:
 - Have plenty of visuals in your presentations and work areas.
 - Offer English / Spanish classes on-site.
 - If you have many Latino workers for whom English is not a first language, consider including this topic in employee orientations and/or diversity initiatives. It is important

for employees to understand that their Spanish-speaking colleagues may be choosing that language simply for comfort-sake – *not* to be rude or to exclude them.

- Avoid instructions over the phone or speakerphone.
- Organize language "buddy systems" in which Spanish-speaking employees and English-speaking employees help one another in their language learning quests.
- Reward language learning efforts – they take a considerable amount of employee time, and are unlikely to succeed if unsupported.
- Do not assume that all Latinos need special help in English or require you to speak slowly – not all Latinos speak Spanish and even those who do may have spoken English all their lives. Likewise, do not assume that all Hispanic applicants will be willing or able to address language or cultural issues pertaining to the Latino community.

Some common misconceptions

- All Latinos are liberal

When asked to label themselves conservative, moderate, or liberal, 34.8% of the adults polled called themselves conservative, 29.2% moderate, and 24.9% liberal. It is true, however, that most Latinos are democrats: The same poll found 54.7% democrats, 17.2% republicans, and 11.2% independents. The remaining respondents either supported other parties (1%) or didn't know.

- Most Latinos are recent immigrants

The Latino Coalition / Hispanic Business Roundtable asked respondents to indicate how long they had been in the U.S. 80.7% of the respondents had been in the U.S. for over 10 years. That number includes 32.4% who have lived in the U.S. all their lives. (Only 7% answered they had been here between 1 and 5 years).

- Few Latinos speak English.

When researcher Daniel Roy gave his middle-class respondents the option of having the interview conducted in English or in Spanish 40% preferred English and 92% said that either Spanish or English could be used. A similar question was asked by Latino Coalition / Hispanic Business Roundtable researchers and reached comparable results: 43.9% of those respondents chose English

- Only low-income, poorly educated Latinos are likely to face discrimination.

The Heldrich Report found that higher income minority workers are *more* likely to have a personal experience with discrimination.

Culture

Our biggest dilemma was whether to generate a list of Latin American commonalities and differences. In order to help our participants understand the *cultural roots* of the various Latino groups in the U.S., we could now focus on the cultures of various Latin American *countries*.

Difficulties with this approach include:

- There are just *too many* differences between all Latin American countries. Moreover, it is impossible to account for national, regional, ethnic, urban/rural, social status, and individual variations.
- Indigenous groups are very diverse and were not the focus of our research.
- Immigrant Latinos in the U.S. have likely "blended" their original cultures to local cultural influences. Immigrants often become "cultural hybrids", bridges between two worlds. Remember – the families of your Latino friends, colleagues, or employees may have lived in this country longer than yours has!
- A contrast between Latin Americans (*residents of Latin America*) and U.S. residents compounds the challenge. U.S. residents or citizens are decidedly a heterogeneous group. For instance, if we say that the personal space needed by a Latin American is *smaller* than that of the average U.S. person, *who* are we talking about? Is there such a person? Does such an average even make sense?

Because some basic generalizations may be helpful, we will make a special effort to compare and contrast a few cultural traits of various Latin American *countries*. Please keep in mind all the previously stated limitations.

Some Cultural Commonalities

- A high emphasis is placed on the family.
- Group needs are typically seen as more important than individual needs.
- Relationship building is very important.
- Negotiations are slower (because of the importance given to relationship building).
- The personal space required is typically smaller. Hugging, kissing, touching arms and shoulders are common.
- Hierarchy and social status are very important.
- Verbal communications cannot be properly understood "out of context". Status, level of relationship, hierarchy, clothing, all should be considered part of the communication process and are essential for the understanding of the message.
- Typically a more relaxed view of time is prevalent (but there may be different time standards expected from foreigners and in business environments)
- Most Latin American countries dislike the term "Americans" when attributed to U.S. citizens. Many Latin Americans are keenly conscious of the fact that they are "Americans" as well.

- Eye contact is typically seen as a positive trait in most Latin American countries, especially amongst people of comparable social status.

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Some differences

- While most Latin American cultures tend to be more relaxed time-wise, some groups may be more punctual than others. For instance, Chileans, Costa-Ricans, Paraguayans, and Peruvians may be seen as more punctual, especially for business relations.
- Portuguese is spoken in Brazil, Spanish is spoken in the remaining countries of Latin America, except for the French Guiana, where French is spoken. This list does not include indigenous languages.
- Cuban-Americans have the highest educational level amongst U.S. Latinos – 23% of the population has a college degree, contrasted with 28.1% of the non-Latino whites and 10.6% of the general Latino population. Cuban-Americans are also less young than other Latinos (40.7 years in average, contrasted with 24.2 years for Mexican-Americans and 27.3 years for Puerto Ricans).
- There are major differences in body language and gestures between the various Latin American countries, so be extra careful with your gestures.

Final Tips

Thank you! Here are some final tips to continue your journey:

- Consider offering language learning opportunities to all employees.
- Consider cultural training on the cultures you have the most contact with **but** be careful of any training on "Hispanic Culture" – there is no such "culture." Because of the complexity of this topic, we suggest that if you hire many Latinos of one given ethnic origin, you should try to study the cultural specifics of that group.
- Include intercultural communications components to your orientation programs or training systems. Pay special attention to employees with managerial and hiring/recruiting responsibilities. Deeply ingrained biases and misunderstanding of intercultural communications challenges could easily lead to the discrimination of Latino employees.
- Participate in and support Latino community events. This will show Latino employees you value their roots and will help send a message to other employees on the value of diversity.

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Useful Web Sites

Executive Planet. 2001. www.executiveplanet.com
Information on business etiquette from a variety of countries

Cyborlink. 2001. www.cyborlink.com.
Information on business etiquette and culture from a variety of countries

Diversityinc.com. www.diversityinc.com
Diversity site with information on various diversity-related topic including culture, race, gender, disability, and others

The Latino Coalition www.thelatinocoalition.com
Various articles on Latino issues and policies

Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM). www.shrm.org
Articles on diversity and human resources