

A pocket-size translator tackles the world

Plymouth start-up Kwingo hopes to mitigate language barriers in the workplace

By Thomas Lee

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Le duele? Puede moverse? Necesita una ambulancia?

For restaurants and construction firms that employ Hispanic workers who don't speak English, knowing how to ask in Spanish whether someone needs an ambulance would come in handy during an emergency. But unless a manager is bilingual or remembers enough vocabulary from 10th-grade Spanish class, that injured worker is out of luck.

Kwingo, a start-up in Plymouth, hopes to solve that problem by providing useful phrases and words, along with definitions and pronunciation tips, via mobile devices such as cell phones and PDAs. The company ... is betting that exploding cell phone use combined with growing demand for translation services in the workplace will lead to mucho dinero.

"Do you know what people want? Cheat sheets," said Lisa Foote, a former Target and Capital One executive who founded Kwingo last year. "Cheat sheets ...are bulky and hard to carry around. Cheat sheets go out of date the moment they're printed.

"People who have desk jobs, you can have your cheat sheet on the Intranet, the FAQs, the help desk number. It dawned on me that we didn't have the facility for mobile workers. The magic about Kwingo [the combination of 'quick' and 'lingo'] is that we can take any frequently accessed information and make them available to workers [using any Web-enabled mobile device]."

For a monthly subscription fee, employers can use any Web-enabled cell phone to call up a continuously updated database of words and phrases relevant to their industries. For restaurants, Kwingo offers 1,400 commonly used kitchen phrases like "Tira la basura, por favor" ("Take out the garbage, please") or "Ponga al vapor los esparragos" ("Steam the asparagus"). Kwingo's database can also contain recipes, operating manuals and food safety information like Food and Drug Administration recalls.

Language barriers can be dangerous, especially in industries like construction and food manufacturing that employ large numbers of people who don't speak English working jobs with frequent health and safety risks, experts say.

"There are so many safety issues," said Ed Rosheim, a principal at Workplace Languages, a St. Paul company that provides translators, manuals and on-site training to companies like Famous Dave's and Marriott hotels. "If the employer can't communicate in Spanish, it opens the employer up to liability. Workers have the right to know the laws, regulations, and safety risks. They have to know how to do their jobs correctly."

Between 1970 and 2006, the percentage of foreign-born workers in the U.S. civilian labor force nearly tripled, from 5.3 to 15.6 percent, according to the Census Bureau. The Migration Policy Institute, a Washington think tank, estimates 52.4 percent of the 37.2 million foreign-born people in the United States age 5 and older spoke limited English in 2006.

Rosheim says crash-course language classes in the workplace can only do so much because people tend to forget what they learn.

"It doesn't matter if it's a one-day seminar or a multi-week course," he said. "The retention is still Hola and Como estas? We need some type of quick fix, where you don't have to retain anything."

Foote says several restaurants are testing the service. She also wants to offer the service to travelers and municipalities. ...