

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 6: Language Learning, Volunteer, and Work Opportunities to Prepare for a Government Career

[Intro music]

Francesca Di Silvio: Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

[00:30] 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 to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Francesca Di Silvio. Have you ever wondered what experiences can help prepare you for a job in the federal government? In [01:00] this episode we're going to talk about language learning, volunteer, and work opportunities to prepare for a government career.

Our guests today are Britta Lyew, Olga Karsch, and Ban Babieh.

Britta Lyew is a recent graduate from the University of Alaska Fairbanks where she received her MA/MFA in English literature and creative writing. Her family speaks a variety of Hakka, and she has studied Mandarin Chinese. She currently works for EcoFriendly Foods as a market vendor.

Born in Saint Petersburg, Russia, [01:30] Olga Karsch moved to the United States in 2013. She worked as a Russian and Italian translator, interpreter, and language instructor before being accepted into the English for Heritage Language Speakers (EHLS) Program at Georgetown University. Upon graduating, Olga joined the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection agency as a Mission Support Specialist at the Workforce Management Division, where she works today.

Ban Babieh's current role is a Sanctions Licensing Officer at the Office of [02:00] Foreign Assets Control under the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence in Washington, DC. She started federal service in 2019 as an Asylum Officer in the New York Asylum Office under the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. As an Arabic speaker, Ban attended the EHLS program in 2019. She is also on the Board of Directors for the NSEP [National Security Education Program] Alumni Association, volunteering her time to support the NSEP Alumni Community.

Thanks so much for joining us, and let's get started!

[02:30] [Transition music]

Francesca: So, can you tell us a little bit about your experience searching for a federal government job and working in the federal government?

Ban Babieh: Not knowing from where to start with landing my federal government job was a real challenge for me. I learned about USAJOBS.gov through a family member. And [03:00] I applied for many positions, but I never received any response, until late in 2017 I got introduced to the National Language Service Corps and became a volunteer as an Arabic linguist. Through them I learned about the EHLS program, the English for Heritage Language Speakers, which is one of the National Security Education Programs that is funded by the Department of Defense.

The program itself was intense, but the learning [03:30] experience was phenomenal. It opened up many personal and professional development opportunities. I received an invitation to attend a job fair at George Washington University. At that time, USCIS were present in that job fair. And they were offering the asylum officer position. So I applied for that. And that was March 2019. I didn't hear back from them until June, maybe, and they invited me for an interview. [04:00] I did the interview, and from then, I started the process of tests and some additional information and documentation required until I received the official conditional offer.

By August 2019 and even before my official graduation, I landed my first federal government offer and was on board with the Department of Homeland Security at the New York Asylum Office before the end of that year.

Francesca: [04:30] Great, thank you. And Olga and Britta, can you also tell us about your experience searching for a federal government job and working in the federal government?

Olga Karsch: Sure. My journey to the federal government career was kind of long, but definitely there are things that I've learned from it and I'll be happy to share it today.

I have started applying for government jobs around 2017, 2018. I applied for many, many jobs mostly on USAJOBS but had very little luck. In 2019, I applied and got [05:00] accepted into a scholarship program funded through the National Security Education Program as a speaker of critical language. Upon completion of the program, I finally started landing interviews and I received actually several job offers from different agencies and government contractors as well before accepting one from Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, where I'm currently working.

So after completing the [NSEP] program, I received access to exclusive job listings, also special hiring authority [05:30] as a recipient of the scholarship, which basically kind of bumps you up on the applicant list. So it definitely, definitely was helpful.

Britta Lyew: So, my experience is in searching for a federal government job—I do not have one yet—this began relatively recently, so fall of 2021 where I browsed around USAJOBS.gov, and I also took the FSOT, the Foreign Service Officer Test for becoming a Foreign Service Officer for the State [06:00] Department. And I passed the written version of the test, but I did not pass what are called the QEPs, basically an essay writing portion. So I didn't pass that, but I aim to retake it again in October, which is one year from when I first took it.

Francesca: And how have you, and how are you now currently trying to prepare for a government career?

Britta: So right now, in terms of language, just studying a little bit every day. [06:30] I have a few tutors who I work with to make sure that I can get my speaking up to a polished enough point. And I've been trying to read as much source material, particularly news articles, to make sure that that stays sharp.

In terms of other ways I've been preparing outside of language, really just kind of looking through the job listings. My parents, both of them are federal employees, I've been talking to them about the process and I would recommend doing that. See if you know [07:00] anyone with whom you can network, obviously try to do that.

Francesca: And what about you, Ban and Olga, how did you prepare for a federal career?

Ban: Personally, I worked so hard on improving my federal resume, using many tools that the EHLS program instructors shared with us. I kept my notes from my classes when in school and referred to them whenever needed for guidance. And throughout the process, I communicated with my instructors as well, and with other employees [07:30] within the federal government.

Olga: Well part of the EHLS program, we were also provided with the career development skills class, which basically helped us polish our resumes, also our interviewing skills as well. So I would say, I would recommend focusing on these two things for sure. Because federal resume is very different from, you know, the private sector resumes.

Start also compiling information about your family, travel, contacts. For the federal [08:00] job, you will likely need to fill out the paperwork to complete the pre-employment or background process. Even if you don't have a security clearance they will still ask you to fill out all those documents and it will be really handy and helpful if you have all this information ready.

Francesca: And can you talk about any language learning opportunities that can help someone prepare for a government career?

Ban: I would say the National Security Education Program offers multiple scholarships for language learning.

Britta: So [08:30] one thing that I've been using quite frequently is this platform called italki, which one can use to find tutors in language. In my case, I've been using it to find Mandarin tutors to talk with every, you know, couple of times a week.

As far as study abroad opportunities go, a few of my colleagues applied for Fulbright positions to go study abroad and one of them went to Mongolia, one of them went to Kyrgyzstan, I believe. And they both said those were fantastic opportunities to learn [09:00] the language in the field, how it's actually used outside of a textbook scenario.

Olga: I would definitely recommend looking into scholarships like the Boren Scholarship and the Critical Language Scholarship program. They provide funding to U.S. citizen students at different levels of proficiency to study critical language—critical to United States interest languages.

You can also find schools, local schools like there's schools in DC, like Global Language Network, where you can take classes for free. And I think it's very [09:30] helpful. You can also, I guess, teach and volunteer to teach so you can practice your language skills and you can take free classes. So I think it's a great opportunity as well if you don't get into any of the scholarship programs.

Francesca: Okay. Thanks, that's great. It's a great segue to my next question. If you have anything to add about any volunteer opportunities that you would recommend to help prepare for a government career?

Ban: Definitely joining the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps. So for example, like the AmeriCorps, they pay stipend [10:00] to cover the normal expenses, living expenses. While the Peace Corps it's internationally, and the students or volunteers will receive a monthly in-country living allowance that will be used for their expenses as a volunteer. So these are the most two well-known opportunities for Americans.

Olga: I just wanted to mention one thing about Peace Corps and AmeriCorps that I've heard. There are some restrictions if you plan to join the intelligence [10:30] community at some point in the future and if that's what you're interested in, there are some restrictions on how many years should pass before you can actually join the intelligence community after you complete the volunteer service with Peace Corps. So just keep that in mind. Yeah, but definitely, they are great opportunities.

I would say there's also, I think many federal agencies offer volunteer opportunities, you just have to go to their website and look at that and then maybe check on USAJOBS as well because they publish unpaid internship [11:00] opportunities as well. I remember seeing that United Nations also offers some volunteer opportunities. And finally, I think if you are confident, if you have skills and experience with translation and interpreting, you can also sign up to become like a part of the National Language Service Corps.

Ban: Yeah, because they provide like volunteer opportunities for—like they need it at the spot a linguist, or interpretation services. So they will reach out to you and offer you the job.

And [11:30] if you would like to be somewhere, just engage with that community and volunteer some of your time to get to where you want to be. Just volunteer within the community, like worship houses, other events, meetups. You can find thousands of those meetups online. So just find the time to go and attend and engage with people, and you will be surprised of the results of these [12:00] activities. It's small activities, but it adds up to your experience.

Francesca: Can you share any advice you have about work opportunities to help someone prepare for a government career, or ways to find professional positions and prepare for them?

Olga: Yeah, I would say internships for the federal government they, again, they're usually some on USAJOBS. There are several programs, there's a pathways program. They offer paid internships to recent grads, undergrads or recent graduates and current students.

In terms [12:30] of job opportunities, I would also look at the federal contracting companies because, you know, it's easier to get in, they have a variety of different career field options. The hiring process is a lot easier and faster, and it's kind of a good transition into federal government.

Ban: And it will be beneficial also to seek mentorship, for example, mentorship programs. Or you can reach out to people in similar positions and do like an [13:00] informational interview or just meet for coffee, invite them for a coffee and chat with them, ask them questions. How did they reach to their—how they got that position? It will happen at some point.

Francesca: So, what additional ways would you recommend for students to build their resumes and be able to show their language skills when they're looking for a federal government job?

Olga: I would say, take language proficiency test if you [13:30] can, so you can include the scores on your resume to make you more competitive. Again, invest in your resume, polish your resume. Take professional development courses, like writing courses, public speaking courses.

Britta: Yeah, I would definitely second taking proficiency tests. And for Mandarin, that would be the HSK test. If you can get a solid HSK score on your resume, a numerical quantity, that would definitely stand out.

I would also second resume building workshops, like [14:00] especially if your university offers it, like a university's career development center, usually they provide—in some cases free for students, in some cases free to the public, one-on-one workshops, which are very, very helpful. I've taken resumes to my graduate institution. They've been stellar.

Francesca: Britta, you mentioned you have taken the Foreign Service Exam, which is quite a challenging exam, and are planning to take it again. Is there anything you can share about how to prepare or what people might need to know about that exam?

Britta: Yeah, so [14:30] the FSOT, so Foreign Service Officers Test, is a multiple choice exam that tests an individual's both substantial knowledge and situational judgment. All parts of it, especially the substantial knowledge, it's sort of like a basically a liberal arts exam. Like how well do you know world history, economics, political science, some mathematics? And then for the situational judgment, it's a lot of hypothetical scenarios. Like, okay, say [15:00] situation x occurs at a U.S. embassy, what should you do?

And for studying for that, what I found very helpful for the world history etc. portion was some Crash Course videos on YouTube, which are like other lecture series on YouTube, those are very helpful. There are also a few good books available. One is *Inside a U.S. Embassy*, which gives the reader an insider's perspective of what are the various positions and departments within the U.S. embassy.

Francesca: And is there anything else you would like to add about your experience searching for [15:30] federal jobs?

Britta: So one thing I'd like to add for Mandarin in particular, is the State Department at least is looking for a higher level of competency of speaking and listening versus reading and writing. Basically, what they're looking for is what's called a 2-1 for Mandarin. So speaking at 2, given the Interagency Language Roundtable grade. And for reading, they're only looking for elementary proficiency. So definitely focus as much as you can on listening and speaking.

Ban: [16:00] Well, I would say in general, the federal government jobs, it's all there, on USAJOBS. It's just the search is not easy because it depends on who you are and what you would like to do in the future and what you choose for your career path. So write down your goals and match it up with your skills, until you see what position or what you actually love to do.

Olga: I would also [16:30] say from my experience, I would definitely recommend looking into ways to get into scholarship and maybe internship programs sponsored by the federal government agencies. Because it will make you first a more competitive candidate, and also upon completion of those programs, usually you'll get help either with your resume building or you will get access to exclusive job listings. USAJOBS wasn't as helpful for me just because they prioritize veterans a lot and current federal [17:00] employees as well before regular applicants. Just keep at it because you never know what will be the perfect fit.

[Transition music]

Francesca: 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 Ban, Olga, and Britta for sharing their thoughts on finding a federal job. Let's sum things up.

[17:30] First, we learned that there are many different ways to prepare for a government career. We learned about specific volunteer, internship, and scholarship opportunities that may help you get your foot in the door with the federal government. Finally, we learned that once you're ready to apply for a full-time job, you should make sure that your federal resume is polished and reflects what you have learned from these experiences.

In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by talking about how people use tests to demonstrate their language proficiency [18:00] for federal government positions.

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!

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers was created and produced by the [18:30] 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]