

Originally published in . . .



Volume 6, Number 2, Summer-Fall 1997

Hiring and Managing a Culturally Diverse Workforce: No Prescriptions Please

[Brian K. Linhardt](#)

As a human resource professional working in agriculture, I have seen comments recently from various labor consulting sources concerning "best management" practices in supervising individual workers from diverse cultures. In this brief article, I offer some of my own thoughts on why we should tailor our management practices to individuals and not ethnic groups.

From my experiences with different populations, and acquaintance with a fair amount of past research, it is clear to me that differences among individuals within any particular ethnic or racial group are much greater than differences between cultural groups as a whole, especially with respect to job-related abilities, including interpersonal skills. Individuals bring different levels of ability and experience to the job, both of which affect the development of their competence, knowledge, and performance in a particular position.

Individual Differences and Lumpy Labels

Although members of a cultural group do tend to share some similarities among themselves and some differences from other groups, people are largely idiosyncratic critters. At times we perceive and respond to the same situations differently from other people of either our own or other backgrounds. We have individual differences in ability and personality that are independent of cultural background. The formation of personality-what motivates a person, how he or she relates to others-is a complex process unique to each individual. Personality is affected by and in turn affects each person's experiences and abilities. Because ability and work experience levels vary more from person to person than from cultural group to group, no generalized cultural guidelines or management prescriptions can possibly be valid across the range of individuals of any ethnicity.

As humans, we tend to categorize both things and other people, and it's often necessary and functional to do so. An overuse of categories, or stereotyping, however, can keep us from recognizing and respecting individual differences in even a single-ethnic workforce, let alone the multi-cultural environment of California agriculture.

The California Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (1993) reports that 82 percent of seasonal farm workers originate from Mexico, another 10 percent are foreign-born elsewhere, and only 8 percent are native U.S. citizens. In contrast, the majority of farm owners and general managers here are native U.S. citizens not of Hispanic origin. (*California Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey, A Demographic and Employment Profile of Perishable Crop Farm Workers*, Research Report No. 3. 1993. U.S. Department of Labor, in collaboration with UC Agricultural Personnel Management Program and Aguirre International. Available in PDF format on the APMP website under [Publications: Project Reports](#))



Demographic statistics are blunt tools, however, and these do not reflect that, despite their common national origin, workers who come from Mexico are ethnically and individually diverse. In fact, the term "Hispanic," for example, is so broad as to be nearly worthless as a classification. It includes individuals living in the mountains of Chile, a Spanish suburb, and an indigenous rural community in Mexico. As many California farmers have learned, there can be dramatic individual differences in work performance within a group of employees from a single state in central Mexico, in addition to social differences between them and other Hispanic workers, such as Mixtecs from the state of Oaxaca. Like "Hispanic," most other broad ethnic group labels may refer to a host of varying peoples.

Cultural Differences and Hiring Information

Tests for job-related knowledge are used occasionally in decisions about hiring and promotion to supervisory positions, and they have been found to be good predictors of successful performance in those jobs. The scores on this type of employment test are also positively correlated or associated with scores on general mental ability tests, such as high-school equivalence and college-entry exams. Some significant differences between ethnic groups, however, often show up on these tests of job-related abilities. Much of the difference in test scores between ethnic groups has been attributed to socioeconomic and other biasing influences, but a large body of research that has controlled for these factors still finds significant differences between groups. Typically "African-Americans" and "Hispanic-Americans" score lower on these tests, while "Asian-Americans" and "Caucasians" tend to score higher. Nevertheless, the scores among individuals within the same ethnicity differ more widely and significantly than do the average scores between ethnic groups. To underscore the point regarding the near meaninglessness of broad ethnic categories, Cuban "Hispanics" score similarly to American "Caucasians," while indigenous peoples of Mexico score similarly to, though slightly higher than, "African-Americans."

For the employer, hiring individuals who earn the highest scores on a job knowledge test will often bring aboard workers likely to perform best, but between-group differences raise possible legal difficulties if use of the test scores adversely impacts "protected" groups. Adverse impact is usually indicated by a significantly lower hire rate of applicants from a specific ethnic or gender group than from the whole applicant pool. The unintentional discrimination it may reflect is as unlawful as disparate or unequal treatment, even though the latter is more blatant and takes a more obvious toll on employment relations.

Many organizations have attempted to design tests to help choose the most qualified candidates without any cultural bias, so as to avoid both disparate treatment and adverse impact on minority groups (i.e., reduce the differences in average scores between respective ethnic groups). The Ravens Progressive Matrices, a non-verbal intelligence test that uses geometric shapes and differentiates among individuals

with respect to their mechanical ability, is an example of a supposedly "culture-free" test. Because most if not all jobs require some cognitive or mental skills and abilities, these types of tests are generally among the highest single predictors of successful job performance in positions ranging from irrigator to mechanic to manager. They are inexpensive and of great efficacy. However, research studies in practical applications have found that even the Ravens test generally results in a high degree of adverse impact on minority group and female applicants, which could lead to legal difficulties as well as perpetuate differences in social and economic status between ethnic groups in our society.

How can it be that a "culture-free" test has this effect? A partial explanation is that despite our individuality, past experiences shared by members of a cultural group help shape their present perceptions and learning styles, and some level of culture is present in virtually everything we do. By this line of thinking, there is probably not such a thing as a completely "culture-free" test. For example, Hispanics put a high value on educación, a Spanish cognate for education. However, the meaning of educación is not the same as that of "education." At the core of educación are the social skills of respectful and correct behavior, in contrast to the mainstream U.S. notion of "education" having to do with the acquisition of knowledge and mental prowess. Thus, a Hispanic immigrant who seeks to become "educated" can do so mainly by acculturating and adapting to the social norms of a new society.

Many research studies that have addressed the issue of cultural bias in testing have found little indication of its existence. An interesting set of studies across several industries examined results from ability and job knowledge tests that were created by supervisors who were of the same ethnic background as the largest number of "minority" candidates for various positions. Despite the ethnic similarities between the test creators and the test takers in these trials, and the use of culturally familiar language and content, the minority candidates as a group fared no better or worse than in previous conventional tests, which had been created by persons ethnically dissimilar to them. These results strongly suggest that factors other than cultural influence are stronger determinants of job performance, or at least job knowledge.

Employers can structure their selection procedures to take advantage of job knowledge tests while reducing risks of legal difficulties stemming from adverse impact. For example, many employers use a job knowledge test for prospective supervisory staff as only one step of many in the pre-hire process. They also use such other assessment tools as reference checks and structured interviews to obtain information that provides a more complete view of an applicant's overall abilities than a job knowledge test could adequately reveal. If adverse impact does occur, and a member of the affected group files a discrimination complaint, use of the job knowledge test can be justified if it is both "job-related" (based on a job analysis and accurately predictive of job performance) and of "business necessity" for the particular employer. A standard for this latter condition is the unavailability of any other procedure that predicts job performance as well while resulting in less adverse impact.

The Importance of Effective Supervision

Mental ability tests like the Ravens Progressive Matrices are not likely to be found directly job-related. Job knowledge tests, on the other hand, are likely to be both accepted by courts and highly useful as indicators of future employee performance when created in line with simple job analyses and job descriptions. Even the best job knowledge tests, however, cannot by themselves cover all the factors that make for good job performance and a successful employee. There is often a gap between what a worker knows and how he or she actually uses it in performing the job. Factors such as motivation, honesty, reliability, and ingenuity are often vital to superior employee performance and overall business success.

Employing and retaining individuals in the work-force with desirable but difficult-to-measure personal

traits are not easy, but the odds of accomplishing them can be improved through well-designed hiring procedures and compensation systems. Research on non-ability predictors of job performance, such as personality, has become increasingly active in recent years, but relating well to individual employees, whoever they are, remains very important. No matter what personal traits, cultural groups, and job-related abilities are within a firm's workforce, skills of managers and supervisors heavily influence whether they are effectively applied to production.

As noted above, some significant and important "between group" differences have been found, for whatever reason, with respect to both race and gender. I believe that while these differences exist, most individual employee traits and behavioral responses to management are not significantly associated with any particular ethnicity. These characteristics vary much more among individuals within any given ethnic group than between groups as a whole. Learning about various traditional customs and communication styles is helpful to managers, especially in becoming better acquainted with people of different cultures. However, I disagree with consultants who advise managers to use canned "best practice" techniques in dealing with a diverse workforce or a group of individuals who appear different from the predominant culture.

Cultural influences on employee performance matter, but individual ability, traits, and values matter more. Managers are best off if they pay attention to, respect, and consider in their everyday decisions the individual characteristics of their employees. Disappointment awaits those who subscribe to guidelines that purport to comprehensively describe the vast domain of human tendencies and behavior within any particular ethnic or racial group.

Readers can find specific suggestions on how to communicate with employees who do not speak English well in "[Supervising Across Language Barriers](#)," *Labor Management Decisions*, Summer 1992, Volume 2, Number 2, page 3. The article is available on the [LMD page](#) on the APMP website at <http://are.berkeley.edu/APMP/>.

[LMD Contents Page](#) | [LMD Main Page](#) | [APMP Home](#)
