



Lessons from Nevada: Establishing a Local Translator/Interpreter Organization

By Judy A. Jenner and Karen M. Tkaczyk

There are many states that do not have organizations for translators and interpreters, or else have dormant ones, even though there might be a significant number of language professionals in the area. Until recently, Nevada could count itself among them.

We had both been thinking—separately, 400 miles apart—that Nevada needed a professional organization of this type. Therefore, we counted ourselves fortunate when we discovered that several talented and committed linguists had already founded such a group.¹ The Nevada Interpreters and Translators Association (NITA) was incorporated in April 2008, and in a short time its board of directors had created a very solid foundation on which to build. We joined NITA's board a few months after its inception, and are proud to say that the group has worked very hard and made significant progress in broadening the association.

We have learned a lot, and we thought it might be beneficial to share our experience with other potential

organizers and organizations-to-be. What follows is a nonexhaustive to-do list for those who would like to start an organization in their state.

First Things First

Research: The first task is to find out if there is already an organization in your state/region. Consider both interpreter- and translator-specific organizations, and try to obtain information on whether anyone else has attempted to form an organization in your area. If so, what challenges did they face? Is there significant interest in this type of group among local professionals? Contact national organizations and ask if they have any contacts in your area.

Learn From Other Organizations: Nevada is a very large state, and we would eventually like to have active

sections in both southern (Las Vegas) and northern (Reno, Carson City) Nevada, and even in the outlying areas in the longer term. The Carolina Association of Translators and Interpreters (CATI) has been most kind in advising us on how their organization works well over a large region. Other organizations, such as the Northern California Translators Association (NCTA), have also helped out by sharing their experiences and lending advice about how to get started. The main thing is not to be afraid to ask for help. This is a very friendly industry and colleagues are frequently delighted to offer assistance.

Use ATA's Resources: ATA is very supportive of regional associations and has been extremely helpful. During last year's conference in Orlando, we

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attended a session on “Recharging Your Local Chapter” and learned a lot from ATA Chapter Committee Chair Caitilin Walsh and representatives of other organizations. It was a great forum for exchanging ideas and getting invaluable input from other, more established groups. Both Caitilin and Jamie Padula, ATA’s chapter and division relations manager, have been valuable resources. (You can find their contact information on ATA’s website, www.atanet.org.)

Create a Good Team: An organization is only going to be as good as its team members. You do not need many: a few committed people will be enough in the beginning. Eventually, you will want to form a board of directors, but more on that in a moment.

Administration

Write Bylaws: This process can be an intimidating task, particularly if no one on the team has previous experience. Start by reading the bylaws of other organizations, which can usually be found on their websites. These can provide you with a basic template for how such documents should be structured. Remember that bylaws are not meant to be set in stone. Therefore, it is important to include a provision in the bylaws allowing for provisions to be made as necessary.

State Administration: Incorporate the organization in your state. Of course, the process varies, so find out what your state requires and collect the necessary paperwork. In our case, we needed items such as bylaws, records of meetings, and copies of NITA’s promotional material. Once NITA was approved for 501(c)6 status (see next item), the board had to follow up with Nevada’s department of taxation.

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IRS Administration: Apply for an EIN (employment identification number)² and file for 501(c)6 status.³ Professional translation and interpreting associations fall into the category of business leagues, and are eligible for tax exemption under the 501(c)6 status.⁴ NITA had a growth phase where several founding members were in favor of our association becoming a 501(c)3 association (a charity), but with ATA’s advice and after reading IRS documents on the subject, the board reached a consensus to file for 501(c)6 status. You should note that there is a 15-month period from the date of incorporation during which it is best to file Form 1024 for recognition of exemption.⁵ There are possible ways around this for those who are not sure they can file within this period, but that timeline was not too hard for us to meet.

Board Management

Create a Board of Directors: This is the most crucial element to the organization’s success. You should be realistic. Your core people will be doing all the work, at least initially. In the beginning, try to recruit two or three officers. Ideally, you will have a president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and perhaps others with specific roles (e.g., professional development, membership, and public relations). NITA started out with just six people. Be sure to invite people to the board who are committed to helping the organization grow, and who are not afraid of rolling up their sleeves.

Establish Criteria for Board Officers: Who would you like to have on the board? Professional translators or interpreters only? Students? Corporations? Decide what works for you. In our case, we have professional translators and interpreters, and one translation student, who have all worked in the profession for several years. We invite prospective board members to send us their résumés and tell us why they would like to join the board and what they could contribute. We have thorough “job descriptions” to help people understand what each position involves, and encourage all members to attend board meetings to see how the association functions.

Establish Ground Rules for Expectations: How many hours are you expecting board members to put in? By setting expectations, fellow language professionals will be able to decide if serving on the board or on a committee is something they will be able to fit into their schedules.

Board Meetings: In the bylaws, you will have decided the minimum number of board meetings to hold each year and minimum attendance requirements for board members.

Use Robert’s Rules of Order: This is another of the “don’t reinvent the wheel” concepts. Robert’s Rules are the standard for how to run board meetings, hold votes, make motions, etc. Understanding them is a great way to hold efficient and productive meetings.⁶

Membership

Determine a Membership Fee Structure: Will you have student members? Corporate memberships? Discounted memberships? We went with \$35 for a basic membership, as we are a very young organization. We also have student and corporate memberships.

Recruit Members: We looked at ATA's directory listings for Nevada and wrote notes to all the members in our area, encouraging them to join NITA. In addition, we contacted as many other translator/interpreter organizations as we could.

Building the Foundation

Open a Bank Account: The treasurer is the one who should handle the finances and have authorization to sign checks on behalf of the organization. Be sure to keep all organization finances separate from any personal finances.

Decide How to Communicate: This was somewhat of a challenge for us. We needed to decide which e-mail addresses to use, and whether webmail or direct configuration was most effective and secure. Thanks to our information technology guru, we all have @nitaonline.org addresses as well as our other business e-mail addresses. We also have a great online forum called The Cantina, where board members can exchange ideas. It is separate from e-mail, and we all have to remember to go there several times a week, since our organization moves pretty fast. Once we figured out the best way to handle e-mail communications—who should receive which e-mails, who does not need to be copied—we were able to control the sometimes overwhelming flow of e-mails and replies and streamline the process.

Create a Good Website/Find an Information Technology Guru: The website does not have to be fancy, and can contain just the basics (About Us/Contact Us/Board/Events). A basic

Raise money by offering workshops and, if possible, have the speaker donate his or her time. Tracy Young, NITA's founder and immediate past president, donated 40 hours of her

Offering some type of professional development activity is one of the most important functions of a professional organization.

site can be set up with Google Sites (which can also host the domain for roughly \$10/year). Ideally, you should have associated e-mail addresses for each member. If your budget permits, hiring an information technology person to help you with the site is ideal. If not, try to find a board member with these skills.

Added Value

Design a Logo: We chose a simple design with our state's outline and our organization's name inside of it. We were able to use our personal networks to receive several free concept submissions from people with graphic design skills, and offered a free membership to the individual whose design was chosen.

ATA Affiliation: Most new organizations cannot meet the requirements for becoming an ATA chapter, but becoming an ATA affiliate group has less taxing requirements. NITA quickly achieved affiliate status.⁷

Raise Money: Membership dues will most likely not be enough to keep your organization afloat in the beginning.

time to do a very popular health care interpreting training class, which we offered at a very affordable rate.

Publish a Newsletter: We created our newsletter in Microsoft Publisher, which comes with the regular suite of Microsoft Office products, and sent it out as a PDF. The newsletter is not fancy, but it is a great way to communicate with members. Some of us also regularly contribute to other association publications, and ask to reprint some of their articles so that the newsletter can have a wide range of contributions.

Offer Professional Development: This is one of the most important functions of a professional organization. In our first year, NITA offered two types of interpreting training, and the board has some form of continuing or ongoing education planned at least every quarter in 2009. Of course, we are always looking for excellent and affordable speakers who do not break our piggy bank. While we do not like to do it, sometimes we have to ask folks to donate their time, which many gladly do.



Create Brochures/Marketing Material:

While this can really cut into your budget, you can at least make simple tri-fold pamphlets that can be printed at the local office supply store, preferably in color. We have a large banner with the organization's name on it, and we hang it on the wall wherever meetings or events are held.

Public Relations: Ideally, you will be pitching to local and regional newspapers, television and radio stations, and other media outlets, asking them to profile the organization. Alternatively, you can send out free press releases about your organization online and write about it as much as you can—on translation blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc. Use social media to get the word out about your organization. Add it to your LinkedIn profile. You can also start a LinkedIn group and post on the discussion boards. The more people know about your organization, the better.

It Just Takes Work

Establishing a regional organization for translators and interpreters is not an unmanageable task. Once the work is split among several people whose skills complement each other, the core group can achieve a great deal. Of course, for a thriving organization, a broader membership is needed. NITA had nearly 40 members at the end of its first year, largely in northern Nevada. Our big task for 2009 is growing the association in the Las Vegas area and beginning to hold events there. Karen is NITA's president for 2009-2011, and Judy is NITA's vice-president for 2009-2011. There is no doubt that the hard work of all the association's volunteers will continue to pay off, and that as a group we will meet our goal of elevating the profession in our state.

Links of Interest

IRS 501(c)(6) Organizations

www.irs.ustreas.gov/pub/irs-tege/eotopick03.pdf

Form 1024 Application for Recognition of Exemption Under Section 501(a)

www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f1024.pdf

American Translators Association Chapters and Groups Information

www.atanet.org/chaptersandgroups/index.php

Robert's Rules of Order

www.robertsrules.org

Nevada Interpreters and Translators Association (NITA)

www.nitaonline.org

NITA LinkedIn Page

www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=882237

Carolina Association of Translators and Interpreters

www.catiweb.org

Northern California Translators Association

www.ncta.org

Notes

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2. Facts on applying for an employment identification number can be found at www.irs.gov/businesses/small/article/0,,id=98350,00.html.
3. IRS 501(c)(6) Organizations, www.irs.ustreas.gov/pub/irs-tege/eotopick03.pdf.
4. Form 1024 Application for Recognition of Exemption Under Section 501(a), www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f1024.pdf.
5. Form 1024 Application for Recognition of Exemption Under Section 501(a), www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f1024.pdf.
6. Robert's Rules of Order, www.robertsrules.org.
7. American Translators Association Chapters and Groups Information, www.atanet.org/chaptersandgroups/index.php.

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