

FEATURE STORY

Translation Services: An Economic Development Cluster in the Making?

In March, while college basketball fever swept the nation, some of the best minds in linguistics and translation quietly gathered in Salt Lake City for a Translation Summit, co-sponsored by the National Virtual Translation Center, the American Translators Association, and the BYU Center for Language Studies.

Approximately 100 people attended this first-of-its-kind event, which brought together translators, government representatives, and corporate executives to discuss translation services and U.S. government language policy. The fact the Summit was held in Utah is subtle recognition of the state's strength in translation services and follows on the National Security Agency's plans to open a foreign-language translation center here.

It's also no accident that Utah is home to the 300th Military Intelligence Brigade, the only military intelligence linguist brigade in the nation, with 700 members involved in translation, interpretation, and transcription services in the State of Utah alone.

"Translation services is an economic cluster in the making," says Fred Lange, director of procurement technical assistance centers (PTAC) for the Governor's Office of Economic Development (GOED). "Industry, government, and academia have recognized the increased demand for translation services and Utah is well-positioned to be a big player in this growing sector—we have the critical mass."

Jeff Mitchell, commander of the Utah National Guard's 300th Military Intelligence Brigade (Linguist) and director of translation services for NWB Technology, LLC, an 8(a) Small Business, says Utah is a largely untapped resource for translation services. "We are looking at growing that resource," he says. NWB, which is owned by the NorthWestern Band of Shoshone Nation, is one of a small handful of Utah companies currently tapping into the state's workforce of trained linguists.

NWB estimates that because of the LDS Church's missionary program, about 60 percent of the 10,000 missionaries returning to Utah each year speak a foreign language, which means the state has a trained workforce of about 6,000 linguists in over 100 languages replenished each year.

When the NSA came calling at BYU, Ray Clifford, director of BYU's Center for Language Studies (and chair for the Translation Summit), told the Deseret Morning News (link: <http://www.deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,635187139,00.html>) that "77% of the BYU student body (and 85% of its seniors) speak a second language." Furthermore, Clifford said 93% of the students who served as missionaries abroad for the LDS Church are at advanced or higher levels, compared to 47% at five major liberal arts colleges in the U.S.

Lange says Utah is the ideal place to provide translation services because those workers with language skills typically have "in country" experience and conversational abilities. "They are easier to train and can pick up additional skills quicker," he says. Mitchell adds that the large numbers of workers who speak multiple languages minimizes the logistical costs of running a translation services operation. "People are starting to recognize Utah for its reasonably-priced resources," he says. NWB typically pays translators anywhere from \$20 to \$30 an hour.

The National Virtual Translation Center (NVTC), a co-sponsor of the Summit, was created by Congress in February 2003, and acts as a brokerage firm for many different government agencies like, the Dept. of Defense, Dept. of Homeland Security, FBI, and others.

The American Translators Association (ATA), which also co-sponsored the Summit, was founded in 1959 and is the largest association of translators and interpreters in the U.S., with approximately 10,000 members.