

Working in a Chocolate Factory

Martha Tacuri

BEFORE YOU READ: What do you think are some of the safety issues for workers in a chocolate factory during the pandemic?

From Caring for Cows to Making Chocolate

Twenty-one years ago, I came to the United States from Ecuador to have a better life. In Ecuador, my job was to help my mom by taking care of our cows. In the U.S., my job has been to work at a chocolate factory. I have been doing this job for 16 years.

My friend, Ana, told me about this job in 2004. The chocolate factory did not have many employees. It only had two employees who spoke Spanish and eight who spoke English. I did not know any English. Understanding and following the instructions was hard for me, but my manager and coworkers were nice people. They helped me learn English.

Improving My English and Getting Promoted

The chocolate factory has four different areas: kitchen, production, packing, and shipping. At first, I worked as a helper. I worked in different areas of the factory depending on where they needed me. After ten years, the factory was starting to grow bigger. They asked me if I wanted to

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be an assistant manager in the packing area. I agreed to take on more responsibility, but I was scared because of my language barrier. I started taking some English classes at Literacy

Volunteers of America. Then I found more ESL classes at the local high school.

The classes helped me to improve my English a lot, and I was able to communicate better with



everyone at work. I was an assistant manager for four years, and then I was promoted to the manager position. I have been a manager for the past three years. As Packing Manager, my job is to make sure the boxes of chocolate look perfect, and are shipped out on time. I work 40 hours a week and get paid a salary.

Staying Safe During the Pandemic

When the pandemic hit the United States in March 2020, everyone was scared about how quickly the virus was spreading. The owners and workers were worried about their families. We were worried about being exposed to Covid while working at the factory.

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The owners of the factory made many changes. First, they had a meeting with everyone at work to give instructions about how to protect ourselves from the virus. They told us that we would have to start disinfecting the whole factory

once a month, and we would need to wash our hands throughout the day. As a manager, I had to make sure people followed the rules.

Next, the owners decided to split the amount of workers working each day so that we could

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keep social distance.

We had eight people working one part of the day and eight people working the other part of the day.

The owners also made some modifications to our wages. They decided to pay us 90% of

our normal wages even though we did not work a full 90% of our hours.

In the spring of 2020, there were very few orders, and I started to work only about 20 hours a week. But they kept my pay at 90%. At first, it was weird for me. But I was able to spend some more time with my family, and I enjoyed that.

In November of 2020, I tested positive for Covid and so did six other co-workers! Now we had to stay at home to quarantine. Luckily, I was able to take paid sick time for the days I missed.

Making Less Money

Getting a paycheck that was less than before affected me economically because I still needed to continue paying the same bills every month. I had to make some changes on how I spent my money. I stopped buying clothes and eating out. I prioritized paying my rent, then my electricity, heat, and internet bills because these bills were the most important in order to survive.

I realized that my situation was not bad compared to other people who lost their jobs and had no source of income. There were people who had to start looking for places where they could get some food in order to survive. It was so sad to see that. Thank God that in the United States there are so many organizations to help people in many ways. Because of that, I feel very grateful to live in this country.

No One Lost Their Job

Although it has been a difficult year for everyone, we are grateful to the company because they supported us for a full year. Now we have our salary and work hours back to normal. We all work 40 hours a week again, and no one has lost their job at the chocolate factory because of Covid.

Martha Tacuri is from Ecuador. She has been living in the U.S. for 21 years. She is married and has one daughter who is a college student. Martha is always looking to spend free time with her daughter. Martha also enjoys watching movies in English to improve her English. She has been taking classes at WERACE (Western Connecticut Regional Adult and Continuing Education) for the last four years. She is currently a High Intermediate level student. Recently she transitioned from being an in person student to an online student due to the pandemic.



AFTER YOU READ:

1. In your own words, tell the story of Martha's 16 years at the chocolate factory.
2. What did the owners do to protect themselves and their workers and their families from Covid?
3. What did the owners do to keep their workers employed during Covid?
4. The U.S. government had a program to support businesses to keep their workers employed during Covid. (Perhaps the owners of the chocolate factory were able to use this program.) It was called the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). Research online to learn more about the PPP. How much did the government loan to businesses in this program? How much of the loans have been forgiven? Share what you learn. (To wrap your mind around large numbers, read "How Much Is a Million? A Billion?" on pp. 11-12.)