

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 10: Recruiting and Hiring Processes for Government Jobs

[Intro music]

Jamie Morgan: Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection [00:30] to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

Hello, and welcome to Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers. We believe in the power of multilingualism, and in this podcast series we'll discuss how your language skills can help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government. By sharing experiences that link language study to potential federal careers, we'll teach you how to leverage your language skills [01:00] to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Jamie Morgan. Have you ever wondered what the recruiting and hiring processes look like for federal government jobs? In this episode we're going to talk about the specific steps of applying for federal government jobs.

Our guests today are Beth Schill, Tanja Szabo, and Matthew Myers.

Beth Schill is a Senior Manager of Employer Relations & Industry Advising at the Cawley Career Education Center at Georgetown University. In her [01:30] role, she works with employers and students to find opportunities in the government, non-profit, and education sectors.

Tanja Szabo is an Associate Professor at Georgetown University's School for Continuing Studies. She teaches mid-career professionals in the English for Heritage Language Speakers (EHLS) program.

Matthew Myers is the Assistant Director of Industry Advising at George Mason University. He currently works with undergraduate and graduate students looking to [02:00] get into the federal government as well as government agencies looking to recruit those populations.

Thank you so much for joining us and let's get started!

[Transition music]

Jamie: Can you just tell us a little bit about what you do?

Tanja Szabo: I am a career skills development instructor. I teach mid-career professionals on a National Security Education Program (NSEP) [02:30] scholarship called EHLS, English for

Heritage Language Speakers, which is a program that trains naturalized Americans and NSEP scholars for a career in the federal government. The scholars come from a variety of backgrounds and speak targeted critical languages that are useful in national defense capacities.

Matthew Myers: I work at George Mason University within University Career Services where I'm one of the Assistant Directors for Industry Advising. And I specifically work with all of our students who want to go into the government, but also with all of our government partners [03:00] as well. So I get to work with the employers on the government side to be able to hear about what they're looking for, what skills, what trades, what attributes they need out of the next generation of college students. And I get to hear from the students about what they're experiencing going through the process.

Beth Schill: I work at Georgetown University in the Cawley Career Education Center, which is the primary career center for all undergraduates at Georgetown. And similar to Matt, I sit on what we call our industry advising team as well. And I also work both with students, meeting them [03:30] one on one, talking about career objectives and trying to help them find places where they can use their skills and talents within public service and similarly work with many of the same recruiters in fact, that Matt works with, to try and understand from their perspective what they are looking for, with the hope of ultimately helping everyone match up so our employers are getting the talent that they need and students are finding meaningful, purposeful careers.

Jamie: So first let's talk about recruiting. What is your experience with [04:00] recruiting processes for the federal government?

Matthew: I think it's going to depend a little bit on what sector of the government you're looking at. It can be a very arduous process sometimes, but it's not an impossible process. And that's what I work with the students on quite a bit. There's a lot of particulars that you have to be able to hit along the way, but if you take your time, it is a very attainable option for anybody who wants to go in that direction. You might need to be prepared for a little bit longer of a process than if you're looking at the private sector. I think that's the part that catches people [04:30] quite a bit. But overall, the individual steps of the recruiting process I don't necessarily think are radically different than private sector.

Jamie: So are there any specific recruitment events that you would recommend students attend or perhaps any other resources related to recruitment that you would suggest students look into?

Tanja: I think there are an awful lot of hiring events that happen, particularly in the intelligence community. I know that National Ground Intelligence Center and a couple of other [05:00] of the agencies run these career fairs.

Beth: We do some specific programming, which is often also open to our alumni. We do a career fair in the spring semester that is also done in conjunction with about a dozen different consortium schools.

And we have seen some online fairs, particularly, I'd say within DHS (Department of Homeland Security) and the intelligence communities. Another organization that does a fair in the fall is called FAPAC [05:30] and FAPAC is the Federal Asian Pacific American Council and it's made up of federal employees. You don't have to identify as a member of the Asian Pacific community. But they do a career fair in the fall. They also do like a national training program that's, again, open to anyone. And like a lot of those are really cool because they bring in recruiters who are doing more on-the-spot hiring as opposed to saying, oh, go to our website and go to USAJOBS. And that's where I find some of [06:00] those are really helpful.

Matthew: I think the other thing that I wanted to add in is that I know the question asked, how can students be recruited in the federal government? But if you're a student listening to this, I wouldn't count on you being proactively recruited.

You still have to be the one to take the lead on this, unless you have, you know, maybe you're a doctoral student, you have a very, very specific niche area, I wouldn't count on somebody reaching out to you. You're going to have to do more of the legwork, you're going to have to reach out, apply, look into the different organizations, and showcase your skills [06:30] specifically.

Jamie: Do you have any advice for our listeners who may be in high school that are interested in starting to look into some of these opportunities?

Matthew: Yeah, I would say start early. As you're finishing up high school, there are internships that you can be able to do as early as senior year of high school. And some of the organizations that all three of us have talked about so far, their intern pool, the hiring deadlines can be as early as late August or early September. So if you're going to be an incoming college student, [07:00] you might have to apply if you want a certain highly sought-after internship within the first week of your college career, depending on how your calendar falls. So the more work you can do early on in getting those experiences the better. So there's no such thing as too early to start.

Tanja: There's a thing called a SMART scholarship, which is a scholarship for high school seniors to consider if they're going into STEM fields. It's a government-run program that gives scholarships to high school graduates [07:30] starting in their second year of university if they're going into a STEM field, and it pretty much guarantees employment in the federal government in those fields once they've graduated.

Jamie: What are KSAs and what do they mean for hiring?

Tanja: In terms of breaking down job descriptions, in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities, which is what KSAs stand for, it is a useful tool for people to start cataloging their jobs and their skills and their life skills, because it helps them to [08:00] break down their experiences, their work and life experiences, in terms of what knowledge that was brought into it, the skills that they learned, and how they were able to apply those skills towards an external end. OPM (Office of Personnel Management) also has a very useful list of core competencies, which also appear in job descriptions on USAJOBS and the core competencies are all the soft skills that the agencies and contractors are looking for to be able to [08:30] qualify you on things other than your hard skills.

Jamie: So can anyone speak to the skills questionnaires and what job seekers should know about them?

Beth: I would say it varies with the position that you're applying for. I often say it's a way for federal agencies to verify that what you put on your resume is in fact the truth. And I'd say for heritage language learners, it could get a little more specific into like if a job requires knowledge or [09:00] proficiency in a specific language, it may ask you a lot of different questions about how you've used that, in what context: I've learned about it in a classroom, or I've learned about it in a classroom and I've applied it in a classroom, learned about it and applied it on a job, or I am considered subject matter in this field, or fluent. And, like I said, it depends on the position. Some don't even have them.

Matthew: I think when you're filling them out, especially on those questions, [09:30] give yourself grace. Okay, maybe you're not, you know, 100% fluent in that language, but if you have a high level of proficiency, don't downgrade yourself all the way down to Intermediate at that stage.

Jamie: Let's talk a little bit about the salary system for federal government jobs. How can students find out how much a job pays and are there bonuses for language skills? What are some of the opportunities there for students that are bringing those skills to the table?

Matthew: Yeah so, the majority of government jobs are going to be on what's called the GS scale, [10:00] and that is publicly accessible information. So if you go on the OPM website, you can be able to have that full transparency of this is what this job band is going to be.

Tanja: Yeah, and I'll speak a little bit to the language bonuses. I can't speak for all federal jobs, but I do know that in the intelligence community, a lot of the three-letter agencies, CIA, FBI, DIA, those places do in fact pay bonuses for languages and they will also pay you to learn new languages if [10:30] you are able to get in the door at those agencies.

Jamie: What is a security clearance, and what is the process for getting one?

Matthew: So the way I would look at it is, the security clearance is the government's risk assessment of you and your reliability to be able to access classified information. So they're going to look at the full picture of who you are. I would heavily encourage you to look for an internship even that would have a clearance, because if you have a clearance through your internship, you are going to be so much more attractive to employers when you're looking for your full-time position, whether you stay at the same [11:00] organization or not, because it's going to save a lot of time, it's going to save the organization a lot of money.

Tanja: A practical tip in terms of working towards a security clearance as well, is – what you can do in advance – is to fill out an SF-86 form because if you do get a job offer from a federal agency and they require an SF-86, they're going to require it quickly. And for your purposes, filling out an SF-86 is going to [11:30] take a really long time because you have to dig up a lot of information about previous residences, people that you know, your bank finances, your travel history, you have to alert people that they might be contacted. So it's a very time-consuming process. Otherwise your job is actually going to be delayed for a considerable amount of time until you can get that document sorted out. Be mindful of noting down your travel dates, the connections that you have, the people that you [12:00] know, the foreign people that you interact with, because those things will also come into play.

Beth: And then even within the classified world, there's different levels and there's going to be different things that are expected of you as part of that process. I always tell students who meet with me, always be honest. So never try to hide a mistake. Even if it's something that you're not proud of, the way they do the system is set up where if you are caught lying, that is definitely a reason [12:30] you will not pass.

Jamie: Let's talk a little bit about resumes and how one should potentially structure their resume in order to be attractive as a candidate for a federal government job.

Tanja: The usual path to a federal job is through USAJOBS, and USAJOBS has a resume builder built into the website. I would strongly recommend that you use the template that they give you because uploading your own resume [13:00] will likely not have all of the categories that the USAJOBS template has including things like desired salary, supervisors you can contact, hours worked, whether you're available for part-time or full-time. It's a very specific format called the federal resume.

Matthew: I would say with federal resumes, if you're looking at the job description, they say you need one year of experience with this skill. They're going to systematically go through and count through all that and if it's not on there, they can't assume that you [13:30] have it. So be repetitive, be detailed. It might be a little annoying to do in the moment, but that's how you're going to make sure that you get through the systems and get in front of a hiring manager.

I think the big thing is give yourself a chance to be selected. If you can make the case for why you're going to be a good fit for it, make the case, be thorough. You give them the ability to say yes, rather than you self-select out. Not all skills have to be demonstrated directly through work experience. You can be able to highlight it through classroom experience in a project that you did, potentially.

Jamie: Do you have any [14:00] thoughts on how heritage language learners who are bringing those unique linguistic and cultural skills to the job search can present those skills and just really tailor their resumes to show those skills?

Tanja: In terms of what heritage language speakers bring to the federal government, the value of their experience is not quantifiable. I mean they bring so much to the federal government on so many different levels that the need for heritage language speakers is [14:30] monumental, but the job descriptions don't necessarily highlight that piece of the need from what I've seen. So first you have to read the job description really carefully. And also consider what being another language learner means in terms of a skill set, right? Like your patience, your systemic thinking, the way that you process information, those are all skills that are inherent to language learning.

Matthew: [15:00] The nice thing about these applications is you can be able to formulate a new section on your resume to be able to fit a certain category. You still need to make sure all the core pieces are there, but if you need to add any- maybe it's through volunteerism that you can be able to put in there how you've been able to apply your language skills. Maybe it's through a class project, a lot of different ways you can be able to showcase language skills and give it the opportunity to be showcased. And again, don't self-select out of that opportunity.

Jamie: Let's imagine that our listeners have been through [15:30] the entire application process, and now they are preparing for an interview. How should students prepare for an interview for a federal government job?

Beth: I think one thing to think about is that much like the application process, the interviews are very structured and they have rubrics on the back end where they have to ask the same questions of every person who makes it to the interview stage. And they're going to judge you on a rubric against how everybody else who comes in to interview also answers that same exact question. So you want to really go through the job description again, looking at what are the different skills they're looking for, knowing on your resume where you have experiences that align and being able to speak to the strongest example.

Tanja: A lot of federal government agencies are moving to digital interviews, which changes the dynamics of interviewing considerably. These are not Skype interviews. These are not face-to-face [16:30] interviews. It is literally you being prompted by the computer to answer a question in a two-minute response, and this is really nerve-racking and very impersonal, but on the flip

side, what's nice about this is that the interview is then saved and can be shopped around in different departments in the same agency. So it's kind of a mixed bag in terms of the benefits and the drawbacks of the digital interviews. [17:00] But I would recommend that you get comfortable with being on camera and speaking on camera because it's very possible that your interviews may be a digital one.

Jamie: So now we are imagining that the interview is over. What can students expect after the interview? What would happen after potentially receiving a job offer?

Tanja: Well, I think the first thing that would happen is a conditional job offer. And I strongly recommend [17:30] that even if you are over the moon about the salary that you're getting, you should still negotiate the salary because it's almost a test by the agency. If you don't negotiate your salary, they're going to think you're a pushover. So I would suggest negotiating the salary because after you get the job that can't be negotiated, there's no latitude for a change after the contract is signed.

Beth: I have one thing to add, too, in terms of salary [18:00] that I think folks don't consider is, what are the other benefits of the federal government? So like federal government has, in most cases, incredible work-life balance. You get all the federal holidays off. Usually, it's the 40-hour work week.

If you work for the DoD (Department of Defense), you actually get part of those 40 hours can be working out. You also have the student loan repayment that I know the Biden administration has been working to amend so that more people can take advantage of it, where if you're in federal service for, I think, [18:30] 3 to 10 years, it depends on the agency, you can get part, if not all, of your student loans repaid. So there's a lot of these other benefits that are actually pretty unique to the federal government that you really do not have in private industry. So I often tell students like, okay, maybe your salary, yeah, it's not going to be what you would get at a consulting firm or a finance firm or a private organization. But when you look at all the other benefits and working for an organization that has a mission that you can really get [19:00] behind, and when you stay in it longer term, like you're in the government for 10, 20, 30 years, your salary increases to an incredibly respectable level.

[transition music]

Jamie: Well, that's all for today's episode of the Language Pathways Podcast! Thanks for joining us, and a big thank you to our guests for [19:30] sharing their thoughts on recruiting and hiring for the federal government. Let's sum things up.

The guests talked about how recruiting events, scholarships, and internships are great ways to learn more about job opportunities and to get noticed by hiring managers. Being proactive early on can really help you succeed as you pursue a career in the federal government.

Highlighting your skills, including your unique skills as a heritage speaker, in a detailed way is important for your federal [20:00] resume, and you should also highlight how your knowledge, skills, and abilities, or KSAs, align with the requirements outlined in the job description. Finally, make sure to prepare for all parts of the federal government hiring process, including potentially getting a security clearance, and think about the many ways that you can demonstrate your skills when interviewing for a position.

In the next episode, we'll sum up what we learned in this podcast series about how to build connections between language learning and federal careers.

[20:30] To continue on your journey through federal career pathways for heritage language learners, check out the other episodes in this series. You can also find the resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our website. Thanks for joining us and see you next time!

[21:00] Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers was created and produced by the Center for Applied Linguistics. This podcast is one component of a project funded by the National Security Agency to develop and share materials highlighting federal career opportunities for heritage language learners of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, and Russian.

[Outro music]