

SATURDAY, MAY 6, 2000

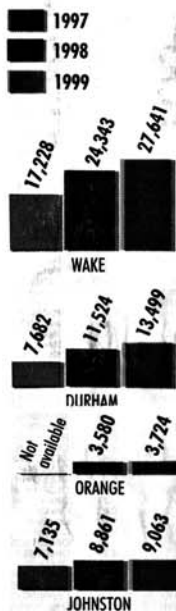
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# Spanish spoken here

## Companies struggle to accommodate a changing work force

### Hispanic residents

Between 1990 and 1999, the population of Hispanic residents in North Carolina grew from 76,745 to 348,991. Here are population figures for the Triangle:



Note: Numbers do not include migrant and seasonal workers

Source: FaithAction, Greensboro, N.C.

FRANK MEDLIN/  
The News & Observer

By SABRINA JONES  
STAFF WRITER

Early Friday, Estela Martinez, a house cleaner, started her workday with a bilingual lesson in her company's Raleigh office. She opened her workbook, picked up her pencil and smiled shyly as she answered her instructor's questions. Her co-workers sat down at the rectangular table and took turns reciting their home addresses, useful phrases like "Speak slowly, please" and numbers in English.

Twice a week, the women, all Hispanic immigrants, learn English in the office of Molly Maid, a home cleaning business. The company hired Hugh Avera, a Raleigh translation and education specialist, to help employees and their supervisors whittle down communication problems.

On the wall, there is a sheet listing work-related Spanish phrases that Avera translated into English, including *Qué es la siguiente casa para limpiar?* (What is the next house to clean?) and *Cerraste la puerta?* (Did you close the door?). Of the company's 16 employees, only two are not native Spanish speakers.

Martinez, 25, who immigrated two years ago to North Carolina from Hidalgo, Mexico, said the classes help her feel more comfortable on the job. Day to day, she's in the company of customers and supervisors whose mother tongue is English.

"That's where I use it the most, with work," she said in Spanish.

As more workers from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and other countries join the payrolls of companies, managers are doing more to help their employees adjust to a foreign workplace. Companies are translating employee manuals into



Hugh Avera, left, helps Molly Maid employees Estela Martinez, Francesca Serrano and Edilberta Nava with their English.

STAFF PHOTO BY SHER STONEMAN

Spanish, hiring consultants to teach supervisors about cultural differences and recognizing Hispanic customs. And more businesses are dealing with issues of diversity.

In the past decade, the Hispanic population of Wake County more than doubled, one of the fastest growth rates in the nation. The area's changing demographics have fueled the growth of companies like Bilingual Communications, said co-owner Yasmin (pronounced Jasmine) Metivier, a Mexican-American consultant who has interpreted safety training programs, translated employee manuals and videos and conducted cross-cultural seminars for landscaping companies, hotels and construction sites.

She and her husband, Michael, an Apex business consultant, recently developed a two-hour

audiotape to aid companies with Hispanic workers called "Managing in Two Cultures" (Bridgeworks, \$31.75). Without education, cultural misunderstandings can arise between managers and new immigrants, Metivier said.

Many blue-collar immigrants come from rural regions of Latin American countries, have a third- or fourth-grade education and are unfamiliar with the American system of business, Metivier said recently in a seminar held in Raleigh with representatives of textile companies from across the state.

Many laborers, for example, are uncomfortable calling a supervisor by his or her first name or questioning people in authority. They may not understand job benefits such as life insurance and 401(k)

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ing experience."

At Southern Landscape Professionals in Willow Spring, Bill Adams, the company's president, said about half of his employees are Hispanic. In response, he has learned some simple landscaping terms in Spanish, has had a consultant develop a cassette with the Spanish version of the employee handbook and honors Hispanic holidays. These are simply good business decisions, he said.

"This is our work force," Adams said. "If we don't have these guys to do the labor that the normal Anglo guy in the United States will not do for any price, we'll go out of business. We have to have them."

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That reticence is a cultural difference that Ken Barnes has noticed, too. He is the plant supervisor for Roy's Rental Uniform Service in Cary, where 16 of the company's 40 workers are from Mexico and Guatemala.

His dry-cleaning plant hired Metivier to visit workers every Wednesday to talk about job issues. He has seen women quit

their jobs because they were afraid to reveal their pregnancies or their husbands didn't want them to work.

"They suspected that they would be terminated," Barnes said. "They did go on maternity leave. The other employees saw how we reacted. It was an education problem. Most of these ladies, this may be their first manufactur-

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plans. And women might not have heard of maternity leave and may think they will be fired if they tell an employer they're pregnant.

And Metivier has seen signs of employers' ignorance. Managers might not know that Hispanics use both their mother's and father's last names, for example. Or they may be unaware that unwillingness to make direct eye contact can be a mark of respect. Metivier also remembers walking into a grocery store and noticing misspelled names on the name tags of employees. The employees were afraid to correct their supervisors, she said.