LANGUAGE ACCESS MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

Rashelle LeCaptain LeCaptain
Connecting Cultures, Inc.

Abstract: Many healthcare organizations are struggling to understand how they can develop language access plans that comply with the legal requirements of equal access in healthcare while controlling costs. This can be accomplished by creating a customized language access plan to meet the needs of each organization separately. This is a substantial investment of time, money and other resources that must be successful to create full buy-in from the top to the bottom of any healthcare organization. Management solutions that clearly identify the needs of the healthcare interpreters, together with strong development and execution of organizational language access plans will bring the most value for organizational leaders, medical providers, limited English proficient patients and interpreters alike.

Management programs for healthcare interpreters can positively diminish the likelihood of interpreter burnout. Hard skills necessary to be a successful health care interpreter including fluency, code of ethics, standards of practice, among others, are becoming better known and understood. Properly understood behavioral style, workplace motivators and other soft skills will increase the retention rate of professional health care interpreters. Healthcare organizations will benefit from successful language access plans with long-term interpreter retention while seeing an increased return on investment.

1.   THE PROCESS

Healthcare language access management programs developed using the following four-step model bring a high return on investment to any healthcare organization: Understand Needs, Define Expectations, Meet Needs, Control. This model is equally effective for managing healthcare language access plans as it is for healthcare interpreters. Managing language access plans for healthcare organizations will be addressed in parallel with healthcare interpreters.

Language access management programs are most successful when health care organizations understand the needs of their organization and the role of the healthcare interpreter. Next it is important to define expectations required for the selection of service delivery and for interpreters within an organization. A healthcare organization can meet the needs of healthcare interpreters by identifying and defining the roles healthcare interpreters will serve according to the unique needs of a particular organization. Plan expectations will be completed by carefully selecting service delivery methods. Language access managers can also begin to provide the proper resources necessary to create a successful environment for the interpreter. The final phase of the process is control. Organizations that require established guidelines of success be monitored and measured both for vendors and interpreters will result in the development of relationships with their vendors that become partnerships and they will gain long-term retention of their interpreter talent.

2.   UNDERSTANDING NEEDS

In efforts to cut costs and improve quality, many healthcare organizations are moving toward implementing internal interpreter departments that employ full and part-time interpreters to serve their limited English proficient patients. Interpreter development is time consuming and requires experts to train and oversee the execution of each interpreter. Hard skills may seem easily identifiable. A potential interpreter who's resume boasts fluency and experience working as an interpreter for family members and friends may appear to solve all of their problems. Managers often jump at the opportunity to hire interpreters with this type of resume.   This may lead to the realization that there has been a mistake. Organizational leaders who do not understand the nuances and skill sets required to become a qualified interpreter many find themselves in a situation in which their costs have decreased together with the quality of delivery. This decrease in quality can lead to increased risk management concerns as well as an increase in secondary costs.

In the planning phase of any language access plan, it is important to identify the needs of an interpreter. Hard skills, identifying fluency, standards of practice and code of ethics are topics to evaluate during this phase. Oftentimes the owner of the language access plan is someone within an organization who's primary role has nothing to do with language access. Some organizational leaders with limited knowledge of language access in healthcare are responsible for creating a plan that will meet organization legal requirements but are uncertain how to accomplish this. Seeking out experts in the field who consult on identifying the needs of an interpreter will save time and money later in the process.

Healthcare has taken strongly to the Lean and Six Sigma planning initiatives in an effort to improve their process and decrease costs. These successful programs also can be used in the development phases of language access planning. Healthcare organizations must identify the unique language access needs that will support their mission and values. Capturing data, including appointment volume, location of appointments, department utilization and population size for a given limited English proficient community will generate a clear picture of an organization's current state and bring about the ability to plan for the future state of their language access program.   Uncovering opportunities and celebrating successes are easily identified when the organizational language access needs are understood.

3.   DEFINING EXPECTATIONS

Defining expectations is well known piece of any planning phase. In Six Sigma it is the first and most crucial phase. The Six Sigma process of Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control (DMAIC) ensures that the improvements needed are well defined to develop long-term improvements in any organizational process. Language access plans are no different. Defining the expectations of the plan and its many parts will allow a healthcare organization to identify the service delivery methods that will be best for its unique needs.

3.1   Healthcare Organizations

When the needs of the healthcare organization are understood, completed in the first phase of development, it is important to explore what success will look like. Organizational leaders, the healthcare providers, patient access specialists, and the limited English-speaking patient must all have his or her needs met by this plan. Defining expectations requires that attention be paid to each of these groups and the future state of the language service delivery be clear. Take, for example, buying a home. Before anyone makes a decision on such a significant purchase he or she will clearly define their expectations for their new investment.

Language access services are no exception. This plan will meet a variety of needs within an organization and can be viewed as an investment into the forward movement of that organization. A dialogue between organizational leaders and the healthcare providers that must use the services will benefit the entire organization. Oftentimes organizational leaders and administrators see the cost of services whereas healthcare providers see the usefulness of the services. Commonly these perspectives stay in their respective silos and create additional challenges. A complete view of the plan and process will be most beneficial to the organization.

Michael L. George, author of "Lean Six Sigma for Service" discusses the importance of the voice of the customer (VOC) in the defining phase. "The DMAIC (Define-Measure-Analyze-Improve-Control) methodology associated with Six Sigma is very good at reinforcing VOC awareness. In the Define stage, for example, instructions for creating a team charter include capturing any available VOC information relevant to the project and defining targets based on customer needs, (Ref. 1)." In any healthcare organization, leaders, providers, administrators and patients are all customers of any internal process.

3.2   Healthcare interpreters

All language access plans require the use of professional interpreters. While there are many avenues in which an organization can acquire interpreter services, it is the organization's needs that must be met. Expectations for language service providers, both internal and external, will be important in maintaining and controlling a plan. Interpreters need expectations that will guide their services and create consistency regardless of the individual doing the interpreting.

Once defined, expectations can be used to develop policy and procedure that will support organizational missions, goals, and values. Policy and procedure guidelines are crucial to successful management of interpreters. Policy and procedure are the tools managers use to ensure the delivery of services provided by their direct reports are being adhered to. These services support the organization and the community members it serves.

4.   MEETING NEEDS

Establishing a thorough language access plan will clearly and concisely meet the needs of a healthcare organization. A customized plan will meet the diverse needs within a healthcare organization and will contain clearly defined expectations for execution. The role interpreters will play within an organization and what will be required of them will be clear.. The next phase

of development is to establish how the needs of the organization and the healthcare interpreter will be met.

4.1   Healthcare Organizations

An organization has four options to execute their plan: internal interpreter departments, external vendors, and a combination of internal interpreter departments, external vendors and bilingual providers. Each option has positive and negative aspects that to weighed by the organization to select the best service options. Cost, productivity, efficiency, risk management and auditing requirements are all components that can be considered in this phase.

External Vendors

External vendors currently offer three general options: face-to-face interpreting, telephonic interpreting, and video interpreting. Face-to-face interpreting is the most common form of interpreting and there are many agencies and free lance interpreters available to provide these services. Nationally, telephonic and video interpreting vendors are available and regularly used. Language service vendors should be analyzed based various criteria not limited to cost.

Returning to the purchasing a home example, most buyers scrutinize the quality, layout, price, and location of the home, among others, before making their investment. A home listed at a low price may have beautiful pictures posted on the Internet and this brings excitement to a potential buyer. However, when the home is visited it is clear that it does not meet the buyers' expectations as anticipated.

Language service vendors are similar. The initial attraction to any external language service vendor can be found in the sales pitch, pricing, and the list of services. Thorough screening will minimize the possibility future problems commonly seen upon language service providers, including unreliable service, inconsistent service quality and billing errors.

With clear expectations defined it will make it easier to select a vendor for language access needs, regardless of the particular interpreter service they offer. Transparency, internal quality controls, cost, execution of customer service, internal process and others criteria can be used to screen external vendors. The screening phase should fit the policy and guidelines for all of the other large investments made for that organization. The goal should be to select a service that can develop into a business partner and bring the most value to the organization.

Internal Interpreter Departments

The healthcare organization's decision to hire interpreters directly is most often made because the quality of service delivery by external vendors is lacking. This is decision is also made in an effort to control costs. Either way, it is a decision that will create a shift in organizational culture that will enhance or damage the need for process change and improvement. Oakland and Tanner state "Major organizational change requires huge investments in energy, time and resources, but many change programs fail to meet expectations. Published estimates of success levels can be as low as 10%, (Ref. 2)."

The hard skills required of the professional healthcare interpreter are becoming better understood throughout the healthcare industry. However, there is still a large hill to climb. These hard skills are more obvious to hiring personnel: verification of language fluency, training program validation, theoretical knowledge of healthcare interpreting and practical experience. These criteria are the foundations of professional interpreting.

Soft skills, however, are less understood for healthcare interpreters. Target Training International explains "Hiring the right people in the selection process will have a direct result on retention. Less cost in firing and re-hiring can save a company thousands or millions each year, (Ref. 3)." Customer service, attention to detail, team participation, long-term goals and workplace motivators are just some of the soft skills that can be considered when making an investment in a new employee. A healthcare interpreter can be hired hired because they possess the hard skills needed to fill the position, but their soft skills may not meet the needs of an organization. The organization may need to fire that same interpreter for their lack of soft skills, costing the organization time, money, and productivity. This will surely minimize any return on investment sought by the initial decision to make the hire.

4.2   Healthcare Interpreters

Healthcare is an ever-changing industry that sees multiple improvements in medical care throughout a given year. Competition between healthcare service providers is becoming even more evident as hospitals work to expand their capacity within their marketplace, maintain quality care, and decrease costs. The need to stay current with this constant change requires all healthcare professionals to seek resources that will continue their education, providing various streams of professional development.

Like all other healthcare professionals, the success of healthcare professionals is found in professional development. Because healthcare interpreting is still a developing profession, access to initial, and continuing, education resources are sparse. Managers and organizations must be creative in seeking opportunities for interpreter professional development. This will ensure that the investment made to provide language services to the organization will be successful.

Preparation for the encounter is one of the greatest advantages an interpreter can have. There are a variety of resources available to healthcare organizations that can support the development of its interpreters. The first of which are books containing vocabulary, diagrams and explanations of various medical encounters and procedures. Observation is another strong training tool readily accessible in any medical setting. Interpreters can preview the types of settings they will be working in will create a professional level of anticipation. In addition to reading materials and observation, departmental education offered to community members, such as mental health, diabetic education and cancer treatment seminars are just a few examples of available educational opportunities an interpreter can benefit from. Preparation is only as effective and the resources available. Employers of interpreters should make these resources readily available.

Anticipation for any healthcare encounter requires preparation. Coaching and mentoring are necessary for all healthcare interpreters after their encounters. Healthcare offers a variety of situations that are emotionally charged and difficult to handle. Without proper support healthcare interpreters are sure to reach burnout.

The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia defines burnout in business as a "physical or psychological condition induced in workers by overwork or overexposure to stress in the workplace. Burnout markedly impairs the performance of an employee and may even incapacitate them. Some jobs are known to cause burnout, and employees may expect to work in such positions for a limited period only. Jobs known to cause burnout, such as trading in financial markets, tend to be very well paid. In other industries burnout is unpredictable and companies take measures to guard against it, such as enforcing holiday breaks and introducing stress management programs, (Ref. 4)."

As with other healthcare professionals, healthcare interpreters need an opportunity to debrief and discuss their challenging cases. The resources that create this environment are not readily available to most independent interpreters and can be organized and provided by the healthcare facilities and managers. Employee Assistance Programs, debriefing guidelines, stress management and safety training are all necessary to minimize work related stress. The minimization of these stressors is one way of decreasing interpreter burnout. Healthcare organizations that can diminish interpreter burnout by providing proper resources for their interpreting staff will have a greater return on investment that those who do not.

5. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTROL

Historically healthcare organizations have been left with an "either/or" option for their language service needs. Organizational leaders are left saying "I can choose this vendor or I can choose that vendor." The vendors claim to offer the same service and the thought of creating an internal interpreter department is too daunting. Owners of language access plans often have no control over their plan and are left at the "mercy" of their vendors. Fortunately, this is no longer the case. In establishing concrete language access management solutions an organization will create tools that will manage both their language access plan and healthcare interpreters.

5.1 Language Access Plan

Via language access management solutions, an organization will have worked to understand their organizational needs, define the expectations of the organization's language access plan, and develop a process to select the modes in which language services are delivered throughout the organization. Simply put an organization will have executed a process to meet the needs of an organizational language access needs and requirements. The execution of this plan will be dependent on the use of external vendors, in-house interpreters, and bilingual providers.

The control of the plan requires organizational leaders to hold vendors accountable to the execution of the services established in the sales process. Conduct regular business reviews with the vendor to discuss and evaluate how successfully the vendor is meeting the organizations

needs. Reviewing the delivery of language services can be difficult for a healthcare organization. There are question about how organizational leaders will gain feedback from those who use the language services.

An opportunity to educate the medical providers and staff on what to look for when working with healthcare interpreters is present in earlier dialogues in the defining phase. Neutrality, professionalism, empowerment and consistency of the healthcare interpreter are all things a consumer of language services can observe and evaluate, regardless of language. This feed back, along with the collection and reporting of selected data points and customer service measurements are powerful ways in which an organization can evaluate a vendor. Scheduled business reviews will give the healthcare organization and its vendors an opportunity to review performance expectations and identify successes and opportunities in which improvements could be made.

5.2   Healthcare Interpreters

Just as healthcare organizations should hold vendors accountable, managers of interpreter services can hold their interpreters accountable. Organizational policy and procedure are defined and managers can seek feedback from consumers to measure the success of a given interpreter. Beyond policy and procedure this is also an opportunity to discuss professional development plans, successes the interpreter has achieved and opportunities for improvement. One suggestion is to ensure that conversations that are held regularly. Ongoing feedback will help the manager address concerns immediately and identify the needs an interpreter has and meet those needs in a timely manner.

Soft skills required of an organization's employees are important to consider. All employees provide a specialty service to the healthcare organization. However, the soft skills required are more subjective and can be difficult to measure. Management tools, such as job benchmarking, behavioral science and the desired attributes of the healthcare interpreter role will support a manager in supporting the healthcare interpreter and will minimize the probability of interpreter burnout. The proper management tools will also aid in the selection and development of a strong and long-term interpreter team that will bring the greatest value, increasing the return on investment for the healthcare organization, efficiencies and quality of care for its medical providers, customer service for patients and effective control for administrators.

6.   THE PLAN-RETENTION

Healthcare organizational leaders will develop and retain relationships with language service vendors and healthcare interpreters that will bring the best return on investment following this four-step model. Understanding the language service requirements for an organization and the limited English-proficient communities it services will lay the foundation for a value added process. Defining expectations for the delivery of these services will ensure successful organizational change measures to bridge the gap between leaders, medical providers, administrators and patients. Selecting the service delivery methods will create a customizable solution for the unique needs identified within in each healthcare organization. Accountability,

7

business reviews and internal evaluations will give organizational leaders control over their language access plan. These four steps create lasting business partnerships that create the most value for any healthcare organization.

The four-step model is equally effective for healthcare interpreter directors and supervisors. Understanding the needs of a working interpreter will identify the roles and responsibilities required within an organization. Defining expectations will create a professional development process for healthcare interpreters. A manager can use the professional development process and tools and increase the interpreter value to a healthcare organization. A properly managed professional development plan will support and retain professional healthcare interpreters by minimizing interpreter burnout and increase an organization's return on investment.

7.   REFERENCES

1. George, Michael L. *Lean Six Sigma for Service: How to use lean speed & six sigma quality to improve services and transactions*. McGraw-Hill 2003

2. Oakland, J., & Tanner, S. "Successful Change Management" *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence* 2007, 18(1/2), 1-19. doi:10.1080/14783360601042890.

3. *Target Training International* 2008.   Retrieved from http://www.ttidisc.com/people-energizing-people/2007/07/online-assessments-are-the-no1-best-practice-in-recruiting/

4. *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather guide* 2009. Retrieved from http://www.credoreference.com/entry/heliconhe/burnout