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## SPEAKING OF SUCCESS

Why companies offer advanced English classes to employees

Elise Dauksevicz, CEO of AlphaChemical

GARY HIGGINS / BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL



By [Lucia Maffei](#) – Technology Reporter, Boston Business Journal

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Since taking her first cashier job at Stop and Compare in the early 2000s, Honduras native Noemy Argueta Balla has moved up the corporate ladder. Last year, the grocery chain promoted Argueta Balla to “hiring and employee engagement manager” for its Lynn store. In that role, she’s in charge of job interviews and customer complaints — delicate tasks she handles mostly in English, a language that’s not her own.

Argueta Balla is one of several employees that Stop and Compare has promoted to management roles after they completed advanced classes of English for speakers of other languages, or ESOL, provided at no cost to her during work hours by her company.

Employer demand for English-as-a-second-language classes has increased after the pandemic, as more qualified immigrants looking for work have been arriving in the Bay State, teachers and organizers say. According to local employers, offering basic ESOL classes has helped attract talent and screen for culture matches — and advanced English language classes have been an effective retention tool.

Promising employees who complete classes become eligible for managerial roles and end up staying longer, the companies say.

Franklin Peralta, director of business engagement and public policy at English for New Bostonians, a nonprofit provider of English classes to immigrants, said that investing in the language skills of immigrants at any level is “a huge benefit, with clear ROI.”

“We see more companies seeing the potential for middle-management training,” he said.



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Student Luz Maria Rivera makes an oral presentation to fellow ESL students at Alpha Chemical, located in Stoughton. GARY HIGGINS / BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

## A workforce need

In Massachusetts, the foreign-born labor force is at 844,500, or 21.8% of total workers, according to recent data [by Boston University's Questrom School of Business](#). In other words, more than one in every five workers is an immigrant.

In 2023, the influx of over 50,000 immigrants helped to offset the loss of 39,000 residents who moved out of the state — a trend of net outmigration that has increased over the last decade, according to the study.

While many immigrants end up working in the state's flourishing technology and biotechnology sectors, or as nurses and other healthcare professions, other newcomers to Boston seek employment in manufacturing or in the service industry. Many immigrants who have a formal education, Peralta said, lack a full command of the English language.

“They are not fluent (in English), and that’s an issue,” he said.

That’s where English for New Bostonians comes in. In recent years, ENB has worked with manufacturers, restaurant groups and service providers to provide both beginner and advanced ESOL classes.



Image: © Boston Business Journal / Gary Higgins

Franklin Peralta, director of business engagement and public policy, English for New Bostonians. GARY HIGGINS / BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Companies can apply to the state Workforce Training Fund Program, [a funding source](#) under the state's Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development. Once they get the grant, companies and ENB work together to tailor the curriculum taught by ENB instructors either in person or over Zoom.

One of the companies that has been taking advantage of the program for a couple of years is Alpha Chemical Services Inc., a Stoughton-based manufacturer of specialty cleaning and sanitation products, with a permanent staff of 70, mostly from South America.

At Alpha Chemical, about 25 employees take either beginner or intermediate language classes.

CEO Elise Dauksevicz said that employees in the intermediate group already can speak English, but need to practice group presentations and master technical jargon. Their supervisors evaluate their progress, ultimately deciding whether they're ready for a promotion.

At Stop and Compare, about 80 employees have taken the classes over the years, according to CEO Vivian Iannotti. "It's a good recruitment tool," she said. "We want people who want to improve themselves."

## **Employers' needs**

Class content varies based on an employer's needs. Some businesses ask for classes on group-presentation skills or customer-facing skills, while others require professional email communication or the ability to produce quarterly business reports.

"Having companies that are involved is incredibly important for the success of the program," said ENB instructor Sarah Barber, who teaches "Advanced English skills for professionals."

At C&W Services, for example, a subsidiary of Cushman & Wakefield that provides janitorial, maintenance and reception staff, workers are required to produce reports for building owners and property managers — a challenging task when about half of C&W Services' 3,800 Massachusetts employees are not native English speakers, according to Angel Doyle, vice president for client services.

Dozens of employees have taken the classes, Doyle said, and many have been promoted or put in a succession plan. Classes are held over Zoom, so workers can conveniently attend during downtime at the building where they work.

About classes being held during work time, Doyle said, "I have not heard a single complaint" from property managers. "If there's an emergency, they'll pick up the phone," she said of students.

Barber, the ENB instructor for 10 students at C&W Services, said her advanced class covers topics such as accent reduction, public speaking and professional vocabulary. One of the concepts she stresses in class is avoiding the verb, “to get.”

For example, she said that she teaches that a report for clients of C&W Services should not say, “the bathroom got cleaned.” Rather, it should say the bathroom was “scrubbed and thoroughly disinfected,” she said.

Yet professional vocabulary is not the only skill Barber wants her advanced students to work on.

“There’s quite a lot of confidence-building that goes into the class,” she said.

Carlos Garcia, another Stop and Compare employee who achieved a promotion to store manager after taking ESOL classes, said balancing work, classes and family responsibilities hasn’t been easy, but he now uses the English skills he’s acquired every day.

“I always encourage my co-workers to take the class,” Garcia said.