

Finders Keepers: Recruiting & Retaining Bilingual Staff

By Andrea Bodkin & Estelle Duchon, HC Link

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This resource is part of HC Link's series aimed at building the capacity of organizations to deliver services in French. Past resources in this series include [understanding Franco-Ontarian contexts and their effects on health](#), [engaging with francophone communities](#), and [building a bilingual organizational culture](#). While all of these pieces are important – and many are interrelated – in creating an environment that supports French Language Services, in order to actually be able to deliver services in French you will need French-speaking and/or bilingual staff.

We often hear from organizations that we work with that finding bilingual staff can be difficult, that hiring is complex and that retaining bilingual staff is even more challenging. In this resource, we will discuss three important steps that improve the chances of success for organizations: recruiting bilingual staff, retaining them and developing strategies to keep bilingual staff in your organization.

*[Cette ressource a aussi été développée en français.
\(Recruter et retenir son personnel bilingue\)](#)*

INTRODUCTION

The last several decades have taught us a great deal about the conditions that support health and where we, as health promoters, should focus our efforts. We know the factors which need to be addressed in order to support and improve population health. These factors – the determinants of health – include language and culture. Evidence strongly suggests that clients who receive services in their language follow health advice and instructions more closely, have less need for hospital services and stay healthier. Service-providers who offer services in French have a better understanding of their francophone clients and can offer higher quality services that are more closely suited to their needs. However, a willingness and desire to be able to provide services in French is not enough: a number of factors and components must be in place in order for an organization to effectively develop and deliver French Language Services (FLS) and ultimately, improve the health of francophone communities.

Steps to Delivering French Language Services



RECRUITING BILINGUAL STAFF

Recruiting staff in general can often be challenging. Finding just the right person with the right skill set, personality and experience can be difficult. Adding another very specific, and somewhat rare skill such as bilingualism, makes the challenging task even more so. By identifying the precise needs of your organization, recruiting candidates and assessing the French competency of candidates, you can increase your chances of finding that person.

1 – Assess your needs

Clearly identify the human resources requirements necessary in order to achieve your bilingual service delivery objectives. Be specific about the duties – and the required level of French – that will be included in the position. For example, a front-line position may require advanced oral skills but moderate written skills whereas a technical support position may require the opposite. Determine if the position should be designated bilingual or not. Having designated positions allows for consistency if/when the position becomes vacant – and the francophone community and your partners will know the position is here to stay.

Also consider if you need a French-speaking person or a Francophone. Will this person do community outreach? Does this person need to understand francophone cultures? Does she or he need an established francophone network? What level of English proficiency (written and oral) does your organization/team require?

You may need to determine what, if anything, you are ready to compromise on. Finding the perfect candidate with the expertise and language skills might not be possible in the short-term. Consider if you are willing to provide additional training to a prospective candidate in order to bring their skills to the level that you need.

2 – Recruit candidates

It is simply not enough to indicate on the English job posting that the successful applicant must be bilingual. In order to attract bilingual candidates:

- ▶ Post the ad in both languages (including on the French side of websites such as Monster and Workopolis).
- ▶ In the English ad, include a line in French that the position is open to bilingual applicants.
- ▶ Post French advertisements in French-language media, websites, listservs, etc.
- ▶ Network by reaching out to your French partners and French organizations. Go to francophone events with recruitment flyers.
- ▶ Find candidates on bilingual LinkedIn groups or bilingual job fairs.

3 – Assess the competency of applicants

This is necessary for designated positions, but it may also be helpful to get an external assessment of the skills of candidates for non-designated positions. An assessment will also identify if and how the candidate could improve their French. It's important to remember that assessing competency goes beyond language: if knowledge of francophone culture and stakeholders is necessary for the position, include questions in the interview to determine the applicant's familiarity/competency. If you aren't familiar with these contexts, consider asking a francophone stakeholder or partner to be a part of the discussion or interview.

RETAINING BILINGUAL STAFF

Many people think that recruiting and hiring bilingual staff is the most difficult part of the equation. In reality, finding and recruiting just the right person is only the first step; once you have found them, you must keep them. There are two very important factors in retaining bilingual staff: building an environment that supports staff who work in both languages and developing/maintaining a bilingual culture. While these might sound like the same concept, they are actually two sides of the same coin.

Build an environment where working bilingually is supported

Creating conditions that make it easy to work bilingually will help your organization hold onto bilingual staff.

Maintain a welcoming workplace

Make it clear that bilingual staff are welcome to speak French whenever appropriate.

Inclusion and collaboration

Make sure that your bilingual staff do not feel isolated and that they are included in the team. If there is the opportunity, allow staff to shadow someone in a similar position (even from another agency, a different service or a partner organization) for a few days.

Incentives

Some organizations offer bonuses to their bilingual staff in recognition of the additional work and skills required for the position.

Work in partnership

This is critical, particularly if there are no other francophone/FLS staff in your organization. Working with partner organizations who do have bilingual staff will allow sharing of challenges and opportunities among colleagues in similar roles, in addition to providing an opportunity to speak French.

Policies & procedures

Consider what documentation must be available in French and include this in your organizational policies and procedures. A translation policy may also be helpful, outlining what translation work is done in-house versus externally. Consider limiting in-house translation to informal and small texts (e.g. 200 or 300 words) so as to not overextend your bilingual staff.

Tools

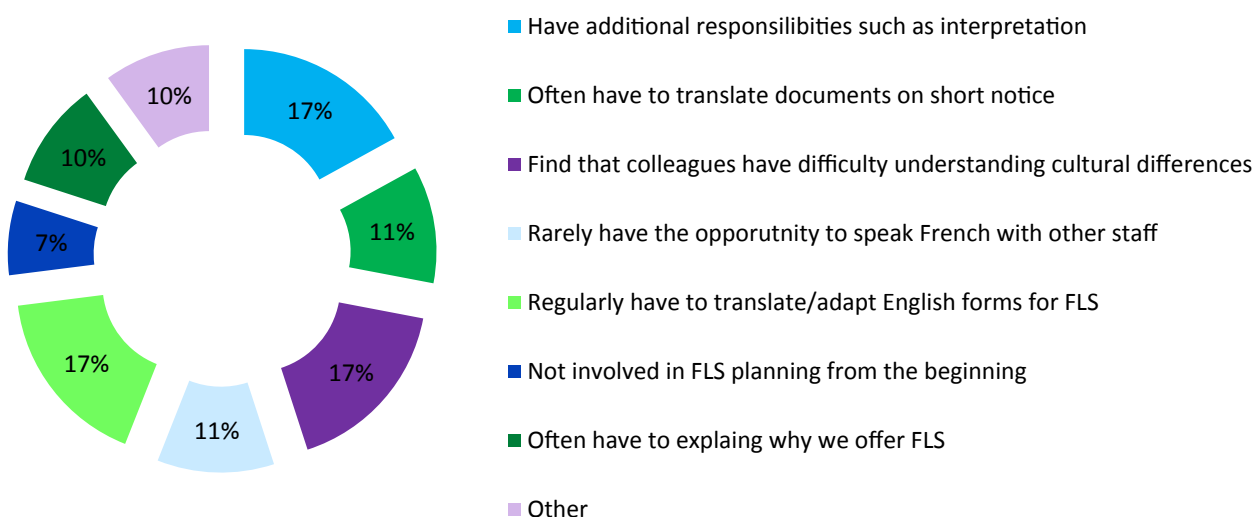
Ensure that bilingual staff have access to the tools that they need, such as a French keyboard or a dictionary and any materials needed to work with clients in French. Determine if you will need French administration and communication support.

Develop and maintain a bilingual organizational culture

In order to retain bilingual staff, it's important to show that your organization has the leadership, engagement and commitment to deliver FLS. Fully integrating FLS into the overall strategic planning of the organization is important. Often times, FLS is an “after thought” that is tacked onto existing plans. It's also important that all staff (not just bilingual staff) are aware of the organizations' commitment and approach to FLS. To learn more about creating a bilingual organizational culture, read [HC Link's resource on the topic](#).

In a recent HC Link webinar with French-speaking and bilingual professionals, we asked about some of the situations that bilingual staff frequently find themselves in.

How often are you in these situations?



WHEN BILINGUAL STAFF LEAVE

It is quite common to have a high turnover amongst French-speaking/bilingual staff. There are a wide variety of reasons for this, from job descriptions not accurately reflecting the actual tasks the staff person is involved in, to lack of recognition of the unique skills and attributes of bilingual staff.

HC Link has developed a [checklist](#) to aid organizations in identifying existing/potential conditions that may make it difficult to retain bilingual staff. The checklist can also be used as a planning tool to proactively create positive working conditions and can help you work through the questions and identify actions to take around some of these points. When asking these questions, it's important to ask your bilingual staff directly for their perspective, and it may also be helpful to include non-French speaking staff.

CONCLUSION

Bilingual staff often need to have a wide range of expertise and frequently have additional tasks, responsibilities and cover larger territories. This can frequently lead to burnout and should be considered. It's important to be flexible regarding FLS; not everything has to be done exactly the same way in French and English. Consider differences in culture as well as the implication on relationships with partners.

Most importantly, value your staff and their FLS work. Make it clear FLS is a priority for your organization. Your staff will recognize this, and make your organization's work a priority as well.

REFERENCES & FURTHER RESOURCES

HR Support Kit: Pathway to Bilingual Services, RIFSSSO (2012)

<http://www.rifssso.ca/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/Trousrse-anglais-pages-qui-se-suivent.pdf>

HC Link's resource series to develop organizational capacity to deliver French Language Services:

- ▶ Creating a Bilingual Organizational Culture (2013)
<http://www.hclinkontario.ca/images/BilingualCulture.pdf>
- ▶ How to Engage Francophones...When You Don't Speak French! (2012)
http://www.hclinkontario.ca/images/How_to_Engage_Francophones.pdf
- ▶ Work Together With Francophones In Ontario: Understanding The Context And Using Promising Practices (2011)
http://www.hclinkontario.ca/images/Uploaded_files/2011/francophones_guide_English.pdf
- ▶ Working Together With Francophones in Ontario - Part 1: Understanding the Context (2012)
http://www.hclinkontario.ca/images/Uploaded_files/2012/CollaborerPart1DEnglish.pdf
- ▶ Working Together With Francophones in Ontario - Part 2: Legislation & Institutional Support (2012)
http://www.hclinkontario.ca/images/Uploaded_files/2012/CollaborerPart2BEnglish.pdf

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www.HCLinkOntario.ca | info@hclinkontario.ca

416-847-1575 | 1-855-847-1575

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Checklist for Assessing Working Conditions of Bilingual Staff

This checklist has been designed to aid organizations in identifying existing/potential conditions that may make it difficult to retain bilingual staff. The questions can also be used as a planning tool to proactively create positive working conditions. When asking these questions, it's important to ask your bilingual staff directly for their perspective, and it may also be helpful to include non-French speaking staff. You can then identify actions to take around some of these points.

QUESTIONS	NOTES	CORRECTIVE ACTIONS
<p>1. Are your French-speaking employees regularly asked to provide services to mostly Anglophone clients? This may discourage your French-speaking personnel and jeopardize the quality of their services.</p>		
<p>2. Do your French-speaking staff have the French language tools that they need to do their work properly? These may be professional tools such as technical documentation or evaluation grids, documents they use with francophone clients (introductory forms, consent forms, explanations of procedures, information brochures, etc.) or language aids such as a bilingual keyboard, French dictionaries, lexicons for terminology in their field and access to terminology banks such as Termium.</p>		
<p>3. Do you ask them to translate or interpret on a regular basis, even if this is not in their job description?</p>		
<p>4. If a francophone staff member has to leave his post to help a non-francophone colleague serve a francophone client, do you make the necessary adjustments to his workload?</p>		
<p>5. Do you account for the fact that bilingual staff members need to be familiar with both French and English communications coming from your organization and the community in order to understand the context of their work within your organization?</p>		

Checklist for Assessing Working Conditions of Bilingual Staff

QUESTIONS	NOTES	CORRECTIVE ACTIONS
<p>6. Do you encourage your French-speaking employees to speak French amongst themselves in the workplace?</p>		
<p>7. Do you offer opportunities to your francophone staff for training and professional continuing education in French? Or to improve their abilities to work in French – to write reports and learn the vocabulary used in the field?</p>		
<p>8. Do you acknowledge the special contributions made by your bilingual staff – in performance reviews, and in employee recognition programs?</p>		
<p>9. Is the manager able to directly evaluate the quality of their work in French?</p>		
<p>10. Do francophone employees have the opportunity to connect with their French-speaking colleagues in your organization or with community organizations?</p>		
<p>11. Do they constantly have to convince people of the importance of their work in order to be taken seriously within the organization?</p>		
<p>12. Does the job posting/description accurately reflect what the employee is actually doing?</p>		

