

## Communication a tool for better safety, compliance and understanding of migrant workers

Every year, thousands of migrant workers arrive in Canada to work seasonally. Sectors, length of stay, countries of origin, Canadian government and that of the workers' country intervention, among many other elements vary depending on the region's working needs, as well as on the program type in which farmers request workers.

In agriculture, apiculture and animal breeding farms, Canada has implemented several programs; however, here I will only speak about the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) –which operates in agricultural and apiary sectors- and the Low Skill Workers Program (LSWP) –which includes the above sectors and several more-.

In 2013 under SAWP more than 17,500 workers from Mexico and over 15,000 from Eastern Caribbean countries arrived in Canada to work for up to 8 months. These workers return to their country at year's end and –if required again- they return the following year for up to another similar period. This cycle may last indefinitely. This is a federal program among countries.

In LSWP thousands of people from Honduras, El Salvador, Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, Guatemala –over 5,000 from this country alone-, and other countries work for up to 4 years in Canada. As current regulations state, to return to Canada, people would have to wait another 4 years. A few workers from Mexico and Eastern Caribbean countries also participate in this program. This is not a federal program.

The SAWP and the LSWP allow thousands of migrant workers in Canada to work in jobs similar to the ones they have in their country, with the considerable difference that generally work in Canada is more intense, requires different technology and it is paid by the hour, not by the journey; that is why workers very often want to work as much as possible. In exchange for their hard work, they receive a significantly higher salary than the one they would get in their country, which they generally send to their family. In this way they contribute to their family and community economy.

In Canada these migrant workers contribute by paying taxes, Canada Pension Plan (CPP), Employment Insurance (EI) and they are basically ruled by the same standards that apply to any other temporary legal worker.

In some Canadian communities migrant workers represent the only available source of labour, given the difficulty in finding people who would want to do the same jobs, given the kind of work involved, effort required, seasonality, salary in the industry, among others elements. Thus, migrant workers' presence and work help many Canadian large and small companies to exist, be more productive and competitive, help create and maintain jobs for locals, and also contribute with their own economical apportionment in the communities they live in, which in some regions is already considerable.

This way, thanks to the working opportunity given by the Canadian government, companies, and farmers' and migrant workers' effort –and that of the latter's family-, the economy of communities where migrant workers live, both in Canada and in their country, improves, and allow end consumers to buy local products at reasonable prices.

While work is the main reason why migrant workers are in Canada, around it a series of apparently unrelated needs are generated that are not usually mentioned or appreciated, perhaps because by being

obvious they become invisible and seem inexistent, or probably because they might not have been considered important as both Programs have grown no stopped, or because they might not seem to be important as at the end of the day work is done.

Communication is a human being's fundamental need, which consists of several elements that we shall now divide in two main streams: one is **linguistic communication** –using words- and the other one is **nonverbal communication** –which is expressed without words-, and to which in this article we will add the person's culture and idiosyncrasy and those of their community of origin.

This way communication is a complex system that most of the time involves both communication types, representing a recurring challenge among people who do not share the same linguistic systems and/or nonverbal references –especially cultural ones-. This is similar to what many new immigrants -as migrant workers- and the people, organizations and authorities go through in Canada.

In my professional experience and in spite of having been closely related to SAWP since 2001, it was only until 2009 –when I did a research on linguistic communication between Mexican migrant farm workers and farmers/supervisors in Ontario for the thesis of my Master on Teaching Spanish as a second language- where among many other conclusions, I found that:

1. Communication between parties is verbal, although it takes place through different means
2. Knowing workers' language: allows a general two-way communication, makes it possible to verify and transmit new or complex information...
3. Timely and effective communication improves work, productivity and personal relations

Becoming interested in the topic, from 2010 to 2011 I did a second research, this time on communication needs between workers from Mexico and Guatemala and people they interact with in Canada outside workplace. In this case results showed the need for better linguistic communication, general information and the enormous influence culture has on message interpretation, among many other conclusions.

Since 2010, I have visited several workers in their homes in Mexico and Guatemala, this has allowed me not only to enjoy their warm, generosity, food and cultures, but also to observe and understand their culture, values and social context and compare them with the relationships and context they develop and live in Canada – context that I have been able to learn more, due to constant traveling in different provinces promoting and delivering my services among Canadian authorities, farmers and migrant workers-.

After all these research, interaction and observation, I have learned that in day-to-day activities, migrant workers' communication difficulties occur more at work, generally **for lack of a common language** or **of lack of awareness of important cultural differences**. A typical example of an error due to unawareness of a language is when the farmer/supervisor gives a message to a worker that acting as translator transmits it in their own language to their fellow workers. In this case the farmer/supervisor loses control of the message, which may be defective due to lack of solid knowledge of the worker's language, causing other communication difficulties: impossibility of verifying, explaining with more detail, etc. A typical cultural difference –usually combined with lack of linguistics skills- is when migrant workers say they understood the message when it is not true.

Situations like these and many others that I have identified have been taken place for years in hundreds of companies that request migrant workers throughout Canada, and although work gets done in the end, among other inconveniences, it makes it difficult to include new or detailed information.

Although communication in farms with migrant workers varies, the ones I have assessed and they followed my recommendations, over time they have seen important changes, appreciating how better communication favours personal relationships, rules compliance, workers' performance -better production, less waste, etc.

However, in companies with migrant workers without common language and/or knowledge of cultural values, changes are casuistic and intuitive, preventing -among other difficulties- the introduction of any change.

Given identified needs I founded **Atoctli** (fertile soil in Nahuatl language), company **created to improve:** communication between employers and migrant workers given language and cultural differences; communication to improve work and safety in and outside the farm and communication to help improve migrant workers' wellbeing in Canada.

To achieve our objectives we offer intercultural presentation for authorities, farmers and workers; work violence prevention presentations in Spanish –to comply with Bill 168 OHSA-; translations and interpretations; Spanish language classes; materials and content design for migrant workers and **Atoctli** a free bilingual, informative and only positive message magazine, which is handed out in Mexico to all farm workers before departing for Canada. Thousands of farm workers from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Jamaica, etc., also receive it and have copies available in areas with higher number of migrant workers in different Canadian provinces. The electronic version of the magazine [www.atoctli.com](http://www.atoctli.com) offers videos, directories, safety signs and the magazine with more information; all texts are printable for free. The e-magazine is promoted among over 1000 farmers and relevant authorities of Canada, Mexico and several countries.

In 2013 for Canadian Agriculture Safety Association (CASA) annual congress, I had a presentation about migrant workers safety needs in Canada, for which I conducted a third research. Results were fascinating, as for the first time I saw how linguistic and cultural differences directly affect a specific area of migrant workers: safety.

Thanks to this short research, I also tested and observed how some materials designed to improve safety, translated into Spanish, may not yield expected results, as migrant workers' profiles were not considered in their preparation. After this research and according to my previous findings and experience it is clear to me that language itself is insufficient to achieve effective message transmission and comprehension.

My presentation caught the attention of farmers and their representatives as well as provincial authorities of different Ministries, and some of them have stated to me their desire to learn more about the subject, either to adapt or create safety materials for migrant workers so they can fulfill their objectives, or to train their associates for better communication and attain better safety, rules compliance, meet farmers obligations, etc. From my personal view point, these responses reflect the supportive Canadian spirit, and confirm my theory that communication and its effects had not been approached more due to unawareness of its existence and effects, than due to negligence.

As for safety of migrant workers, my own experience makes me believe that creating and implementing safety materials and clear safety policies suited to workers' profiles and languages, and farmers' needs, realities and farm circumstances would have very positive results, perhaps even better than if applied to Canadian workers, as it was mentioned by most farmers surveyed for the third research. So let's continue understanding and looking after communication needs of farmers with their workers, as I'm sure there are promising results awaiting us.

If you want more information on the topic, our presentations, **Atoctli** magazine or other services we offer please contact me at [info@atoctli.com](mailto:info@atoctli.com)

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