



Preparing Latinx Workers for Success: National 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 18.9%⁴ 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



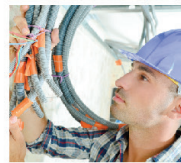
29.7%
of Food Manufacturing Workers



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

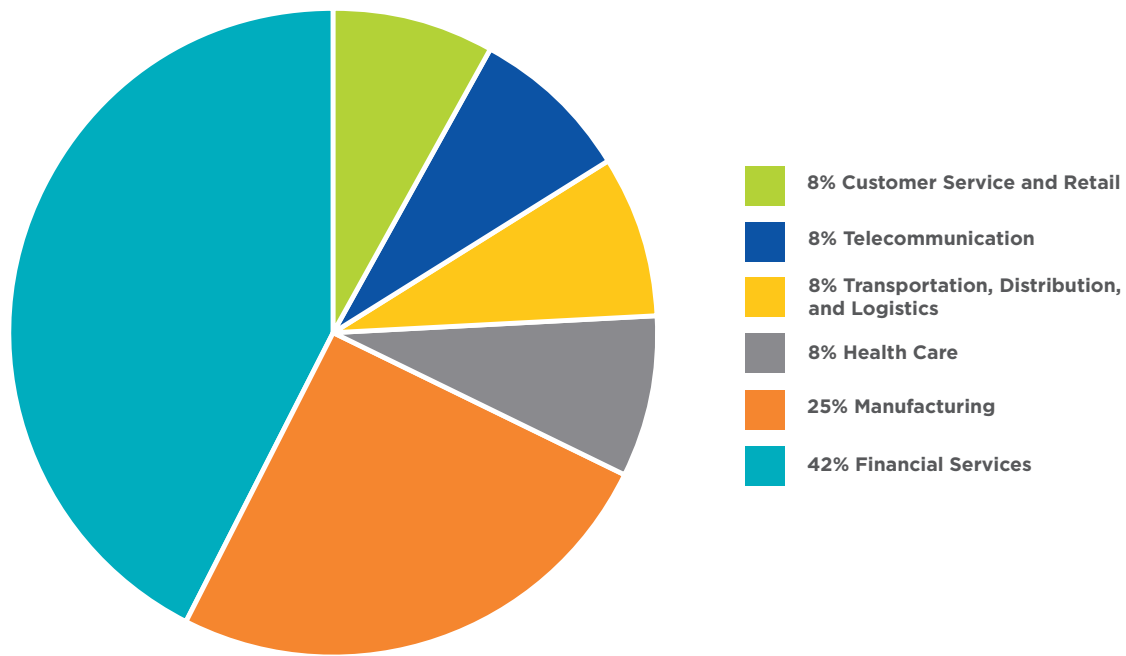
As the pandemic continued to ravage communities across the country, UnidosUS Affiliates reported two pressing priorities: 1) funding for short-term relief efforts for families whose lives and livelihoods were impacted by the pandemic; and 2) an understanding of the 2020 and 2021 hiring strategies and 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 partners who are members of the UnidosUS Corporate Board of Advisors (CBA)* 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

This document provides a synthesis of the information that UnidosUS obtained from interviewing human resources, talent acquisition, or diversity and inclusion leaders from 12 corporate employer partners/CBA members to gather information on hiring trends and skills needed for entry-level positions during, and post-pandemic. The employers interviewed represented the following industries:

- Banking and Insurance
- Manufacturing
- Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics
- Health Care
- Telecommunication
- Customer Service and Retail



Findings

Based on the interviews conducted by UnidosUS, this report is broken into three parts:

- Hiring Projections
- Skills
- Role of Affiliates

Hiring Projections

All 12 employers that UnidosUS spoke with said they were not furloughing or laying off any staff in 2020. However, about a quarter of employers mentioned having hiring freezes at the onset of the pandemic that were slowly lifted as the business's need for hiring new talent became evident. For example, one of the employers mentioned that hiring levels at the beginning of the 2020, pre-COVID-19, were significantly higher than any of the recent previous years; however, as the pandemic hit, their hiring came to a standstill and now they are only hiring for positions that will help their organization become technologically stronger. In addition to hiring freezes, all

employers reported having lower than usual staff turnover during the pandemic which decreased their need to hire.

While the majority of the employers stated that they were not changing their hiring goals for 2020, the positions they were hiring for were evolving as compared to their pre-pandemic projections. For example, employers continued hiring for business-critical and entry-level positions that were customer-facing and impacted revenue as compared to professional positions in their engineering or information technology departments. Due to the evolving nature of the pandemic, all employers reported they were unsure what their hiring projections or strategy for 2021 will be.

The only employers that reported an increase in entry-level hiring during the pandemic were organizations that were either in the customer service and retail sector or in the transportation, distribution, and logistics sector. These organizations specifically noted hiring for thousands of part-time positions to keep up with the

increased demand for pick-up and delivery services. It was unclear, though, whether this would be a consistent hiring demand moving forward or was temporary due to circumstances created by the pandemic.

Skills

All employers emphasized the need for soft skills (vs. hard skills) to access and succeed in any job. Only two employers identified hard skills, such as a four-year degree, mathematical analysis abilities, or industry-specific certifications, as necessary to access their entry-level positions. Employers identified strong communication skills, listening to customer needs, being resourceful, taking initiative, good work ethic, problem-solving, and analytical skills as the most important skills for an individual to work at their organizations. Some employers noted, due to the pandemic, there was a greater emphasis on change management and adaptability skills. Employees needed to think outside the box and come up with innovative solutions to common problems. For example, one interviewee noted that under pre-pandemic circumstances, it was easy to provide stellar customer service since there was face-to-face interaction and easy access to resources; however, this became significantly more challenging via remote/virtual interactions with customers. Under these circumstances, they noted it was important for staff to be agile, resourceful, and innovative so they could quickly solve problems and address customer needs.

Digital literacy skills were specifically mentioned by all employers as one of the most important skills for individuals to access any job in the future. Not only were digital skills needed to apply for a job but also for onboarding purposes. With all hiring and interviews happening virtually, all 12 employers noted that they had moved to a virtual onboarding process.

The pandemic highlighted that many jobs can be done remotely and that it is imperative that employees have high levels of digital literacy skills that will enable them to work from home efficiently as well as provide the same quality of customer service to their clients. Employers noted that having a basic understanding of Microsoft Office Suite and cloud computing (Google Suite, SharePoint, etc.) was imperative to be successful in most entry-level positions. They also noted that for customer-facing roles, understanding technology and its benefits and being able to explain the same to the customer was very important.

In addition, employers noted that most of the initial onboarding and professional development trainings that were previously being held in-person are now happening virtually and will continue virtually in the future because a) it saved thousands of dollars in meeting and travel costs; and b) more importantly, it gave employees the flexibility to take part in training per their schedule. It provided employees the additional flexibility of not having to manage home and work schedules to attend trainings away from home for multiple days.

As employers evolved and moved towards work from home, they noted that employees needed to be agile, especially have learning agility, so they could quickly adapt to the changing circumstances and continue to excel in their job. Employers emphasized on the need for employees to maintain a work-life balance as they worked from home.

Lastly, empathy came up as an important skill for any customer-facing job. More than ever, employers needed their employees to be empathetic towards the customers' situations and use that lens in their decision-making, relationship-building, and sales pitch.

Additional skills that employers noted to be successful in a job were:

Paraphrased quotes from employer interviews

LISTENING SKILLS

“Listening skills are extremely important. We are not selling an easy product. Being able to understand what the customer needs, what we have to offer, and then matching them up—it is not easy. This is why having strong customer service skills, listening carefully and with empathy, to make sure we are offering the right product is very important.”

CUSTOMER SERVICE MINDSET

“We need everyone at the organization to have a customer service mindset. Every line of business has someone else as a customer whether that is internal or external. So, we always need to provide excellent customer service. Moreover, everyone needs to have the problem-solving mindset as they are providing customer service. Always be ready to solve a problem for your customer — irrespective of your position or line of business.”

LEARNING AGILITY

“We saw that COVID-19 required us to shift resources quickly. Almost everything moved online in a short duration. Those that could learn the new ways of doing business, took trainings, and quickly adapted to the situation did well and were successful.”

FORWARD THINKING

“We are always looking for employees who are thinking outside the box. We want employees that don’t take status quo and work with it but challenge it. They should always be thinking of how we can do something better, what will take it to the next level. Always think about improvements and efficiencies and what will take the company to the next level. We need employees with a continuous improvement mindset.”

Role of UnidosUS and its Affiliates

At least 10 out of the 12 employers noted the need to be better connected to UnidosUS Affiliates. They did not view UnidosUS Affiliates as a source for talent acquisition. It was also unclear to them that Affiliates, by virtue of being rooted in the communities they serve, were representative of the customer base corporate partners were trying to attract to their businesses.

All employers noted they were interested in working with UnidosUS to develop a hiring strategy that would help them meet their entry-level hiring goals as well as their diversity and inclusion hiring goals. Ideas for collaboration included:

- A conscious shift for the employers to view Affiliates as hiring partners for their entry-level talent acquisition needs. About 50% of the employers recommended

connecting their local hiring managers to UnidosUS Affiliates so they could develop a hiring relationship.

- Employers noted that, outside of the current circumstances with the pandemic, there are usually many entry-level positions open with a specific hiring process for each role. They recommended connecting their local hiring team with the Affiliates, so Affiliates were aware of the positions that were available and the minimum qualifications and requirements for each position. Based on this information, Affiliates could then tailor their programs according to the qualifications to increase the chances of their program participants being hired.
- Employers also noted that while they were familiar with programs and processes at UnidosUS; they were not as familiar with the program models, timelines, training programs, or the community at the Affiliate level. Thus, there is a need to develop stronger partnerships with Affiliates.
- Employers noted an interest in developing a long-term relationship with the Affiliates that went beyond a hiring partnership and provided opportunities for their employees to volunteer at the organization and be more involved in the local community.
- The need for UnidosUS to take the lead on developing or updating curricula to include the aforementioned digital literacy and soft skills that employers are seeking in entry-level hires.

*UnidosUS's Corporate Board of Advisors

Established in 1982, UnidosUS's Corporate Board of Advisors (CBA) is made up of senior representatives from 24 industry-leading corporations. This passionate group of leaders meets twice per year to review UnidosUS's accomplishments and initiatives, discuss issues affecting both the Latino and corporate communities, and establish areas for mutual collaboration. CBA members also work with UnidosUS to maximize financial support to both the institution and its Affiliate Network through vital financial, in-kind, and programmatic support.

For this report, 28 representatives from 12 CBA members participated in interviews and shared information about hiring trends and skills needed for success at their respective corporations. We are deeply grateful for their time and expertise.

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>.
- 6 The Latino Community in the Time of Coronavirus: The Case for a Broad and Inclusive Government Response. UnidosUS. July 2020. http://publications.unidosus.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/2066/unidosus_latinosinthetimeofcovid.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y.

