

The cost of providing quality interpreting

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In the United Kingdom, the amount of public money spent on interpreting services is considerable. The UK government has a legal responsibility to provide “access for all” to many of its public services, which means the public sector is one of the highest users of interpreters. Public sector organizations requiring professional interpreters include the Ministry of Justice, the National Health Service, police forces, HM Prison Service, The National Probation Service, the Criminal Prosecution Service and central and local government.

Here, we will look at the history of interpreting and how it has evolved; the impact of modern day life; the cost of providing a high-quality service to public sector organizations; and the risks associated with using interpreters who are not suitably qualified or experienced.

A brief history of interpreting

Interpreting has been taking place since the birth of mankind; however, due to the very nature of the spoken word, there is no evidence to support this until 3200 BCE,

when the Egyptians had a hieroglyph representing the word *interpreter*.

Years later the concept was also used by the Greeks and Romans, whose upper classes refused to learn the languages of the people they conquered and subsequently ruled. Therefore, servants and slaves learned new languages, and some became interpreters.

Interpreters have also been extensively used by pilgrims who traveled the world in order to spread word of their beliefs, and explorers who were keen to discover new lands and people.

Jean Herbert, who was born in 1897 and died in 1980, influenced the development of professional interpreting. He was the son of an English-speaking French father and married an English woman. Jean wrote and translated a number of books relating to the Far East and in 1939, during World War II, he saved 2,000 Alsace residents from being shot by the Germans. He spent the rest of the war engrossed in the study of Hindu text, until 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 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.” This “requires a deep knowledge and a vivid interest for foreign culture, customs, literature, history and ways of life.”

Today, people move freely around the world traveling from country to country and in some cases, migrating permanently. This means the role of an interpreter has changed dramatically from the early instances mentioned above. So what is the cost of providing a high-quality interpreting



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service, with appropriately qualified interpreters at the heart of it, in a multicultural society, where not everyone speaks the same language and how is it best managed?

What interpreting looks like today

In today's world, interpreting has rapidly increased, and therefore the role of the professional interpreter has evolved and changed.

Professional interpreting involves appropriately vetted, qualified and experienced linguists. Professional interpreting is mainly used in order to help people access public services, such as health care.

There are various interpreting qualifications. The most recognized and relevant qualification is the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI), available in law, health or local government specialisms, across a range of languages. There are many language related degrees and in order to register with many language service providers (LSPs), interpreters will be required to prove a certain number of hours of experience in public sector interpreting and provide documented evidence of continuous professional development.

At the other end of the spectrum there are interpreters native in a foreign language with a demonstrable command of spoken and written English. There are also interpreters native in English with a demonstrable command of spoken and written skills in a foreign tongue, and holding a Community Interpreting Certificate or equivalent qualification.

British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters working within the public sector should ideally be registered with The National Registers of Communication Professionals working with the Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD), and they should also be members of the Register of BSL/English Interpreters. Qualifications include National Vocational Qualification Level 4 (pre-October 2010) BSL/English Interpreting and Language Units, National Vocational Qualification Level 6 (post-October 2010) BSL/English Interpreting and Language Units and Postgraduate diploma or MA in BSL/English Interpreting from the University of Central Lancashire or the University of Leeds.

Interpreters are dedicated professionals and have a great passion for their work. Becoming a fully-qualified interpreter takes years of training and, as the vast majority of interpreters are self-employed and work on a freelance basis, they become qualified at a considerable personal cost. This is the very reason a qualified interpreter demands a payment reflecting this.

Interpreting services within the public sector

It is crucial that public sector organizations delivering important and highly sensitive services such as health care and social services use only qualified and suitably experienced interpreters. No matter how well a person speaks the same language as another person, it does not make them a qualified, experienced interpreter.

Most interpreters work on a freelance basis via an LSP, and it is the responsibility of the LSP to make sure the interpreters they provide are appropriately qualified and experienced for the work they undertake. No responsible LSP would allocate work to an interpreter who is not fit for the purpose. There is, however, a significant cost attached to this in terms of the recruitment and vetting of interpreters. In order to thoroughly undertake the vetting procedure, an LSP will check security clearances, right-to-work, relevant qualifications and will undertake a series of interviews. In the United Kingdom, the typical cost to an LSP of recruiting and vetting an interpreter is between £350.00 and £450.00.

Why can't the public sector simply secure interpreters directly? This is theoretically possible, but good quality LSPs are experienced in working with freelance interpreters and most will have developed a clear set of terms and conditions and standards for interpreters to work with.

Additionally, many LSPs have developed technological solutions in order to support processes for booking interpreters. Public sector organizations may have little understanding of volume and demand, but with the use of technology and detailed management information, LSPs are able to monitor demand and find solutions to any changes that may occur, in order to achieve fulfilment rates. Public sec-

tor organizations that use LSPs should have noticed a reduction in the cost of interpreting services in the last five years and, as LSPs continue to develop improved technological solutions, this should mean greater value and efficiency in the future.

When procuring language services, it is essential that public sector organizations undertake a thorough assessment of their language service requirements. At the point of contract award they need to carefully consider which of their shortlisted LSPs are most likely to deliver a high-quality service based on their price, using the criteria outlined in the service specification.

A good example of this in practice is BSL. There are approximately 900 BSL interpreters in the United Kingdom, and following years of training in order to become registered with the NRCPD, they have strict terms of payment. This means that an LSP will only secure these interpreters by paying in line with their terms of payment. It is important that public sector organizations check that the LSP's pricing structure reflects this.

Another example is languages where fewer qualified interpreters are available, such as Tamil or Nepalese. If the contract price of one provider is considerably less than another, a procurement professional needs to ask the question, "will the cheaper provider be able to undertake all the assignments necessary or are we going to be left with a high number 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 than that of a common language, such as Urdu, where more qualified interpreters are 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.

Managing the procurement process is not easy for the public sector organization or the LSP. Here we have highlighted that awarding contracts to a reputable LSP may not be the cheapest solution, however, it is most likely to be the most cost-effective and high-quality solution in the long term.

Interpreting risks

A good-quality LSP will categorize the work and 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?

There are a number of risks associated with the use of inexperienced, unqualified interpreters. Safeguarding is perhaps the first that comes to mind. A reputable LSP will not only know the qualifications and experience their registered freelance interpreters hold, but they will also thoroughly vet interpreters and know their background. This is especially important in cases involving mental health, children, young people and vulnerable adults.

Appropriately experienced and qualified interpreters will also be very familiar with the environments they work within. For example, an interpreter who is appropriately vetted, qualified and experienced in health care interpreting will be comfortable working alongside health care professionals and patients 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.

A good-quality LSP will use technology to enhance the service they provide to their customers. This will often mean the customer will be able to track the status of their bookings in real time, and be able to see details of the interpreter that has been assigned. Similarly, a good quality LSP will be in a position to respond appropriately to special requests, such as the gender of the interpreter and ensuring the same interpreter is used when continuity of service is important.

The future of interpreting

Providing a high-quality interpreting service is not always the cheapest option, but it is essential to prevent risk to both public sector organizations and their customers. Contracting a high-quality LSP will mean organizations do not just obtain a supplier, but a partner that will work closely with them in order to provide solutions to problems and cost-saving efficiencies.

The Association of Translation Companies (ATC) recently undertook a survey of its members that are currently 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 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 preeminent 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.” The language service industry is still relatively young, but it is rapidly growing.

As we continue to move around the world in ever-increasing numbers, we will more and more 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 evolves and matures, 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. **M**

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Translation and interpreting

Capita TI has been awarded a place on a number of high profile frameworks, which offer a wide range of public sector organisations, a fast, easy and competitive route to procure language services.

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