



Ombudsman

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Your Voice Matters

A Dialogue on Official Languages
at Shared Services Canada

FIRST SPECIAL REPORT



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Ottawa, November 2019

Mr. Paul Glover

President

Ms. Sarah Paquet

Executive Vice-President

Sir/Madam:

I am pleased to present to you this Special Ombudsman Report entitled: *Your Voice Matters: A Dialogue on Official Languages at SSC*.

The *Official Languages Act (Act)* has been in force for 50 years, and its application remains a core element of the Federal Public Service. To some extent, official languages (OL) touches us every day. Shared Services Canada (SSC) is committed to actively support its employees in developing their language proficiency and makes every effort to make employees feel comfortable communicating in the language of their choice. SSC has not yet achieved the desired state.

In May 2019, SSC's All Staff Town Hall highlighted the need for a better understanding of SSC employees' OL realities. This was also echoed in my 2018–2019 Annual Report where I briefly outlined what we heard regarding official languages. Whether the comments and concerns were genuine or reflected a misunderstanding of the legislative framework, supporting policy and/or practices regarding OL, it was clear that language issues impact employees and deserved a detailed dialogue.

This is why, during this past September and October, my Office conducted information-gathering dialogue sessions across the country. We received individual written submissions, phone calls and met employees in 62 in-person group meetings. Over 300 SSC employees at all levels helped us better understand the issues.

What we heard closely reflects the results of the Public Service Employee Surveys and complaints filed against SSC with the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (OCOL). And more importantly, they were nearly unanimous on key elements of interest. They continue to have difficulty in meeting and maintaining the language requirements of their position—they see official languages as a barrier to overcome rather than a desired culture or end-state.

Our goal was not to explain or defend any policy or its application. We entered each dialogue to encourage discussion and capture employees' thoughts. We accept their points of view, experiences and perceptions as legitimate and valid.

Our role was not to validate whether their comments were "true/false" or "right/wrong." This report highlights what is working, what isn't working and the challenges SSC employees face as we move toward a culture that ensures SSC has the capacity to function in both official languages.

I applaud the Department's willingness to discuss its approaches to OL to ensure they align well with everyday realities while respecting the Act. I would like to thank employees at all levels who participated and generously shared their thoughts with us. For many, it was emotional and difficult, and I am grateful for their trust in my Office and allowing us to present their views in this report. As always, SSC employees have demonstrated professionalism and a desire to make SSC an even more respectful, inclusive and productive workplace.

Luc Bégin
Ombudsman

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CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

Legislative Framework and Supporting Policies

Canada enacted the *Official Languages Act* (Act) in 1969 to recognize and enshrine the equal status of its two official languages. The key element of the Act and its supporting policies is to ensure Canadians can access federal services in the official language (OL) of their choice. The Act also specifies the obligations of the Government as a bilingual employer. As such, SSC employees at all levels have the right to be supervised, to write, to speak, be trained and to receive personal and central services in their language of choice. Some exceptions exist, based on whether or not they work in a designated bilingual region.

Following a recommendation by the Commissioner of Official Languages to the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS), CBC/CBC became the minimum language proficiency requirement for manager and supervisor positions in bilingual regions. In August 2016, SSC announced that it would designate all new supervisory positions—and new appointments to current supervisory positions—in bilingual regions as CBC/CBC. However, employees who were in supervisory positions and do not meet this requirement, have incumbent rights. It is important to note that as SSC becomes a more virtual organization, applying this policy could become more complex.

The Public Service Employee Surveys

The latest results of the Public Service Employee Surveys for SSC do not show significant progress on OL issues. At the same time, the number of complaints remains high.

The Public Service Employee Surveys 2014 and 2017 show that:

- ✓ Francophones are less positive than Anglophones about the possibility of using their official language of choice at work.
- ✓ 67–66% Francophones at SSC said they feel free to use their official language of choice in meetings compared to 92% of Anglophones.
- ✓ 63–66% of Francophones believe that during meetings the chairpersons created an environment where they feel free to use their official language of choice compared to 87% for Anglophones.
- ✓ 57–59% of Francophones feel free to use their official language of choice in preparing written materials including emails compared to 89–91% for Anglophones.

These figures illustrate an imbalance in the use of official languages at SSC and validate the employees' point that SSC operates mostly in English. This was a key issue raised during the dialogue sessions.



Official Languages Complaints

SSC currently ranks among the top five federal institutions when it comes to OL complaints. Soberly, we are first among those who do not serve the public.

Since the establishment of SSC until mid-September of this year, there have been 156 complaints to the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages (OCOL). Fifty-six were filed in 2018–2019 alone. In the first half of this fiscal year, 16 new complaints were submitted.

Of the total, the Commission deemed 144 founded:

- 30% pertained to the language requirements of positions. Most questioned English Essential requirements; and
- 60% dealt with the language of work, such as all communications, training and related material, supervision and systems being in English only.

In addition, since the beginning of the fiscal year, SSC has dealt with eight internal complaints relating to language of work. All were founded.

All this brings us to where we are today. We have employees who are unsure of what SSC expects of them, face changing rules and policies, and see no clear path to success due to language requirements.

And yet they want to succeed! We met with employees who have worked very hard to reach their oral C (often after repeated attempts). Some faced learning challenges and others could simply not find a workable solution. We spoke with many employees who are bilingual and do much of their work bilingually within their teams and with clients but simply cannot “get their oral C”. While we heard no significant complaints about the written comprehension and written expression tests, there was near universal frustration **at all levels and by both linguistic groups** with the oral expression test. The most revealing data is the very low pass rate for Second Language Evaluation Tests Oral Proficiency for Level C. The following table underlines this point.

		2017-2018						2018-2019			
		Success rate %, Rounded									
		English Test			French Test			English Test		French Test	
Test	Level	SPC		PS	SPC		PS	SPC	PS	SPC	PS
Oral Competency	B	94	<	96	82	>	81	96	N/A	74	N/A
	C	45	<	56	23	<	33	45	N/A	25	N/A
Written Expression	B	90	>	86	45	<	57	86	N/A	51	N/A
	C	—		72	—		40	—	N/A	—	N/A
Written Comprehension	B	94	>	92	75	<	82	92	N/A	83	N/A
	C	73	<	75	45	<	61	S. O.	N/A	67	N/A

Notes:

- In order for a success rate to be presented, the sample must meet a minimum criterion of 50 results. A cell that does not meet the minimum criterion is marked “—”.
- NA denotes information not available.

In the last two years, fewer than half of SSC Francophones passed the oral C English test, and only one quarter of SSC's Anglophones passed the French test. Given that pass rates for tests is the only measure of training success, this is a cause for concern.

The PSC's standard of assessment seems generic and employees have explained that the evaluation does not align with the SSC work context and their daily work realities. In fact, there is a strong belief that we are asking employees to be more proficient in their second official language than in their first. Since the PSC does not test and grade an employee's first official language, this is hard to argue.

Employees said they are grateful SSC has increased and centralized funding for second language training. But some indicated they do not have their manager's support for operational reasons. These employees must learn on their own time and sometimes at their own expense. This greatly impacts their wellbeing and further creates challenges in balancing personal and professional life.

We also heard general comments that:

- Constant technical difficulties with current tools for group training (such as online, and/or teleconference) make it difficult to learn.
- The training SSC offers is set up to pass a test, not to flourish in the second language.
- The fact that employees believe SSC and the Public Service in general operate mostly in English does not provide the proper immersive environment ("use it or lose it"). This does little to make SSC a bilingual organization.

SSC senior management must demonstrate leadership in the use of official languages. With authority come more responsibility, including the need to operate and communicate effectively in both official languages.



SSC Enterprise Approach 3.0

During the dialogue series, managers and employees indicated that OL is a critical factor in attracting and retaining employees. In fact, this factor has a spillover effect on SSC's operations and services. As the Department embarks on SSC 3.0, it will need to address OL programs to ensure employees receive the tools to engage, enable and empower them to operate in a bilingual organization.

OUR WORKFORCE

The following tables illustrate the current state of bilingualism at SSC. These key statistics help identify areas where we need progress. Where important, we have broken out statistics for the CS professional group as it represents the majority of our workforce. Our statistics come from PeopleSoft data held by SSC. These figures represent a point in time.

Employees' First Official Language

Category	English %	French %
All SSC	61	39
EX/CS-05	59	41
Supervisors/Managers	46	54
Other employees	65	35

What is our bilingual capacity?

Level	GROUP			
	All SSC %	Supervisors/ Managers %	Executives %	CS-03/04 %
Incomplete/Lower than BBB	53	26	14	29
BBB	17	12	5	13
CBC and Above	31	62	82	58
Total BBB and Above	47	74	87	71

Session discussions raised a particular concern for the impact of language within the CS community at the CS-03/04 level. Given the weight of comments by participants and the fact that those employees occupy many technical supervisory positions including Team Leads, the following table shows their language status.

Please note that an “expired” entry may not be an immediate problem. Someone who does not change positions can have an expired language profile but still meet the requirement of their current position.

It does however indicate a potential mobility issue, because that person will require testing (and perhaps refresher training) to update their profile. This also represents an important challenge in succession planning and a downstream cost liability for training and testing. Employees have told us they do not want to be tested or worse, compete for positions, for fear of failing the oral test or obtaining a lower score than they had previously earned.

CS-03 and CS-04 Language Profile Data

CURRENT SECOND LANGUAGE PROFILES

Level	Under BBB	BBB to CBC	CBC and up	Total
CS-03	179	75	245	499
CS-04	76	47	289	412
Total	255	122	534	911

VALID/EXPIRED

Level	Expired	Valid	Total
CS-03	270	229	499
CS-04	141	271	412
	33	25	58
Total	411	500	911

MEETS SECOND LANGUAGE EVALUATION

Level	Not in a bilingual position	Does not meet	Meets but is Expired	Meets and is Valid	Total
CS-03	151	34	93	221	499
CS-04	50	32	67	263	412
	28	2	7	21	58
Total	201	66	160	484	911
	22%	7%	18%	53%	

HOW WE CONDUCTED THE DIALOGUE

Operating Principles for the Dialogue Sessions

The Office followed its four operating principles during the series of dialogues:

- Confidentiality — There are no names attached to any of the information we gathered and quotes are anonymous.
- Informality — We set no agenda for the sessions. We organized separate in-person sessions for employees, supervisors/managers, and CS-05s/Executives, to provide an environment that allowed participants to talk freely.
- Impartiality — This report provides a neutral and unbiased account of what we heard. The Office did not seek to educate, inform or defend any OL policies and practices.
- Independence — The independence of the Office and the “safe space” approach of the Ombudsman function created an environment for employees to share their perceptions, experiences and points of view.



Planning the Dialogue Sessions

We planned for the sessions in three parts:

1. We reviewed language-related documents including: the [Official Languages Act](#); the Government of Canada's [Action Plan for Official Languages 2018–2023](#); the [Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector](#); various TBS and SSC policies and directives; and [The next level: Normalizing a culture of inclusive linguistic duality in the Federal Public Service workplace](#).

2. We decided to include three ways to contribute to the Dialogue:

- ✓ In-person sessions
- ✓ Telephone call-in sessions
- ✓ Written submissions

We planned the Dialogue sessions and developed all supporting material working closely with the Communications Branch, the Learning and Development team, the Official Languages team and the Regional Executives.

Conducting the Sessions

We conducted in-person sessions in the NCR and in select locations across Canada to maximize participation.



We separated the CS community into CS-01 to CS-04 and grouped the CS-05 responses with the EX cadre to better reflect the accountability levels of those in the CS group.

While we were aware of the sensitivity of including gender as an element in our analysis, we did not find that to be an issue with regards to language.

Getting the Word Out

Communications Branch managed the awareness and engagement campaign to get the highest employee presence and contribution rate possible. This included pointing employees to the Learning and Development (L&D) Hub's OL Dialogue registration site. Our communications plan used My SCC as the primary information tool. In addition, Regional Executives promoted the sessions within their regions.

Conducting Sessions

We conducted all information gathering sessions from September 11 to October 24, 2019.



In-Person Sessions

The goal was to provide a safe space where groups of up to 20 employees could offer their thoughts and discuss OL freely. In-person sessions.

We:

- Facilitated 62 in-person sessions (43 for employees, 31 for supervisors/managers and three for the executive cadre)
- Planned English and French sessions for locations with larger numbers of employees
- Held bilingual sessions in most of the regional locations

Some 175 people attended the in-person sessions from the NCR and across Canada.

Telephone Call-In Sessions and Written Submissions

In addition to time set aside for employees to call my Office and submit their views privately, the SYNERGi team developed an online submission form. This allowed employees to anonymously share their thoughts in writing during the Dialogue's entire information gathering period.

We received 128 submissions that included detailed information.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

How We Analyzed What We Heard

Employees spoke freely using their own words in relating their experiences. When any participant made a comment we could reasonably paraphrase or align with a theme or sub-theme, we counted it as a “mention.” In all, we collected some 950 “mentions.”

To bring the picture we saw into focus, we determined five broad theme areas. We then created a sixth group for other areas of concern and interest:

1. The impact OL policies have had on my career
2. The position language requirements
3. Second language training
4. Second language testing
5. The application of the *Official Languages Act* and supporting policies
6. Other

Differences Between the CS Community and the Rest of SSC

Participants in the sessions represented several Occupational Groups that make up the SSC workforce. Some 68% of our submissions came from CS-01s to CS-04s. While many of the concerns were the same, the non-CS community seemed to face fewer linguistic challenges. The CS community expressed concern that there appears to be different applications of bilingual requirements within the Public Service and a feeling that SSC requirements are higher than within other departments.

One broad exception to this observation is that some of the employees currently occupying AS positions are in fact doing “near-CS” duties. As employees migrate to the new IT occupational group, what impact will it have on the situation?



Differences Between the NCR and Employees in the Regions

We also encountered a difference with unilingual Anglophones in the regions. They see the move to a virtual organization as providing opportunities for advancement on a national scale as opposed to being restricted to a small, regional group. They seemed to be more accepting of becoming bilingual, but the unilingual nature of their local environment makes it more challenging to reach CBC levels in a reasonable amount of time. At the same time, this willingness to learn relates to career advancement opportunities and does not necessarily reflect a desire to operate bilingually because they rarely if ever use French on the job. The effective application of a virtual organization and a regional structure may be in conflict when it comes to language.

Francophones outside the NCR face a slightly different situation. They report finding it easier to learn English due to the predominance of written and spoken English and the fact that most of their interaction outside their region ends up being in English.

Like Anglophones, they have significant challenges meeting the oral C. They acknowledge personally accepting to work in English for ease of operations but feel their language rights are not respected.

High Performance Computing as a Case Study

We decided to visit HPC in Dorval as an example of a national level Directorate that is not headquartered in the NCR to see if there was a difference in environment. Some regionally based HPC staff attended some of our regional discussions across Canada as well.

HPC appears to be one of the most culturally bilingual organizations on the technical side of SSC. Staff at different levels recognize and appreciate the tremendous effort the leadership team at all levels puts into communicating bilingually to a respectful level.

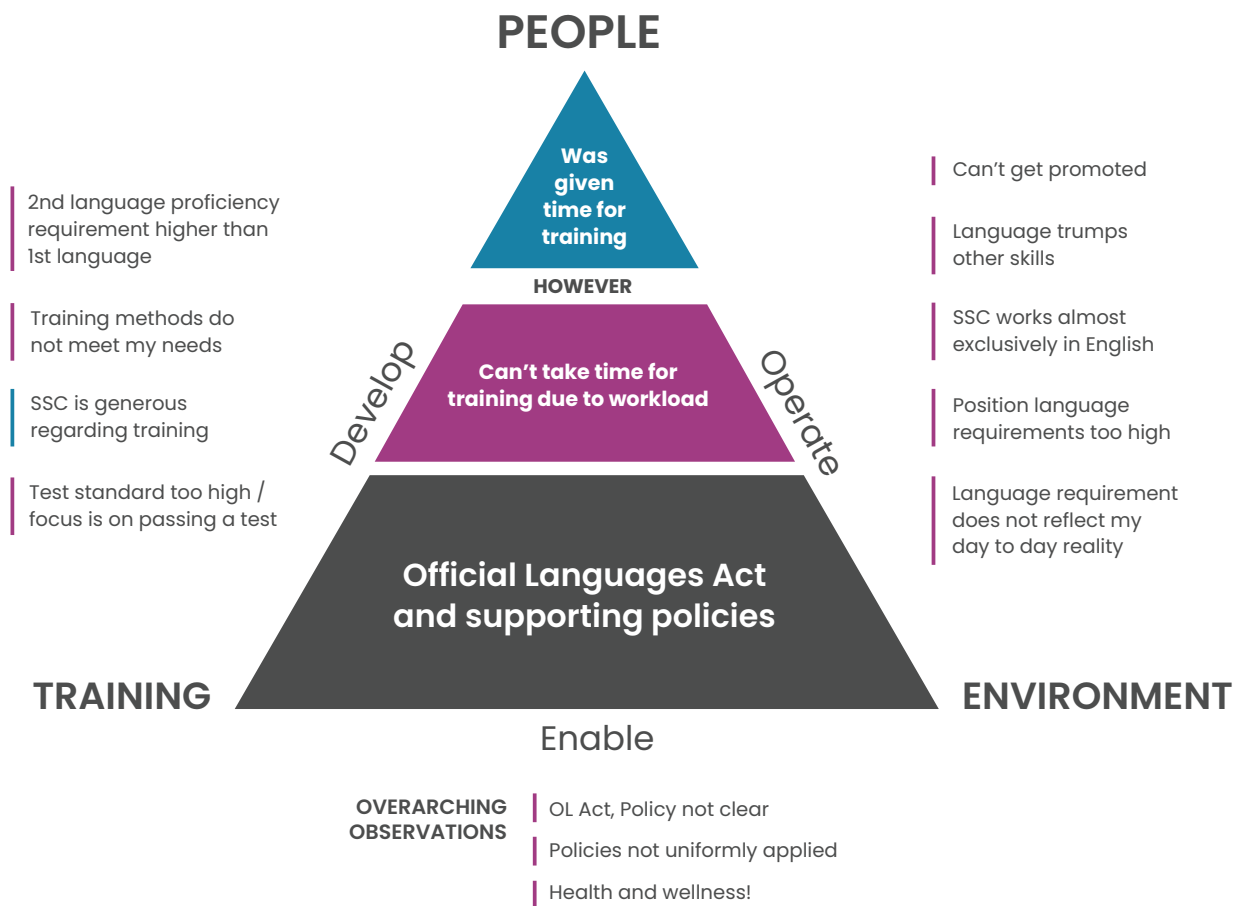


A Visualization

In considering what we heard and observed, it became clear that three key elements are at play: people, training and the work environment of SSC. We connected these along three action axes: develop, operate and enable. The diagram below illustrates how they connect and where we can situate the major items we heard, in relation to each of the elements and axes.

What we heard and observed...

Note: 68% of mentions were from CS-01 to CS-04



RESULTS OF DIALOGUE

The following data provides the summary of what we heard by sub-theme. As the sessions were discussion-based and not a survey, presenting the findings as hard statistics would not reflect the emotion and depth of discussion of individual themes. This is why we present the results as simple lists with themes having the most mentions at the top of each list.

Given the nature of this dialogue, we expected to hear negative comments, and we did. However, most if not all participants generally agreed with the letter and intent of the *Official Languages Act*. Most spoke about how SSC applies OL policies and their impact on them. Supervisors/Managers and members of the executive cadre were able to speak more broadly about the impact on their teams and operations, adding weight to individual comments. There seemed to be few differences in the comments at all levels on many points raised, and near-universal agreement on a few.

Top overall:

- Test standard too high (oral C)
- Can't get promoted, can't change jobs (not bilingual, don't have the required linguistic profile)
- Language trumps technical and management skills in job competitions

The above two were substantially higher than the remainder.

- I am expected to be better in second OL than in first
- SSC works in English
- Policy not uniformly applied

- Policy requirements not clear
- Language requirements too high
- Consultants don't need to be bilingual

We present our observations by theme. They contain general statements on what we heard, employee suggestions and food for thought.

Keeping in mind that the Dialogue Sessions did not seek to inform, educate or correct participants' understanding of OL, we did note that several points they raised were based on missing, incomplete or incorrect information. This does not detract from the following observations. In fact, it allows SSC to determine what it must emphasize in its OL information dissemination.

Career Implications

This theme sought to understand what impact OL policies and practices had on a participant's career. The discussions were sometimes very emotional. Main sub-themes included limitations and/or opportunities in both advancement and mobility as well as whether bilingualism should be more widespread.

Top career implication comments:

- Can't get promoted, can't change jobs (not bilingual, don't have the required linguistic profile)
- Lack of opportunity, mobility (can't change jobs due to language requirements of positions sought/desired)
- Second language should be a basic skill

**WHAT WE HEARD:**

- It has become increasingly difficult to attract and retain people with the right technical skills because of the policy that all supervisory level positions be at a minimum CBC/CBC. This has an impact on SSC's operational capacity. Teams are being affected by turnover/departures due to language requirements. There is also a feeling that SSC has changed the rules in the middle of their career.
- Most of the employees feel the language requirement trumps technical and management skills. It is also apparent that some believe a number of employees are being promoted because of their language skills, not because they are the best technical fit.
- There is an overwhelming perception the level C oral qualification standard is much too high for the context and realities of their work. Many believe that the ability to communicate effectively and to be understood should be sufficient to be considered bilingual in their work context.
- SSC changed the language requirement for supervisory positions without a clear transition plan. Employees believe there is no career progression. For regional staff, this is compounded by the lack of current opportunities, most of which are NCR-centric.
- Employees no longer bother applying for CBC positions because CBC is too challenging considering time and effort. As a result, many employees become disengaged.
- CBC linguistic profile does little for SSC to become bilingual because SSC, the Public Service (clients) and industry operate in English.
- When balancing pressures between work and personal life, many feel attaining the oral C is too hard, especially for those in unilingual regions.

"Second language is not a glass ceiling, it is a concrete barrier"

— A regional employee

"Bilingualism must be seen to be part of my job, not just something I do"

— An employee

"I worked hard to get BBB because I was told that was the standard required, and now you've changed it to CBC and I don't know if I will ever reach it. You can't just change the rules in the middle of the game"

— An employee

"I am now mourning the death of my career"

— An employee

DISCUSSION

Managers have indicated they have difficulty in attracting the right people because of the language requirement. The language requirements also appear to prevent some candidates, who might be excellent managers, from either moving to a higher level or laterally to another job. Most comments dealt with the challenges of the level C in oral proficiency.

Employees report being screened out of competitions at the outset because they do not meet the profile and that their technical merits don't matter. Worse yet, some are told by their managers not to apply because it's a waste of their time. They then adopt a "why bother" attitude. This is compounded by a prevalent belief that SSC applies CBC more strictly than other departments, which is leading many to consider leaving. We cannot underestimate the impact of this on employees' self-worth and engagement.

There is a feeling we are hiring or appointing those who have the correct language profile and not necessarily those with the best technical and management skills to do the job.

A general comment from Anglophone employees was that persons are appointed based on language skills and may not be as qualified as others. The unstated message is that Francophones are being favoured in this manner.

We also heard the opposite side to this situation. Someone, usually a Francophone, may be appointed without necessarily wanting the position but is the one who fits the language bill.

They do their best, knowing full well that Anglophone subordinates and even peers don't consider them equals, even though the language requirement is valid. They are sometimes made to feel incompetent and some report others hope they will fail, just to prove their view. In other words, if an Anglophone with the language skills gets the job, they were the best fit—but if a Francophone gets the job, they got it just because they are bilingual. This may suggest an underlying element of prejudice and has a very real mental health impact that does not contribute to a respectful work environment.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

- Does SSC management take advantage of all the flexibility it has to meet OL obligations?
- Should letters of offer include some statement of expectation that defines what we are about, what we expect of our employees and our commitment to embracing a bilingual organizational culture?
- Should our OL obligations, policies, training opportunities and bilingual values be part of all orientation programs for new or returning employees?
- Should SSC conduct detailed exit interviews with all employees to determine what reasons, including language issues, motivated their departure?

Position Language Requirements

We introduced this theme to understand what impact OL policies and practices had on a person's current position as opposed to their career. It quickly became apparent that participants wanted to discuss more than just their positions. Supervisors/Managers and CS-05s/EXs discussed at length the staffing challenges arising from OL, particularly for new supervisors in light of the CBC requirement.

Top Position Language requirements:

- Language requirements too high
- Language requirements do not reflect day-to-day reality
- No need to be bilingual in my current position/No need for second language in my job (the work is predominantly in English).

WHAT WE HEARD:

- English is the language of IT. The language requirement of positions does little to encourage and/or maintain a bilingual work environment.

- SSC's rapid adoption of CBC/CBC with no apparent transition plan has affected operations, impacted careers and lowered morale. This ultimately affects our services to our clients.
- The virtual organizational approach will compound OL issues.
- The C level of oral proficiency in the second official language for all supervisors does not represent the work context and reality of SSC.
- This is particularly true for CS-03 supervisors.
- We seem to have lost our way on official languages. We are losing our staff and using workarounds like secondments and consultants to bridge the gap.
- There is little flexibility at SSC to use the non-imperative staffing process to bridge the gap.



“I am concerned my position will become CBC after I retire and my subordinates will not be eligible to compete.”

— A manager in a unilingual region

“We are being asked to hire more in the regions, harder to find bilingual candidates.”

— A CS-05

DISCUSSION

Employees tell us that the language requirement of positions does little to encourage and/or maintain a bilingual work environment, it is simply considered an obstacle to overcome. Some employees see the creation of Technical Advisors (TA) as a language workaround. It allows management to use the TA positions to protect, transfer or promote employees that do not have the required linguistic profile. There is also a perception that language requirements assigned to TA positions are based on the current profile of an employee being assigned to such a position.

Technical Advisor Positions as of 1 Oct 2019

Language Requirement	Number of Positions
English Essential (EE)	537
French Essential (FE)	3
French or English Essential (E/F/E)	113
BBB	298
CBC	18
Total	969
% not meeting CBC	98%

While this approach seems to help people in the short term, it could be problematic downstream if those in a position to take on management positions do not meet the CBC requirement. And while it may protect SSC employees and the department's operational capacity, it could harm their careers in the medium to long term.

We often heard that the language of work of IT and SSC is English. We examined this statement and spoke to academics involved in teaching IT in French and others who work in IT elsewhere in government and in the private sector. We found that while many key manuals used in IT are indeed in English, all the terminology exists in French as well as in other languages. It is quite common for industry employees to work in their local language.

There is an overwhelming perception that the oral level C for all supervisors in bilingual regions is too high for the context and realities of the day-to-day workplace, particularly at the CS-03 level. Employees at the first level of supervision feel an extra burden. In addition, employees who saw their position requirements evolve from Essential to BBB and now CBC are of the view that SSC has moved the goal posts in the middle of the game and they are demoralized.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

- **How can SSC reconcile unilingual "regional" structures and the desire to become a virtual organization while providing employees the opportunity to acquire language skills needed to progress?**
- **Is it possible to make greater use of non-imperative staffing processes?**
- **Do we have a plan to enable the many unilingual Technical Advisors to achieve an adequate second language level profile allowing them to compete?**

Second Language Training

This theme examines what is available and the road to success. Discussion yielded two distinct areas: training to pass the PSC tests and second language maintenance. Main sub-themes include whether employees could take or be given time to train, funding, available training methods and the quality of training.

Top career implication comments

- Training methods do not meet my needs
- Can't take time due to workload (as a self-imposed limitation)
- Training quality not good
- Supervisor/manager won't let me take time (as an imposed limitation)

WHAT WE HEARD:

- Employees recognize and appreciate SSC's investment in official language training.
 - The total language training and testing expenditures 2016–2019 = \$2.78M and the language training and testing budget 2019–2020 = \$4M.
- Employees state that the objective of the training is to beat an overly complex and difficult oral exam and does little to advance a bilingual culture.
- While they appreciate that SSC has put in place virtual group training and many find it useful, employees report that the current training offered is inadequate.
 - ✓ Current training does not prepare you to pass the oral exam.
 - ✓ Part-time learning will take too long for those starting from a low or no second language ability.

- ✓ Online instructors vary from one module to the next, each having different accents, teaching methods and varying levels of knowledge of the students' work environment.
- ✓ Students within training groups are often at broadly varying levels; so those with a lower level struggle and lose their confidence.
- ✓ Audio quality of online training can be a major obstacle.
- ✓ Time zones do not seem to be considered for regional staff.
- Employees and/or their managers may feel that operations are too important and language training falls off the table.
- Employees perceive that executives have much better training benefits and can more readily access full-time training.
- Employees have a hard time "blocking" office hours for second language training. In particular, those who support clients report it is nearly impossible to set aside dedicated time. It is a challenge to focus on language when you are constantly interrupted by calls, emails or your supervisor.
- The currently available training options for low-priority employees could take several years and they are not able to compete for supervisory positions until that point. This greatly hinders career progression and succession planning. We should invest in early-career employees with low or no second official language skills.
- Other than one-on-one training, the current SSC offering is insufficient to attain an oral C level.
- The time required to get an oral B level coupled with heavy workloads does not allow for success. The new C requirement makes success appear far or out of sight.
- SSC does not have a bilingual environment so French language skills erode between five-year testing windows.
- Managers may not respect preliminary assessments to determine the amount of training required.
- It is not in a classroom that we learn a second language.
- We are investing significant employee time and departmental money in training. There does not seem to be any performance measure on our training investment. How do we know if our training is working?

"I make sure that employees get six hours for training at work rather than at home. It's important. You have to put in the time."

— A manager

"I couldn't afford to send anyone on full-time training due to lack of staff to complete operational requirements."

— A manager

DISCUSSION

While they appreciate the centralization of and funding for language training, employees don't seem to believe it is leading to success on the language test. In addition, the lack of a bilingual culture and environment in SSC's day-to-day work means that language learning is not enhanced outside the training activities. It also means that skills will erode over time, leading to a cycle of expiry—crash courses—testing—passing—erosion. The mental stress involved cannot be overstated due to the significant career impact of failing the test.

There is a perception that senior executives may not have the same obstacles in accessing full-time training.

This is compounded by the notion that executives should already have, and have maintained a second language profile, as opposed to say a CS-02 who wants to become a Team Lead at the first level of supervision.

Some employees have reported that the current training they are offered seems to be inadequate in that it does not bring them to a point where they will earn an oral C. And given the predominance of English within SSC, practising at work is not realistic for Anglophones working on their French to maintain an oral C.

We also noted that there is a widespread lack of knowledge of what is available, what the priorities are and how to access the training. Many don't seem to be aware of the information found in My SSC or on GCdocs.

Language Training Priorities and Training Options

TYPE OF TRAINING OFFERED BY PRIORITY

Priorities

Available Training Options

1	Non-imperative appointments and employees whose position is affected by an Official Languages complaint	<p>The initial assessment will determine the type of training required to meet the linguistic profile of the position in the prescribed delays</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time individual language training • Full-time group language training • Part-time individual language training • Part-time group language training
2	Executives (EX) whose language test results require revalidation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time individual language training • Part-time individual language training
3	Employees who do not meet the linguistic profile of their current position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time group language training • Part-time group language training
4	Professional development, talent management, language retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part-time group language training

CS employees explained they have a very operational approach to their work. It was obvious they don't feel they can take the time necessary for language training. Many reported feeling pressure from their managers that keeps them from asking for training time. This means discussions about language training are not given a priority equal to the stated aim of SSC being bilingual. It was suggested that the offer of language training and maintenance be mandatory when joining SSC and each year as part of each individual's Learning Plan.

When given time to attend their training sessions, employees are not completely free from their duties. This means they are not concentrated and present (mindful) to optimize their learning. Managers may not respect preliminary assessments to determine the amount of training required. Let's assume an assessment determines that an employee will require 20 weeks to attain the desired level and is given 12, when in fact it may require 24 weeks as the 20 was an estimate. Have we set them up for success or failure?

Second language training opportunities for early career employees who are often unilingual (and in an English Essential or French Essential position), are very limited. How would this encourage those with strong potential when their first supervisory position may require a CBC if BBB will take years? SSC may need to find a way to offer success-oriented training as part of its talent management.

"I can't take time for training on top of my job. Language should be part of my job."

- An employee

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

- Do we need a clear performance measurement framework for language training and maintenance?
- Should OL training be a mandatory offering to all employees as part of the performance management program?
- Should SSC create a funded Advance Training List (ATL) to backfill employees on extended language or other academic training?
- Are there opportunities to take a second look at immersive or maintenance training programs?

Second Language Testing

This theme examines how testing is conducted and what is required to achieve success. During all of our discussions, we heard almost nothing about the reading and writing tests and near-universal frustration with the oral test.

Employees noted that the inordinate amount of time required to prepare for the test did not guarantee a successful outcome. It is important to consider that the only measure of success for training and testing are the pass rates on PSC tests.

Top second language testing comments:

- Testing standards are too high for the oral C
- The test itself had no relationship to an employee's day-to-day work environment

WHAT WE HEARD:

- It is all to pass a test which does little to become bilingual since the organization operates in English and employees cannot maintain their second language skills.
- We are not testing the ability to communicate, we just need to “beat” the test.
- By all accounts, employees have indicated they find the test standard is too high and the testing has no relationship to their day-to-day work environment.
- It is the view of the vast majority of the employees that the current evaluation standard is asking employees to be more proficient in their second language than their first.
- Employees told us that during oral C evaluation, they are asked to support opinions and express hypothetical and conditional ideas. Given they operate in a technical domain, this is something they would find challenging in their first official language!
- Employees report a lack of confidence in the validity of PSC’s evaluation processes for granting the oral C. Pass/fail appears to be too arbitrary and feedback is so basic it does not provide guidance for improvement.
- In addition, employees found some evaluator feedback unhelpful. For example, being told they:
 - ✓ have an accent is insulting—since everyone has an accent.
 - ✓ hesitate during responses was frustrating—because they hesitate before answering in their first official language.
- There is a lack of understanding of the definition and difference between oral B and C levels. The gap between the oral B and C is perceived as being a huge divide.
- The evaluation is seen as a test and not the assessment of an employee’s ability to work in the second language within the context of their work environment.
- Communication in general, and within SSC, is moving toward “plain language” writing and speaking yet the testing demands a much higher performance level. This means in fact that employees don’t actually practise the tested level of speech on a day-to-day basis, making learning and maintenance a challenge.
- Employees perceive the pass mark for the oral C has increased in the past years, leading to higher failure rates and some employees dropping from C to B despite their feeling they have maintained or increased their second language skills.
- The oral test outside the NCR and Montréal must be done via a land line creating many obstacles for the employees including having to find a land line, dealing with poor sound quality, receiving no visual feedback and sometimes working in a poor test location.

“I have lived and done all I can in English for 20 years, I have an E in Reading and a C in Writing, can’t get the oral C”

— A Francophone employee

DISCUSSION

The only performance measure for second language training or testing is SSC employees' success rates on the PSC tests. We know that the failure rate for the French oral test is 75% and 55% for the English test. We heard from both language groups that the aim of training is to pass, in effect "beat" the test. Measures employees must take to get the oral C indicate that the general training available may not ensure success.

Some even report paying for individual coaching out of pocket to prepare for and pass the test. They then hardly if ever, use the complexity of language the test demands. One reported spending six weeks in one-on-one coaching sessions, simply rote memorizing the way to answer test questions, adding that it did not increase their actual bilingual ability.

Employees have said that they and their instructors are only focused on the test. Once they reach a level, people tend to forget what they have learned. They do not take pride in acquiring the second language. It is all about passing a test.

Nearly all employees indicated the test standard is too high and unrealistic since it has no relationship to their day-to-day work environment. It is clear that it is difficult to obtain the C in oral proficiency. Some employees have attempted up to eight or more times, some saw their level drop from a previous C to a B and many simply quit trying. What was revealing was that of those who dropped out of training, many said they had been using their second language regularly.

"During our sessions, we saw several instances of employees engaging us and discussing the subject with us very comfortably in their second language. They were bilingual, spoke to us fluently and were very articulate and understandable but failed to get the oral C."

— The Ombudsman

It is important to note that comments about the oral C test come from both Anglophones and Francophones. While the success rate for Francophones is higher than the reverse, both face very high failure rates. And given the gap in those results, employees ask if the tests are equally fair.

Feedback for the oral test is inadequate. Employees with multiple failures report receiving the exact same feedback each time. Even those who undertake test-specific training for the oral C report the frustration of their instructors who fully believed they were ready for C yet fail. Detailed feedback is available at a cost of nearly \$1500. SSC will pay when the candidate is enrolled in language training.

Finally, we must note that there are effectively only two language levels of consequence. We found that the A level serves no real purpose other than perhaps determining a start point for training. Those who have an E are free of concern for the remainder of their careers. This leaves B and C. If we listen to the concerns regarding the huge gap from B to a reportedly high and increasingly difficult to obtain C, there is actually little room for progress. It almost becomes a binary discussion.

Application of Official Language Policy

Discussion of this theme consumed the most time and yielded a wide variety of comments. Sub-themes included respecting language rights, language of work, application of policy across SSC, the language of meetings, etc.

Top application of official language policy comments:

- Policy not uniformly applied
- Policy requirement not clear
- Can't work in the language of my choice
- Meetings are always in one language



WHAT WE HEARD:

- The degree to which an employee is required to be bilingual is not consistent across federal departments/agencies. This has led to retention issues and employees reportedly leaving SSC for organizations whose language requirements appear to be less strict.
- What does the right to work in the language of your choice mean in an organization that primarily operates in English?
- Most meetings are in English. When unilingual Anglophones are present it is not possible to hold a bilingual meeting.
- Francophones feel unfair pressure to function in English and forego their linguistic rights. Those who push back are considered problem employees.
- At the same time, when Francophones switch to English in meetings, Anglophones lose out on an opportunity to maintain their second language skills.
- There is a disconnect between what senior leadership says about SSC being bilingual and the day-to-day reality of employees. How can we have senior leaders that are not bilingual yet expect brand new Team Lead/supervisors to be CBC?
- There is a feeling that most employees are being held to a higher standard than their leaders. Leaders must demonstrate bilingualism by example.
- When queried, many senior managers and executives report working in English more than 90% of the time.
- Translation and interpretation technology exists. SSC should examine and consider if technology offers a suitable solution to improve bilingualism.
- There are tools we can use to enhance writing skills in both languages so why not deploy them more broadly?

“For me, the subject of OL is first and foremost a question of diversity and inclusion. It’s to allow both Francophones and Anglophones to fully express themselves in the language of their choice and to be perfectly understood.”

— An executive

DISCUSSION

It is striking that while no employees disagreed with the aims of the *Act*, it was obvious that there is a need for more awareness and a better understanding of the supporting policies and their applications.

It seems that the language profile assigned to certain positions is a way to meet legal obligations rather than to create a bilingual environment or increase employee engagement.

English is the de facto “language of work” at SSC, which does not help employees to maintain or improve their French. Francophones adapt to this environment by accepting to bend to the masses, sometimes becoming more comfortable in English by default.

Given SSC operates mostly in English, many questioned the value of learning a second language but would do so simply because it is the only path to career advancement. Their motivation does not seem to reflect a culture of bilingualism.

Comments made it obvious that much effort is spent trying to staff positions in the face of perceived high OL requirements. We heard that language is something to overcome rather than embrace. Such actions undermine the organization’s stated long term goals.

Francophones report they cannot truly work in French. This follows the SSC results of the 2017 PSES, where 59% of French FOL employees say they feel free to write in the language of their choice as opposed to 91% of English FOL employees.

Employees feel they must produce documents in English or they are asked to produce them in English. There are similar results about feeling free to use the language of their choice in meetings (67% for French and 95% for English FOL employees).

Some practices also send a perhaps unintended message about the use of both official languages. We heard of instances where:

- all documents for a meeting were sent in English only, with a small notation at the bottom of the agenda stating “attendees may use the language of their choice”; and
- English documents were distributed with the notation that French versions will follow.

These examples make the official languages unequal and may prevent employees from truly getting and/or offering the best input.

Although we discussed tools that can offer language assistance, this was not a focused part of our sessions. There were however some suggestions to make it easier to operate in a more bilingual fashion. For example:

- Purchase only bilingual keyboards. This would allow all users to type in the language of their choice without having to memorize character codes.
- Offer tools such as Antidote as basic SSC software at no cost to managers. There may be other tools that offer similar levels of assistance in both languages. This would improve written communications in both first and second languages.

During our sessions, we also asked if SSC has a full and readily accessible English-French lexicon for its technical terminology. If one does exist, employees were generally unaware. Unless we develop and promote all terminology in both languages, we will not be able to nudge the organization toward greater use of French.

The language of technical training SSC provides was raised a number of times. Employees report being told some training was only available in English when a quick search showed it was available in French in Montréal and elsewhere. It was also pointed out that even if a course manual cannot be translated, the training can still be done in French with the use of English as required.

Finally, employees questioned and challenged why all in-house IT training could not be offered in both languages.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

- Are we satisfied that staff, at all levels, are aware and understand the OL policies and their application within SSC?
- Are we using the existing guidance that help run meetings or communicate in writing in a manner that promotes a bilingual culture?
- Could SSC create a technical language working group:
 - develop and maintain a readily available bilingual lexicon; and
 - recommend language assistance tools that can assist in creating a more bilingual workplace? (such as Antidote, bilingual keyboards, etc.).

- Is there an opportunity to formally recognize those who exemplify leadership in the promotion of languages as part of the SSC awards program?

Other Points

Top other comments:

- Language trumps technical and management skills in job competitions
- I am expected to be more proficient in second OL than in first
- SSC works in English
- Consultants don't need to be bilingual



Micro aggression

WHAT WE HEARD:

- Sometimes it's the little things that have a large impact, such as your manager not using the accent in your name in an email.
 - Or that the email system doesn't allow for accents in the addresses.
- During a meeting, if a Francophone speaks French, the meeting Chair will translate into English but not the other way around. This singles out the effort required to adapt to the use of French and makes the Francophone feel that they are responsible for slowing down the meeting.
- Comments alleging that someone was appointed just because they were bilingual and not technically as good as the others makes the appointees feel singled out. Given this only happens when Francophones are appointed, it is hurtful and casts doubt on the abilities of all Francophones.
- Francophones report that they too often have to ask for information or documents in French, which makes them feel their requests are "bothersome".

Such action has a lasting impact on individuals at the receiving end whether or not they were deliberate. Eventually, they become demoralized and give up trying to have their rights respected.



Mental Health

WHAT WE HEARD:

- Language training and testing take a mental health toll on employees. It is extremely challenging for many to balance heavy operational workloads, family obligations, technical skills development and hours of personal time to learn a second language.
- Employees who were transferred to SSC when it was created often occupied unilingual positions within a regional structure. When SSC reorganized them into a virtual structure, several were faced with the need to have BBB for advancement at the supervisory level. SSC subsequently set the level at CBC without communicating a path for them to attain higher levels. This has been demoralizing for many who see their careers not progressing within SSC.
- Not allowing employees sufficient time for second language training was mentioned many times. They are willing to learn but suddenly find themselves facing what they see as an insurmountable obstacle. Employees want the training time they need to succeed.
- Employees who fail to obtain the oral C after multiple attempts simply give up. It was described as hitting a concrete ceiling.

“Operations are affected because I have to leave to do language training to advance my career. It is very stressful and my family suffers.”

— A manager

“The impact of stress can be measured but we don’t do that in government.”

— An Executive

“I have a documented learning disability and it could not be accommodated. My experience was demoralizing, demeaning and difficult. My spouse is Francophone, I speak French but cannot get a C in oral. I tried 10 times. It is demoralizing to admit defeat.”

— An Anglophone employee

DISCUSSION

We cannot discount the impact of these micro aggressions and mental health factors. It was surprising and heart wrenching to see just how much some strongly committed employees suffer, leading them to self-doubt and loss of motivation.

We also noted both sides feel that policies favour “the other linguistic group”. Their feelings are legitimate and they have more in common than they might realize.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

- Are we cognisant of the mental health impacts on employees due to the official language requirements?

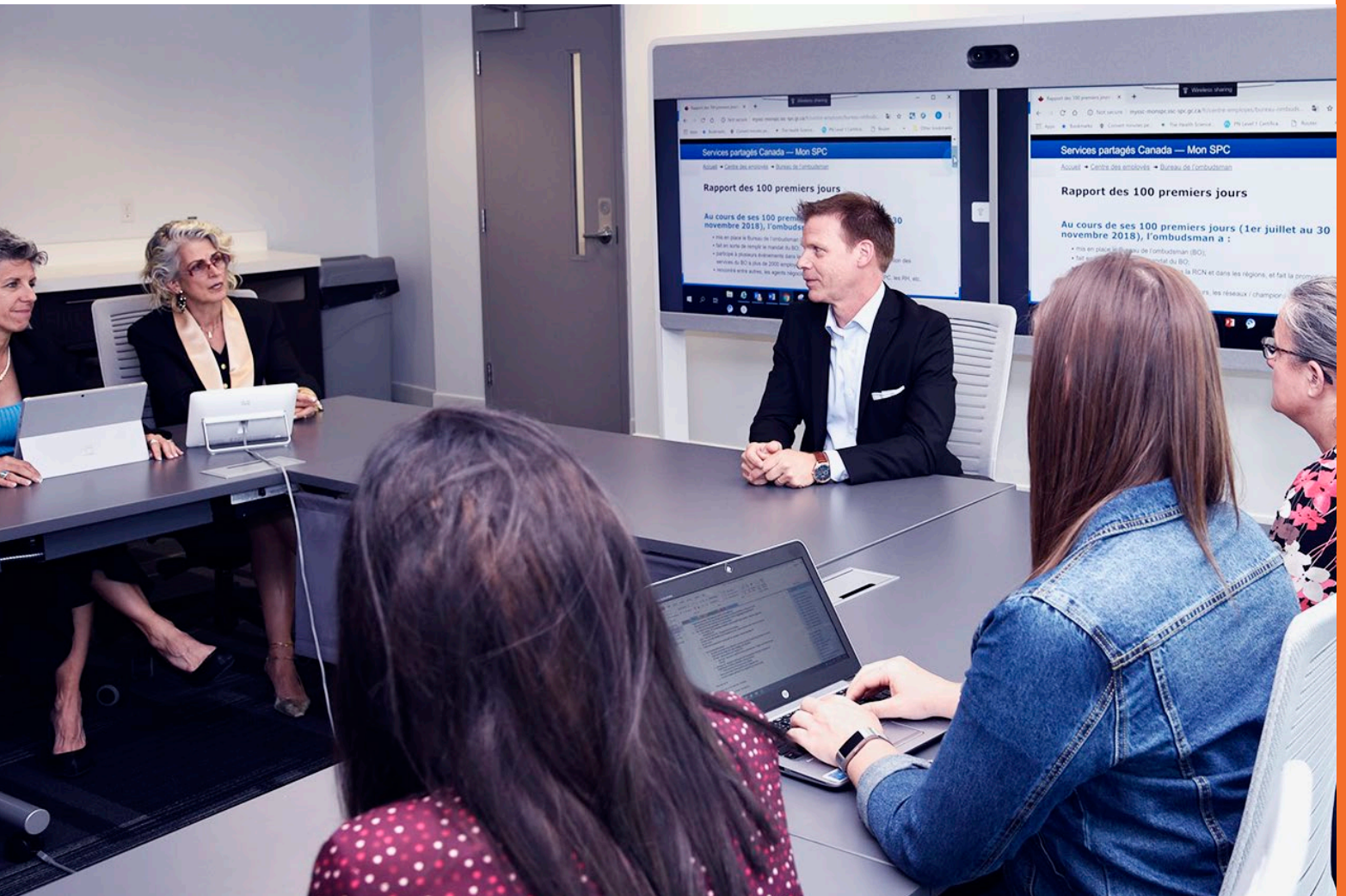
Conclusion

We heard many things from SSC employees who trusted us and told us what they thought. We have presented those recurring ideas that paint the picture of the OL situation within SSC as described to us.

We observed that the requirements and policies regarding language are unclear at all levels. This leads to confusion and misunderstanding. There is also a feeling that “the other” linguistic group is being favoured, yet both report similar challenges. Ultimately, bilingualism must be part of SSC’s culture although it is trying hard to put in place the means to move in that direction.

Without doubt, the oral C test dominated the dialogue. This is the central element that links training success to staffing, culture and operational capability while meeting the requirements of the Act and its supporting policies.

We have provided much to consider as SSC continues to evolve. Ultimately, SSC must get the parts right if it wants to achieve the desired end state of Enterprise 3.0.



Thanks

From the OL Dialogue Team

This is my first Special Report as Ombudsman and it was carried out in a relatively short timeframe for such a comprehensive undertaking. As usual, we were greatly assisted by many professionals across SSC and I wish to offer my thanks to those who were of such tremendous help.

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I know others helped us and, if we failed to mention them personally, know we are grateful and apologize.

And finally, to the many employees, supervisors, managers and senior staff who graciously gave of their time to tell us what they think about this important subject. YOUR voices matters!

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