



English
Proficiency
Systems

A culturally diverse food processing company increases profitability by unleashing their untapped asset: limited and non-English speaking employees.



When Sanitation Manager Michael Reynolds enrolled 23 Hispanic, Hmong, and Somali sanitation employees in the system to acquire eighth grade English skills necessary for the food processing industry, he was skeptical of the scheduling problems that time off the job would cause. “My people worked hard to make up for time lost from those in class because they knew their time was coming.” However, in the first year after completing the system, he saw more benefits than he had ever imagined.

Insufficient English Skills Impair Productivity

“It is essential that my sanitation employees in three different plants —Ice Cream, Specialty Foods and Convenience Foods —understand and follow procedures in USDA inspected areas,” explains Reynolds, “Ice Cream plant personnel must be able to read Clean in Place (CIP) system charts and follow cleaning procedures. And since my team must be cross-trained, it is critical that different cultures communicate and work well together, which requires a common language.”

While those requirements seem minimal, some of his employees from diverse cultures with limited English skills had a difficult time meeting performance expectations. While most could memorize or read CIP charts and cleaning procedures, they were unable to easily read safety posters. They couldn't verbally express or document problems they encountered. So it was common for a sanitation employee to delay the resolution of a problem until a bilingual or lead person happened to come by.

These delays periodically prevented the plants from passing USDA inspections on time and jeopardized employees' ability to follow safety guidelines, as well as operate and maintain electrical and mechanical equipment —major factors in productivity.

Overcoming the Language Barrier

Reynolds believed that EPS' customized communication system was the most effective way to eliminate what he determined was the barrier to his team's productivity.

The employees immediately embraced the programs that were custom built using the language and terms of their work environment provided by the department managers. They not only learned to read, comprehend and speak English that was applicable to their jobs, but most importantly, they learned to think in English.

Proficiency Translates into Big Benefits for Company and Employees

The sanitation manager credits his team's success to their acquired proficiency in English and their improved ability to communicate. "My people immediately contact the right people when they have an equipment problem rather than letting it go until production start-up or a bilingual person happens to come by. They read and understand the safety posters."

But this seemingly simple achievement has generated real dollars-and-cents benefits. The reduction in production downtime due to sanitation failures and/or equipment being damaged due to sanitation (mainly water) damage dropped 11% for a savings of about \$250,000 during the first nine months. Plus there was an additional 3% savings over the next nine months. USDA inspections were more efficient due to improved communication between the employees and the inspectors.

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A Federal U.S.D.A. Inspector explained, "A literacy course was introduced to the sanitation crew in one of my inspected facilities for English. Over an 18 month period, many things changed. The employees themselves understood not only the sanitation program, but they could understand me and knew what was required if a SSOP (Sanitation Standard Operating Procedure) failure was noted. This reduced the amount of time I was required to be in the production areas. Being able to communicate with them removed some of the frustration of performing required inspections from them and me."

First reports of injuries declined, and to his sheer amazement, Reynolds' staff, which works with chemicals on a daily basis, had incurred no lost-time injuries in 18 months.

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A chemical vendor, Bob Embrey of LW Chemicals, Inc., noted the crew's improvement, too. "Safety is a huge concern for companies since it is tied to one of the biggest expenses—workman's compensation, medical/ accident, OSHA, and related insurance premiums. The financial benefits derived from reducing accidents are tremendous to companies. The success of EPS' system helped Mike's crew eliminate accidents. I will recommend it to other customers who are interested in improving plant safety."

According to Reynolds, his employees read and understand the profit sharing plan and other employee benefits, which he believes contributes to increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover. The blending of diverse cultures in the classes forged a strong bond between the employees, spawned a team mentality and facilitated departmental cross-training efforts. Communication also has enhanced his employees' career development—one of his employees has advanced to a supervisory position since completing the system.

Completing the system has enabled employees to identify and resolve problems, improve job skills, provide suggestions for improvements, assume additional responsibilities, and better understand their job description. These improvements have reduced overtime, product loss, downtime, and work-related injuries.

"I wish I could take all the credit for my team's successes, but I know it is due to us being able to talk to each other." Reynolds says. "My crew is a very happy group and retention is high."

Everybody Wins

In addition to the bottom line benefits his employees have generated as a result of their acquired English skills, the positive impact that the system has had on his employees' personal lives makes Reynolds a strong proponent of the system. "The quality of life for my people has improved so much. I hear stories of things they do with their children that they would not have done prior to this class."

All employees who took the system reveal greater confidence and self-esteem as a result of their newly acquired proficiency. One person fulfilled his citizenship requirements. Another obtained a driver's license. "I have a husband and wife team and since completion of this course, she had the courage to get her driver's license and is not dependent on her husband and children to get around." Many have opened bank accounts, so they can write checks. They are now able to establish more meaningful relationships with fellow employees and people in their communities.

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Learn how English Proficiency Systems' proven, customized system can unleash the untapped asset of English proficiency to increase profitability.

Call (612) 419-6148 e-mail: info@epsco.us

for more information.

**Critical
Issues:**

Help employees with limited English proficiency learn and understand their job requirements, expectations and responsibilities. Help limited English speakers communicate effectively with management, colleagues and USDA inspectors

Solution:

English Proficiency Systems' (EPS) customized communication system enabled limited English speaking employees to acquire a level of English proficiency that has improved bottom-line results.

Results:

- The reduction in production downtime due to sanitation failures and/or equipment being damaged due to sanitation (mainly water) damage dropped 11% for a savings of about \$250,000 during the first nine months. An additional 3% savings was realized over the next nine months.
- No lost-time injuries in 18 months
- Improved communication with USDA inspectors occurred during inspections.
- Employees could understand and follow procedures in USDA inspected areas. They could read charts and follow cleaning procedures.
- Employees communicated and worked well with each other, which provided opportunities to cross-train them.
- High employee retention resulted due to increased job satisfaction and morale.



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