



INTERNAL AUDIT DIVISION

AUDIT REPORT 2013/012

Audit of human resources strategy for interpreters and translators in DGACM

Overall results relating to the effective development and implementation of a human resources strategy to attract and retain interpreters and translators were initially assessed as partially satisfactory. Implementation of three important recommendations remains in progress.

FINAL OVERALL RATING: PARTIALLY SATISFACTORY

28 February 2013

Assignment No. AH2011/550/03

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AUDIT REPORT

Audit of human resources strategy for interpreters and translators in DGACM

I. BACKGROUND

1. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of the human resources strategy for interpreters and translators in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM).

2. In accordance with its mandate, OIOS provides assurance and advice on the adequacy and effectiveness of the United Nations internal control system, the primary objectives of which are to ensure: (a) efficient and effective operations; (b) accurate financial and operational reporting; (c) safeguarding of assets; and (d) compliance with mandates, regulations, and rules.

3. The United Nations is one of the world's largest employers of language professionals. It employs hundreds of language professionals working in DGACM through its offices in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. These language professionals comprise interpreters, translators, editors, verbatim reporters, terminologists, reference assistants, copy preparers and proofreaders. Additionally, language professionals are also hired by the United Nations Regional Commissions in Addis Ababa, Bangkok, Beirut and Santiago.

4. In recent reports to the General Assembly, DGACM highlighted that its ability to attract the best in the field, given the stringent professional expertise required, had become a real challenge due to demographic changes and the impact of globalization, especially for certain language combinations. More specifically, as of July 2010, the overall vacancy rate at the four duty stations was 15 per cent for interpreters and 14 per cent for translators. When projected retirements in the period 2010-2016 were factored in, DGACM's estimated turnover was 43 per cent for interpreters and 40 per cent for translators. In absolute numbers, this meant that the language competitive examinations would have to produce 119 new recruits for interpretation and 217 for translation during the period in question. The interpretation units were expected to experience turnover ranging from a low 8 per cent for Chinese to a high 20 per cent for English; for the Arabic, French, Russian and Spanish booths the estimate was 18 per cent each. Similarly, the translation units will also experience turnover ranging from a low of 10 per cent (English) to a high of 22 per cent (French).

5. Replacements for language staff can be recruited only through a lengthy and intricate competitive examination process. DGACM has expanded its outreach activities and has entered into relationships with a number of prominent universities with the aim of generating more interest in the United Nations among language students worldwide.

6. Comments provided by DGACM and the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) are incorporated in italics.

II. OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

7. The audit was conducted to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of DGACM's governance, risk management and control processes in providing reasonable assurance regarding the **effective development and implementation of a human resources strategy to attract and retain interpreters and translators.**

8. The audit was included in the 2011 OIOS risk-based work plan due the high risks associated with the DGACM being able to recruit interpreters and translators as required.

9. The key controls for the audit were: (a) human resources targets and strategies; (b) coordinated management; (c) contingency plans; and (d) training and development plans. For the purpose of this audit, OIOS defined these key controls as follows:

(a) **Human resources targets and strategies** – controls that provide reasonable assurance that human resource targets and strategies are set to ensure the timely recruitment and retention of competent staff.

(b) **Coordinated management** – controls that provide reasonable assurance that potential overlaps and gaps in the delivery of the interpretation and translation services are managed, and that issues involving other UN actors are identified, discussed and resolved in a timely manner.

(c) **Contingency plans** – controls that provide reasonable assurance that DGACM develops and uses contingency plans and/or available alternatives to augment staff shortages/vacancies as necessary.

(d) **Training and development plans** – controls that provide reasonable assurance that training and development plans exist to ensure staff skills and competencies are upgraded/updated in accordance with the demands of the jobs and the professional development needs.

10. The key controls were assessed for the control objectives are shown in Table 1. Certain control objectives (shown in Table 1 as “Not assessed”) were not relevant to the scope defined for this audit.

11. OIOS conducted this audit from October 2011 to October 2012. The audit covered the biennia 2008-2009 and 2010-2011, as well as the proposed strategic framework for the period 2012-2013, and focused on assessing the strategies developed and implemented by DGACM to sustain succession planning for interpreters and translators.

12. OIOS conducted an activity-level risk assessment to identify and assess specific risk exposures, and to confirm the relevance of the selected key controls in mitigating associated risks. Through interviews, analytical reviews and tests of controls, OIOS assessed the existence and adequacy of internal controls and conducted necessary tests to determine their effectiveness.

III. AUDIT RESULTS

13. DGACM’s governance, risk management and control processes were assessed as **partially satisfactory** in providing reasonable assurance regarding the **effective development and implementation of a human resources strategy to attract and retain interpreters and translators**. OIOS made four recommendations to address issues identified in the audit. DGACM has implemented various human resources initiatives, including the formalization of off-site translation, a review of the language competitive examinations process and a university outreach programme. However, the efficiency of conducting the language competitive examinations, the targeting of outreach activities based on the needs of individual language groups, and managing the language roster required further improvement. Additionally, DGACM needs to develop strategies to ensure that it has adequate capacity to provide the desired level of coverage for all meetings. DGACM has adequate arrangements to meet short-term staffing needs and training and development plans.

14. The initial rating was based on the assessment of key controls presented in Table 1 below. The final overall rating is partially satisfactory as implementation of three important recommendation remains in progress.

Table 1: Assessment of key controls

Business objective	Key controls	Control objectives			
		Efficient and effective operations	Accurate financial and operational reporting	Safeguarding of assets	Compliance with mandates, regulations and rules
Effective development and implementation of a human resources strategy to attract and retain interpreters and translators	(a) Human resources targets and strategies	Partially satisfactory	Partially satisfactory	Not assessed	Satisfactory
	(b) Coordinated management	Partially satisfactory	Satisfactory	Not assessed	Satisfactory
	(c) Contingency plans	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Not assessed	Satisfactory
	(d) Training and development plans	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Not assessed	Satisfactory
FINAL OVERALL RATING: PARTIALLY SATISFACTORY					

15. OIOS made four recommendations to address issues identified in this audit. DGACM and OHRM accepted and are in the process of implementing the audit recommendations.

A. Human resources targets and strategies

DGCAM has implemented an adequate succession planning programme

16. In order to address the general shortage of language staff, DGACM is pursuing a three-pronged approach that involves the formalization of off-site translation, a review of the language competitive examinations process and a university outreach programme.

17. Regarding off-site translation, DGACM aims to establish a balance of about 75 per cent in-house staff members to 25 per cent freelance capacity. Consultations with the International Association of Conference Translators were in progress with a view to renegotiating and updating the 1991 agreement between the Association and the UN to formally incorporate off-site translation. DGACM expected that the negotiations would align the remuneration levels of freelancers with those of other staff.

18. Beginning in 2011, DGACM, together with the Examinations and Tests Section (ETS) of OHRM, started to schedule language competitive examinations based on factors such as staffing complement in the various DGACM sections, number of vacancies, projected retirements and separations, as well as the status of the roster. There were eight language competitive examinations scheduled for 2012.

19. Additional steps were being considered to accommodate a larger number of examinations, such as extending the length of the examination cycle from 12 to 18 months (so that lower priority language examinations could still have a guaranteed slot later in the cycle); combining the examinations of related

language occupational groups; and reducing to six months the period between the holding of an examination and the establishment of the related language roster. However, because of resource constraints within ETS, implementation of these initiatives was contingent upon DGACM providing staffing assistance. Since DGACM has implemented an adequate succession planning programme, OIOS does not make a recommendation.

Screening and marking of examination papers needs to be streamlined

20. The yields from examinations were generally low, suggesting that there was scope to reduce the number of candidates convoked for each examination. Screening activities mainly involved vetting that applicants met the eligibility requirements. (Applicants are required to have a perfect command of one of the official languages of the UN as their main language, as well as proficiency in two passive languages.) As shown in Table 2, during the period 2008-2010, 8,987 candidates were convoked to the language competitive examinations out of a total of 20,482 applicants, and 475 were placed in the language roster giving an overall yield of 5 per cent.

Table 2: Examination yields from 2008 to 2010

Language	Candidates				
	Applied	Took exam	Took Exam/ Applied Ratio	Rostered	Rostered/ Took Exam Ratio
Arabic	1,721	1,363	79%	41	3%
Chinese	9,964	2,267	23%	88	4%
English	1,504	906	60%	154	17%
French	3,196	2,453	77%	90	4%
Spanish	2,705	1,653	61%	42	3%
Russian	1,392	345	25%	60	17%
TOTAL	20,482	8,987	44%	475	5%

21. Yields for certain languages, e.g., Arabic, Chinese, French and Spanish, were as low as 3 to 4 per cent indicating that enhancing screening procedures could lead to a reduction in the resources required for subsequent stages of the hiring process. A discussion paper prepared for the DGACM/OHRM expert panel on revamping the language examination format and methods suggested that low pass rates were largely due to poor performance in tests relating to the main language.

22. Automated preliminary screening is an area where new technologies could be used to streamline and speed up the examination process. All related screening in connection with the language examinations applications were done manually, i.e., there were no screening questions in the vacancy announcements to allow for a more targeted selection of the candidates convoked for an oral or written exam. Through the use of automated screening on the basis of specific criteria, DGACM could continue to reduce the candidate pool to a reasonable number; thereby lowering the number of convoked candidates for each examination than the current averages.

(1) DGACM in coordination with OHRM should implement automated preliminary screening procedures to streamline the language competitive examination process.

DGACM accepted recommendation 1 and stated that Inspira (the new online recruitment system) includes an automatic screening mechanism for purposes of screening applications for competitive examinations. Based on the action taken by DGACM and OHRM, recommendation 1 has been closed.

There is scope to further refine outreach activities to take full account of the needs of the individual languages groups

23. DGACM initiated in 2007 a Universities Outreach Programme. The key objectives of the Programme were: (i) to ensure better visibility of language career opportunities at the UN; (ii) to help candidates to prepare more effectively for the language competitive examinations; and (iii) to explore other potential avenues for cooperation between international organizations and training institutions. To date, 20 Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) have been signed with universities. Furthermore, DGACM was formalizing a revived internship programme as part of the MOU scheme.

24. DGACM provided, upon request, pedagogical assistance such as workshops, lectures, translation/interpretation training, to universities with which they have MOUs. Since 2009, 80 such activities have been held. Table 3 presents a breakdown of the outreach activities by language:

Table 3: Breakdown of outreach activities from 2009 to 2012 by language

Language	Outreach Activities	
	No.	Percentage
Arabic	5	6%
Chinese	11	14%
English	2	3%
French	28	35%
Spanish	4	5%
Russian	30	37%
TOTAL	80	100%

25. Although DGACM included outreach to pools of potential workforce as one of its outputs in its proposed programme budget, it did not allocate resources to the related activities. Instead, outreach activities were conducted on a voluntary basis by staff members visiting a particular location, e.g., during home leave, official business, etc. This limited DGACM's ability to target the activities to languages where there was the greatest need based on projected vacancies and yield from examinations. For example, the Russian language had one of the lowest projected vacancies and the highest yield from the examinations, yet outreach to potential Russian candidates was the highest. The outcome of outreach activities would be enhanced if they were programmed in DGACM's workplan and allocated resources.

26. DGACM carried out in early 2012 an assessment of its outreach activities showing that at least nine candidates passed the language competitive examination after benefiting from an internship or traineeship. Nevertheless, DGACM could refine its outreach activities by aligning them to the needs of the individual language groups.

(2) DGACM should include in its next strategic framework, objectives and expected accomplishments related to the outreach activities.

DGACM accepted recommendation 2 and stated that objectives and expected accomplishments in the programme strategic framework are subject to review by the Committee on Programme Planning and approval of Member States. Recommendation 2 remains open pending the inclusion of the outreach objectives in the DGACM strategic framework.

Roster management needs to improve

27. An online roster management module was launched in 2011. It allowed programme managers to access and share information on candidates on the roster awaiting recruitment on career appointments. Full integration of the language roster into the new online recruitment system Inspira, was underway during the audit.

28. Since 2011 OHRM updated the online roster management module with details of successful candidates of the UN language examinations going back to 2000. As of 31 March 2012, there were 310 successful candidates remaining in the roster (from a total of 1,123 entries). However, there was no systematic tracking of the reasons for candidates' refusal of offers of appointment. This was compounded by the fact that there was no clear policy on the duration of keeping successful candidates in the roster, except for OHRM's practice to remove a candidate from the roster after two refusals of formal written offers. Nevertheless, it was envisaged that the Inspira-based module related to the language professionals would allow for tracking of reasons for candidates' refusal of offers. Furthermore, it was envisioned that a system of self-validation would be in place, whereby rostered staff would indicate their availability annually, as well as their continued interest in remaining on the roster.

(3) OHRM in coordination with DGACM should update the language roster database in a timely manner and implement a robust Inspira-based talent management system that supports applicant sourcing and tracking.

OHRM accepted recommendation 3 and stated that applications for competitive examinations conducted from 2012 are handled in Inspira and rosters for them have been created. Procedures and guidelines for hiring managers to access those rosters are being finalized. OHRM is also working with DGACM on the arrangements to migrate previously rostered language candidates into Inspira. Recommendation 3 remains open pending notification that the Inspira-based talent management system has been updated with the relevant details of eligible candidates from language examinations.

B. Coordinated management

Need for capacity analysis to meet expected service level for regional bodies

29. DGACM provided technical secretariat services and substantive support to all meetings of intergovernmental organs and expert bodies, including bodies entitled to meet "as required" (i.e., bodies entitled to meet on an *ad hoc* basis in addition to their sessions with fixed dates for which budgetary provisions were made), and meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States. DGACM stated in its strategic framework for 2012-2013 that it aims to utilize over 90 per cent of its interpretation services capacity and to provide interpretation services to 100 per cent of all "as required" meetings for bodies entitled to meet "as required"; however, the target for servicing regional and other major groupings of Member States was not specified. DGACM explained that such meetings were only required to be serviced on an "as available" basis, and it was not practicable to set servicing targets as availability of resources was affected by several factors, some of which were unpredictable. According to resolutions, rules and established language arrangements, servicing of intergovernmental meetings and meetings of expert bodies takes priority over meetings of regional groups.

30. While interpretation resources were allocated to cover "as required" meetings, they were not fully utilized because of cancellations. OIOS is of the view more accurate workload forecasting is possible in a globally coordinated manner, resulting in improved utilization. In 2011, 13 per cent (2010: 16 per cent) of

meetings were cancelled, but only 57 per cent (2010: 61 per cent) of interpretation teams could be reassigned to other meetings. An overall performance analysis of scheduling reliability, resource utilization factor and number of cancelations and reassignments for all meetings with interpretation would provide a clearer picture of the effectiveness of DGACM's interpretation capacity.

(4) DGACM should undertake an overall performance analysis of its interpretation capacity to increase interpretation services provided to regional bodies.

DGACM accepted recommendation 4 and stated that the performance analysis and assessment of capacity utilization would take into consideration historical trends, allocated resources for the biennium 2014-2015, and existing mandates and organizational policies. Recommendation 4 remains open pending notification that DGACM has undertaken an overall performance analysis of its interpretation capacity.

C. Contingency plans

DGACM had adequate arrangements to meet short-term staffing needs

31. In order to support the DGACM's goal of establishing a balance of about 75 per cent in-house to 25 per cent freelance capacity for translation services, several initiatives were implemented. For example, section chiefs maintained lists of potential candidates and used them, together with industry directories, to fill short-term staffing needs. To expand the pool of qualified freelancers further, the DGACM/OHRM Joint Panel on Review of the Language Competitive Examinations Process recommended in July 2011 to allow second-tier candidates (who came within an agreed number of percentage points of the competitive examination passing score) to be eligible for freelance work (as opposed to career appointments for rostered candidate). DGACM arrangements to meet short-term staffing needs supported flexibility in handling workloads during both peak and normal periods.

D. Training and development plans

Adequate training and development plans were in place

32. During the reporting period, DGACM and OHRM continued to implement planned training activities with an emphasis on interpretation and translation-specific skills.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

33. OIOS wishes to express its appreciation to the Management and staff of DGACM and OHRM for the assistance and cooperation extended to the auditors during this assignment.



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STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Audit of human resources strategy for interpreters and translators in DGACM

Recom. no.	Recommendation	Critical ¹ / important ²	C/ O ³	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date ⁴
1	DGACM in coordination with OHRM should implement automated preliminary screening procedures to streamline the language competitive examination process.	Important	C		
2	DGACM should include in its next strategic framework, objectives and expected accomplishments related to the outreach activities.	Important	O	Inclusion of the outreach objectives in the DGACM strategic framework.	June 2014
3	OHRM in coordination with DGACM should update the language roster database in a timely manner and implement a robust Inspira-based talent management system that supports applicant sourcing and tracking.	Important	O	Notification that the Inspira-based talent management system has been updated with the relevant details of eligible candidates from language examinations.	June 2013
4	DGACM should undertake an overall performance analysis of its interpretation capacity to increase interpretation services provided to regional bodies.	Important	O	Notification that DGACM has undertaken an overall performance analysis of its interpretation capacity.	December 2015

1 Critical recommendations address significant and/or pervasive deficiency or weakness in governance, risk management or internal control processes, such that reasonable assurance cannot be provided regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

2 Important recommendations address important deficiencies or weaknesses in governance, risk management or internal control processes, such that reasonable assurance may be at risk regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

3 C = closed, O = open

4 Date provided by DGACM and OHRM in response to recommendations.