

Overcoming Language Barriers

By Jim Parrie, Ph.D., CPF

Today, production framers often need to use immigrant labor from different countries. Here are some steps you can take to minimize language barriers and produce quality products.

Anyone who has been running production framing operations understands the tightening labor market. As the national unemployment rate continues to run just below 5 percent, manufacturers struggle to find qualified, motivated labor that can be acquired at a fair wage. In certain areas of the country like Honolulu or Las Vegas, unemployment is below 3 percent. The unemployment shortage in these markets is further compounded by a higher cost of living. This places a larger burden on picture frame manufacturers seeking to compete with overseas competition or even domestic competitors located in lower manufacturing cost states.

Today's labor shortage is a by-product of several factors. Recognizing these factors is important so that you can react accordingly:

Educational System. The U.S. educational system continues to lag other developing nations in test scores despite the ever-growing increases in government and private funding. The U.S. ranks in the top three in per pupil funding, yet we are seventh in average test scores. The impact upon the framing industry of these lower test scores is that there are fewer qualified workers. Anyone who has done any type of hiring recently has seen evidence of this: applicants who cannot fill out the simplest application and those who cannot read a ruler or convert a fraction into a decimal. American corporations



A color-coded chart sits on the work surface of a computerized mat cutter, a universal communication tool that can guide speakers of different languages and dialects to produce the right mats with a minimum of verbal instructions.

will spend more than \$2 billion this year teaching basic math, English, and writing skills to home-grown labor. These costs decrease profits and are eventually passed on to consumers.

Victims of Plenty. Many of us who are over 30 years old worked while we were in high school and/or in college. Typically we worked because our parents could not afford to pay for us to go to school or we wanted to go to a better school. Today, that is not the case. We live in an affluent society, a society that spends more money on entertainment than on food. Many of today's younger applicants do not need to work. They work to earn extra spending money, to buy an X-Box game or just to hang out with friends. They typically do not

work out of necessity. Therefore, it is difficult to motivate this type of labor.

Tech Jobs. The more motivated and skilled students today want technology-based employment. Many seek employment that revolves around software, not flipping burgers. Those who want to work with their hands want more than an average framing job pays. Plus, there is less glamour in fitting pictures than in graphic design or building web pages. Our schools are also producing more technological savvy students while our vocational schools are woefully lacking in funding and infrastructure.

The result of all these factors (plus others not mentioned) is a tight labor market that has forced many manufacturers to hire immigrant labor. Most framing manufacturers do not hire immigrant labor because they can pay them 50 cents on the dollar. It is quite the opposite. Immigrants are being hired because they are hard working, show up on time, produce excellent quality, and are very grateful for even the most modest of perks.

This situation is not without challenges. One of the biggest is language. Most immigrant labor in the U.S. is Hispanic or Asian. While the greatest number of immigrant workers speak some version of Spanish, the language problem for both groups is similar. Compared to English, there are many more variations in the differing dialects of Spanish as well as in slang and expressions. Some facilities where the entire labor force is Hispanic are composed of workers from a variety of countries: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Argentina, and Mexico. Though each worker is Hispanic, words have different meanings for each nationality. For example, the word for car can be *coché*, *caro*, *automobile*, or *auto*. It is similar to the more notable differences between American and English speakers. Is it an elevator or a lift? A bonnet or a hood?

These word differences make teaching a new skill difficult because of the various terms used by the numerous nationalities. It is hard enough to teach framing to someone fluent in English. Teaching it in another language, using words that may have four, five, or even six different meanings, can create chaos in a work environment.

One solution used in larger corporations is to translate all procedure and operations manuals into the pre-



Using different colors for carts in a production facility tells everyone about the type of work needed, the work flow, and even the priority of the jobs contained in those carts.



dominant languages of a production team. This can require a sizable investment, so it is essential to weigh the cost with the anticipated return. Translated documents must reflect not only the languages but also the particular dialects of your production team. For most facilities this is not an affordable option.

The most effective way to train a multi-national work force for production framing is to 1. simplify each task, 2. break it down into small bits of information, and 3. use universal communication methods whenever possible. The third approach, universal communication, is one that offers production framers an efficient way to

deal with language barriers.

One method of universal communication is to use colors and small numbers to identify tasks, equipment, raw materials, tools, and production cells. Colors and small numbers are easier to remember than complex procedure manuals. For instance, carts are colored based on the shipping method of the product. Color-coded carts allow a manufacturer to use blue carts for second-day air shipments,

red carts for next day air, and black for ground. When a fitter finishes an item he or she refers to the color code on the bottom of the work order and places the finished item in the appropriate color-coded cart. When a cart is moved to the shipping department, it is easily identified by anyone there. The shipping stations are also color-coded. The red next-day air table only handles red carts, for example, which helps minimize confusion.

Another method is to use large signs to label materials and then systematically run that color code throughout the production stream. For instance, one production facility labels each mat board with the manufacturer's mat board number as well as its own internal number plus the pre-cut size and an actual color swatch. When a mat is pulled from a pick list, the CMC operator has a swatch chart on the work station that is used to match the mat according to the number on the cut list and the color swatch chart at the station.

Even the pick list is simplified. The numbers used to identify products are internal numbers that have no more than two digits. Most production facilities use numbers supplied by moulding manufacturers, which can be quite lengthy. To use universal communication, the moulding number could be a color (signifying the manufacturer), a letter (signifying the raw material), and two or three digits (signifying the pattern number). Whatever method you choose, always seek to simplify each step.

Many multilingual facilities place large color signs over each workstation that are numbered and/or color-coded. It is easier to tell a new, non-English speaking hire to go to "Red 1" than "Go to the multi-channel joiner."

Consider how small components like screw eyes, hangers, nails, etc. are stored. All workstations should be exactly the same. When you open the drawer of one fitting station, it should be exactly like all the others. This makes training easier. Tools should also be consistent. All fitters should use the same staple guns as opposed to being faced with a hodgepodge of equipment. One of the great attributes of some cultures is that when they are shown a task one time, they will repeat that task the same way without error. The problem is, if they are shown the wrong way or if there are inconsistencies in the system, then these same workers will produce 10,000 items wrong-but they

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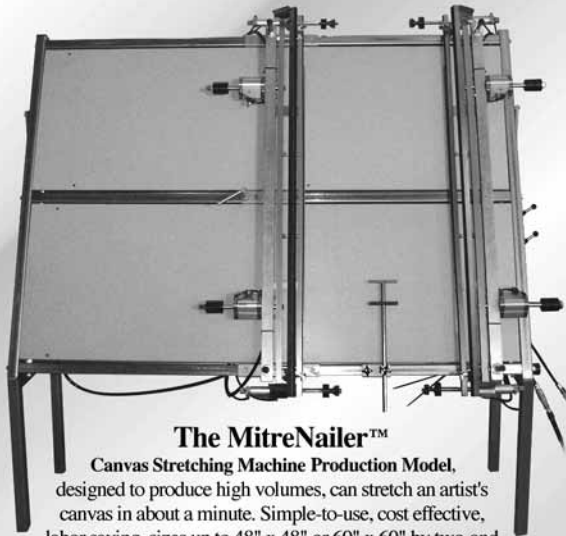
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the items will be wrong in exactly the same way.

To overcome language barriers, remember to simplify work steps and procedures as much as possible. Break things down into small tasks, and use universal communication whenever possible. You may not be able to eliminate language barriers completely, but you can keep them at a manageable level. ■

Jim Parrie, Ph.D., CPE, is a 30-year veteran of the framing industry has owned and operated small frame shops, galleries, and wholesale operations to high volume OEM facilities. Currently, he owns Millennial Technologies & Consulting International, a consulting firm to high volume framers, retail chains, and manufacturers throughout the world. Jim has overseen the construction of moulding manufacturing facilities, small chain operations and OEM operations in excess of 150,000 square feet. Integrating production and marketing systems with state-of-the-art technology has earned him a variety of consulting agreements with numerous manufacturers in the U.S. and abroad.



Color codes and short numbers are used to indicate mats and other materials needed for a job. This makes it easy for a worker to pull the right materials without error.

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