

FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS



MAY 1, 2006

FOR-EIGN LAN-GUAGE SKILLS

(fôr·in lāng·wij· skils)
noun

A proficiency in a system of conventionalized sounds and marks from another place or country.

FURTHER READING

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Government Accountability Office, "State Department: Targets for Hiring, Filling Vacancies Overseas Being Met, but Gaps Remain in Hard-to-Learn Languages" GAO-04-139 (November 2003).

Pearson, Robert W. "Foreign Language Facilitator: Start Early." Editorial. *The Washington Post* (October 24, 2005).

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The U.S. government has a shortage of employees with foreign language skills—such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Russian, Farsi and Pashto—that are critical to the government's ability to operate effectively in today's global environment.

HIGH DEMAND, LOW SUPPLY

More than 80 federal agencies employ individuals with skills in more than 100 different languages, according to the 2005 National Language Conference Report. Unfortunately, the shortages of skilled language personnel across these agencies are complicating the government's efforts in trade, peacekeeping, diplomacy, security and intelligence. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's backlog of untranslated audio counterterrorism materials nearly doubled from April 2004 to March 2005 to more than 8,000 hours, according to the Inspector General. In addition, the Director General of the Foreign Service indicated in 2005 that 60 percent of the State Department's critical language speakers are eligible to retire in five years. These shortages stem from four major obstacles:

★ **Talent Pool.** In addition to employees who specialize in languages, the government needs workers who are both fluent in foreign languages and possess expertise in various specialized fields. Because the private sector also wants to employ these individuals, competition in hiring is intense.

★ **Shortage of Teachers.** According to a Modern Language Association survey, U.S. enrollments in critical language classes are increasing. Challenges remain, however, in finding qualified instructors: the National Center for Education Statistics found that in the United States, only nine doctorates were awarded in Chinese for 2003, and none in Arabic or Korean.

★ **Security Clearances.** Security clearances can take more than a year to conduct and require candidates to meet stringent criteria. For example, many native speakers do not qualify due to citizenship requirements or foreign ties. These factors make it difficult for many language specialists to find federal employment.

★ **Training.** Language training requires a substantial investment of time and money that may not always pay off. Despite increases in funding, 21 percent of State Department diplomacy officers in language-designated positions are still below the required level of proficiency, according to a 2003 Government Accountability Office report.

FIRST STEPS

Congress and the federal government have increased efforts to improve recruitment and retention of individuals with needed language skills. Many agencies offer scholarships, pay increases, or hiring bonuses as incentives. Moreover, Congress and the White House are working to improve early critical language education and study abroad programs, which could provide a larger talent pool of applicants in future years. However, to make the most of these efforts, priority should also be given to developing a government-wide assessment of needed language skills.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Individuals with a mastery of foreign languages are essential for our federal government's domestic and international operations. Failure to identify and fill needs in this regard will have tremendous negative repercussions. If the government is to protect the interests of the nation and promote the welfare of the American people, it must build a workforce capable of communicating effectively in a global environment.



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