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## **Spanish-speaking workers in demand**

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Luis Lobo has a drawl strong enough to make listeners think he's a North Carolina native. But Lobo moved to the South from Costa Rica when he was 10.

A bank executive, Lobo is among those Southern professionals who are Hispanic and bilingual.

That group is so small, however, that many companies are finding it difficult to hire employees fluent in both English and Spanish to serve the exploding population of Hispanics in Southern states.

Six of the 10 states whose Hispanic population grew fastest between 2000 and 2002 were in the South, the Census Bureau reported in September. Georgia grew faster than any other state, 16.8 percent to 516,500 Hispanic residents. North Carolina wasn't far behind, with 15.7 percent growth.

The rise in Hispanic population has created demand for more bilingual workers at businesses and social service agencies. But finding employees who speak English and Spanish well is difficult for businesses in small towns and for those that aren't well-known.

Lobo, a vice president for the Potomac region of BB&T Corp., wants to hire more bilingual bank tellers and managers. The Winston-Salem, N.C.-based company has 1,400 branches in 11 states -- mostly in the South -- with 28,000 employees.

"It's atrocious to have a bank that is trying to serve a multi-ethnic makeup that only has one certain type of employee," said Lobo. "It's wrong and bad for business."

About 48 percent of U.S. Hispanics speak both Spanish and English very well, according to the 2000 census. Lobo is looking for employees who are not only proficient in two languages, but also are knowledgeable about the Hispanic community's culture and needs.

So he visited job fairs and local schools, but had little luck filling positions that require at least a high school degree. While the task was easier in Washington, D.C., where the Hispanic population is large and more established, it was a challenge in North Carolina, where the company had to bring in bank workers from other states.

"We want good people to come work for us, so we're willing to provide all the training necessary," said Lobo. "We have to go to the mountain if it won't come to us."

Larger companies with a broader geographic reach see the same recruitment problems, but they are better able to deal with them.

When Atlanta based-CNN started its 24-hour Spanish-language news network, it looked outside Georgia for staff. The network's 140 employees are mostly from Latin America or from states outside the South, said Christopher Crommett, senior vice president of CNN en EspaÃ±ol.

Crommett said he can't use traditional recruitment services, because they aren't set up to find such specialized employees. He uses employee referrals to fill most open positions. But because he is hiring for a high-profile company, he doesn't have a problem finding employees willing to relocate to Atlanta.

"The CNN name is a wonderful drawing card," he said.

Likewise, multinational companies such as Atlanta-based Coca-Cola "don't have an issue with recruiting bilingual employees," said Lori George Billingsley, a Coke spokeswoman.

### **Extended problem**

The problem extends beyond the business world. Many social services in Athens are inaccessible to Spanish speakers, said Elizabeth Taxel, case manager at Catholic Social Services. Less than 10 percent of the local population of 157,000 is Hispanic.

Catholic Social Services acts as a go-between for the growing population of Hispanics who don't speak English. Taxel translates job listings into Spanish and shows up at her clients' doctor appointments free of charge.

"If there were more bilingual personnel in all sectors of the community, people wouldn't need to come to our agency," said Taxel. "They would be able to access those services directly."

Catholic Social Services has been looking for months to hire a certified bilingual counselor, with no success. "We have been looking everywhere. They just aren't out there," Taxel said.

Contributing to the shortage of bilingual candidates with a high school diploma is that a large percentage of Hispanics either drop out before high school graduation or continue on to higher education, leaving a small pool of those in the middle.

About 20 percent of Hispanics dropped out of high school in 2000, the Pew Hispanic Center found. Of those with college qualifications, more than 80 percent of graduating high school Hispanic seniors go on to higher education, according to Hispantelligence, a market research firm.

In Georgia, two-thirds of Latino students dropped out of high school before graduation, according to research by Jorge Atilas, professor of housing and consumer economics at the University of Georgia. Atilas blames the dropout rate on a lack of bilingual teachers in Georgia.

Cultural factors may also be behind the large dropout rate, because immigrants may encourage their children to get a job rather than go to school, said Atilas. He said undocumented immigrants can go to college, but aren't eligible for state scholarships.

## **Demographics**

Immigration in Georgia is different from other places in the country, said Atilas.

California, the No. 1 magnet for immigrants, attracts many highly skilled people. Cuban and Puerto Rican immigrants, who predominate in Florida and New York, tend to be better-educated and more affluent, he said.

Most of Georgia's Hispanic immigrants come from Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia, Atilas said, and work in construction, poultry or carpet factories, not office buildings. Many workers can't even read Spanish, he said.

"They are coming for economic reasons, and they are leaving countries to make better lives," Atilas said. "They are coming with a lower professional and educational level."

Because immigration into some Southern states is more recent, schools and communities have not had time to absorb the new population.

"When you think about it in terms of a community being able to adapt to changes, five or six years is nothing," said Taxel. "That's not enough time for a pool of perfectly bilingual people to develop."

Hispanics born in the United States have a much lower dropout rate than immigrants and are the ones who usually end up in professional positions. So as immigrants settle in the South and their children finish school, the number of bilingual professionals should grow.

But that's not helpful to companies that need to hire bilingual employees to deal with their more immediate needs.

"We just can't wait for the class of 2010 to graduate," said Taxel.