

How Organizations Can Address the Unique Challenges Facing Latino and Hispanic Employees

Effective diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies must take a detailed approach to workplace fairness and inclusion. While broad-stroke principles can lay a helpful DEI foundation, true inclusion is the product of specific strategies that target the unique needs of different segmented populations. For Latino and Hispanic Americans, two obstacles affect their inclusion at a much higher rate than they affect other communities: language barriers and immigration/work authorization status. To accommodate Latino employees and customers, organizations must develop strategies for specifically addressing these two challenges.

Spanish Language Accommodations

Spanish is the fourth most spoken language in the world, with over 550 million speakers globally. In the United States, 41 million people [speak Spanish](#) as a native language, and another 11 million speak it as a second language. This makes the U.S. the country with the second-largest population of Spanish speakers in the world, behind only Mexico. Unsurprisingly, most American Spanish speakers are Latino or Hispanic, with 75% of Latinos possessing a [high level of fluency](#) in Spanish.



In catering to the unique needs of Latino and Hispanic Americans, companies must consider Spanish language accessibility a top priority. These accommodations should go beyond minimal gestures that merely signal support without providing it. For example, while many U.S. businesses display bilingual signage for essential information, few offer employees or customers the ability to engage with the organization fully in Spanish.

Spanish Language Inclusivity in Action

One organization seeking to push Spanish language support forward is Wells Fargo (No. 15 on the 2024 Top Companies for Latino Executives list and [No. 23](#) on the 2024 Top 50 Companies list). During the development of Fargo, the company's virtual assistant, Wells Fargo worked with its Latino ERNs (employee resource networks) to integrate multiple Spanish dialects into Fargo's functionality. Speaking at Fair360's [2024 Top 50 event](#), Kristy Fercho, Head of Diverse Segments, Representation and Inclusion, described the development process.

"One of our developers said, 'What are we doing for our Spanish-speaking customer base?' Twenty-eight percent of our customer base is Spanish-only, and 58% is Spanish-preferred," Fercho said. "We rolled out the first-ever virtual assistant in Spanish: Fargo en Español. It was a great example of how business connects with DEI to solve the needs of our customers."

In a [press release](#) announcing the rollout of Fargo en Español, Wells Fargo emphasized how Spanish language accessibility is a core part of developing an organizational culture that is specifically inclusive of Latino and Hispanic Americans.

“Offering a Spanish-language capability that can provide details and context about a customer’s financial journey—to the same extent the English-language solution can—improves accessibility to our growing Latino customer base,” the company said. “To ensure the Spanish-language capability is as comprehensive as possible, Wells Fargo leveraged the knowledge of its Spanish-speaking employees representing over a dozen Spanish-speaking countries to test, train and fine-tune Fargo to understand a number of different regional language differences and dialects.”

Initiatives like Fargo en Español demonstrate how companies can go beyond a broad-strokes approach to fairness and inclusion by instead developing a DEI strategy that targets the specific needs of segmented populations.

Employing Undocumented Workers

The American immigration system and processes for obtaining work authorization disproportionately affect Latino and Hispanic communities. It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of Latino Americans are documented residents or citizens. Eighty-one percent of all Latino Americans are U.S. citizens, which includes 41% of foreign-born Latino Americans. However, of the 11 million undocumented individuals living in the U.S., data from the [Migration Policy Institute](#) shows that 75% are of Central or South American origin. Nearly 80% of these individuals have lived in the U.S. for five years or more, and over 5.5 million are under the age of 35. As such, undocumented Latino workers make up a significant portion of the U.S. workforce, yet they face constant barriers to securing and maintaining long-term employment.

While there is a widespread perception that undocumented immigrants are not legally able to work in the U.S., the barriers to employment these individuals face are often matters of employer awareness, not legality. In reality, there are multiple pathways for organizations to legally hire or contract

work from undocumented individuals. What prevents these individuals from obtaining work is the failure of organizations to understand the employment processes for such persons.

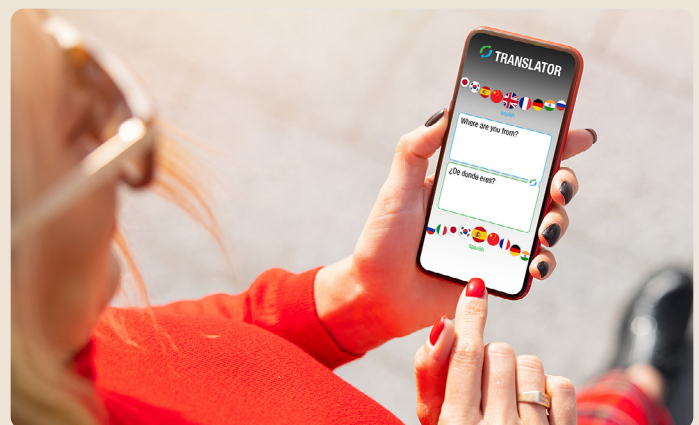
Undocumented Status and Work Authorization

Many companies may conflate immigration status with work authorization, though the two are not synonymous. An undocumented person can still have a right to work in the U.S., which allows them to go through the same hiring process as a U.S. citizen or documented resident.

“If you have work authorization as an undocumented person, pretty much every industry is legally open to you,” said Cassandra Liss, a Graduate Assistant for Undocumented Student Services at Rutgers University – Newark.

Work authorization often supersedes immigration status as a matter of employment legality. If a job candidate can prove they have that work authorization, their immigration status becomes irrelevant as it pertains to an organization’s ability to hire them.

“In terms of the employer process, with work authorization, no one should be asking anyone’s immigration status,” said Liss. “If they have work authorization and a social security number, that should not be coming up.”



Independent Contractors

Even without work authorization, organizations can still solicit work from undocumented individuals through other means. Independent contractors, for example, don't have to provide proof of work authorization the same way that W-2 employees do.

"A big thing that I think employers can look at is what jobs can be done by an independent contractor? In fact, for employers, you don't have to pay benefits, you don't usually have to provide equipment or things like that, so it can really be beneficial," Liss said.

Many work opportunities can be contract or stipend-based, allowing undocumented workers to build successful careers with established organizations. Companies that are willing to transition W-2 positions into contractor opportunities can thus be more inclusive of the needs of undocumented individuals.

"I spend a lot of time trying to let people know that you can have, say, student workers who are undocumented without work authorization," Liss said. "They just have to be paid differently, and some wording may have to be different...The payment process looks a bit different.", but it's still relatively easy."

Educational Resources

One of the most effective strategies for supporting undocumented communities is that of education. In the face of misinformation and a lack of understanding of the issues surrounding undocumented employees, organizations should take steps to educate themselves on the proper processes for recruiting, employing and contracting these workers.

The following resources can serve as a starting point for companies to improve their understanding of issues facing undocumented Americans:

Fellowships and Other Non-Employment Based - Opportunities for Undocumented Students

The Dream - Business Resources

A Guide to ITINs, EINs and Taxes

"There are a lot of really great workers and skilled individuals within the undocumented community who do have work authorization and those who don't. It is possible to integrate them into the workforce; it just takes more time," Liss said. "What are employers ready and willing to do?"

