



### Did you know?

Cultural differences, language proficiency, and literacy may act as challenges to ensuring the health and safety of seasonal migrant agricultural workers. As a farm operator it is your responsibility to ensure the safety

and well-being of your workers, whether they live in the next town over or overseas. The challenges can be met effectively with a combination of research and careful preparation.

## A complex challenge for any workplace

### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Culture encompasses all the values, norms, beliefs, customs, language and traditions of a certain people. What may seem only “natural” from your perspective—the right way to act, do things, and behave—is actually a function of your culture and upbringing. Culture is like an iceberg. Superficially, there may be many commonalities between your culture and that of your migrant workers. But the largest part of an iceberg is underwater. It is unseen until you bump into it. So don’t be surprised if your migrant workers act or behave in ways that surprise you. And don’t assume workers will automatically adapt to your expectations of work and behaviour. Instead, take the time to explain those expectations so that your workers understand the culturally-appropriate boundaries they should respect while on your farm or in your community.

### Different Understandings of

**Safety.** Safety standards may differ from country to country. As a result, some workers might not understand the need for safety precautions, or may view extra safety steps as either optional, or a drain on time, rather than being good for their own health and safety. So it is vitally important that you communicate and enforce health and safety requirements on your operation, and that you make clear to all workers that health and safety practices are not an option, but a condition of employment.

### Different Gender Relationships.

The status of women varies from country to country. Some cultures place women in more traditional, hierarchal relationships to men. For this reason, some male migrant workers may be reluctant to take direction from female supervisors, or may feel it is okay to make comments about a woman’s physical appearance that may not be appropriate in a Canadian workplace. Establish expectations for the treatment of women at your worker orientation. Make it clear that workers are to refrain from lewd or derogatory comments,



are to treat female employees with respect, and are to follow instructions from female supervisors without incident.

### Different Expectations of

**Status and Promotion.** In Canada, there is a strong emphasis on assigning responsibilities based on an individual’s experience and capabilities. Be aware that migrant workers may establish an internal “pecking order,” or dominance structure that may not align with your existing set of supervisory relationships. Certain individuals may try to use language skills or other factors to increase their status within the group. However, they may not understand your supervisor’s instructions clearly, or may misinterpret them, passing

along inaccurate instructions to other workers in the process. All of this undermines your management structure and could put your workers at risk of injury. Make sure your supervisors understand that they should communicate instructions directly with all workers and refrain from using migrant peers as interpreters. And take the time to define supervisory roles early, providing workers with clear direction on who they will be receiving direction from and how they will be receiving it.

### **Different Expectations of Work.**

When workers arrive in Canada, they are often away from their families for extended periods of time with the expectation that they will provide economically for their families back home. This or other pressures may drive workers to try to overextend themselves by working as many hours as possible, regardless of their health and well-being. In contrast, employers may be required by law to limit the number of hours worked to protect the health and safety of workers. Communicate expectations of work hours clearly to your workers. Explain what the limits are, why they are in place, the importance of breaks, and how working tired increases the risk of injury and



should be avoided. Look out for workers who may try to seek employment with another operator during their off-time to earn more income. This practice should be discouraged as it puts everyone who works on your operation at greater risk of injury and reduced productivity.

### **Worker Pride and Embarrassment over Misunderstandings.**

Few people like to admit that they don't understand something, or that they have made a mistake. Migrant workers may be even more likely to feel embarrassed by a misunderstanding or error, possibly because they fear they will be "sent back" to their country. Don't take their word for it. Make it your standard practice to explain and demonstrate expected work behaviour before each task. Make it clear that it is okay if your workers don't understand, need to ask questions or require further clarification. Observe their work and provide constructive feedback in a non-threatening way until you are confident they can perform the task appropriately.

### **The Right to Refuse Unsafe Work.**

The concept of the Right to Refuse Unsafe Work may not exist in your workers' home countries. However, it is a right they are entitled to while working in Canada. Be sure to cover this right in your worker orientation and training processes. Workers should never feel that they have to complete a task regardless of the safety of the working conditions. Going over the Right to Refuse Unsafe Work is important not only from a liability perspective as an employer, but it also helps to protect your workers from injury.

## **LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY**

Think of a time when you were in another country where your native language wasn't spoken. How difficult was it to order food, ask for directions, or buy tickets for the next bus or train? How relieved were you when you found someone who understood just enough English or French to help you out? Now think of your migrant workers. They may be coming to work on your farm with little or no English or French language skills. Don't get frustrated or raise your voice in an effort to be heard. They aren't hearing impaired. Instead, exercise a little bit of patience, respect and understanding. The fact is that your workers may not always understand what you are trying to explain to them. Even if they keep agreeing with you with the few words of your language they do know. They may just be agreeing with you to avoid embarrassment, in an attempt to impress you, or because they are impatient and want to move on to the next task. Don't fall for it. Instead:

### **Speak Slowly, Simply and Politely.**

Speak with simple words and use simple sentences. Watch for feedback from them that shows they understand.

**Don't Use Slang.** Variations of dialect may seem second nature to you, but probably won't be understood by non-native speakers of your language. So avoid it.

**Avoid Jargon.** It might pass in producer circles but it will most likely be lost in translation with your workers.

### **Be Melodramatic and Confident.**

Use big hand signals and body language to communicate your instructions. You may feel silly but it may help your workers understand you more clearly.

### **Learn Key Phrases in Their Language.**

As a supervisor, learn key words or phrases in the language of your workers. This could include equipment names, rules, policies, and emergency phrases. Learning these key words or phrases will demonstrate mutual respect in the workplace and it will make it easier for workers to understand instructions.

### **Identify or Hire a Staff Person That Can Communicate Fluently With Your Workers.**

It is critically important to identify or hire a staff person that can communicate fluently with the majority of your workers in their own language or languages. As stated above, don't rely on workers who do not have a good command of your working language to pass on information to the rest of the crew. Remember that worker pride and ambition may result in an incomplete or inaccurate message being sent on your behalf, which could put other workers at risk.



## **LITERACY**

Literacy is the ability to communicate via the written language, including reading and writing. While we might take it for granted in Canada that most people can read and write, this is not necessarily the case in other countries. So be mindful of your obligations as an employer, as well as the literacy challenges you may face when employing migrant workers.

### **Health and Safety**

**Documentation.** To begin, in many jurisdictions across Canada regulatory standards require employers to ensure that specific health and safety documentation—such as Material Safety Data Sheets, labels and signage—is accessible to all workers. Initiate a process with your suppliers to determine if such information is available in the language or languages of your workers. If these materials are not available, ensure you have someone on staff available to interpret this information for any worker requiring it.

**Literacy Rates.** Even when instructions or other health and safety information is written in the predominate language of your workers, don't assume

that everyone understands it.

Whether you are providing written instructions to your workers in English, French, or another language, keep in mind that literacy rates vary from country to country. Not only may your workers be unable to understand your slides, flip charts, signs or posted notices in your language, but they may also be unable to understand them in their own language.

**Different Dialects.** What is more, since there are many different dialects in any given language—or ways of speaking and communicating within an existing language—even if your instructions are translated, they may not be understood. As well, while certain agricultural terminology may be commonplace in English or French, it may not have an equivalent translation in another language. To overcome these and other communication challenges, make ample use of pictures, demonstrations, short video clips or other visual techniques to ensure that your workers have the greatest chance of understanding what is expected of them and what precautions they need to take to undertake various job tasks safely.

## Promoting cross-cultural understanding

Migrant workers provide a vital service to Canadian farmers. At the same time, farmers provide migrant workers with economic opportunities that they might not have access to in their own countries. Take time to research or read up on the language and culture of your migrant workers. Show respect for their culture by acknowledging their cultural or religious holidays.

And encourage employees of different backgrounds, genders, age groups, or other demographics to interact and get to know each other better. Improving cross-cultural understanding not only strengthens relationships between employers and workers, but it also helps to ensure the health and safety of everyone who works or lives on the farm.



## Resources

[migrantworkerhealth.ca](http://migrantworkerhealth.ca)

[atoctli.com](http://atoctli.com)

[smallbusiness.chron.com](http://smallbusiness.chron.com)

[ncfh.org](http://ncfh.org)

[farmworkercliniciansmanual.com](http://farmworkercliniciansmanual.com)



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