



Confabs: ESL training dearth hurts industry HR goals

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Washington Luis Grespo, a native of Mexico, worked as a dishwasher for nearly a year at a branch of The Palm steakhouse chain until an English-as-a-second-language pilot program improved his communication skills enough to warrant his promotion to line cook.

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But as it was revealed during two recent industry conferences, success stories like Grespo's are in short supply as foodservice operators struggle with how best to offer often time-consuming and costly language lessons.

Elected officials, restaurant executives and suppliers at the biennial conference of the MultiCultural Foodservice & Hospitality Alliance held here recently urged restaurateurs to be leaders in the effort to improve the English proficiency of some 5 million Hispanic workers in the United States.

"Nearly two-thirds of low-wage [earning] immigrant workers do not speak English proficiently, and most of those workers have very little formal education," said Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Fla. "And yet we know by the census that more than 82 percent of people speak only English. To increase English language proficiency not only will create economic self-sufficiency for these hard-working people but also better those industries that depend on these workers."

Grespo is a prime example of the difference language training can make.

"I want to give thanks to everyone who has made it possible and gave me the opportunity to be a part of this program," he said in unflinching English. "It was a wonderful experience for me."

Grespo spoke before more than 500 restaurant and hotel executives at the MFHA conference. The audience leapt to their feet in a Grand Hyatt ballroom as they applauded his accomplishment. Grespo was one of many speakers who explained the need for the industry to provide English language instruction to its Hispanic workers

"Young man, you bring tears to my eyes to know we have the power to impact lives," said Gerry Fernandez, founder and president of the MFHA, a nonprofit organization that promotes diversity in the hospitality industry.

Concerns raised at the MFHA conference about the need to address the language issue are supported by a recent, informal survey of members of the Council of Hotel and Restaurant Trainers during their conference in Dallas before the MFHA event. The survey found that the majority of companies do not offer any English-language instruction to their non-English-speaking employees.

Almost 90 percent of the 155 respondents reported that their restaurants do not offer any type of program. Of the remainder, 36 percent said their companies offered classroom instruction and 27 percent used a private-language instruction company. Other methods were computer courses, community programs or videotapes.

High costs were the most frequent reason CHART members gave for not offering courses, followed by time constraints and no dedicated manpower.

Those barriers to offering language instruction were repeated during a related session at the MFHA conference.

"To bring a teacher into the back-of-the-house or into the workplace to teach English is great if you have one or two or three restaurants," said Bill Groux, founder and chief executive of Retention Education, a workforce development company that supports educational products for Hispanic adults.

But that option gets more complicated and costly the more units a restaurant company has, Groux said.

Community college programs may work for some, but often non-English-speaking workers hold down two or three

jobs in addition to managing their families and have little time to enroll in classes, Groux said.

The Palm upscale chain long has understood the need and the challenges of ESL programs, said Scott Vasko, vice president of human resources for the New York-based operator. The company has an annual turnover rate of only 26 percent for hourly workers in part because training is a major focus. It has been trying to make language instruction a part of that training.

"Right now 54 percent of our workforce is Hispanic," Vasko said. "We've tried partnering with community colleges, [but that] didn't work because of many challenges. We talked about bringing in instructors, and that didn't work."

Vasko said he was thrilled when he learned about a pilot program that would let employees study at their own paces at home.

The Palm was one of 15 restaurant chains that participated last month in a test of a new ESL program created by LeapFrog Enterprise and Retention Education with the support of Coca-Cola Co. and MFHA. Sed de Saber, or Thirst for Knowledge, was designed specifically for Spanish-speaking foodservice workers. A six-book bundle teaches 500 vocabulary words and 340 phrases related to foodservice and everyday-life skills. It works with LeapFrog's Quantum Pad learning system, an interactive technology that uses voice and audio commands.

Two hundred Spanish-speaking employees in 25 states were tested before and after using the program, said Groux from Retention Education.

"Those with the least amount of knowledge learned the most, which made sense, but we found that every single group learned," he said.

Grespo was one of six Palm employees who used the Sed de Saber program.

"I am learning English with Sed de Saber," he said.

The ESL presentation was one of several sessions that touched on workforce diversity issues for the industry during the MFHA conference. Attendees also heard presentations on obesity, immigration reform, the plights of gays and lesbians in the industry, and the importance of creating alliances with community-based organizations.

MFHA honored PepsiCo with its Corporate Champion award. Sodexo received the S.E.E.D., or Strategic Examples of Excellence in Diversity, Award. And Bukulesh "Buggsi" Patel, chief executive and president of BHG Hotels, received the Ernest Royal Pioneer Award, which is given to an individual who exemplifies restaurateur Royal's commitment to helping minorities succeed in the industry.

Three Johnson & Wales University students also received scholarships from MFHA and the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation. They were Christopher Bennett, who is a student at the university's Charleston, S.C., campus, and Magda Halim and Michael Santini, who both are students at the school's Providence, R.I., campus.

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