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High demand for bilingual workers

By Tiana Velez

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In a city nearly 36 percent Hispanic, and which receives 4 million Mexican visitors annually, having a bilingual staff is more a necessity than an option for Tucson's small- and mid-sized businesses.

Some business owners, however, are finding that recruiting qualified bilingual applicants is easier said than done.

Though the need for bilingual candidates has been fairly consistent over time, in recent years the demand has risen noticeably, said Tami Ballis, division director of administrative staffing firm OfficeTeam in Tucson, 5255 E. Williams Circle, Suite 6800.

New requests for bilingual candidates arrive in her office almost daily and are so high in number that a qualified applicant can usually be placed before leaving the office, she said.

Some companies will even ask for names of bilingual job seekers even if they aren't currently hiring.

In Pima County, 82 percent of the population that claims to speak Spanish at home also speaks English well or very well, according to data supplied by the 2000 U.S. Census.

So why the dearth of bilingual applicants?

One reason may be that people who can speak Spanish at a conversational level do not have the same competency at a higher level typically required in the workplace, said Mary Gruensfelder-Cox, executive director of the nonprofit Microbusiness Advancement Center, an organization that aids minority- and women-owned businesses.

"Just like any high-demand, low-supply commodity, these folks are few and far between," she said. "It's even worse when you're talking about having certain job skills beyond the language capability."

At the Children's Clinics for Rehabilitative Services, 2600 N. Wyatt Drive, the need for bilingual employees with at least some knowledge of medical terminology is significant.

Out of 100 employees, about 35 are bilingual, said Jay Langdon, human resources specialist at the clinic.

Aware that not all applicants have a strong command of Spanish medical terminology, the clinic offers internal training and certification for employees to learn.

"I can imagine logically that there will be a day that I won't have a bilingual position to post, but I haven't seen it yet," Langdon said, joking.

Recruiting tips

- 1. Use traditional and nontraditional methods of posting jobs. Advertise in a publication written in the language of the ethnic group you're recruiting. Or consider joining that group's chamber of commerce or a local civic organization that serves their interests.
- 2. Hold a diversity job fair.
- 3. Collaborate with local English as a Second Language education programs.
- 4. Register with specialized career Web sites such as LatPro.com that cater to bilingual professionals.
- 5. Reimburse employees for language training.

Sources: The Society of Human Resource Management and LatPro.com, staff research

While finding employees who can speak Spanish is relatively simple for administrative positions, the challenge has been recruiting for highly-skilled jobs.

Nationwide there is a shortage for bilingual pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and speech therapists, Langdon said, citing three open positions for which the agency currently is having difficulty finding applicants.

"The recruiting strategies really vary. Most recently we've had a lot of success with three things: job postings on a major online job board, employee referrals and job postings within the clinic," he said.

For other positions, the clinic also advertises in Spanish language publications and trade magazines.

Though few of the clinic's jobs require candidates to speak *and* write Spanish well, the demand for both capabilities has become fairly common, even at the expense of limiting the pool of job candidates, said Marti Davis, Arizona and Colorado regional recruiting manager at Manpower Professional in Phoenix.

"If the written language component is not an absolute necessity, they should knock that off the list of requirements," she said.

A third issue that has risen in the search for bilingual employees is that of how much to pay.

If you want a truly bilingual professional, "you need to pay the money," Davis said. "They're not going to take a salary that isn't competitive."

"Spanish is kind of like the second language of America, so that's going to be easier to find," she added.

But if it's Chinese or another Asian language — for which she's seeing more requests — "businesses will likely need to pay a premium."

It's a buyer's market, if the buyer happens to be a skilled bilingual employee.

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