

REFLECTIONS ON RUNNING A MICRO- INTERNSHIP: Making a Difference by Starting Small



Even after completing an approved training program, new translators often still lack the necessary experience and expertise to be able to compete in the industry. This is where internships can help!

By Mary McKee

Note: I would like to thank my colleague Jamie Hartz for her contributions to this article.

Every well-informed translation buyer wants to work with an experienced linguist. And who can blame them? Even the least savvy client wouldn't want a newcomer after reading page 15 of the translation buyer's guide *Translation: Getting it Right*, which stresses how "risky" it is to hire a student translator, asking the reader:

Q: Would you approve of medical students performing minor operations to pay their way through medical school? (Would you describe your brochure/ letter/ annual report/speech as "minor"?) Would you have your company's financial statements prepared by business students to save money?'

Even after completing an approved training program, new translators often still lack the necessary experience and expertise to be able to compete in the industry. Given how few translation training programs exist in the U.S., and how intense the competition can be in the global marketplace, it's not surprising that few translation internships exist, let alone paid internships. This makes it extremely difficult for new translators to get the real-world experience they need.

The Problem

In my experience as a graduate of the Kent State University master's program in Spanish>English translation, many of my classmates and graduating students from other language programs trained to become translators but

ended up going into project management. Some of them, I'm sure, intended to do so from the beginning, or determined during the course of their degree program that project management was more suited to their desires and talents. But anecdotal evidence and my own experience starting out suggests that the difficulty of breaking into the industry and the inherent instability of the freelance lifestyle pushes many people to seek more stable and salaried jobs in the industry even if they would have preferred to work as a translator.

I wanted to do something about this, but it seemed more like a systemic and industry-wide problem that only large companies could change, by finding the goodness in their hearts to help develop the human resources that they will need in the future.

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Starting Small to Find a Solution

The Black Squirrel Translator Collective (BSTC), of which I'm a co-founder and member, is a working group that provides many tangible and intangible benefits, including helping each other avoid burnout. BSTC is currently made up of four women translators who graduated from the Kent State University master's program in Spanish>English translation.² When we were students, we were fortunate enough to land well-compensated translation internships made available through our professors and leads sent to the translation student organization. This provided invaluable experience in the real world with supervision and the opportunity to use a real company name on our CVs.

After the pandemic struck our industry hard and further decreased opportunities for new translators, I wanted to do something to help. With BSTC having gained some name recognition and after the launch of our new website, I realized that we had become a "real" entity with the "authority" to offer an internship position. I approached fellow BSTC members Jamie Hartz, Hannah Sampson, and Victoria Chavez-Kruse about taking on a paid student intern during the summer of 2021. Although we couldn't offer a full-time internship, we could offer some paid work, which is a start!

Since our collective is focused on women, we wanted to offer our mentorship to a female student. We also wanted to

continue our connection to Kent State University, so we contacted Kelly Washbourne, a professor of Spanish translation at Kent State, who connected us with Nancy Cabrera, a second-year student in the MA program.

Structure

The structure of the internship was relatively informal. We wrote up a simple document describing what we envisioned for the internship program and chatted with Nancy over Zoom to answer her questions and see whether she seemed like a good fit for our team. We also contacted our clients and let them know a team member would be joining us for the summer. This allowed Nancy to sign applicable documents to allow her to work as a contractor with us for our regular clients.

We offered Nancy at least two paid minimum-rate projects (for us, that's usually 200-400 words) per week for the duration of the summer. For each project she was offered, one BSTC member would be in charge of mentoring and managing the project, providing feedback and guidance along the way. Nancy usually completed the translation step while one of us completed the editing step. Roughly once a week, one of us would also meet with Nancy over Zoom to review her work and discuss any questions. These meetings were also a chance to network and discuss our careers, provide mentoring and referrals to contacts that might be of interest, and generally discuss the translation industry.



Outcomes

Since founding BSTC in 2016, my colleagues and I have found that despite our best efforts, our workflow through the seasons remains unpredictable. At the beginning of last summer, we anticipated that we wouldn't be busy. But by the time Nancy joined us, however, we had already scheduled many conferences, large jobs, and other events that made us as a group less able to take on the amount of work from our clients that we usually do. Having another translator whose background and education we were familiar with and who we could count on to help us with some projects was extremely valuable.

When I spoke with Nancy to get her thoughts for this article, she said she felt the experience was valuable for building her

real-world skills and that she would recommend it to another student if we were to offer the position again. Nancy said that prior to the internship, she really didn't have a sense of what a freelance life would entail, but this internship gave her a good idea of what to expect. Nancy also felt that the compensation we offered was reasonable for the amount of work she put in.

Future Improvements

Nancy wished we had provided more information and a more thorough walk-through of our project flow and expectations at the beginning of the internship. Being a few years out of school, my colleagues and I had forgotten how steep the learning curve is when you begin paid work. We provided Nancy with the types of materials that our



clients usually provide us and expected her to read and absorb them on her own. If we offer this internship again, we'll definitely do more of a walk-through at the beginning.

Final Thoughts

On the whole, this internship was a win-win for both the intern and our collective. We all gained insight, Nancy got some experience, and BSTC was able to distribute our work during a time that was very busy for us. My colleagues and I at BSTC feel strongly that internships can be a great way for freelance translators to contribute to the next generation of our profession while also getting something in return. If other translators or groups of translators were to offer a similar experience to student

translators, we could make a huge difference to those starting out while also building connections across professionals in our industry of different experience levels.

How You Can Help

If you or a group of your colleagues are interested in implementing your own micro-internship, we offer these considerations for pursuing a similar arrangement:

Look for an intern: Contact professors you know or academic programs you have a connection with to get recommendations for students with aptitude for translation and freelance work. If you don't have contacts, consider reaching out to any of the translation and interpreting education programs listed on ATA's website.²

Communicate parameters:


Create a written record of how the internship will work. How much will the student be paid? How long will the internship last? What will be expected of them? What will be expected of you?

Provide feedback: Translation experience won't be as valuable to the intern if they don't also receive some feedback. You'll need to carve out time during the internship to provide clear, honest, meaningful feedback to the student so they can learn and grow. (Chances are you will too!)

Make time for small talk:

Having a weekly chat with Nancy allowed our team to freely discuss topics we might not have otherwise brought up. She asked great questions about how we had gotten into the field, and we learned about her interests and goals. We shared resources and tips that were helpful to us.

Be open to learning:

Whether you began translating last year or 30 years ago, we all have something to learn from each other! You're the primary teacher in this relationship, but you may have things to learn from the intern as well. 

NOTES

- ¹ *Translation, Getting it Right—A Guide to Buying Translation*, http://bit.ly/Getting_it_right.
- ² To learn more about BSTC, see: McKee, Mary. "The Benefits of a Translator Collective: Staying Sane as a Freelance Translator," *The ATA Chronicle* (September/October 2018), <https://bit.ly/McKee-collective>.
- ³ List of Translation and Interpreting Courses, <https://bit.ly/translationcourses>.



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