

SMARTER STATE CASE STUDIES

MAYOR'S OFFICE OF NEW YORK: VOLUNTEER LANGUAGE BANK

This expert network is matching the supply of multilingual civil servants to the demand for translation services



TALENT BANK

February 10, 2016

We would like to thank Azadeh Khalili, Executive Director of Citywide Language Access Initiatives, and Kenneth Lo, Language Access and ESOL Initiatives, both of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, for their assistance.



SMART CITIZENS SMARTER STATE



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BASIC INFORMATION

BASICS

Owner

Citywide Language Access Initiative, Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, New York City

Project Owner

Azadeh Khalili
Executive Director
Citywide Language Access Initiatives
Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs
AKhalili@moia.nyc.gov

Audience

Civil servants that know a second language, matched up with civil servants who need translation or interpretation.

Problem that Volunteer Translation Bank Tried to Solve

Providing translation and interpretation services on a large scale. 25% of New Yorkers are not proficient in English (1.8 M), which creates an important barrier for communicating effectively about City services. Executive Order 120 instructs its agencies that are public facing to make sure language is not a barrier to access services.

Project Summary:

The Volunteer Language Bank tapped the language skills of city employees to provide fast response to the needs of agencies serving residents in 70 languages.

Platform

The Language Bank is hosted on the City's intranet. The database was created in-house by an application developer at the Mayor's MIS unit.

Design Basics

The tool allows agencies to ask for interpretation or translation assistance in a specific language; post a document for translation; or leave information about the situation that needs to be interpreted. Volunteers sign up online after they obtain permission from their supervisors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What's new?

Services that previously required scarce and expensive professionals are now provided both by professionals and by volunteers.

Incentives for Participation

Mostly intrinsic. According to the Executive Director of the Citywide Language Access Initiative, volunteers are motivated by their personal passion and commitment to helping other immigrants receive the services that they need. Every year the City has customer service awards for those workers who provided services for over a certain amount of hours, or got a good rating from an agency.

Challenges

Because volunteers are not certified as interpreters, and the city has a legal responsibility to provide correct translation and interpretation to citizens, the language bank cannot be used for all jobs available, such as legal or medical interpretation or for 311. To fill the language gap, the City has contracted with professional vendors to provide those services. The Language Bank works for small jobs, such as checking if a translated document from a vendor is accurate, making a phone call to a customer, or as a last resort. There hasn't been funding for certifying workers during the past three years.

Anticipated impact/Metrics

The project doesn't have associated indicators, but can monitor the number of volunteers, requests, hours spent by volunteers, the volunteer's agency, and the number of requesting agencies. Currently there are 1234 volunteers in the bank, completing 498 requests from 28 agencies in FY2015 in over 3500 hours. The volunteers come from 35 agencies.

Why is this project interesting?

For many cities and localities that do not have funding for vendors, this tool can be useful.





Language services -- translation and interpretation -- are a matter of urgency in New York City, where some 25% of residents--1.8 million people-- have limited English proficiency. Public health, public safety, and child welfare demand communication with all residents in a language they can understand. In addition, language access to City services is a right under civil rights law, and the City has been sued because people with poor English comprehension were not receiving needed services. In 2008, Mayor Michael Bloomberg signed Executive Order 120, which required agencies that offer direct public services to provide meaningful language access. Through the Volunteer Language Bank (VLB), multilingual volunteers from among City workers offer a valuable supplement to professional interpreters and translators. While the Volunteer Language Bank has existed in some form since 1989, the launch of the Citywide VLB database on the City's intranet in July, 2010, provided a new tool to harness the language skills of City employees.

New York City public schools and the 311 service that accepts calls from residents who are reporting problems in the city have long provided interpretation services. The 311 operators have tools to identify the language of the caller. Within three minutes, they can get an interpreter on the phone. Schools and 311 operators still rely exclusively on professional interpreters. Numerous other agencies, however, use the VLB to remedy the shortfall in available translators, especially for small jobs.

The City posts requests to recruit volunteers twice a year. Currently, more than 1200 volunteers, who speak approximately 70 languages, have joined and worked a total of more than 3500 hours helping to interpret and to translate or review documents and to provide rapid responses in specific situations when there is a need.

After obtaining permission from their supervisors, workers sign up to volunteer on the City's intranet. In turn, agency staff members can post and manage requests for translation or interpretation assistance (Figure 1). If there is a document to translate, the agency posts it on the intranet with a request for specific languages (Figure 2). If a person contacts the agency with a specific request, the agency summarizes the situation and language needed on the intranet.



Announcements

- ▶ [Document Translation Protocol: Tips for Volunteer Translators](#)
- ▶ [LTI available languages](#)
- ▶ [Volunteer Language Bank Walkthrough & Tips](#)

My Agency Liaison(s) 0 found

Service Requests that I created 18 found

3963	TRANSLATION	ITALIAN	CLOSED	10/7/2015	10/7/2015
3966	TRANSLATION	ITALIAN	CLOSED	10/8/2015	10/8/2015
3974	TRANSLATION	ITALIAN	CLOSED	10/13/2015	10/9/2015
4071	INTERPRETATION	TIBETAN	CANCELED	11/9/2015	11/10/2015
4073	INTERPRETATION	PUNJABI	CANCELED	11/12/2015	11/12/2015
4075	INTERPRETATION	HINDI	CLOSED	11/12/2015	11/12/2015
4077	TRANSLATION	CHINESE	CLOSED	11/12/2015	11/13/2015

Home page for an agency staff member

Service Request Status: NEW Request Id: NA

Creator
Kenneth Lo Created On: 1/26/2016 Agency: OOM

Request Criteria

Language* Request Acceptance Deadline Date* Only look in (City Agency) *

There are NO volunteers who know languages marked in red !

Request Type* Oral (Interpretation) Written (Translation)

Requested Skill Level

UNSELECT ALL

- SUPERIOR
- ADVANCED HIGH
- ADVANCED MID
- ADVANCED LOW
- INTERMEDIATE HIGH
- INTERMEDIATE MID
- INTERMEDIATE LOW
- NOVICE HIGH
- NOVICE MID
- NOVICE LOW

Check if you want ONLY NYCertified Volunteers

Only Volunteers available on Short Notice or for Emergency Situations

Request Description (Please specify preferable dialect, if any. For example Traditional Chinese, Simplified Chinese, etc...)

Creating a request for translation





The database relays requests to volunteers with the appropriate language skills. Volunteers can then respond and sign up to do a translation. Agencies informally rate volunteers after their interventions. Medical and legal interpretation are typically not provided through volunteers, because these involve technical or complex language and require additional training.

For several years, the City had a certification program to test the language proficiency of volunteers, but this process was expensive, on the order of \$400 to \$500 to certify one person. Thus, it was defunded three years ago.

What motivates City workers to volunteer for this on top of their regular jobs? Usually, it's a desire to help fellow immigrants. The City issues customer service awards each year for volunteers, noting those who provided a particularly large number of hours translating or got good ratings from the agency.

The success of the Volunteer Language Bank shows that government workers can be motivated to contribute extra effort, particularly when they personally identify with the people they are helping. The New York City experience is also an example of the hidden talents that exist throughout government, and suggests how it can be brought to the surface and harnessed. It shows that fast, highly-responsive services can be offered using modest network technology and a volunteer database. Nonetheless because the City bears a legal responsibility to ensure that key services are delivered in a language citizens can understand, the City is scaling back its use of the Volunteer Language Bank in order to emphasize the use of professional services.

WHY VOLUNTEER TRANSLATION BANK: OBJECTIVES

The City of New York needed translators and interpreters to carry out its mission of providing services to all city residents. The bank vastly increased the number of translators and interpreters available at low cost. It may also have created closer bonds between the city and its workers, who felt a personal mission to help.

<http://www.cac.mil/common-access-card/>
<http://csrc.nist.gov/groups/SNS/piv/>



DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The VLB database built on a pre-existing communications medium, the City intranet. It needed facilities for signing up workers and connecting them quickly with projects posted by agencies. A rating system also was deployed to support quality improvement.

HOW IT WORKS

Recruitment is done on a simple basis through bi-annual appeals to City workers. Volunteers are self-chosen and currently are not certified or vetted, although their work is rated afterward.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Volunteer Language Bank was a bold experiment in drawing on untapped skills among City workers, and finding motivations for them to participate.

- *Ask your staff what untapped skills they have.* A formal system for recording these skills can harness them and produce value for the City.
- *Motivate staff by helping them identify personally with the people they are helping.*
- *Build quality measures into routine activity.* This is cheaper and requires less effort on the part of staff, which can also lower the barrier for participation.

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ABOUT SMARTER STATE

New tools—what GovLab calls technologies of expertise— are making it possible to match the supply of citizen expertise to the demand for it in government. Smarter State is a GovLab initiative to design and test how public decision-making could improve if institutions knew how to use the technologies of expertise to tap the wisdom of citizens' and civil servants.