



TOWARDS A BILINGUAL NETWORK

AN OVERVIEW OF BEST PRACTICES

What does bilingualism mean?

“ Putting bilingualism into practice at your organization means, first and foremost, giving your members the opportunity to communicate and participate in their preferred language. ”

– Canadian Heritage, *Making your Organization Bilingual*, p. 5.

In the Canadian context, developing a bilingual organizational culture means to carefully consider the needs of your colleagues, clients and general audience expressing themselves in the other official language. You want them to understand what you say, just as you want to understand what they answer in return.

There are three phases to making an organization bilingual:

- The Planning Phase
- The Implementation Phase
- The Follow-up Phase

The Planning Phase

This phase consists in:

- Evaluating the current language situation in your organization
- Assessing the resources and costs required to deliver services in both languages
- Creating committees and attributing responsibilities to lead bilingualism efforts
- Adopting an official language policy

The first step is to gather information related to your minority language communities. Who are they, and what do they need? What gaps exist between your organization's capacity to provide services in both languages and their needs? You need to consider all aspects of work — publications, meetings, events— within your organization.

Adopting an official language policy is important to ensure that bilingualism is implemented efficiently and consistently. It also cements the long-term viability of the project and makes bilingualism truly official. Developing a language policy begins by enacting an official statement of bilingual status for your organization. Then, you can write and adopt a language policy detailing the general principles of your organization's bilingual engagement, as well as some of the specific measures that will be implemented.

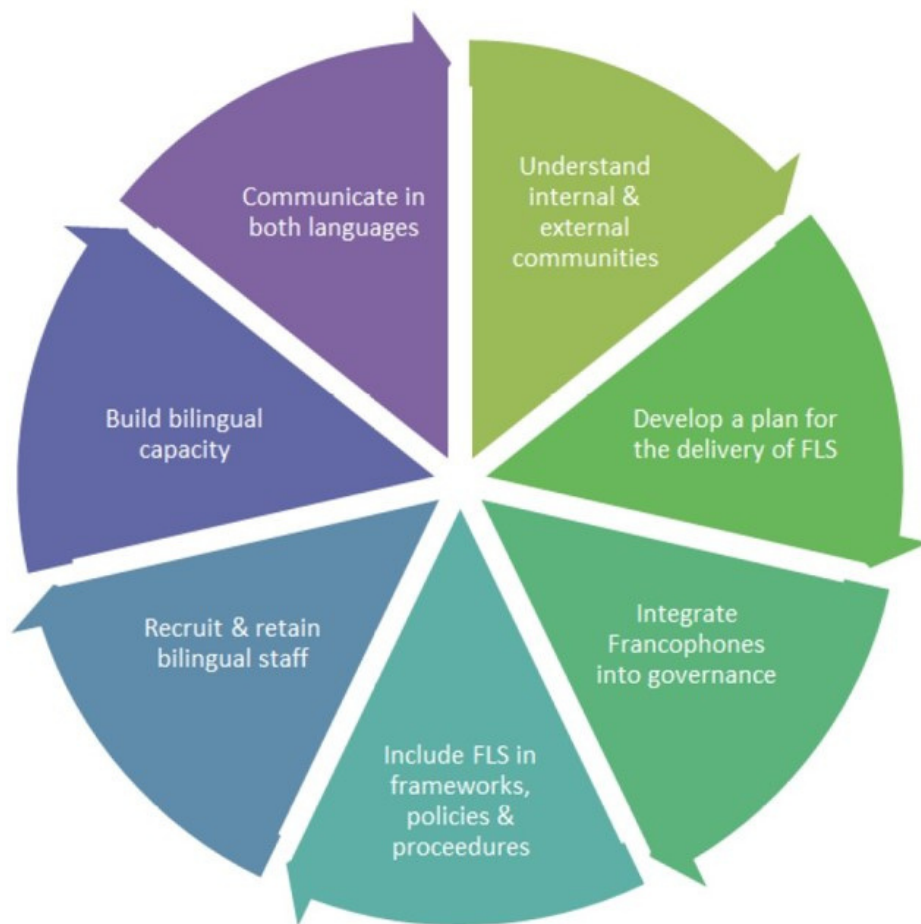
You have to name somebody in the organization who will be ultimately responsible for ensuring the overall application of the policy, keeping employees at every level accountable.

Here are some example statements that could be part of a language policy:

“Members should, as a general rule, be able to obtain services from and communicate with (organization’s name) in the official language of their choice.”

“Communication received in French or English will be replied to in that language.”

“When a meeting, conference or seminar includes members of both official languages, efforts will be made to ensure that participants feel free to use the language of their choice.”



Seven Steps to Creating a Bilingual Organizational Culture
(FLS = French language services)

Source: HC Link, [Creating a Bilingual Culture](#)

The Implementation Phase

This phase consists in:

- Establishing guidelines and procedures in accordance with the adopted language policy
- Defining roles and responsibilities in the application of these guidelines

Guidelines specify the details of how bilingualism should be concretely implemented in the day-to-day activities of your organization. They should naturally stem from your organization’s statement of bilingual status and language policy, as adopted during the planning phase of the bilingualism plan. Guidelines and procedures to follow must be clearly laid out and ideally, should be detailed in a procedures manual.

Key elements to consider include:

Written communications

- Clearly establish what communication materials need to be provided in both languages
- In cases where only one language is available, at least provide a translated summary
- Acknowledge that some content may need to be adapted rather than simply translated to better correspond to its new audience. Some geographically or culturally specific examples used in a presentation could need to be changed, for example.
- Initiate and respond to correspondence in the preferred language of each individual



Meetings

- Make sure that documentation for the meeting is made available in both languages
- Address participants in their preferred language
- Designate a bilingual facilitator who could, for instance, remind participants they can use both languages or keep track of the balance between French and English and advise when to readjust
- Consider technical solutions such as Powerpoint's translated live captions feature, as well as hiring simultaneous interpretation services for key meetings such as general assemblies



The Canadian Commissioner of Official Languages website makes available a [collection of custom videoconference backgrounds](#) for participants to signal their language preference or the fact that they are trying to practice their second language. Useful!

Events

- Aim to have both French and English presenters
- Advise all presenters early in the process that they need to be prepared for a bilingual audience
- Consider providing summaries of key points in the other language, as well as translating questions and main answer points during Q&As if interpretation is not available

Human resources

- Make sure to integrate both anglophones and francophones within governance structures, including the board of directors
- Identify which positions and services need bilingual personnel, and determine the associated proficiency levels required
- Recruit and retain bilingual staff accordingly

Your organization should aspire towards two key principles while developing bilingualism procedures:

- » **The Active Offer of minority language services.** Services should be made available in the minority language without people having to ask or go seek for them. They should be offered upfront, made readily available with little to no delay. Points of first contact in your organization (with the public for instance) are especially important in that regard.



» Colleagues, clients and members of the public should never hear the sentence “sorry I don’t speak French/English”. All members of your organization must be aware of services offered in the minority language so that they know what to do when contacted in that language. For instance, anybody potentially in contact with francophones should be able to say “un moment s’il vous plait, je vous réfère à mon/ma collègue”, and should know where to refer that person to.

The Follow-up Phase

This phase consists in evaluating the progress of your bilingualism efforts by:

- Developing performance indicators against which to measure results
 - What was the initial situation in each aspect of work related to bilingualism?
 - How has each aspect progressed since the start of the bilingualism efforts?
 - For example: What percentage of your publications are translated? Did your events feature presenters in both languages? Were all procedures consistently implemented?
- Polling members and clients for feedback

Following some of the main recommendations in this guide, a potential annual checklist to assess bilingualism efforts could contain elements such as:

- Were all new publications offered in both languages? If not, was a translated summary made available?
- Were all communications (paper and electronic-based) initiated and responded to in the recipient's preferred language?
- Was documentation for each meeting provided in both languages?
- Did all events feature presentations in both languages?
- Were simultaneous interpretation services offered for important meetings such as the annual general assembly?

Adjust your action plan as required. Revise procedures and implement new measures according to feedback.

Resources to Go Further

These were the main sources used to write this guide. Read them yourself for more information or an in-depth look at any specific topic:

Andrea Bodkin, HC Link (2013). [*Creating a Bilingual Organizational Culture*](#).

Canadian Heritage (2014). [*Making your Organization Bilingual*](#).

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (2021). [*Effective practices for chairing bilingual meetings and externally sourced presentations*](#).

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (2020). [*Active offer: A culture of respect, a culture of excellence*](#).