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English Speaking Employer + Immigrant = New Cell Phone Applications

June 2009 Amanda Martinez

When Larry Upton built his home in Austin Texas four years ago he expected the construction company to hire Mexican day laborers to do much of the work. But he wasn't expecting the language barriers between the Spanish-speaking workers and their bosses.

"If there wasn't someone around to translate, work came to a standstill," he said. So Upton, a Spanish speaker, stepped in and he quickly learned that more was at stake.

"The workers were being exploited by their inability to communicate in English, paid low wages, and forced to live hand to mouth," he said. I got to know these guys well, they were amazing artisans being taken advantage of because they couldn't communicate."

It was then that Upton realized laborers need access to basic English language instruction but had no time to take classes and no money for language programs like Rosetta Stone "But they have cell phones," he said.

With that, began Upton's [Edioma](#), a mobile translation company, that will teach subject specific English and Spanish to monolingual speakers via cell phones.

Already, English-speaking employers can download IDigo Home an iPhone application that translates phrases on housekeeping, lawn care, painting, plumbing, electric, and automotive work for \$1.99.

With a scroll down the screen, users select a situation – Housekeeping - Scroll to an environment – Kitchen - And select an action - clean fridge - *Por favor limpia el refrigerador* appears on the screen and can be played for pronunciation.

Please wash the floors, please polish the silverware, and use this type of grass - are some other examples.

Spanish became the first language because of Upton's experience, but it's also one where demand continues to grow. In 2008, Hispanics comprised 49.4 percent of the foreign-born labor force, according to the Bureau of Labor.

Cell phone applications for orders can all sound a little upstairs downstairs, but day laborers on Cesar Chavez Street and domestics workers in the Mission District said they welcome better communication with their bosses.

"Understanding what the boss wants can be stressful," said 54-year-old Jose Sanchez as he stood on Cesar Chavez Street on a recent Tuesday morning waiting for work.

In his ten years working here, Sanchez has become adept at decoding employers who grab dictionaries or "draw pictures on paper."

But it's not easy and confusion between employer and employee starts immediately, day laborers said.

"The cars drive up, and the drivers shout questions about carpentry, paint and wages," said Juan. "Most workers say yes to anything even if they don't understand because they want to work."

Just then a car honked and motioned him over. Juan hopped in the short Toyota work truck, no questions asked.

Upton said he hopes this first application will relieve the initial stress felt by both parties. Short translated phrases always start with *por favor* (please) and suggest general phrases for payment, contact information, and work schedule.

For painter Juan Garcia understanding how much employers want to pay is the hardest part.

Cuanto Cobras por dia? and *Cuanto cobras por hora?* The iPhone application breaks down charges by hour, day, and week.

What does Garcia think about the application. "I would need one too," he said. "Sometimes they don't understand the accent and when I say fifteen they think fifty."

By Fall IDigo Home will be available in a Spanish to English version called Edigo. But Upton said this is only the beginning. Edigma is already developing translation kits for native Spanish-speakers to use at the bank, shopping, or visiting the doctor.

While the [Pew Hispanic Center](#) reports 59 percent of Latino adults have a cell phone, nearly 100 percent of the day laborers out on Cesar Chavez said they had cell phones. However, without work the last four months, few had been able to afford the prepaid cards they use for service.

Some 27 percent of Hispanic males work in construction and maintenance industries according to a 2006 community survey by the U.S Census and Tuesday's street corner with made it clear that many are suffering. The unemployment rate in San Francisco building trades is over 20 percent, according to a report earlier this month in the [San Francisco Business Times](#)

Jeremias Gomez Hernandez, one of those workers, said his cell phone service was cut two months ago and on Tuesday he used the cell phone in his pocket only to tell the time. "No work means no money to keep my phone activated," he said.

Upton's language program won't require the phone to be activated—just charged. And the applications for Spanish-speakers will be on lower end phones, he said.

Beyond the practical exchanges over wages and work, some Spanish speaking workers and their employers talked about the isolation that comes with being unable to communicate.

Housekeeper Esther Gress, said yes she would like to be able to tell her employer when she has to reschedule for a doctor's appointment and she would like to be able to understand Erin Meek's instructions easily.

But Gress would also like to get to know her employer.

"I would like to be able to talk with her while I'm cleaning. I know she travels a lot but I cant ask her about it," said Gress.

Meek feels the same "I would really like to converse socially and ask, how are you, how are things going," she said.

Meek said she would consider trying out the translation program but doesn't have an iPhone, "Its interesting to think," she said, "the social implications that this technology could have on our communication."