

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Finding the Right Pieces with Service Agencies: Redefining the Relationship

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Abstract

With the increasing need of service providers to provide classroom accommodations, more institutions are finding themselves outsourcing to service agencies. Outsourcing is a costly option, yet necessary. The San Diego Community College District (SDCCD), with the support of the Purchasing department, redefined the relationships with agencies to ensure accountability, quality assurance and justify the costs.



Why Outsource?

The San Diego Community College District's Interpreting Services Office provides accommodations in three college campuses and six Continuing Education units. We found that with the size of our deaf/ hard-of-hearing student population, our in-house contract and hourly interpreters could not cover all the classes. This is aligned with our legal obligations (ADA, Section 504 & 508). Fortunately, our District allows outsourcing to service the remaining uncovered classes.

SDCCD's Journey with Service Agencies

Previously, this process involved an informal procedure of agreeing on a price between DSPS and agencies. The primary focus at that time was just the price. The District would sign an agreement form from the agencies and then we would get services. The relationship at this time was that we were following what the agencies were telling us what we had to do to get services.

In 2006, the rising cost of interpreting services became a concern for us. We decided to consult the Purchasing department for their help in the process of establishing agreements. The Purchasing department is experienced with the process of identifying qualified vendors, communicating District's expectations, negotiations and monitoring the vendors' ongoing performance with the District. With the Purchasing department's expertise, we were able to:

- Manage the rising cost of outsourcing,
- Define and monitor quality customer service,
- Formalize the existing relationships with service agencies with clear expectations in writing, and
- Set our own terms and conditions.

We learned some lessons from the first fiscal year after trying this approach.

- Lesson #1: “The lower price, the better it is,” is not always true. The focus should be on finding the best package deal. If the overall service quality is excellent with a slightly higher rate, then perhaps this would be the better deal.
- Lesson #2: Clarity is the key. If we are not meticulous with details, then there would be room for confusion and loopholes. We were able to fine-tune the terms and conditions in our contracts to ensure the agencies understood what we wanted from them.
- Lesson #3: One interpreting agency is not enough for a District of our size. We were able to secure approval from the upper management to have a back-up or secondary agency to fill all of our needs.

After two years of navigating through the process with agencies, the District was able to establish a District-wide bid for interpreting agencies which would result in the same agreement for all departments within the District. Previously, DSPPS/ Interpreting Services Office had the best rates, terms and conditions. We were able to help other departments that coordinate their own service requests that would benefit from the same rates, terms and conditions, such as Human Resources and ASL/ITP department. The bigger client you are, the more room for negotiation.

Considerations

In the journey with service agencies, we realized that there are several important considerations when selecting agencies. Those are addressed in the discovery process.

- Availability of service providers: Essentially, how large is their pool? Are their service providers available to cover our classes? We have classes from 7 AM to 10 PM daily.
- Agency’s office hours: We discovered that it does make scheduling easier if the agencies had similar office hours to ours. This is especially helpful in early mornings when we need substitute coverage for morning classes.
- Office coverage for evenings/ weekends: Do they have an answering service or an alternate system that would enable them to help cover classes at the last-minute in the evenings and weekends?
- Availability of office staff: Do they have staff that is readily available to address our needs?
- Length of business experience: How long has the agency been in business? We ask for references from other educational institutions.
- Communication methods: What is the agency’s best communication method? E-mail is the quickest way for our office to do scheduling and we like agencies that can meet us halfway on that.

Examples of Our Terms and Conditions

This is a general overview of our terms and conditions. Agencies were able to meet those terms and conditions.

- Specific rates are identified for day (7:00 AM-5:00 PM), evening and weekends.
- Specific qualifications of service providers that we expect are outlined in our contracts (i.e. no non-certified interpreters, no student interpreters).
- 24-hour cancellation notice
- Billing minimum and increments are clearly spelled out.
- No last-minute/travel fees
- Reassignments are allowed and their service providers are expected to comply accordingly.
- We will identify and specify our needs. They will follow them accordingly and not make decisions on our behalf (i.e. assigning a second interpreter for a 3-hour lab class when we asked for just one).

- Their service providers are expected to comply with the District policies and procedures. We give them a quick reference sheet outlining some important points from our service provider handbooks including the following:
 - Wear a name tag for first-time assignments.
 - Wear business casual attire unless otherwise stated.
 - Compliance of RID's Code of Professional Conduct & NCRA's Provider and Consumer Bill of Rights
 - Report student no-shows *immediately* after the 20-minute waiting period and wait for reassignment information.
 - Work only during their scheduled time.
 - Communicate any changes to assignment information: classroom changes, schedule changes, teacher changes, and any additional deaf/ hard-of-hearing students.
- We agree on an invoicing frequency in writing (monthly or weekly) and delivery method (to who and how—e-mail PDF attachments are best!).

Conclusion

By being clear on all parts of the service provisions, our existing relationships with agencies had taken a positive turn and we have obtained better service. Based on the District's experience in this process, it is highly recommended that other educational institutions work with their Purchasing department to redefine their relationship with service agencies.

