



Preparing Latinx Workers for Success: Local Employers Share Skills Needed in a Rapidly Changing Job Market

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts on the Latinx* community and for other people of color through illness, loss of life, and economic implications. According to the CDC, Latinos and African-Americans in the United States are three times as likely to be infected as their White neighbors, and nearly twice as likely to die from the virus.¹

In January 2020, the national unemployment rate in the United States was 3.6%.² As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact the nation's economy, unemployment numbers rose rapidly—by April, the overall unemployment rate spiked at 14.7%,³ and a distressing 18.94% for Latinos. More recent statistics from August 2020 showed a respite for the nation and for the Latinx community, with the unemployment rate dropping to 8.4% and 10.5%,⁵ respectively.

While unemployment remains high, at the same time, Latinos are overrepresented in essential businesses that remained open throughout the pandemic. As previously stated in *The Latino Community in the Time of Coronavirus: The Case for a Broad and Inclusive Government Response*, “hundreds of thousands of Latino workers are considered essential to the safety and security of America and do not have the luxury of telework, physical distancing, or self-isolation during the crisis.”⁶

* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

Latinos Make Up 17.6% of the U.S. Workforce, and:



54%
of Agricultural Workers



29.7%
of Food Manufacturing Workers



29%
of Medical Assistants



20.5%
of Grocery Store Workers



18.8%
of Transportation and Utilities Workers (mail and electricity)



15%
of Frontline Protective Service Workers (firefighters, police, etc.)



14.1%
of Pharmacy and Drugstore Workers

Source: UnidosUS calculation using U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey." Tables 11 and 18, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/tables.htm> (accessed June 23, 2020).

Background

As the pandemic continued to ravage communities across the country, UnidosUS Affiliates reported two pressing priorities: 1) funding for short-term relief efforts for families whose lives and livelihoods were impacted by the pandemic; and 2) an understanding of the 2020 and 2021 hiring strategies and goals of employers to ensure they could provide Latinx workers with the skills needed to compete for jobs as they become available.

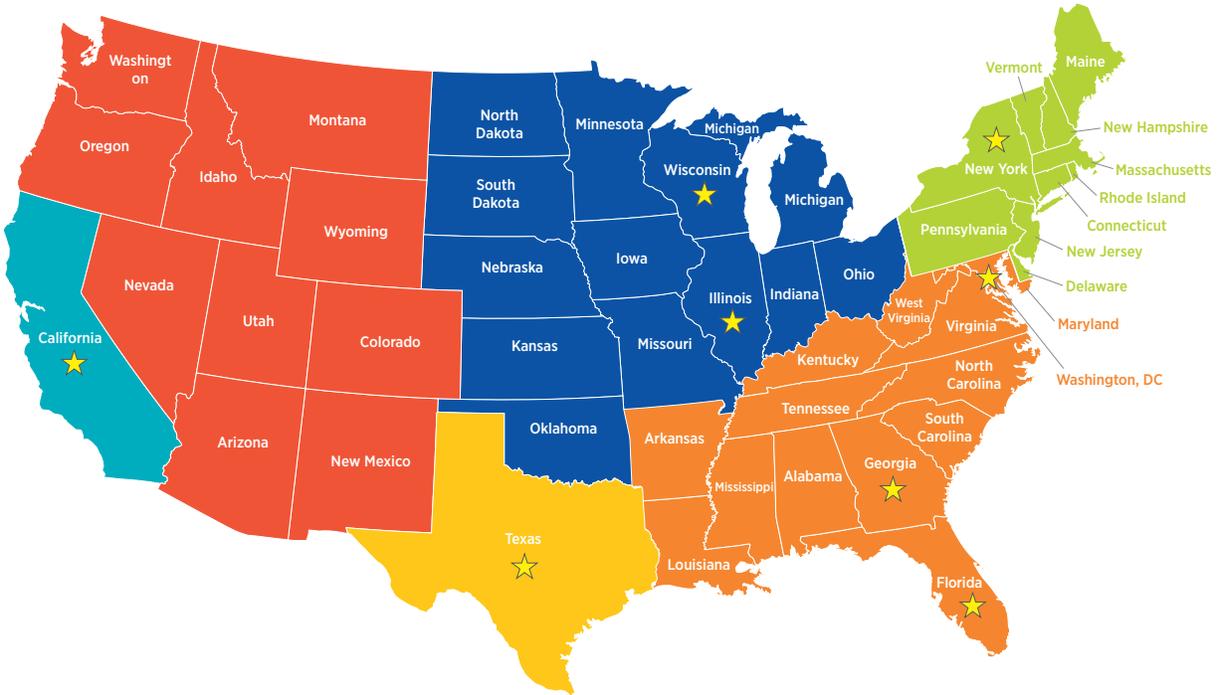
In early June, in response to the Affiliate request, UnidosUS, in partnership with nine Affiliates and grantees, launched a research project that aimed to understand the hiring needs of local and national employers and how UnidosUS and its Affiliates could best be responsive to their talent needs in the rapidly evolving environment created by the pandemic. Between June and August 2020, UnidosUS identified 12 corporate partners and the Affiliates identified 71 local employer partners to interview and conduct focus groups so they could understand:

- Hiring projections for 2020 and 2021
- Skills needed for entry-level positions during and post-pandemic
- The role of UnidosUS and its Affiliates in preparing Latinx jobseekers to access these jobs

Together, the nine organizations represented seven states and the District of Columbia in five of the six UnidosUS regions:

- **California**
 - › MAAC Project, San Diego, CA
- **Texas**
 - › SER Jobs for Progress, Houston, TX
- **Midwest**
 - › Vera Court, Madison, WI
 - › PODER, Chicago, IL
 - › Center for Changing Lives, Chicago, IL
- **Northeast**
 - › St. Nick's Alliance, Brooklyn, NY
- **Southeast**
 - › Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, Washington, DC
 - › Latin American Association, Atlanta, GA
 - › Centro Campesino, Homestead, FL

For each state, overall unemployment rates vs. Latinx unemployment rates varied greatly. The table below, from Economic Policy Institute, provides unemployment rate comparison for second quarter (April-June) 2020.⁷

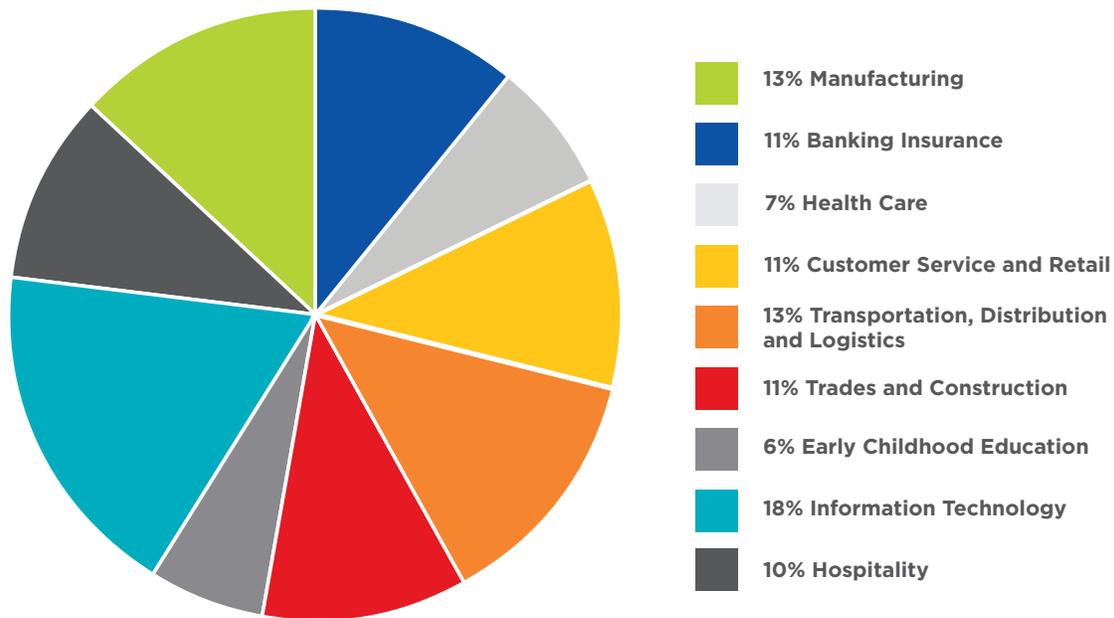


STATE	STATE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	LATINX UNEMPLOYMENT RATE
California	15.9%	18.1%
District of Columbia	9.7%	Data unavailable
Florida	12.6%	14.5%
Georgia	9.9%	12.4%
Illinois	15.7%	23%
New York	15.2%	22.0%
Texas	11.7%	14.1%
Wisconsin	11.4%	Data unavailable

Together, the nine Affiliates interviewed human resource, talent acquisition, or diversity and inclusion leaders from 71 employers to gather information on hiring trends and skills needed for entry-level positions during and post-pandemic. These employers represented businesses that had more than 40 employees and focused on one of the following industries:

- Early Childhood Education
- Information Technology
- Hospitality
- Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics
- Banking and Insurance
- Manufacturing
- Trades and Construction
- Health Care
- Customer Service and Retail

EMPLOYER REPRESENTATION



Findings

Based on the interviews and focus groups discussions conducted by the Affiliates, this report is broken in three parts:

- Hiring Projections
- Skills
- Role of Affiliates

re-open, they operated with a skeleton crew with employees donning many roles as employers could not afford to bring back all the employees and operate at full, pre-pandemic capacity, due to seating and social distancing limitations. Layoffs and staff furloughs continue to remain a reality of the industry through the release of this report in October 2020.

Hiring Projections

All interviewees (except in the construction sector) noted that they either slowed or froze hiring at the onset of the pandemic. Given the uncertainty, employers were not sure if they could afford to hire new staff. Many employers also noted decreased turnover or attrition rates as their employees were interested in stability and continued to stay employed due to the pandemic. Representatives of the hospitality sector noted an increased need to lay off or furlough their staff due to temporary restaurant and hotel closures. As these sectors began to gradually

Interviewees from the construction sector noted that since they were considered essential businesses and were not restricted to mandatory closures in many states, they continued with their projects. Construction employers did, however, note that while the pandemic did not affect their hiring strategy, they do have a shortage of workers due to an increasing number of workers retiring soon. According to National Center for Construction Education & Research (NCCER), 29% of the construction workforce will retire by 2026; and, in just five more years by 2031, 41% will retire.⁸ As such, there is a continuous and increased need for workers in the trades.

At the time of interviews and focus-group discussions in August 2020, most interviewees, except for the hospitality sector, noted that they had lifted the hiring freeze and were continuing to hire for staff on an as-needed basis, and staff that were either laid off or furloughed were starting to return. A few employers, especially those in the warehousing sector, speculated that many employees that were furloughed early-on due to the pandemic were hesitant to come back due to the unemployment benefits they were receiving which were greater than what they were earning as full-time employees. While the additional government support during the pandemic was beneficial for unemployed individuals; their lack of return to employment once available highlights the failure of not having a living wage standard in the United States.

Majority of the employers stated that they were not changing their hiring goals for 2020, but the positions they were hiring for and the skills needed in those positions were evolving due to the pandemic. For example, employers in the customer service sector emphasized a greater need for employees that are patient, resourceful, empathetic, and able to navigate different options for their customers. Many employers noted the need for employees with a strong customer service mindset, irrespective of the industry they were working in.

Skills

All 71 employers unanimously agreed that soft skills were more important than technical skills for entry-level hires. Employers identified the following soft skills as the most important to get a job:

- Customer service and people skills
- Strong communication and interpersonal skills
- Critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving
- Teamwork
- Relationship-building
- Attention to detail
- Self-confidence

It is important to note that every employer emphasized good customer service skills as the key to finding and retaining a job. With remote work or virtual customer engagement, good customer service skills were highlighted as becoming even more important. Employers also rated empathy and the ability to understand customer's need before offering a solution as highly sought-after skills.

In addition, employers identified the following additional skills as skills needed for entry-level employees to advance in their careers at the organization:

- Flexibility and adaptability to different situations
- Willingness to learn
- Strong work ethic and time management
- Taking ownership and responsibility
- Growth mindset
- Conflict resolution
- Patience
- Emotional intelligence
- Ability to work under pressure
- Cultural fit within the organization

In terms of technical skills, all employers—including those in construction, manufacturing, and transportation, distribution, and logistics—noted that knowledge of basic computer skills such as Microsoft Office Suite, Google Suite, virtual meeting platforms, and basic cloud computing were imperative to succeed in any job. Employers noted that at the minimum, given all jobs were posted online, job seekers should have sufficient digital literacy skills to apply for a job online and participate in a virtual interview process.

It is important to highlight that even though construction, manufacturing, and transportation, distribution, and logistics sectors are traditionally considered hands-on sectors with little need for computer skills for entry-level positions, employers emphasized the need for their entry-level workers to have digital literacy skills to read blueprints and operate different software/technologies.

In the information technology sector, digital skills were noted as a requirement for entry in any job. While not a requirement to apply for a job in the other sectors, they were certainly needed to be able to work and grow in that sector. For example, employers in the early education sector noted that with the education technology evolving rapidly, it was important for para-educators to be comfortable with using technology to provide better education to their students. Para-educators and teachers were expected to know how to use existing technology for lesson delivery and supporting students. Similarly, health care employers noted the rise in telehealth services and the increased need for health care workers with digital literacy skills that could easily navigate and provide telehealth services.

Employers that offered remote working options emphasized on the ability of workers to manage their time effectively and continue focusing on their learning as a growth opportunity.

Paraphrased quotes from employer interviews

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Health care employers noted that knowing how to deliver high-touch, good customer service in a hospital environment is extremely important. A health care worker may be working with sick and worried patients and their families; it is important to have empathy and emotional intelligence to interact with them.

CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS

Employers need workers that are not scared to deal with customers. They should be dynamic, thick-skinned, and get along with all types of personalities. They should not be afraid to pick up the phone, and answer chats or emails.

IMPORTANCE TO LEARN EXCEL

Excel is the best tool to master analytics and problem solving. Even though it automates, it also forces you to think, manipulate data, create formulae, process task sequences, etc. Excel teaches people how to think differently/better.

Role of Affiliates

The nine Affiliate organizations that participated in this research are well-established in the communities that they represent and have strong relationships with local employers as was evident by the number of employers they reached, and the rich data they gathered through interviews and focus-group discussions.

Each organization has a different relationship with their employer partners, which generally fit into one of these three categories: 1) employers that are partners in co-designing program models and leading trainings; 2) employers that look at Affiliates as potential talent hubs but are not involved in co-designing programs; and 3) employers that may reach out to Affiliates for hiring talent but do not have a formal relationship with them. However, each employer had clear ideas on how the Affiliates could better support them as well as the jobseekers they interact with to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes and higher rates of employment for Latinx community members:

- All nine Affiliates had employer partners that were interested in hiring participants either during the pandemic or as employment opportunities become available post-pandemic.
- At least 50% of the Affiliates had employer partners that were interested in being more engaged in workforce training programs and offered to conduct mock interviews with participants.
- At least 50% of the Affiliates reported that employer partners were impressed with the candidates they had employed through Affiliate programs and encouraged them to continue with the same level of training, vetting candidates for fit, and interview preparation.
- Three Affiliates had employer partners that expressed an interest in exploring an internship model for job placement and offered to help create it.
- Two Affiliates were told by their employer partners that they appreciated the vetting of candidates before they were sent for interviews because this ensured a closer match and stronger chances of hiring.
- One Affiliate received advice about developing relationships with employer partners, so candidate referral was easier. The same Affiliate also had employer partners that were interested in co-designing program models, growing the partnership, and eventually providing funding for the program so they would always have a steady stream of qualified candidates to choose from for their open positions.
- All Affiliates received advice from their employer partners on strengthening the customer service and soft skills aspect of their workforce training programs. Employers continued to emphasize the importance of these skills during the hiring process.
- All Affiliates also received advice from employers on how to restructure their interview preparation process, including increasing the number of mock interviews that participants have, helping participants prepare for virtual interviews, teaching participants how to talk about themselves effectively, and focusing on increasing participants' self-confidence in an interview setting.

Recommendations

Based on the interviews and focus group discussions, following are recommendations for next steps.

- In this continuously evolving economy due to the pandemic, the only way to get accurate labor market data is by staying in-touch with employers. Any labor market projections available today are not accurate markers of new openings, hiring needs, or a retiring workforce. Thus, Affiliates should continue to stay in close contact with their employer partners, so they are aware of changes and can quickly pivot their program models to meet the hiring needs of their employer partners.
- With many people currently out of work, Affiliates should prepare to train and upskill community members so when hiring does pick up, these individuals are well-positioned to access those jobs. Given the employers' emphasis on soft skills and digital literacy skills, Affiliates should consider adding both of these important skill sets to all their job readiness and industry specific training programs.
- Affiliates should continue making connections with local employers to identify where the greatest hiring need is, so they can train and place their participants in those jobs.

Endnotes

- 1 Oppel, Richard A., Robert Gebeloff, and K. K. Rebecca. "The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus." The New York Times. The New York Times, July 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html>.
- 2 "Unemployment Rate 2.0 Percent for College Grads, 3.8 Percent for High School Grads in January 2020." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 12, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/unemployment-rate-2-percent-for-college-grads-3-8-percent-for-high-school-grads-in-january-2020.htm>.
- 3 "Unemployment Rate Rises to Record High 14.7 Percent in April 2020," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 13, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/unemployment-rate-rises-to-record-high-14-point-7-percent-in-april-2020.htm>.
- 4 "Unemployment Rate Rises to Record High 14.7 Percent in April 2020," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 13, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/unemployment-rate-rises-to-record-high-14-point-7-percent-in-april-2020.htm>.
- 5 "Employment Situation Summary." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 4, 2020. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>.
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- 7 "Economic Indicators: State unemployment by race and ethnicity." Economic Policy Institute, August 2020. <https://www.epi.org/indicators/state-unemployment-race-ethnicity/>.
- 8 "Restoring the Dignity of Work: Transforming the U.S. Workforce Development System into a World Leader." NCCER, July 2018. https://www.nccer.org/docs/default-source/pdfs/cii-rt335-longver-final_web.pdf?sfvrsn=80e91f4f_14.

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