

# Workplace



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

Anne Whitten has been running Anne Whitten Bilingual Human Resources since 1974. She specializes in recruiting English- and French-speaking employees.

## In the business of bilingualism

**Pioneer opened Toronto's first bilingual personnel agency**  
Former French grammarian says there's a shortage of workers in GTA

CURTIS RUSH  
STAFF REPORTER

A pioneer in recruiting bilingual employees in Toronto is celebrating more than 30 years of business this year.

Anne Whitten opened the city's first bilingual personnel agency in 1974 and her success has paved the way for other bilingual agencies that followed suit.

"I still pride myself in being the pioneer and still with a good reputation," says the 70-year-old, who is still at the helm of Anne Whitten Bilingual Human Resources Inc. The boutique service, which operates on Edward St. in the University Ave. and Dundas St. area, specializes in recruiting workers who speak both English and French.

"Anne was the first to recognize the need for a bilingual-specific service," says Suzanne Hague, a former placement professional and now the firm's general manager.

"It is also interesting to note that many competitors have come and gone over the last 30 years. She has endured throughout all economies and not everyone can say that. It is different with the multinationals in the industry because they are part of a large group and have more resources. We are a small, independently owned business in a highly competitive industry. Our survival has been the result of exceptional service and value to clients and candidates."

Whitten, a former French grammar teacher at Toronto's Loretto Abbey

Catholic Secondary School and Haver-gal College, had a vision to serve a niche market in Toronto, concentrating solely on English and French-speaking candidates. While there is a demand for Cantonese and Mandarin language skills in Toronto, which has the second-highest Chinese population in Canada next to Vancouver, Whitten has concentrated on speakers of Canada's other official language.

"I don't think at my stage of life I want to branch out," she says.

"The working language of the GTA is primarily English," Hague says. "However, with many head offices here in Toronto there is a need for bilingual staff to service national business."

A large portion of bilingual staff is hired in the capacity of customer services representatives. This crosses all industries and sectors. However, any company that is national in scope will look for key bilingual personnel — in human resources, sales, accounting, sales management, translation, Web design, proofreading, financial analysis or help-desk support.

Some positions, such as customer service personnel, require excellent oral or conversational French but not written French, whereas some positions demand excellent oral and written communication skills.

"Many of our positions are for translators," Hague says. "Being bilingual is not enough. You need formal training and education in order to assess wheth-

er or not a translator is the calibre the client is looking for. You need someone on staff with the credentials to make a valid assessment. In our case, Anne has done translation herself and is highly literate. She does all of these assessments. This is what clients pay for when they use an employment agency."

The business, which began in 1974 after two years of operation as a translation agency, has moved about four times around the city, "not bad for more than 30 years," Whitten says.

Whitten sold the Adelaide Translation Agency to her sister, Jacqueline Klym, who still operates that service.

"To combine both was a little difficult," said Whitten. "I decided to devote more time to the personnel side. One thing led to another and 30 years later, I'm still here."

She remembers that her first big client was Swiss-based Hoffmann La Roche, a pharmaceutical firm, which needed almost the whole Toronto office staffed immediately.

"I had 30 people to hire, including the chauffeur for the president," she said.

Whitten says she has always drawn on her experience as a teacher of French language and grammar.

"It was a tool I could really work with. Business has changed over the years, but the quality of the language still has to be there. That's why these days it's far more difficult to find good people because they don't teach anything anymore — whether it's English or

French."

"But we work with any type of business really because we find they need bilingual people because more than likely they will deal with Quebec. There's a great deal of business between the two provinces so we need valuable people. We also have a growing francophone community in Toronto."

Whitten, a Belgium native who has been in Canada 44 years, says sometimes companies will be happy with hiring someone who has only a small working knowledge of French but a strong command of English.

"English is never going to take second place. In fact, it's going to be the first language around the world," Whitten said.

Anne Whitten Bilingual Human Resources Inc. fills more than 200 permanent positions annually throughout the GTA. There are a number of temporary employees on assignment with clients.

"There is a shortage of qualified, bilingual candidates in the GTA," Hague says. An estimated 1,000 positions needing bilingual speakers are currently unfilled in the region.

Whitten says the difficulty stems from "our education system, which isn't what it used to be" when writing and grammar were compulsory.

Last year, Whitten, who co-founded the Canadian Belgian Business Association, was decorated by the government of Belgium for her outstanding work for the francophone community of Toronto.

"I am now an officer of the Order of Leopold II," she says proudly.