

# Training migrant workers in the UK

**As the number of non-UK nationals employed in the UK market continues to increase so does the need to ensure the health and safety training these workers receive is appropriate and effective. David Towlson outlines some of the challenges associated with training migrant workers and offers some potential solutions.**

**T**he UK today is truly cosmopolitan. Walk around any large city, use public transport, look around and listen and you will soon detect people conversing in a wide variety of languages.

Since the expansion of European Union membership to 28 countries, nationals of 27 other countries are now able to freely move to, and work in, the UK. Add to this the UK's special arrangements with countries such as Switzerland and Turkey, the Commonwealth citizens with UK ancestry who can also be fast-tracked into working in the UK, and other nationals who are granted special permission under the UK's points-based system, and you have many different migrant workers.

## The facts

The chances are that most companies will employ at least some foreign nationals. The size of the foreign-born population in the UK doubled from 3.8 million in 1993 to 7.8 million in 2012, while the number of foreign citizens grew from nearly 2 million to 4.9 million according to The Migration Observatory.

Labour market statistics from the National Office of Statistics show that the number of non-UK nationals in employment increased by 26,000 to 2.64 million in July to September 2013 from the same quarter in the previous year.

Despite the political rhetoric, people do not generally come to the UK to take advantage of the benefits system. Many, indeed, are highly skilled individuals who have been successful professionals in their own countries. Some may be escaping war or political persecution and may now be reduced to low paid, unskilled work simply because their qualifications are not recognised, or their



rudimentary grasp of English makes them appear uneducated, as they struggle to articulate their thoughts.

## Duty of care

Migrant workers are owed the same duty of care as native British workers. This includes protecting them by making sure they are made aware of workplace risks and are trained in the use of equipment and procedures to help manage those risks. This all involves communication, which entails far more than merely speaking the same language. We all interpret words and gestures through our own cultural mindset and context.

If you're being taught in your native language, although misunderstandings still happen, they are usually easily corrected. The teacher can approach the problem in many ways, using the full richness of your native tongue, while having a shared cultural heritage and reference system makes communication richer and easier. But for migrant workers, English may be their second or third language and there may be few shared cultural references.

## Teaching options

As a teacher, the approaches that you might try depend very much on the level of English language fluency in your group. Strategies may include:

- Providing training in the native language of the migrant group, if such trainers are available.
- Hiring an interpreter, although teaching like this can be extremely hard work and costly for all concerned.
- A buddy system – making use of the more able to help explain a concept in their native language to a colleague.
- Making supplementary written or graphical information available in different languages.
- Ensuring at least a minimum standard of English for training attendees using standard tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).
- Learning a little about the migrants' culture, so that appropriate examples can be used to make the point in a more effective way.

More usually, migrants have a wide range of proficiencies in English and those who are less confident may appear shy, uninterested or uninvolved in lessons conducted in a second language. Teachers must be alert to this and not assume, by the lack of questions, that everything is understood.

## Learning the language

Having said that, a goal of migrants who intend to work in the UK for long periods must surely be to learn the language. This is certainly the intention behind the UK Government's citizenship programme, with its insistence on learning English. The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) note, in their guidance on migrant workers ([www.hse.gov.uk/migrantworkers/employer.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/migrantworkers/employer.htm)), that it may be a good idea to provide, or encourage people to attend, English classes.

Learning English is obviously not a quick fix, but a long term investment. It all takes time, so it needs to be allowed for. In the end, training has to be effective and not simply something to be got through.

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