

## SYNOPSIS

### DILGEA LANGUAGE SERVICES BROADENING THE HORIZONS

Enhancing the professional status and skills of interpreters and translators (I/Ts) ...can only be brought around by changes in attitudes on a number of fronts. The profession has to mature into believing it IS a profession. This can only happen when it moves out of the part time area to a full time career with some opportunities for advancing. In order for full time career opportunities to arise, the I/T industry must be expanded. The purpose of the Language Services Task Force is to examine the feasibility of an amalgamation of Public Sector Language Service providers and to make recommendation to the Department of Immigration on improving service delivery and management practices within its existing services.

Language services will need to be better managed, rationalised and placed on a sound business footing. They must (a) broaden the base of the industry and (b) change some of the operational culture. To broaden its base, the attitudes of the Australian business community also need to alter. Language is not a problem. It is a key to open new markets, domestic and overseas. So when our business gets more businesslike - equally the business community will be able to expand its horizons.

NB: This paper was written a long time **before** the Olympics.

J. Shannon

## **DILGEA LANGUAGE SERVICES BROADENING THE HORIZONS**

The Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs (DILGEA) has had a central role in the development of Language Services in Australia. The Department is responsible for the Telephone Interpreter service (TIS) and the provision of translations. You may not be aware that the Telephone Interpreter Service -a national 24 hours a day- 7 days a week -access to language services is unique in the world. But now 17 years later, it's time to evaluate the existing service delivery and project what the future might bring.

After much lobbying and support for TIS from the communities, its launch must have looked like a bright new era for the development and maturity of Australia's own Translating and Interpreting profession.

While in its second decade, the community and DILGEA Language Services Management were aware that the blossoming of the service and the profession had not occurred. The Australian community had not embraced language provision as a valued asset as we had hoped and that our service (as well as others) was not meeting 100% of the existing needs. A spiral of decline began:

- we were having trouble attracting and keeping bright new linguists
- the service delivery declined with access problems on the telephone and long turn around times for translations
- productivity suffered
- priorities changed
- clients sometimes found it too difficult to even try to access the service

In 1989 DILGEA commissioned Peat Marwick Management Consultants to undertake a thorough review of existing language services in Australia. Their report revealed the major problems resulting from the current diversity of Commonwealth and State translating and interpreting service operations:

- a duplication of resources, administration and effort
- wasteful competition for scarce professional resources
- confusion for users of language services.

There are ten separate language services aside from DILGEA currently operated by the States and the Commonwealth. These vary significantly in operational size, service mode and quality. The Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS) is the only national, general language service and accounts for some 35 per cent of the total government expenditure on language services estimates in excess of \$30 million in 1989-90.

The TIS service was created in the spirit of a voluntary organisation to meet an immediate "welfare need". As such, the culture within the organisation as well as the pervading attitude of many of our contract staff is one of altruism. From interviews with staff, it is obvious that many of the translators and in particular, interpreters, are involved in this work because "they believe". It is certainly not for the money alone.

There is a similar situation with many organisations such as welfare and overseas aid agencies. While these attitudes should be applauded -and there is no doubt that the service may never have been born without them -the continuance along a "charity" mentality has done nothing for the growth of the service, its efficiency or the enhancement of the profession.

In fact, it has worked against it. Attitudes and perceptions have encircled each other so that the "chicken or the egg syndrome" has become, in many cases, the excuse for never moving forward.

For example, a decent wage that reflects the qualifications of interpreters has been a long time coming. Why? I'm not saying anything you haven't heard before but nevertheless, the excuses are:

- (a) there isn't enough money in the barrel because
- (b) we can't charge clients because it will be a disincentive to use the services so
- (c) interpreters don't/can't ask for more because
- ( d ) they know there's only so much money in the barrel and (e) they believe that they won't get the work because clients won't pay ... (a), (b).

But looking at it in a different way ...the last time the plumber said, "Before I arrive at your house you ought to know there is a \$35 service call and \$20 for every 15 minutes I'm there **plus parts**", did I decide I didn't need a plumber? No.

Isn't it a question of perception on both parts? When I need a plumber. I know it. It would not occur to me to ask the cleaning person or someone's brother, mother or child to fix my pipes. Public education about the "trade" skills necessary for language provision is an obvious and important factor ...but so is the self-perception of the profession.

For example, while there is a case for continuing to use very part time I/Ts in order to help them keep their language skills up, it presents a number of problems. If I want to pay interpreters and translators a level of salary that gives some justice to their skills, then I cannot afford to send clients anything less than the best.

Is it the role of the employer or the professional to ensure that their skills remain up to date? I believe that both have responsibilities. However, if someone only wants to work one day a month to maintain their skills, what am I getting for it? It means that the organisation is a perpetual trainer but never a reaper of the benefits. Certainly, there is a place for very part timers. for emergencies, for filling in during holiday periods but there are many very, very part timers.

While we were asking these questions, the Commonwealth Government in its pre-election policy platform made a commitment to establishing a National Language Services Organisation with the aim of overcoming the problems identified above:

- to improve the efficiency and productivity of language service delivery by achieving economies of scale
- to improve the quality of services delivered

- to help meet Australia's existing and developing needs for a viable translating and interpreting industry

This was presented to the June meeting of Immigration Ministers in Hobart. There the Commonwealth agreed to negotiate with the States on the establishment of a National Language Services Bureau (NLSB). The development of a steering committee to negotiate a NLSB was agreed to which would involve representatives from NSW, VIC, SA and QLD and the Commonwealth.

The Language Services Task Force was established as a direct result. Our role is simply:

- To improve existing services
- to manage these improvements so that they are compatible with a NLSB concept
- to canvass specific features of a national organisation such as the structure, its Corporate Plan, its relationship with other service providers, staffing issues etc
- to research and develop options for an NLSB with a view towards business, marketing, training and development plans
- to act as a Secretariat to the Steering Committee that would ultimately decide what the nature of any future organisation might be.
- to initiate a training strategy program for language services staff in 1990-91

### ***The Proposal***

The Commonwealth envisages a stand-alone, financially independent, national interpreting and translating service organisation with joint Commonwealth/State ownership, which would operate as a common service for government agencies throughout Australia. Research so far shows this to be the most efficient and cost effective way of rationalising the present mixture of government language services. It would operate on the basis of government agencies using the organisation's services, paying for them. Care would need to be taken to ensure services remained accessible and free to migrant service and welfare organisations and in particular individuals. The Commonwealth through DILGEA would continue to meet the cost of such users until appropriate government agencies could be identified as being responsible for them.

In October 1990 consultations with States will begin to establish a management steering group which could evolve into an interim board of management. The membership is likely to involve major provider states and the Commonwealth and would be followed by consultations with other interested parties.

It is envisaged that by May 1991 a proposal arising out of the considerations of the steering committee will go to the Commonwealth and State Governments for consideration. Should this be accepted, the establishment of a new organisation could take place by December 1991 with a view that by July 1994 the new organisation would be as financially independent to the maximum extent practicable.

### ***Attitudes***

The potential of a NLSB has made the Task Force really look at the cost effectiveness of DILGEA's service delivery. As a result, I have a growing belief that it is better to use the very best translators and interpreters as much as possible and reward them enough to

be able to keep them from wandering to other fields. This is simply good business as we all know.

What it means though, is that perhaps 600 – 1000 people around Australia will have solid and continuous work rather than 3000 getting very small chunks. Further, I would want to take on more people on contracts to ensure I had access to high demand languages. This could mean retainers or perhaps guaranteed work for 2 days a week or a fortnight or even full time work on contract for two or three years. We asked some West Australian contract people what they thought of this and they said that while the potential was there to make more money running around on different jobs, the security and regularity was more attractive especially because they could organise transport and childcare.

There is some opposition to this idea and it comes from within the organisational culture. In it's infancy, TIS really had two aims. To meet the language needs of migrants and to help develop an interpreting and translating profession in Australia. We should be proud that we have in some small way, achieved both ...but like a bell curve, what has been an achievement is now an inhibitor.

If we focus on migrant needs and not the language needs of Australia, we will become marginalised in the new “pragmatic” era. That means that the number of jobs in the area will decrease as funding decreases.

If we continue to see ourselves as perpetual trainers, we will never be able to guarantee a level of professional service that is worth marketing here and overseas. So, by using very part timers, the core of the profession does not get enough work to sustain it, the very good I & Ts leave, the standard drops and little new blood is added to the pool because it is not an attractive profession and shows little future.

In other words quite clearly, we have to widen the market and change the modus of the profession.

Coming back to the attitudes and what I said about servicing Australia's language needs -the perspective is really basic. I didn't ask myself whether the plumber needed me! To put it very plainly, if a non

English speaker fronts up to the counter in David Jones -who has the problem? David Jones or the customer. Since the role of the store is service- I say David Jones. You could say it's cultural. Our task, yours and mine is to gently move Australia towards understanding that language barriers are a two way communications problem.

## **Improvements**

Attacking some of the immediate problems, DILGEA has begun a number of activities:

Improvements to existing Language Services to deliver a better service that is more timely. As well as developing a broader client base than we are currently servicing.

We are installing new computerised telephone systems and handsets as well as a stand alone computer system which will speed up and simplify TIS operations. This means a more professional service delivery in terms of waiting times and volume handled.

We have embarked on a management training program which is developing basic management skills as well as addressing some of the organisations cultural inhibitors. This will be pursued in the corporate training strategy over several years.

By rationalising language services across the country, work can be shared more equally with less waiting time for translations as one obvious outcome. We can offer more work in a logical sequence and identify very good people. These people could be tapped into for specialist skills by using shared data bases. More work also means that the momentum will allow us to employ more people on a more full time basis. (Obviously, a National Language Services Bureau would offer economies of scale.)

DILGEA, through NAATI, is sponsoring legislation for the registration of interpreters and translators. Once this legislation is up and running in the States, it will have to be launched and carried with the same type of public information campaign that Certified Public Accountants have used. In other words. let the public know what the risks are when they choose a non accredited or non registered I&T .

We are organising with NAATI and local tertiary institutions as many bridging courses as possible for level 3 accreditation for DILGEA staff and contractors. We will be drafting a national training plan which will address all levels of the organisation including contract staff. Seminars will be organised for contract staff on speciality such as topics. law, health, publishing and professional development. These seminars will include skill development such as computer training as well as personal development such as how to run a contract business.

### ***The Current Situation***

Aside from the above improvements a number of other activities are taking place:

The first meeting of the Interim Management Steering Group is scheduled for 3 October 1990 in Canberra.

A number of informal discussions have already taken place with NSW, VIC, SA and QLD. These have identified significant differences in service delivery and approaches in these States that will impact on the nature of any new organisation.

State cost recovery for language services is already taking place in SA and NSW. While VIC, QLD and NT provide free services to their government agencies. DILGEA's TIS is implementing cost recovery from government agencies over a three year period. DILGEA will continue to provide free services to voluntary agencies and individual clients not attributable to specific agencies.

Work undertaken by DILGEA indicates that the efficiency of its services could be improved by 30% through better management and procedural reform. Even without the 30% improvement, costings indicate through current financial modelling that a stand-alone organisation is viable in the commercial sector. These models are not based on receipt of any subsidies.

The Task Force has found that many of the efficiency improvements may be applicable to State based services.

## ***The Future***

Should a consolidated organisation be agreed to, it will have greater resources than the current collection of small agencies to spend on advertising and public awareness. These campaigns will have natural spin offs to other professional language service groups (private and public). Particularly since there will be more Government money to be expended which is not tied to DILGEA services. They will also have an impact on raising awareness to language issues and opportunities.

It would also have the resources to explore new markets and expand past the obvious possibilities of tourism, public information and trade.

One of our growing export industries is consultants, we have to ask ourselves why there hasn't been a corresponding demand for language skills.

Australian business delegations negotiating with overseas clients could save a great deal of money by ensuring that discussions take place during the planning period of their trip and that these are interpreted. A number of misunderstandings could be avoided before the delegates meet their overseas associates. For security and feedback they may even consider taking their Australian interpreter with them.

Why do many Australian businesses even attempt to market products overseas without first translating their sales blurbs and product instructions? Are these often done AFTER the sales trip? Can they see that the increased initial sales would have paid for the translations 10 times over? Can they imagine the goodwill engendered if their thank you letters or letters of introduction were translated first? What linguistic imperialists some of our industrialists are! Or is it simply that their marketing divisions are not exploring all of the opportunities available.

Locally, while some cleaning product manufacturers had the foresight to translate information 10 years ago, have you noticed the instructions are in Greek and Italian? Not Vietnamese, Portuguese or Chinese dialects. Unfortunately, these are probably more representative of the workforce. The Australian market needs to smarten up to their employees and their consumers.

Adding a dimension to this aspect is a recent judgement in the Supreme Court of NSW (Dec 89) finding a council negligent for not providing multilingual warning signs in an area known to be frequented by ethnic communities. Could manufacturers find themselves in a similar situation? Yes, particularly when handling products such as cleaning chemicals.

I believe that there is a job to shift the thinking away from a language based "welfare" service for migrants towards bringing Australian businesses and the community into the multilingual universe. Nevertheless, I also believe there is a very bright future for Language Services in Australia. Maybe even language services **will** develop into the next export market.

When the business of languages becomes more business-like in marketing and presentation, the business community will also be able to broaden its horizons.