

How to engage Francophones – when you don't speak French!

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Introduction

Across the province, people working in the areas of community-based planning, health promotion and healthy communities want to fully engage and work with all of the people who live, work and play in our communities – including Francophones. The reality is that across the province many people doing this work do not speak French. But does that mean that they cannot meaningfully engage Francophones in their community work?

Supporting our clients in engaging with Francophone communities is an area that HC Link has been working in for the past several years. We have delivered several webinars and produced many resources – in both languages – on the topic. This issue of *@ a glance*, which builds on a webinar of the same title first delivered in 2012, addresses this very conundrum: how do you engage Francophones when you don't speak the language? It outlines, in three simple steps, practical ways to meaningfully engage Francophones even when you do not speak French. Common pitfalls as well as keys for success are also discussed.

Download this resource at 
www.hclinkontario.ca/images/How_to_Engage_Francophones.pdf

Cette ressource est également disponible en [français](#).

BACKGROUND

The French presence in Ontario dates back nearly 400 years. According to the 2006 census, Ontario's Francophone community is nearly 600,000 people, 4.8% of the population. The proportion of Francophones varies from region to region. In the Northeast, almost one in four people is Francophone and in Eastern Ontario the ratio is one in six.¹ While Ontario's Francophones share French as a common language, the community is diverse in ethnicity, religion, origin, education, culture, income, values and experience. Ontario attracts 70% of Francophone immigrants who have chosen Canada as their place of residence, with a strong representation of immigrants from the Caribbean, the Middle East and Africa.² Therefore there is no *one* Francophone community.

Equity, inclusion and a sense of belonging have become priorities for governments. These principles contribute to a healthier population, better social cohesion, stronger communities and a more equitable and prosperous society. However, Francophones are more likely to state that their sense of belonging in their community is not as strong as Anglophones.³ In some cases, Francophones are more likely than Anglophones to choose lifestyle habits that negatively affect their health. Francophones have lower consumption rates of vegetables and fruits, higher smoking rates, higher alcohol consumption, and state that they have less power to make decisions in their work lives than their Anglophone counterparts.³

Clients who receive information in their own language follow health advice and instructions more closely, have less need for hospital services and stay healthier.³ They also have a stronger sense of community belonging – an indicator of individual as well as community well-being.³ Culture – of which language is a part – is one of Canada's twelve social determinants of health. If you are trying to affect the health of your community (and the people within it) you must consider language and culture as part of your work.



ENGAGING FRANCOPHONES WHEN YOU DON'T SPEAK FRENCH

We suggest three steps to meaningfully engage Francophones in your community work – even if you don't speak French:

Step 1: Examine your motives

Be very clear on the purpose of your engagement efforts (why it is you want to engage Francophones in your community work) and what outcomes or results you expect as a result of the engagement process. There are four levels of community engagement, each with different outcomes and activities.⁴ Is your intention to **inform** Francophones about a new initiative, resource or service? Do you want to **consult** with the Francophone community and obtain input and feedback in order to identify needs and assets or set priorities? **Collaboration** involves partnering with community members in an on-going process of planning and decision-making where community members provide advice and make recommendations that are reflected in the end product. **Empowerment** involves providing supports for community members to define the issues and create their own solutions.

Determine which of these four will give you the outcomes that you need and be able to clearly articulate the advantages in participating in the process to your intended audience. Those you are seeking to engage need to understand what your intention is and the benefits to being involved. Being clear on what you want and need and how the results of the engagement process will be used and will affect the overall project/initiative will be helpful in managing expectations and creating positive relationships.

It is also important, when planning events to engage Francophone communities, to be realistic about attendance numbers. We are often used to events that draw dozens of attendees. As the Francophone population is much smaller than the community-at-large, expect attendance to be smaller. Don't be disappointed – view these events as a starting point, particularly when beginning to work with the Francophone community. As time goes on and relationships begin and continue to build, numbers will increase.

Step 2: Take time to understand Francophone contexts

HC Link has produced a [variety of resources](#) that provide background information and the contexts of Franco-Ontarian communities that will be helpful for you in your planning. It is also important to understand the local contexts of your community and your organization. For instance, has your organization worked with Francophone communities in the past? Is there a history that could promote or hinder your current efforts? Are there community contexts that are important to understand and recognize?

Next, understand where the Francophones in your community are located. It's unlikely that they are clustered in one or two districts/regions, but may come together around French schools and daycares, places of worship and Francophone associations. Investigate the demographics of the Francophone population as they will impact your planning (for example, high populations of seniors or new Canadians). And finally, explore whether there are French media outlets in your community that would provide opportunities to promote your work.

Step 3: Find people to work with

While you **can** work with Francophones when you don't speak French, when it comes to actually delivering services to Francophones you will need people that are French-speaking. Begin by looking in your own organization; is there really no one who speaks French? You may not be aware of French-speaking colleagues as they may not feel comfortable writing/speaking in French or are uncertain of their level of proficiency. Or they may not have come forward because they were never asked before! Be very clear what you expect from the Francophone/French-speaking members in your organization and take the time to find out what they are comfortable in doing and what they are not.

Connecting with institutional supports in your community and establishing partnerships with Francophone stakeholders are important steps. Identify who in your community has links with Francophone communities and who is working in areas similar to yours. Begin to collaborate with other organizations and build on existing assets such as relationships, history, programs and resources.

For an Anglophone or bilingual organization, partnerships with Francophones and the institutions representing them can turn out to be the key to successfully providing services in French. These partnerships will develop greater visibility in the community, increase demand for services in French, and build relationships based on trust. For Francophones, these partnerships can lead to better access to quality services that are relevant to their needs and priorities and are appreciated because they have contributed to their planning and implementation.

COMMUNITY STORY

Barb Eles was the Coordinator of the Healthy Communities Partnership in Sudbury and District for several years. Although she did not speak French, Barb successfully reached out to and engaged Francophone partners as a part of her work. Barb told us how she accomplished this:

The Healthy Communities Partnership has ensured collaboration with our Francophone partners including the Centre de santé communautaire du Grand Sudbury and Centre de santé communautaire de Sudbury-Est. We also aim to ensure that materials are translated by our French language partners. To illustrate how our partnership has helped build inclusivity and increased connections between partners and communities we have, for example:

- ▶ *Conducted a survey on roles and responsibilities of the partnership in both official languages and a Francophone partner assisted with preparing questions and presenting results.*
- ▶ *Worked with our Francophone partners to provide meeting space, a workshop, and in providing administration for a grant.*
- ▶ *Ensured “Partnership Sharing” at meetings which provides the opportunity to share existing projects of our Francophone partners.*
- ▶ *Required bilingual health unit staff involvement with local planning and working groups, which has led to increased connections between partners and communities.*



CONCLUSION

In our work in supporting community-based organizations, networks and groups, we have found **four common pitfalls** when working with Francophone communities.

Consulting the Francophone community unnecessarily or for the sake of consulting without an intention to incorporate the results

Not including decision-makers in the process and losing valuable information and input as a result

Not clearly communicating what will be conducted in English and what will be conducted in French

Resting Francophone engagement efforts on the shoulders of one person in an organization

We have put together **Ten Keys for Success** to help you to successfully navigate these pitfalls and engage Francophone communities in your work:

1. Understand the contexts and environments of the Francophone groups in your community.
2. Define the target groups for your consultation process according to the goals of your community engagement strategy.
3. Start with the number of people you have (don't be disappointed with low turnout numbers!).
4. Involve Francophones at each step of the engagement and planning process (needs assessment, planning, consultation, etc.).
5. Advertise in French in Francophone media.
6. Have a coordinator/facilitator who speaks fluent French.
7. Be clear about the language the event/consultation/service will be happening in. If posters, registration forms and all pre-session information are in French, it's natural to assume that the event will be too.
8. Report back to the Francophone community.
9. Develop the capacity of your organization to be a viable potential partner on various Francophone projects.
10. Spend time within your organization and partner organizations to raise awareness about Francophone engagement efforts.

ENDNOTES & RESOURCES

- ¹ Office of Francophone Affairs [website]. [Statistical profiles](#). Toronto, ON: Office of Francophone Affairs, 2015.
- ² Francophone diversity, [Profiles of the Francophone and Acadian Communities of Canada](#).
- ³ L. Picard and G. Allaire. [Second report on the health of Francophones in Ontario](#). Sudbury, ON: Public Health Research, Education and Development Program and Institut franco-ontarien, 2005.
- ⁴ L. McCue. [@ a Glance: Community Engagement](#). Toronto, ON: HC Link, 2011.

Visit the [Engaging and Working with Francophones](#) section of HC Link's website to read resources such as *First Steps to FLS Planning, Creating a Bilingual Organizational Culture and Recruiting and Retaining Bilingual Staff*. Many of these resources are also available in [French](#).

[@ a Glance: Community Engagement](#) HC Link, 2011.

[Open to Solutions: Annual Report 2009-2010](#) French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, 2010

[Francophone Community Profile of Ontario](#) La Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, 2009

[The French Language Services Act: An overview](#) Office of Francophone affairs, 2010

[HR Support Kit Pathway to Bilingual Services](#) Rifssso, 2012

[Health Provider Workbook](#) Reflet Salveo

[Making Your Organization Bilingual](#). Heritage Canada, 2009

[Moving Toward a Bilingual Organization](#) Health Nexus & Reflet Salveo

[Offering bilingual services in Francophone communities: Important elements to consider](#) OHPE Bulletin 582, 2008

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HC Link works with community groups, organizations, and partnerships to build healthy, vibrant communities across Ontario. We offer consulting services, learning and networking events, and resources in both English and French. Our services are funded by the Government of Ontario and are provided free of charge where possible.

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