

Working with Bilingual Staff

It is not uncommon for aged care providers to employ staff with bilingual or multilingual skills within a variety of roles and professions. These staff members are sometimes called upon to facilitate communication with consumers who speak languages other than English. Harnessing the language skills of staff can be an invaluable resource in meeting the communication challenges of consumers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. However, as with all resources within the workplace, this needs to be carefully managed so as to safeguard the welfare of both staff and consumers.

Whilst most aged care providers would readily acknowledge the benefits of employing staff who speak languages other than English, there are few guidelines or policies underpinning the use of these language skills within the workplace, and moreover, little consideration given to the organisational support required to ensure that staff are able to use their language skills to maximum effect.

Key considerations

The need for policies and procedures

Instituting an effective program for the use of language skills in the workplace requires effective policies and procedures. Indeed lack of clarity and coordination can lead to confusion in roles and responsibilities among staff and compromise objectivity, privacy, confidentiality, risk management and, ultimately, quality of care.

Identifying the diverse language skills within your organisation

Conducting an audit of your current staff pool can provide a snapshot of the potential language resources available to your organisation. Such a survey would identify:

- staff who speak one or more language
- which languages are represented among staff
- the position held and location of your bilingual staff
- whether the types of community languages spoken correspond to those of your consumer

Bilingual staff vs interpreters

It is incumbent on aged care providers to assess the potential for risk in not using professionally accredited interpreters in any given situation and to decide on the appropriate use of bilingual staff. Due to the privacy, confidentiality, ethical and legal issues involved in dealing with consumers, the role of the bilingual staff member **should never be confused with that of a professional interpreter**. For instance, it is more appropriate for professional interpreters to be used in situations such as:

- assessments
- collecting detailed personal information
- explaining admission to/provision of a service
- explaining consumer rights and responsibilities
- developing and reviewing care plans/treatments
- gaining informed consent
- when a consumer wishes to make a formal complaint

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Bilingual staff members on the other hand may have a role to play in:

- providing social support, comfort and alleviating isolation
- assisting other staff members to identify/define a situation where a professional interpreter may be needed
- assisting other staff members to identify/define a situation. For example, where a consumer is having trouble expressing that they are in pain or have a need for specific support
- informing a consumer that an accredited interpreter will be provided
- assisting in clarifying an issue in an emergency situation
- facilitating informal information sharing

Developing a bilingual skills register

Consider developing a bilingual skills register for the organisation. In developing such a register it is important to ensure that staff are given the opportunity to consent to utilising their language within the workplace, that they agree to work to clearly defined policies and procedures and agree to undertake appropriate training. This also provides an opportunity for staff to opt out of this role. Invitations can be extended to all new staff as part of their induction/orientation and on an annual basis for all existing staff. This will ensure that the register remains up-to-date.

At all times bilingual/multilingual staff should be given the right to withdraw from a given situation where they feel a personal conflict or feel they do not possess the necessary language skills for a particular situation/interaction.

All staff wishing to join the register should undergo training on policies and protocols.

Developing a bilingual skills policy

Consider developing a Bilingual Skills Policy for the organisation. Such a policy could include:

- Definitions (e.g. bilingual skills, professional interpreter)
- Roles and responsibilities
- Description and purpose of a bilingual skills register
- Protocols and procedures for working with staff with bilingual skills

Support for bilingual staff

Consider appointing a person within the organisation who will be responsible for coordinating, overseeing and supporting the bilingual staff who have agreed to be part of a bilingual staff register. This person can be a contact person and assist with monitoring languages used, level of demand, patterns of use, identifying issues of concern and possible areas for improvement.

It is important to acknowledge that bilingual staff can be called away from other duties in order to assist others with their communication needs. Time limits need to be set as to how long it is reasonable for a person to undertake this role so as not to negatively affect their other commitments or put them under undue pressure.

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Staff training and development

Staff across the organisation should undertake training on the role of bilingual staff and on policies and protocols around their usage. For example, it is critical that all managers and staff understand the differences in roles between bilingual staff and interpreters and the potential risks of using a bilingual staff member in an inappropriate context.

Continuous improvement

Ensure that the organisation continues to work effectively with bilingual staff by:

- monitoring usage patterns by having staff on the bilingual skills register maintain a record of the inquiry, detailing nature of the enquiry, time involved, language spoken etc. This data can assist providers in identifying trends and in setting future priorities.
- implementing a regular (quarterly/half-yearly) meeting of registered staff members to discuss issues arising such as levels of demand, workplace pressures and other concerns.
- periodically reviewing the language other than English requirements of your organisation
- evaluating and updating the training requirements of staff on the bilingual skills register and broader staff pool
- updating the bilingual staff register as required
- improving policies and protocols as required.

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