



How to Work Efficiently with an Agency: Freelancing Tips for Newcomers

By Cristina Jaouen

As everyone in this industry knows, both translation and interpreting refer to the rendering of meaning from one language into another, the main difference being that translation is written and interpreting is spoken. As a newcomer, you may wonder how the actual practice of translation and interpreting differ from each other, whether they are compatible, or which of the disciplines might be right for you. As a freelance translator and interpreter turned small company owner, I have faced these questions.

Whatever the work setting, you need to remain professional and courteous.

On April 12, 2008, my company held its first “Introduction to Interpreting Skills Seminar” in collaboration with the Hispanic Institute at La Salle University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The seminar was designed for individuals fluent in both

English and Spanish with an interest in becoming professional interpreters. Participants included professional translators wanting to expand their service portfolios, professional interpreters wishing to test their abilities in other interpreting modalities, individ-

uals with experience interpreting in a non-professional setting with an interest in learning how to become a professional interpreter, and those with a general interest in the interpreting profession.

The main goal of the seminar was

Working as a Freelance Translator/Interpreter

Although translators and interpreters do share a passion for languages, the training, the techniques, and the actual work differ considerably. If you are considering entering

lasting five hours. This may become a problem if you have accepted another assignment for the same day or have another commitment.

Working Environment

As a freelance translator, you tend to have more physical control over the working environment. You might have the option of working from a home office or another location of your choice, usually on your own computer, which is generally equipped with the programs that you find most useful. You will most likely have easy access to resources such as dictionaries and other reference materials, whether physical or online. If you stumble upon a particularly complex translation problem, you can discuss this with a colleague or submit your query to one of the many reliable online professional forums, such as www.translatorscafe.com or www.proz.com.

As a freelance interpreter, things may not be so easy to control. Even if you specialize in telephone interpreting, which might also give you the ability to work from home, interpreters need to be ready for the unexpected. You may work at different locations, even different cities, on a regular basis. You will most likely spend a lot of time traveling to and from the assignment location, so you need to allow for unexpected traffic or weather conditions (getting a reliable GPS navigator may be a sound investment). If you require equipment to perform your job (e.g., a microphone, interpreting booth, etc.), keep in mind that technical difficulties can arise at any time. You will need to adapt to any situations quickly in order to perform at your best at all times. Finally, the live nature of interpreting implies a certain degree of uncertainty, which makes it stressful and exciting at the same time. Even if you are lucky ➡

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to help participants find out how they would fit into the professional interpreting world. The interactive program gave attendees the chance to test their natural language skills and learn about the different interpreting modes (consecutive, simultaneous, etc.), types (court, medical, escort, etc.), and techniques. In addition, the ethical, human, and confidentiality issues surrounding the profession were reviewed.

As organizers of the seminar, it was important for us to have participants leave the event with a basic understanding of the interpreting profession and how translation and interpreting are two complementary but different professions. My presentation, entitled “Freelancing and Agency Guidelines for Interpreters,” reviewed some basic professional tips that could benefit both freelance translators and interpreters. I then offered some advice specifically geared toward aspiring interpreters. This article summarizes the main points of that presentation.

the translation or interpreting fields, or perhaps expanding your service portfolio, there are a few basic issues to keep in mind.

Working Pace

As a freelance translator, you work at your own pace. Different people are more productive at different times of the day. Some people like to have set working hours while others prefer breaking their workday into several shorter periods. As a freelancer translator, you usually have a lot of freedom in the way you organize your day.

As a freelance interpreter, you work at the client’s pace. You may choose to accept or decline an assignment, but once you accept, it is the client who dictates the working hours. Whether working in a hospital as a medical interpreter, in the courtroom as a court interpreter, or as an escort interpreter for a corporate client, you will need to schedule around the client’s needs. Another thing to keep in mind is that, although assignments have a set start time, you are never completely sure of when they will end. You may be hired for a two-hour meeting that ends up

enough to be provided with a written copy of a speech, the speaker may decide to improvise or add some last-minute changes. As a freelance interpreter, you can only prepare as best as you can before the assignment, and then rely on your skills. Formal training and lots of practice will definitely help you feel more confident and perform better.

Interacting with People

As a freelance translator, most of your interaction with clients and colleagues will probably be *virtual* (telephone, e-mail, online chat), which may cause a sense of isolation. There are still plenty of opportunities to connect with colleagues and to network (e.g., professional development events, social gatherings, ATA Annual Conferences), but you need to consider whether you feel comfortable working alone or if you need *live* interaction with people as part of your daily routine.

As a freelance interpreter, you need to develop your people skills, as you will be working side-by-side with very different people on a daily basis, whether it be your client, the client's client, a fellow interpreter, or a civil servant. You may have to work with people who are sick or interpret in situations with a strong emotional component. Whatever the setting, you need to remain professional and courteous. Last but not least, physical appearance is important, as interpreters cannot afford to draw attention because of inappropriate attire or poor personal hygiene.

It seems clear that translation or interpreting appeals to different people. Most professionals end up specializing in one discipline or the other, whichever suits their personality and lifestyle best. However, there are advantages to combining both profes-

sions. First, the job becomes a lot more varied. For translators, interpreting may help them connect with other professionals and fight feelings of isolation. For interpreters, it may be nice to have the option of working from home from time to time. Also, combining

information about some of the institutions offering translation and interpreting courses in the U.S. in the Careers section of ATA's website (www.atanet.org/careers/T_I_programs.php). Getting certified is also an important step, as it shows professional

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both translation and interpreting is a great way of reusing existing knowledge and/or gaining new expertise. Finally, expanding your service portfolio will most likely increase your client base, which usually translates into a steadier flow of income.

Being Your Own Boss

Something that should be carefully considered before jumping into becoming a freelance translator or interpreter is that a freelancer is an *independent contractor*, meaning that you are responsible for your income, health insurance, retirement plan, and self-employment taxes, among other things. Although it is not required, as a freelancer you will probably be advised to invest in some professional liability insurance in case things get ugly. It is great to be your own boss, but some people are just not made for it, so be honest with yourself before taking the plunge.

Entering the Profession

The most obvious way to enter the profession is by pursuing a translation/interpreting degree. You can find

commitment and language- or subject-specific proficiency, and it may be especially relevant if you do not have an academic background in translation and interpreting. ATA offers certification for translation proficiency to and from over a dozen languages. For medical interpreters, various resources are available, such as membership in the International Medical Interpreters Association, as well as training programs through various colleges, universities, and organizations (e.g., Cross Cultural Health Care Program's "Bridging the Gap" course). Several states have passed bills requiring that court interpreters pass a state-approved certification test before they are allowed to work in the courtroom. Those interested in becoming federally certified can pursue the certification administered by the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination program (www.ncsconline.org/d_research/Consort-interp/fcice_exam/index.htm). In addition, an excellent source of information for all things judicial is the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (www.najit.org).

Joining associations and attending professional development events are great ways to enter the profession, connect with other professionals, and maybe even get some job referrals. It also shows that you are serious about the profession and that you are willing to invest time and resources in developing your skills as a freelance translator or interpreter. When contacting an agency to offer your services, be sure to list your certifications as well as memberships in local or national professional associations.

Working Efficiently with an Agency

The first step in working efficiently with an agency is to keep your résumé current and follow the agency's application procedures. As a freelancer, you will be dealing mostly with busy project

managers who rely on the company's freelance database to match your profile with the project at hand. The easier it is for the project manager to determine whether your profile meets the project requirements in terms of expertise and budget, the higher your chances of getting the job. Therefore, it is essential that your résumé clearly highlight your areas of expertise by including relevant education and certifications as well as concrete experience.

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Tailor Résumé Content to the Position

If you are seeking interpreting jobs, give priority to the information supporting your actual experience as an interpreter. If relevant, you may mention that you also have experience in translation or in any other field. If you have enough experience, you may want to create two different résumés, one for translation and one for interpreting. Do not forget to include ➡

For more information

ATA Job Bank
www.atanet.org/jb

ATA Career Link
www.atanet.org/careers/T_I_programs.php

ATA Certification for Translators
www.atanet.org/certification/index.php

**Cross Cultural Health Care Program
"Bridging the Gap"**
www.xculture.org

International Medical Interpreters Association
www.imiaweb.org

**Federal Court Interpreter Certification
Examination Program**
[www.ncsconline.org/d_research/
Consort-interp/fcice_exam/index.htm](http://www.ncsconline.org/d_research/Consort-interp/fcice_exam/index.htm)

**National Association of Judiciary
Interpreters and Translators**
www.najit.org

ProZ.com
www.proz.com

Translators Café
www.translatorscafe.com

your rates and general availability. Interpreters should also indicate whether they are willing to travel locally or nationally. Needless to say, your contact information should be complete and up to date.

Follow Application Procedures

As for following the agency's application procedures, spending a

owned website ProZ.com (www.proz.com/blueboard).

Be a Professional Before, During, and After the Assignment

Translators and interpreters should always strive for the highest degree of professionalism. The following tips are for aspiring interpreters, although freelance translators can also benefit

- Ask the project manager about the company's payment terms and invoicing procedures before accepting the assignment, and get everything in writing. Make sure you follow instructions to the letter.
- Do not accept jobs for which you do not feel qualified. It will hurt your credibility and that of the profession.

During the assignment:

- Dress appropriately. Invest in a couple of professional-looking suits. When in doubt, ask the project manager about the most appropriate attire for the specific assignment.
- Be on time, or better yet, get there a bit early. It will help you become familiar with the setting and the participants. When planning your trip to the location, keep in mind unexpected traffic or weather conditions. If you are going to be late, call the agency (and your onsite contact person, if any) to let them know as soon as possible.
- Introduce yourself as the interpreter and make the scope of your job clear. If you are working for an agency, you may hand out the agency's business cards, as it is not appropriate to hand out your own.
- Turn off your cellphone and let voicemail do its job.
- Remain neutral. You are not there to provide advice or express your opinion, but to allow effective communication. If for some reason you cannot remain neutral, it is best that you decline the assignment.
- Call the agency immediately if any problems arise.

If you have enough experience, you may want to create two different résumés, one for translation and one for interpreting.

little time doing some research about the company usually goes a long way. If you specialize in the English↔Spanish combination, do not waste your time, or the company's, by submitting your application to a Russian↔German agency. Mass e-mails do not look good in the eyes of the agency, either, so try to avoid sending your résumé to an endless list of e-mail addresses. (If you still choose to use this method, at least be sure to use the "blind carbon copy" (BCC) option in your e-mail program so that the agency does not have to scroll through a long list of recipients in the message header.) You may also want to check out the agency's reputation before submitting your application. Your more experienced peers can probably provide advice on those agencies that should definitely be avoided, but there are other resources available, such as the Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org) or the Blue Board listing found in the privately-

owned website ProZ.com (www.proz.com/blueboard).

from most of them. Following these tips when working with an agency will help you look more professional and will make your job, and the agency's, easier and more productive.

Before the assignment:

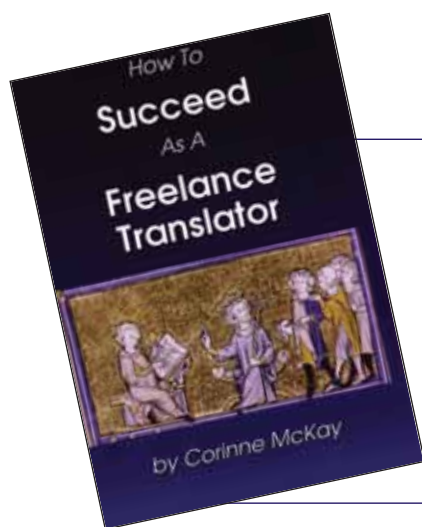
- Be easy to reach. Keep your contact details current and professional. Funny e-mail addresses or voicemail messages may not be that funny when you are trying to get a job.
- Reply promptly to availability requests. It is a sign of professionalism. You may consider getting a BlackBerry or similar device so that you can check e-mails on the go.
- Review the project specifications before accepting the job. Double check the address, the date, and the time of the assignment, and clear up any questions with the project manager before accepting the job.

After the assignment:

- Confirm that the assignment went well. A short call or e-mail to your project manager will suffice. Make sure to mention things such as a change of location or a different starting time.
- Submit your invoice promptly. Again, just like you did before accepting the assignment, confirm the company's payment terms and invoicing procedures with the project manager, and follow them. Maintaining a project/invoice filing system is an advisable business practice.
- Keep your contact details current so that the checks will make it to the right address. Remember, late payments should be handled in a courteous but firm manner.

Still More to Learn

There is always more to learn. For more information, please check out the websites listed in the box on page 19.



How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator

By Corinne McKay

The road to a successful translation business is often much harder than it has to be. In this guide to setting up shop, freelancer Corinne McKay offers lessons learned and shows you how to avoid the most common mistakes—from finding clients to collecting payment. This how-to is great for translators and interpreters just entering the field as well as for old hands who want to make their businesses run better.

How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator (members \$20, nonmembers \$30) is available from ATA's website. Look for the online order form at www.atanet.org/publications or call +01-703-683-6100.

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