(Bilingual) Help Wanted

Exploring your staff's language skills can give you a decisive edge. But first, consider these factors.

By Martin Cross

Janet hoped to give her nonprofit organization a boost in the world of fast-moving globalization by recruiting bilingual employees. She got some unexpected results. Her first big surprise was discovering that many applicants who made no mention of language skills on their resumes reported being able to speak two, three, or sometimes even more languages when asked about it in the interview.

This made Janet wonder: How common is this hidden talent? So, she sent a questionnaire to her staff and was amazed to find that many were in fact multilingual.

However, not all of Janet's discoveries were positive. Her plan was to have her bilingual employees translate communications for donors, clients, other supporters, and prospects who weren't proficient in English. But several people who had described themselves as fluent in other languages made egregious errors in their interpretations. Some of these mistakes could have been disastrous if Janet had sent out the messages without having them doublechecked.

There's more to language than conversation

Janet had been operating under the common misconception that someone who is conversationally fluent in a second language will be able to do everything in that language that they can do in English. The truth is that, while about a quarter of Americans can hold a conversation in a foreign tongue, conversational fluency is only one of a broad range of language skills.

Even in situations that don't require any special jargon, the ability to set the right tone requires a high level of skill. A person who has only spoken a second language at home or learned it during a college year abroad is unlikely to have such mastery.

A translator isn't always an interpreter

The skills gap is even more pronounced when it comes to writing. While our high schools and universities do their best to instill good writing habits in their students, many of us have difficulty producing even an e-mail that's completely

> **Interpreters need very different skill sets than translators.**

free of errors. As you can imagine, it's harder still to write well in a second language. In fact, unless you have used a language as your primary work or study language for many years, it's nearly impossible to write at a level in keeping with organizational professionalism.

Another surprising fact is that even people who have mastered two languages, such as immigrants who began their careers abroad and have since settled into English, may not necessarily be good translators. Understanding what's written on the page and being able to choose the right words to recraft that same message in another language are two very distinct skills. Many years of study and practice, as well as a host of specialized tools and resources, are needed for professional translators to reach a level at which they can work efficiently and confidently. Asking an untrained staff member to take on translation work may be counterproductive and may even involve serious risk in the case of documents with the potential for major impact, such as contracts, user manuals, fundraising letters, or marketing materials.

For similar reasons, because interpreters (who convey the spoken word) need very different skill sets than translators (who work with written text), even a translator with years of experience will likely struggle to serve as an interpreter at an ordinary meeting.

Know exactly what you want & need

Janet wasn't wrong in seeing bilingual recruiting as a tool to boost communication in an increasingly global world, but she needed more information to make good decisions. Rather than simply asking candidates if they spoke any other languages, she should have gone one step further and inquired about the specific tasks she was hoping to have them perform.

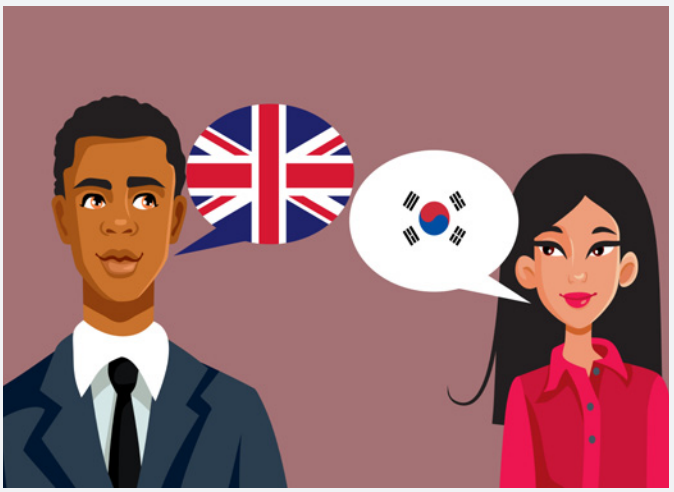
She learned some important lessons: If you want someone to review technical documents in a foreign language, it's best to ask them up front if they feel confident reading such material in that language, not to mention what related experience or education they have to support that confidence. Likewise, relevant training and experience is a must for translations and interpreting.

Linguistic capital is a powerful addition to any organization. It can open windows of insight and doors of opportunity. A multilingual workforce can respond more quickly and flexibly to both opportunities and challenges. In fact, your organization's language skills could be your decisive edge, so it pays to get the right ones.

The High Costs of Mistranslation

In the *NY Times* article "Why Mistranslation Matters," Mark Polizzotti notes that a poor translation can be catastrophic – and in fact it has been. As one example, the Cold War was ushered in with Nikita Khrushchev's threat, "We will bury you." In reality, though, the translator got it wrong. What Khrushchev actually said was, "We will outlast you."

The mistakes your translator makes when communicating with a new client or potential donor may not start a war, but it may cost you a supporter or a large donation. Being sure you have good translators on board is worth the time it takes to get it right.



Martin Cross is the president of Patent Translations Inc., serving law firms and patent departments in the U.S. and abroad, and an active corporate member of the American Translators Association. The American Translators Association (ATA) represents over 10,000 translators and interpreters across 103 countries. The ATA (atanet.org) advances the translation and interpreting professions.

It's a Multilingual World

For more help in opening up your organization to people of many cultures and languages, see articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Is Your Organization Culturally Competent? (Vol. 26, No. 6)

Going International from the Inside Out: Making the Most of Multicultural Staff (Vol. 38, No. 2)

Do You Need a Translator? (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Make the Overseas Leap to Raise More Funds (Vol. 21, No. 5)

The Skill Every Fundraiser Needs: Cultural Wisdom (Vol. 34, No. 3)

What Type of Language Professional Do You Need? (Vol. 41, No. 1)