

CAPITA

Interpreting

What it takes to provide a
high quality service

Capita Translation and Interpreting - WHITE PAPER



We care what people say

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Introduction

As we slowly begin to emerge from the austerity that has swept the UK economy over recent years, questions are now being asked about how governments and other public sector bodies allocate funds, with the underlying intention to create leaner, more sustainable services for the future. High on the agenda is the provision of language services (interpreting and translation), which is unfortunately seen by many as non-essential compared to more mainstream social needs.

However, with rising numbers of asylum seekers and economic migrants across the globe, there is a convincing argument to say that language services are now more necessary than ever. A lack of basic communication as a result of language leads to isolation of individuals and, in extreme cases, whole communities, which can then result in socio-economic problems.

Given these two conflicting pressures of cost reduction versus increasing need, it is vital that organisations who supply language services do so efficiently and professionally, ensuring best-practices are adhered to in terms of service provision, integrity and safeguarding. It is also the responsibility of organisations that use language services to ensure their procurement and delivery are carefully managed.

Throughout this paper, we will look at one particular aspect of language services – interpreting – specifically within the public sector, giving an insight into the current market, procurement options and best-practice guidelines.



Interpreting - its history

Interpreting has been taking place since the human race started communicating with each other.

In 3200 BC an Egyptian hieroglyph representing the word 'interpreter' was found however, there is no evidence prior to then.

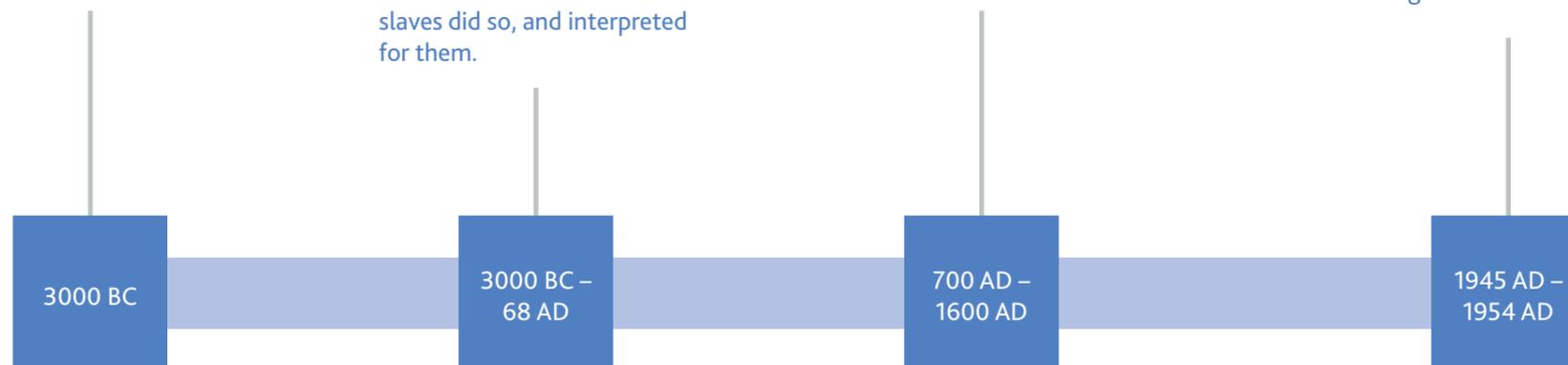
Years later interpreters were used by the Greeks and Romans, whose hierarchy refused to learn the languages of the people they conquered and therefore, insisted their servants and slaves did so, and interpreted for them.

Pilgrims who travelled the world to spread word of their beliefs, and explorers who were keen to discover new lands and people, often took interpreters with them.

Jean Herbert was an interpreter who greatly influenced the development of professional interpreting. Jean wrote and translated a number of books relating to the Far East and following the end of WW2, he received a telegram from the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, which requested that he travel to San Francisco for the founding of the United Nations.

'Interpreters at the United Nations: A History' notes that Jean Herbert said:

"The interpreter must help people in understanding each other in the highest sense of the words, that is, to give more than a literal translation, so as to convey the deep meaning of what is said. It requires a deep knowledge and a vivid interest for foreign culture, customs, literature, history and ways of life."



People now travel from country to country; moving freely around the world and in some cases, migrate permanently. This means the role of an interpreter has significantly changed from the instances mentioned above.

So in today's world, what are the cost implications of providing a high-quality service that has qualified interpreters at the very heart of it?

Interpreting - today's world

Professional interpreting is when qualified linguists interpret the spoken word from one language to another. Public service organisations are the main users of professional interpreting in order to provide people with access to their services. Other organisations who require interpreters on a regular basis include the United Nations and the European Parliament.

The role of the professional interpreter has evolved as interpreting demands have rapidly increased over the decades. As a result of this increase in demand, interpreting is now a recognised and credible profession, sometimes requiring years of training in order to become professionally qualified.

There are a number of types of interpreting to suit various situations however, the most common are:

Instant telephone interpreting

These interpreters are available on demand, which means it is ideal when the need for interpreting arises with short notice, or when there is no real need for an interpreter to be physically present. Instant telephone interpreting can be implemented into an organisation, using technology including dual handed telephones, conferencing facilities, speaker phones, or standard telephones.



Consecutive interpreting

Consecutive interpreting is ideal for situations such as medical appointments, local authority meetings, confidential hearings and legal proceedings, where the interpreter listens to the speaker in the source language, quietly takes notes and then reproduces the speech in the target language. The length of the speech and other circumstances will determine whether the rendering may be done in one go or in several segments. Consecutive interpreters can work on a project-by-project basis or contractual basis, if a more regular service is required.



Simultaneous interpreting (often referred to as conference interpreting)

Simultaneous interpreters sit in soundproof booths, listen to the speaker through earphones and reproduce the speech in the target language through a microphone as it is being delivered in the source language. This method of interpreting requires considerable practice and presence of mind, and the linguists often work in teams of two, with each taking turns in a shift pattern. Simultaneous interpreters are highly skilled and therefore in constant demand.



Whispered interpreting

Occasionally, interpreters may be asked to provide whispered interpreting or "chuchotage", which consists of sitting behind or next to a participant and simultaneously interpreting in a low voice. This type of interpreting is ideal for circumstances where an interpreter may be seen to be a distraction, as the target language will only be heard by one participant.



British Sign Language (BSL)

Since 2003, BSL has been recognised as a language in its own right and is often, the preferred language of some deaf people in the UK. BSL is a separate language from English and has its own grammatical structure. The interpreter will relay what is being said in English into BSL and vice versa.



Interpreting - the public sector

When delivering sensitive and confidential services such as health care and social services, it is very important that public sector organisations use only qualified and suitably experienced interpreters for the provision of language services. It doesn't matter how well someone speaks the same language as another person, it does not make them a qualified interpreter.

The Association of Translation Companies (ATC) recently undertook a survey* of its members who are contractually providing public sector language services within the UK, and subsequently produced a report of its findings. The report was compiled in consultation with its member companies via a combination of written submissions and face-to-face interviews. It has been built on their direct experiences of having worked with the public sector for many years and includes the views from both large and small suppliers.

In the report's Executive Summary, the ATC said "a near unanimous feeling has been that the procurement of language services is treated too much as a commodity, with not enough understanding of how to access and monitor the quality of service. There is a preminent focus by procurers on the cost of service, with a disconnect in understanding the quality that can be provided under any agreed budget".

The most significant recommendation from the ATC's report was "the need for the public sector to reconnect service quality and the cost to deliver that service".

It is important that when using professional interpreters, public sector organisations recognise, it is of the utmost importance that each interpreter is suitably qualified and vetted.

There are a number of qualifications associated with interpreting including the highly regarded Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI). This qualification is available across a range of languages in law, health and local government specialisms.

There are also a number of language related degrees along with specific interpreting courses, which are often combined with proof of a certain number of hours of experience in public sector interpreting and documented evidence of continuous professional development.



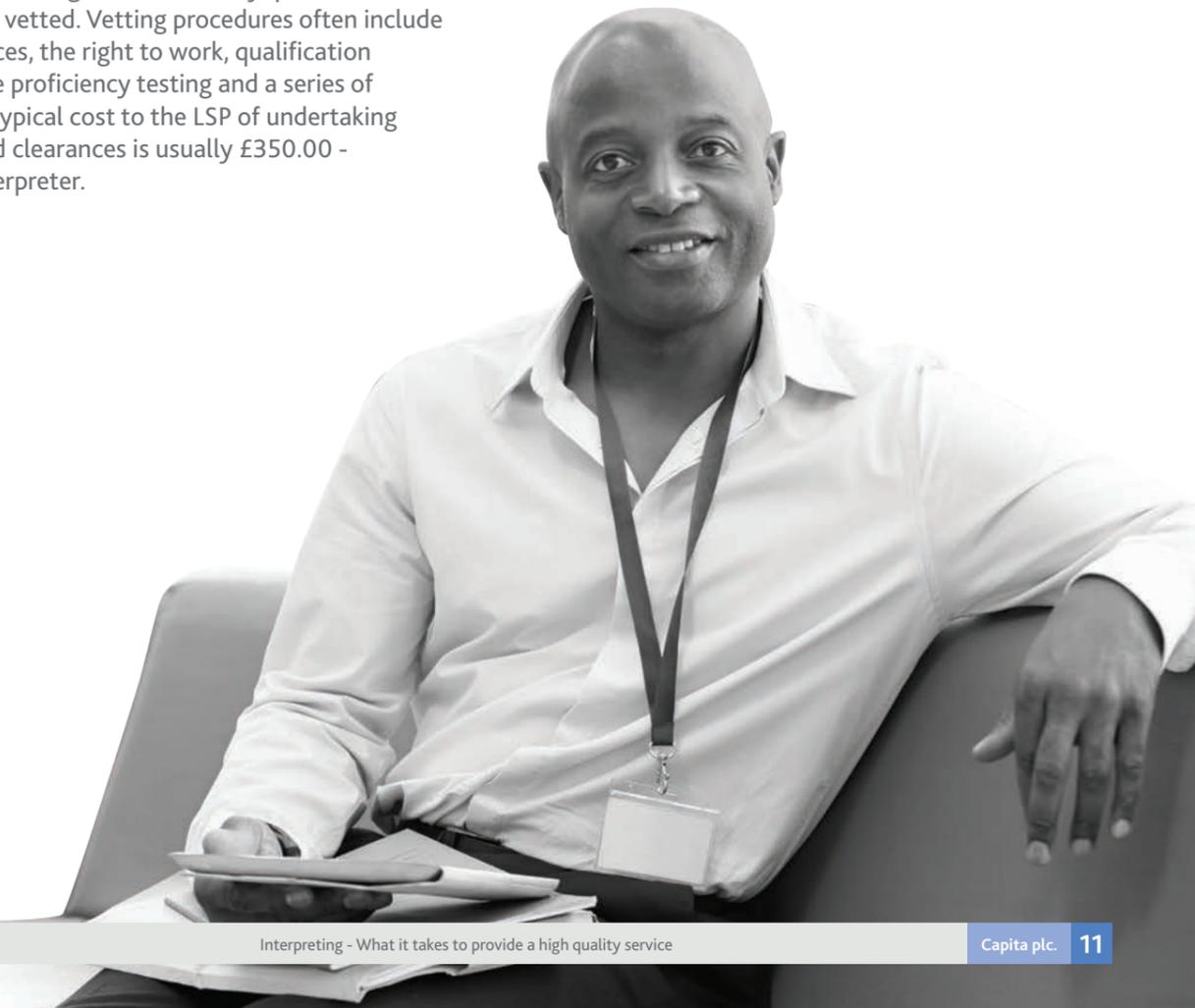
Interpreters who are native in a foreign language and able to demonstrate a command of spoken and written English, may also be used. Similarly, there are also interpreters who are native in English and able to demonstrate a command of spoken and written skills in a foreign tongue, and hold a Community Interpreting Certificate or equivalent qualification.

Interpreters have a great passion for their work and are dedicated professionals and it takes years of education and training to become a professional interpreter. Interpreters are usually self-employed. They become qualified at a considerable personal cost, which is why a qualified and experienced interpreter demands reasonable payment for their work.

Most interpreters obtain work by registering to undertake freelance work for a Language Service Provider, it is therefore up to the LSP to ensure interpreters on their register are suitably qualified, experienced and vetted. Vetting procedures often include security clearances, the right to work, qualification checks, language proficiency testing and a series of interviews. The typical cost to the LSP of undertaking these checks and clearances is usually £350.00 - £450.00 per interpreter.

It could be asked "are LSPs necessary? Is the public sector not able to source interpreters independently?" This is possible however, those LSPs experienced in working with freelance interpreters have a clear set of terms and conditions and standards for interpreters to work with. Fully vetting and categorising interpreters incurs a significant cost for contracting authorities, not to mention the administrative implications.

In order to provide added value and efficiency, professional LSPs will have developed technological solutions to support the processes for booking interpreters. Management information (MI) is crucial with regard to understanding volume and demand, finding solutions to changes such as demographics and assuring fulfilment rates are maximised. With continued development to technological solutions - customers should notice both a reduction in the cost of interpreting services along with greater value and efficiency.



*The Procurement of Language Services in the Public Sector - ATC - Association of Translation Companies - September 2015

What else to consider?

It is essential when procuring language services, public sector organisations carry out a thorough assessment of their language requirements. When deciding which LSP to award the contract to, procurement teams need to carefully consider which LSP is most likely to deliver a high-quality service based on their price, against the criteria outlined in the service specification.

A good example of this in practice is British Sign Language (BSL). In the UK, there are approximately 900 BSL interpreters and following years of training in order to become registered with the NRCPD (National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People), they have strict payment terms. This means an LSP will only secure BSL interpreters by paying in-line with their terms of payment.

Languages where fewer qualified interpreters are available is another good example. Tamil and Nepalese interpreters are considered rare in the UK, and procurement specialists reviewing tender documents in certain areas of the UK where these languages are prevalent in the local community should question whether an LSP can be considerably cheaper than their competitor. Will the cheaper provider be able to undertake all the assignments necessary or is the organisation going to be left with a high number of jobs that are not completed? As demand for qualified interpreters in these language pairs is higher than the supply, the interpreters will often demand a much higher payment rate than that of a common language, such as Urdu, where a higher volume of qualified interpreters is available.

If an LSP is unable to provide an interpreter for assignments due to the lack of interpreters and cost constraints, this will have a negative impact on the quality of service and ultimately, the cost of the contract.

Interpreters usually register their services with a number of LSPs, and this can make it difficult for LSPs to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Perhaps the most important questions for procurement teams to ask an LSP are “what are their vetting processes?” and “is the LSP audited by an official organisation?”

Hopefully, this has highlighted that awarding contracts to a reputable LSP may not always be the cheapest solution, however in the long term, it is most likely to be the most cost-effective and high-quality solution.



Interpreting - the risks

A professional LSP will only allocate an appropriately qualified and experienced interpreter to each individual assignment, so what are the risks of awarding a contract to the cheapest provider based on price only, instead of awarding it to a reputable LSP?

The first risk that comes to mind is safeguarding. A good LSP will not only know the qualifications and experience that their registered interpreters possess, but as they should have been thoroughly vetted, they will also know their background. This is very important in cases such as mental health and those involving children, young people and vulnerable adults.

Interpreters who are appropriately experienced and qualified, will also be very familiar with the environments they work within. An interpreter who is appropriately vetted, qualified and experienced in health care interpreting will be comfortable working alongside patients and health care professionals in a medical environment. They will be experienced with medical terminology and also in how to deliver distressing or even bad news to patients and their families. Incorrect interpreting can lead to unnecessary stress in this type of situation, or worse still, misdiagnosis.

Using technology to enhance the service LSPs provide to customers is becoming a priority. Features such as the ability for customers to be able to track the status of their bookings in real time, book a gender specific interpreter and be able to see details of the interpreter that has been assigned to each job are becoming increasingly important. Similarly, ensuring they are in a position to respond appropriately to special requests, such as ensuring the same interpreter is used when continuity of service is important, is a growing requirement that the cheapest LSPs may not be able to fulfil.



Interpreting - the future

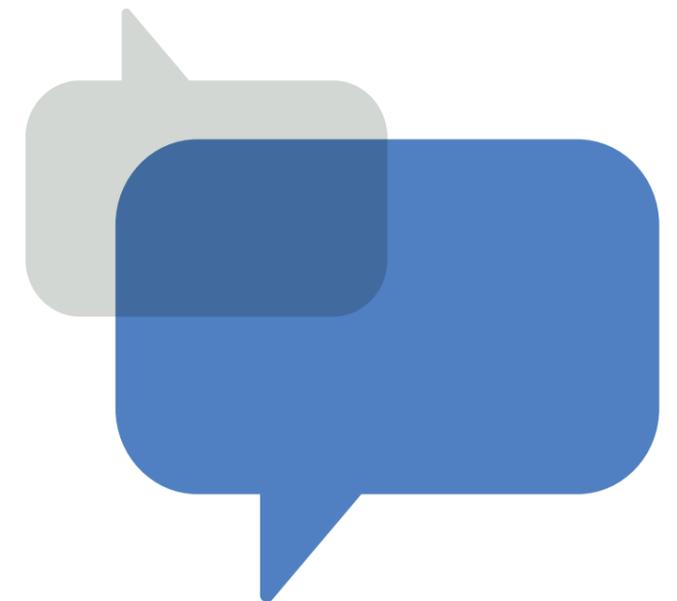
In order to prevent risk to both the public sector organisation and subsequently their customers, providing a high-quality interpreting service may not always be the cheapest option however, it is the safest. In contracting a quality LSP, organisations will not just obtain a supplier, but also a partner who will work with them to provide solutions, problems and cost-saving efficiencies.

Whilst it is rapidly growing, the language industry is still relatively young.

As people continue to travel the world in ever-increasing numbers, we will frequently be mixing with people who do not speak the same language as us. In turn, the need for interpreters will continue to increase, and the demand for professional, appropriately qualified and experienced interpreters will become more relevant.

As the industry matures and evolves, professional, qualified and experienced interpreters will increase in number and we will see less of those who simply speak the same language being used in an interpreting context.

Commissioning directorates and procurement teams will also increase their knowledge base and become more experienced regarding the language industry, which will lead to the provision of quality fit for purpose language services.



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