

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 8: Networking and Searching for Government Jobs

[Intro music]

Jamie Morgan: 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 get you 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, Jamie Morgan. Have you ever wondered how to find a government job that uses your language skills? In this [01:00] episode we're going to talk about networking and searching for federal government jobs.

Our guests today are Alexandra Johnston, Hyejin Hickey, Matilda Rial, and Eman Hasan.

Alexandra Johnston is a sociolinguist, career management specialist, and faculty member in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. She directs the Masters in Language and Communication, an applied sociolinguistics program that prepares graduates to leverage their language and linguistics training [01:30] in business, government, nonprofit, and tech organizations. Dr. Johnston has coached hundreds of linguists and language professionals through successful career transitions.

Hyejin Hickey is a language acquisition professional with expertise in Department of Defense foreign language education. In the past 14 years, she has supported the U.S. Special Operations Command's Special Warfare Center and School, the U.S. Army 1-1 Special Forces Group and Detachment 1, the U.S. Air Force [02:00] 43rd Intelligence Squadron in Okinawa, Japan, and the Defense Language and National Security Education Office, in DC, and the U.S. 7th Air Force in South Korea. Hyejin is a native Korean speaker. She was born and lived in Korea until she came to the United States at age 20.

Matilda Rial is a 2020 recipient of the English for Heritage Language Speakers (EHLS) scholarship at Georgetown University. She is currently the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion with the National Security Education Program [02:30] (NSEP) Alumni Association. Matilda is fluent in both Sudanese Arabic and English. She is continuing her education in artificial intelligence and machine learning with the goal of creating more efficient language solutions for U.S. military forces.

Eman Hasan currently works as a contractor with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). She works as a disaster assistant agent helping register disaster survivors and answering questions about their applications. Eman previously worked with Amentum, [03:00] a contracting company to the U.S. federal government, as an Arabic Linguist.

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

Jamie Morgan: So first, can you please tell us a little bit about what you do.

Alex Johnston: Yes. I have a university position where I can be a faculty member who teaches in a department of linguistics, which is my academic area of expertise, so I have a PhD in linguistics. And importantly, I can also be a career mentor who connects students and people in career [03:30] transition with the world of work beyond academia.

Hyejin Hickey: I'm a business consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton. Because I work for a big consulting firm, they support many government clients. So I started at Northern Virginia, DC area. Then I moved to Korea to work as a language and change manager for the U.S. Air Force. Now I'm living in Honolulu, Hawaii supporting a couple of different DoD clients here.

Matilda Rial: [04:00] I'm a trained physician from South Sudan. I left my country because of the war. And I came to the United States in the late nineties. And in 2019, one of my friends told me about the English for Heritage Language Speakers which I immediately applied and I got accepted. And I did the program at Georgetown for eight months in 2020. After that I was able to [04:30] work with the Library of Congress as a researcher. Currently, I am working as a public health advisor at the CDC quarantine station at Dulles International Airport.

Eman Hasan: I currently work as a contractor with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA. I work as a disaster assistant agent helping registered disaster survivors. I'm also in the hiring process for a position with DHS. And I've also worked as a government contractor as an Arabic linguist.

Jamie: [05:00] Great, thank you! Now, can you tell us a little bit about your experience searching for federal government jobs? How did you find your job and what did you find most helpful when searching?

Eman: Yes, sure. I've always been on the lookout for federal government jobs, so LinkedIn is a major source for me. I also use the job search websites that we have out there, like Glassdoor, Indeed, USAJOBS. USAJOBS is an awesome source specifically for someone looking for federal government jobs. That's your go-to. [05:30] They always have positions. I've been always on the lookout for jobs on different websites.

Matilda: Since I came to the United States, I have been trying to get into the Centers for Disease Control—CDC—not only CDC, but other government agencies that deal with public health, like FDA, NIH. However, I was not able to get the recruiters to offer me an interview or [06:00] refer my application to the hiring manager. After completing the [EHLS] program, I was actually able to get interest from the federal agencies. There is a specific way that the federal agencies are looking for—they are looking for the skills, knowledge, and abilities, and somebody who is not familiar with those steps will not be able to have a successful application with the federal agency and I think that is important.

Hyejin: When I started [06:30] job searching, I didn't know what to do. And one thing that I could think of was, oh, what can I do with my language skills? Oh, I can teach language. That's how I started. Then as I interacted with other people in the field and started supporting different clients who do different types of work, I got to expand my skill set. When I was hired at the firm, you know, I got to connect with [07:00] people that know this field so well. So, my mentor advised me to hey, why don't you do the change management certification. So I did that. So thanks to that, I was able to get plugged into this linguist/change manager position. Once you put your foot in the door, then you have these opportunities to learn about other skills on top of your language skills.

Jamie: Alex, based on your experience helping [07:30] students search for federal government jobs, what do you think is most helpful when searching?

Alex: I think that you should use a lot of different means to search for these jobs in federal government. One way to search for federal government jobs is to hop onto USAJOBS.gov and it's where you'll find civil service jobs posted. One thing to remember about USAJOBS.gov is that they don't hire through that portal for the intelligence agencies. So, FBI, [08:00] CIA, or NSA, those are agencies where they really make use of people with critical language skills and linguistic skills. So those agencies have their own websites and you have to look directly on those agency websites to find information about careers they offer, and they have their own hiring portal there.

Jamie: Thank you for sharing. Before we move on, would anyone like to share additional recommendations for our listeners who are job searching?

Eman: I think I [08:30] do remember signing up for a—I think it was one of those recruiter websites. I signed up to receive jobs through this recruiter and they have been offering me jobs. They did have my resume on file. So, whenever they found any appropriate or suitable positions, they would contact me. So for example, there was a time period when I was like, kind of in between jobs and I was encouraged by some friends to like, sign up with temp jobs, even, you know, these companies that [09:00] find you temporary jobs or, you know, jobs with contractors and they keep your resume on file for when they need you. So, they don't really forget about you. They really keep you in mind whenever they have like a suitable position that pops up.

Hyejin: I noticed some recruiters use actually LinkedIn to search people for positions. So when you are building your profile, making sure it highlights your skillset. But share your experience in a really succinct way that [09:30] highlights the high-level bullet points of what you've done and what you want to do.

Alex: You can set up an automated search with keywords. Maybe it's "linguist," maybe it's "languages," maybe you have an interest in education or international education or study abroad. Try different combinations of keywords in USAJOBS.gov, set up those automated searches, and see what you get back. You really can't substitute the research and the time you put into reading these [10:00] announcements, getting familiar with the language, and getting familiar with the process.

Jamie: Great, thank you. Now let's talk about your experience with networking when it comes to searching for a federal government job. How did you find networking opportunities and what did you find helpful about networking?

Matilda: I think networking is key. And when I first started the EHLS program, we had an opportunity to network with the Boren Forum—now it's called NSEP Alumni [10:30] Association. And I joined it as a board member and I think doing that, I was able to expand my network and I'm still expanding my network. It's very important to be able to be connected and get the information, the right information, the right network, to be able to get in those positions.

Hyejin: Yeah, I think networking is absolutely important. Not just from connecting with the people, connecting with the opportunity, [11:00] but it's also from learning standpoint as well, because when you network, when you see what other people are doing, you can broaden your scope. You can broaden what to look for when you search for your job. You can utilize your digital networking tools—it's what I'm still using.

Jamie: Alex, is there anything you'd like to share about how students can find networking opportunities and what you find helpful about networking?

Alex: A lot of agencies in the federal government do host [11:30] both online and in-person events. So, if you look at the agencies' websites, you'll see, you can look under events in their careers tab, and you'll see that they have a lot of online events that could be in the form of career fairs or workshops. Engaging in networking opportunities is really important and there are so many ways to do it. It's not necessarily going to a career fair.

One of the best ways to network is to do [12:00] informational interviews. Informational interviews are a really key tool in learning about different organizations and about different roles in organizations. You reach out to somebody who works in an organization of interest or has worked there, and you talk to them. You talk to them about their role and about what they

did. And you let them know a bit about yourself, about what skills you have and what might be a position that might—may be a good fit for [12:30] you in that organization. You let them tell you about other people and other positions you might want to research. And I always recommend that when you leave and when you're closing your informational interview, you ask, “Who else should I speak with? Knowing what you know about me now, knowing about my interests, who do you recommend that I talk with? And may I use your name?” So, this is how you can start growing your network from just one [13:00] person.

Jamie: Does anyone have additional recommendations for our listeners who are interested in networking?

Eman: Yes, absolutely. So, the EHLS program has given me a very wide opportunity to network with recruiters directly, especially from the federal government and government contractors, and talk about like what the jobs they had entailed, for example, things like security clearance processes, things like that. But I'm a pretty proactive person. I always have my LinkedIn, you know, up to date [13:30] with information. I try to take as many certificates as possible. You know, I just work on refining my skills every now and then.

Matilda: Keep an open mind and if you have a lead, connect with that person. If there is any career event, attend those career events and through these connections, you'll be able to know about who is hiring at the federal agency. Take that step. Sometimes it's uncomfortable but get [14:00] out of your comfort zone, reach out. And if somebody doesn't respond to you, don't get discouraged, send another email. Be proactive.

Hyejin: For the people that I met through volunteer events or any kind of networking events, they share their resume with me on LinkedIn. And I cannot respond to them all the time, but I read through their resumes. And then I see any positions that fit to their backgrounds and then I share the posting. Sometimes I put their names in the referrals through [14:30] our referral program within the firm. So yes, please reach out to people. Don't be afraid.

Another great way to build your network is a volunteer opportunity. So I volunteered through NLSC—the National Language Service Corps—you get to work with a lot of its DoD clients. And I also volunteered as a translator curriculum developer for some of the military organizations. So volunteer opportunity [15:00] is I believe a great way to build your network and connect with people.

Alex: Try with starting with your inner circle and starting with people who've graduated from your same high school or graduated from your same university or degree program. So all the people that you know, your family, your friends, your friends of friends—see who knows anybody who works in an area of interest in the federal government, then somebody who uses these [15:30] special language skills or critical language skills in the federal government. Don't feel like you're imposing or taking someone's time or making a really big ask of someone

because for the most part, people who are working are used to these kinds of questions, they're used to people reaching out and they do want to give back. And also remember, it's not about asking for a job. That's not what you're doing when you chat [16:00] with people about what they do. It's about learning.

Jamie: Great, thank you! Is there anything else that you'd like to highlight about how to successfully network and search for federal government jobs?

Hyejin: Don't get discouraged. It can be really challenging and sometimes intimidating when you are looking for government work. Just continuously network, continuously try—at the end of the day, all you need is just that one opportunity. So be confident [16:30] and go out there and put yourself out there and meet other people and bring your culture, knowledge, and language to the work that you want to.

Alex: You may have to start with a job that isn't your perfect job, but you'll have opportunities for growth and development and learning the system. And one way to do that is taking a contract position. It's a way to prove yourself and to, again, build [17:00] relationships with the people you're working with so that they know what you can do. They'll be able to recommend other opportunities. And that's one way to get your foot in the door and be open to other career pathways once you're on the inside.

Eman: It definitely is a plus when you have a second language. Federal government agencies are always looking for individuals who have the additional language skills. Don't underestimate your skills. [17:30] Work on your federal resume. That's a very important factor because it is kind of like the first impression that you're showing these recruiters. Don't hesitate to volunteer, take part in internships. There are also so many pathway and scholarship programs that the federal government has to offer. So definitely take advantage of all those programs that they have out there. And most importantly, network and attend job fairs.

Matilda: I would just like to reiterate when searching for government [18:00] jobs, take the advice of your mentors and the instructors because they have the experience and that will help you with getting the federal government job. And also, network—network is very important.

Alex: I think just go for it. Take those small risks of opening your mouth to talk to somebody or sending a LinkedIn message or sending an email [18:30] or talking to that friend of a friend—just that small risk could give you lots of useful information and make you feel reassured that people want to help you, that there are opportunities for you and that there are ways to learn about them.

[Transition music]

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 [19:00] Alexandra Johnston, Hyejin Hickey, Matilda Rial, and Eman Hasan for sharing their thoughts on finding a federal job. Let's sum things up:

All guests agree, you should be proactive in searching for federal government jobs by going on government agencies' websites, USAJOBS.gov, signing up to recruiting agencies' emails and temp agencies, and looking at peoples' careers and people to connect with on LinkedIn. Networking is key, and there are events you can attend where people will be happy to share their email. [19:30] When following up, you can ask for an informational interview to learn more about different careers and grow your network. When looking for a job, make sure to expand your search terms beyond the language you speak and highlight different skills and accomplishments you have. Internships, volunteering, and education will give you great experience that you can highlight when applying for a job.

In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by talking about some roles in the federal government that require language [20:00] skills.

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!

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[Outro music]