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Spanish in the Workplace

Language has, for centuries, been a unifying factor for people of all cultures. The significance of language in America can be seen by the 350 different languages spoken in the United States, according to the United States Census Bureau in 2015. Of the 350 languages spoken one of the most popular languages is and has been Spanish. The popularization of Spanish is a result from the “41 million native speakers and 12 million bilinguals [in the United States making] the United States... the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world” (Quartz). This influx of Spanish speakers has been seen everywhere in the United States. According to the Census Bureau in 2018, there are “59.9 million Latinos in America, making Latinos 18.1 %” of the American population (Census Bureau). Since the population of Spanish speakers in America is so great it is only natural that uneasiness towards Spanish has risen. As a result, the hesitation towards the usage of Spanish in common spaces has, over the years, created growing hatred and has caused strong linguistic anxiety in the American people. Consequently, English-Only policies have become incredibly popular in workplaces. English-Only policies in workplaces have not only successfully implemented ways of keeping Spanish speakers out of workplaces but have also added to the growing disdain towards Latino communities. But does this very concept of taking Spanish privileges away from workers sound very American? Although English-Only policies are oftentimes implemented in workplaces because there is a perception that America is a monolingual country, this response to Spanish in the workplace is incredibly ineffective and harmful to American business.

Since the beginning of American history America has been incredibly linguistically diverse, and there has never been an official language. From its earliest beginnings there has not been one language spoken as the sole language of America. However, strong sentiments were attached to English during the time of America's formation. English became an American symbol and therefore became a sign of being American. This caused creation of what is American and what is not American, which led to the hatred or even fear of foreign languages in America. However, having such strong feelings during the formation of America was extremely difficult because America, as Ruben Rumbuat describes in "Immigration and Language Diversity in the United States" during "...the time of [American] independence, non-English European immigrants made up one quarter of the population and in Pennsylvania two-fifths of the population spoke German" (Rumbuat). And along with the several purchases of land that were made throughout the formation of America, new cultures, customs, and languages were all brought together. Specific purchases or treaties to mention are the Louisiana Purchase and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which introduced thousands of new peoples and even more languages and tongues to America (Rumbuat). With the mixing of several cultures and peoples early in American history, came strong fears of what language was going to have power as the language of the new American people.

The push for monolingual practices and fear towards populace groups in America can be traced back to Benjamin Franklin and his fear of Germans in America. In "Letter to Peter Collins", Franklin describes his fears about the massive German population and wonders "Why... Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who [would] shortly be so numerous as to Germanize [Americans] instead of [Americans] Anglifying them, ...never adopting [the American] Language or Customs" (Franklin). This fear that Franklin expressed

towards the growing German population in Pennsylvania is one of the many instances of this new phenomenon, of fearing the power that a different group of people could have in America. Franklin exhibits the same fears that are exhibited now in the 21st century, two hundred and twenty-six years later.

Although what Franklin said is more than two hundred years old, the same sentiments that he expressed towards the usage of German in America then, are strongly expressed towards the usage of Spanish in workplaces now. Now workplaces implement the use of monolingual practices, i.e. only using English in the workplace, which lead to no good, only court cases and lawsuits. When a workplace imposes English-only policies on their employees, there is only one premise under which it can be done. This premise is that it must be out of “business necessity”, as stated by the Department of Labor; if it is not then employees can decry discrimination and the E.E.O.C gets involved (Department of Labor). How these practices typically begin are that Spanish speaking employees are told that if they speak in Spanish, or any other language that is not English on the job, then that could lead to punishment. There are various forms of punishment which employees can face, as described in “Forever 21 Sued for Allegedly Discriminating Against Spanish-Speaking Employees”. According to this article, employees can suffer from “past and future los[ses of] wages [and the employees] suffered emotional injuries... emotional distress, anxiety, frustration, humiliation, mental anguish, nervousness...”(TLF). According to the Legal Information Institute, such consequences can lead to “atmosphere of inferiority, isolation and intimidation” on behalf of the employees. It does not seem that anyone could work under these conditions it does not seem, so why should foreign language speakers be submitted to such treatment?

There have been many instances of where the E.E.O.C, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, has defended Latinos who were subjected to discriminatory English-only policies, and punishments as stated above, in the workplace. In 2000, in DeSoto, Texas, Spanish speaking employees of Primer Operating Services sued after the company enacted an English Only Policies on to their Spanish speaking employees. Although the employees were bilingual “their primary language or language of national origin [was] Spanish” (Elegal), so enacting an English only policy was discriminatory to the employees because it prevented the employees from speaking in the language they felt the most comfortable in. Did Primer Services think if they were discriminating against their employees? Did they know that their Spanish speaking employees, although they spoke English, felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish? Did Primer Services think that communicating in English presented a challenge to their employees? Obviously, a lack of judgement occurred when the English-only policy was enacted and so the employees then sued Primer Operating Services and won the case.

In 2017, Forever 21, a massive fast fashion franchise in California, enforced English-only laws onto three employees of Spanish speaking backgrounds. Again, the E.E.O.C and the employees discriminated against sued the workplace under premise of discrimination and won the case. The enacting of English Only Policies towards Spanish speaking employees is not only limited to these two cases as it has been a growing trend in workplaces because of the continuous growth of disdain towards Spanish speaking communities and the continual growth of the Spanish Speaking communities themselves. But companies do not gain anything from these policies. As previously stated, fears of foreign languages in America are not new. So, to ease fear associated with a growing population, workplaces enact these policies; however consequences from these policies now can be harmful to American business.

Nowadays, American workplaces have a tendency to want to exclude Spanish from the workplace, but the fact is that this is detrimental to business. This is because of the continual growth of the American Spanish speaking population, and no sign of its decline either. The America Latino population is, according to Antonio Flores in “How the U.S Hispanic population is changing” “the nation’s second-fastest-growing racial or ethnic group [which showed] a 2.0% growth rate [in 2015-2016]”, which is too immense to exclude from business (Pew Research). This data shows that with the continuously growing Latino population in America, logically comes a growth within both Spanish speaking employees and Spanish speaking consumers. Since there is a growth between employees and consumers, not allowing the usage of Spanish in the workplace is harmful to business because an entire demographic of which “accounted for 11 percent – or about \$2.2 billion– of total e-commerce purchases made across the United States in... 2012” as stated in “The US Hispanic Market: 10 Facts Your Competitors Already Know” would be completely lost. If such a business profit was made in 2012 then with the current influx of Spanish speakers in America, and as Virginia Cortijo states in “Analysis of The Best Practices Followed By The Top Business Schools in The United States When Teaching Business in Spanish”, “the buying power of Spanish speakers is increasing”, losing Spanish within the workplace would be extremely bad for business and could hurt the potential for a particular sale with Latinos (172, Cortijo).

Along with the blatant and purposeful exclusion of Spanish in businesses, it could lead to companies receiving unwanted stigma or judgment about the businesses themselves. Latinos could come and think of the owners as xenophobic, racist, or even hateful towards Spanish speaking communities if exclusion happens. This then could lead to a sale never made again. Showing respect to Spanish goes a long way with Spanish speaking communities because

“According to the Experian Simmons Summer 2011 National Hispanic Consumer Study, about 56 percent of Spanish-dominant Hispanics agree that, “When [they] hear a company advertise in Spanish, it makes [them] feel like [the company respects their] heritage and want [their] business.” This also goes along with advertising in Spanish as “Similarly, 54 percent of Spanish-dominant Hispanics feel “much more loyal to companies that show appreciation of our culture by advertising” (Accredited Language Services). Just as American fears run deep so do the feelings of those discriminated against. Although these efforts to keep a business English only might come from a nonbiased place, this can become extremely hurtful to American business, Latino communities, and work relations in America.

There are a multitude of positive outcomes that occur when Spanish is used in the workplace, and this realization is causing many companies to see Spanish as an asset, not a burden. This realization is frankly not new to some researchers and can be traced back to the twentieth century. Marianne Inman, in her dissertation “An Investigation of the Foreign Language Needs of U.S. Corporations Doing Business Abroad” conducted a study which concluded that Spanish is useful in the workplace because of the growth in business with foreign countries in the United States. Inman conducted this study in 1978 which shows how the United States was beginning to realize that foreign languages speakers would be necessary for American business with the turn of the millennium. In her study the foreign language that she concluded would to be the most important to American business was Spanish. This was because of the increase in business with Spanish speaking countries. Along with this growth, she concluded that Spanish speakers would be assets to American companies because they would be able to conduct business in their native language for America. The significance of Inman’s study is that it shows that corporations were anticipating a change would occur with American business. The need of

foreign language speakers would increase with the influx of people coming to America and the booming business opportunities with foreign countries as well. Inman was sure of the drastic change that would occur with American business as she made sure to say that “[The data could be] updated and expanded upon in future studies” (128, Inman).

The importance of Spanish has even been realized by schools because top business schools are integrating it into students education. In “Analysis of The Best Practices Followed by The Top Business Schools in The United States When Teaching Business in Spanish” Virginia Cortijo explores the various ways that speaking Spanish helps individuals out in the workplace. According to Cortijo’s study bilingual people, specifically Spanish speakers, are capable of “higher order, abstract, and creative thinking”, which is something that was not typically thought about but was concluded because Bilinguals are not thinking in solely one language (172, Cortijo). Bilingual people are capable of thinking from two different perspectives, two different cultures, and even two different mindsets. This is beneficial to business because it invites a different type of voice to be recognized in companies and allows for Spanish speaking individuals to use their skills in the workplace instead of hiding their skills or even being scared to use them as seen in the cases mentioned above. For students who do not know how to speak Spanish it is being taught to them because of the importance of using Spanish to conduct business. This allows people who do not have experience with the language to get in on the opportunities that are being introduced into American business. When foreign languages are appreciated in the workplace then business in America expands to all people. In “Language for profit: Spanish-English bilingualism at Lowe’s Home Improvement” Elizabeth Hepford looks into the usage of Spanish in Lowe’s, a home improvement franchise, and explains the various

positive changes that occurred to Lowes after it started “valorizing language for...economic gain” (1,Hepford).

As the Spanish speaking population in America grows, so do new sentiments towards it as well. Spanish, once seen as a burden in America, is finally being recognized for the asset that it is, but even as recently as 2017 we have seen that it is still not respected in the workplace. Although the easy response to discrimination against Spanish speakers in the workplace is to stop the discrimination and allow Spanish speakers to speak in the language they feel the most comfortable in, which leads to better work relations, better work environments, and a well-rounded staff, this is easier said than done. America needs to look within itself and see how the exclusion of a huge majority of Americans or people who contribute to America are affected by such practices. The misconception that Spanish speakers in the workplace are not an asset to business needs to be fought. Spanish, as well as other languages, are important to business because English is not the only one language that is spoken in America. This also accounts for the business world because business outside of America is not only conducted in English. To not allow Spanish speakers to use their language in the workplace takes away their heritage, culture, background and is not American just as Juan Perea states in “Demography and Distrust: An Essay on American Languages, Cultural Pluralism, and Official English, “ that declaring English as the "symbolic" state language excludes "different, but equally American, languages." (Perea). American gains from the usage of foreign languages in the workplace because it unifies the American people and strengthens American business.

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