

effectively managing bilingual staff

This tip sheet will alert you to the issues of managing employees who agree to use their language other than English (LOTE) in the workplace. These employees can supplement the work carried out by qualified interpreters.

What are language skills?

There are four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The four language skills are related to each other in two ways: the method of communication (spoken or written); and the direction of communication (receiving or producing the message). It is important to decide and to clearly state which of these language skills are required for the role.

What is bilingualism?

Bilingualism is the ability to communicate in two languages with equal, or near equal, fluency.

Tip: Decide and clearly state the minimum language proficiency that is suitable for your workplace.

Tip: Clearly establish a minimum level of language proficiency that is applicable in a bilingual context. (i.e. the accepted level of fluency must be consistent across both languages)

Who are bilingual staff?

Employees who agree to communicate in English and a LOTE, and who are not employed as qualified interpreters, are broadly called *bilingual staff*.

Two-way or three-way communication?

Employees that communicate to others in one language only are involved in *two-way communication*. In a work situation, these staff are generally considered to be performing an important part of their job role (e.g. counsellor, receptionist) and meeting a linguistic need.

Employees that communicate in English and a LOTE between two or more parties are involved in *three-way communication*. This is interpreting. This takes more time and usually requires a broader vocabulary. Additional skills such as memory retention, turn-taking and conveying information accurately and objectively from one language to another are also necessary. Qualified interpreters are trained in these skills.

Tip: Bilingual staff should be used to fill simple communication gaps in situations where there are low levels of risk.

Tip: How the LOTE will be used can impact on the time and workload of bilingual staff.

What is a language assessment?

Language is an acquired skill developed over time and this skill is measured through assessment.

Often English is assessed through the job application and interview process. Currently there are no nationally accepted standards, qualifications or assessment measures for bilingual staff who use a LOTE in their work. This is largely because testing must be context specific, as the vocabulary required depends on the nature of the work. In the absence of a formal assessment, informal language assessments can be conducted in the LOTE by somebody familiar with the job (e.g. an ethno-specific agency that delivers aged care services).

Ideally the assessment should be separated into the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Tip: Bilingual staff should receive risk management education about LOTE use as part of service delivery.

Tip: Language assessments can be tied to remunerating staff for using their LOTE, as a quality standard and to ensure quality of service delivery.

Tip: Government departments such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship (OMAC) have established benchmarks regarding translating and interpreting services. These can help you develop a framework for assessing the level of your bilingual staffs' skills.

How are bilingual staff employed?

Many bilingual staff are employed in positions such as receptionists, nurses and counsellors. Their LOTE is an additional skill that can be used to effectively fulfil the requirements of their role.

Some bilingual staff are employed specifically for their LOTE skills, such as 'Macedonian health education worker' or 'Spanish-speaking gambling counsellor'. These employees are sometimes referred to as bilingual workers or ethno-specific staff. The main difference is that they are primarily employed to conduct their work in a LOTE.

Tip: How the LOTE is to be used can assist in identifying where professional support needs to be focussed.

ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORTS

The existence of workplace policies and education for all staff about the appropriate use of employees' LOTE skills will encourage the use of these skills and the retention of bilingual staff.

Clarity of job role

Unless specifically recruited to use their LOTE, it is important to seek employees' permission to use their LOTE skills. Clarifying how and where the LOTE is used, including the frequency of its use, will avoid confusion. This should be done through mutual agreement between bilingual staff and management.

Communication strategy

All employees should know who is willing and able to offer their LOTE skills. A register of bilingual staff with guidelines on how to access and work with these staff can be developed and promoted.

Recognition

The use of LOTE should be recognised in position descriptions and work plans.

Remuneration

Appropriate remuneration encourages staff to develop and use their LOTE in their work. Some organisations pay a flat allowance and annually review the demand for a particular language.

Professional development

Organisations should consider requests for language development as part of professional development.

More information can be found in the CEH report [Bilingual staff research project](#) and the CEH tip sheet [Recruiting bilingual staff](#).

Further information

The Centre for Culture, Ethnicity & Health conducts language services policy workshops. Visit www.ceh.org.au to view our training calendar or book a workshop for your organisation.