



Creating Interpreting Price Quotes for the New Normal

There's no doubt that 2021 was a difficult year—a difficult almost two years, actually. Every profession has been affected by the pandemic in a significant way, and interpreting is no exception. We're lucky, in a way, that technology has allowed us to continue our work as legal, conference, court, and community interpreters. I say lucky because I'm painfully aware that many other professions were not in the relatively privileged position to shift work online and simply disappeared or were decimated. So, while technology isn't always what we want it to be, it certainly has been a lifesaver for interpreters as courts, conferences, and everything in between shut down for in-person events and moved online.

The transition was relatively easy for some and more challenging for others, mostly depending on technology skills and perhaps interest and age. It made me very happy to once again see our worldwide community of interpreters

come together to teach each other about new technologies and share tips and tricks. In fact, I learned most of what I know about remote simultaneous interpreting on Zoom from my colleagues Ernest Niño-Murcia, Aimee Benavides, and Tamber Hilton

of TEA Solutions, with whom I did a group training session early on in the pandemic.

Now that our interpreting work is—and might continue to be—online, we need to take a look at the fee structure agreements, or price quotes, or contracts for services (there are many terms that are used) that we issue to potential clients to make sure we account for this new work situation. As a profession, we don't have all the answers yet, but we're learning along the way and sharing tips and best practices, which I'm happy to do here. In October 2021, I had the pleasure of giving a session about this very topic at ATA's 62nd Annual Conference in Minneapolis, and we had plenty of colleagues in attendance both in person and online. This column is based on that session and I hope you find it helpful.

Why Do You Need a Price Quote in the First Place?

First things first. I'm not a lawyer, even though I'm married to one, so none of what follows is legal advice. Now that I've got this out of the way, let's go back to why price quotes are so important, especially for new clients.

Simply put, in my 20 years in the profession, I would anecdotally say that the most frequent complaint I've heard from colleagues is that a client hasn't paid them, which is both disappointing and infuriating. When I ask whether they had this client sign a price quote (which becomes a contract once

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both parties have signed it), the answer is usually “no.” Now having a signed contract doesn't guarantee that you'll get paid, but it makes it much more likely, and you'll have a much stronger case if you ever need to litigate. ATA has sample contracts on its website¹, so be sure to review them. You don't have to start yours from scratch since I know that can be intimidating, so use the templates provided by ATA instead.

A price quote also doesn't have to be fancy nor complicated. Mine is a simple two-page document converted into a PDF (to make sure no numbers can be edited, at least in theory!) containing all the details of the interpreting assignment the client is booking. I've had to update this quote to adjust it to our new normal situation of online interpreting, and here are the key new elements I believe you need to put some thought into. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers, but these elements should be incorporated into your quote one way or another.

Technology, Internet, and More

Unfortunately, this column would be too long if I went into every detail that needs to be considered under this section, so here are the top ones I believe you must define. I know this is a lot of information, but don't let it intimidate you. Usually the more information you include the better, and since you should create a template, you only have to create it once and then slightly update it for every assignment.

Online Platform and Related Topics:

- Who will pay for the platform? Which one will be used?
- Does the client have experience using the platform? If not, how will they acquire this knowledge? If the interpreter teaches the client how to use it, how will compensation be structured?
- If it's a simultaneous interpreting session, who will be in charge of assigning the interpreting booths?
- Who will be the host of the session?
- At what time should the interpreter(s) log in?
- Is there a separate rehearsal/tech check? How will it be billed? How long will it last?
- Who's responsible for tech support? (Ideally, this should be a dedicated person—who can be a tech-savvy interpreter, but not the active interpreter.)
- Who's responsible for malfunctions/internet failure? How will billing work if the client's internet is down and the event starts one hour later than planned?
- Mainly for conference and community assignments: How will typed questions from the audience be handled? Do the organizers want the interpreters to sight-translate the questions into the target language, or do a

translation of the text and post it into the chat box?

- Do the organizers want the interpreters on camera or not? Which virtual backgrounds, if any, should be used?
- What's the minimum internet speed that's required of organizers, speakers, and interpreters?

Headsets and Audio:

- All presenters and speakers should wear a wired headset or use a high-quality external microphone. (Yes, I know, this often doesn't happen.)
- Some colleagues include minimum audio requirements/maximum decibel information to ensure our hearing doesn't get damaged. It's definitely worth considering, although enforcing these standards does get difficult.
- Both the interpreter and the speakers should be in a quiet room, although all kinds of things can happen (Hello, speaker's cat! Hello, organizer's gardener's lawnmower! You just need to go with it).

Recording Fees, Minimum Charge, Cancellation Fee Schedule:

- Interpreting services are usually delivered in real time and one-time only. If the client records your intellectual property and wants to use it beyond the one-time use that you're selling it for, you should bill for it. My current fee structure is 30% on top



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of interpreting fees, but I've seen colleagues bill up to 50%.

- I'm a big fan of billing at least a half day for interpreting work, and now is the time to insist on high standards rather than lowering them. But the other side of the coin is that online work has allowed us to interpret events that otherwise would not get interpreted due to cost (think small nonprofit meetings, etc.). So, you might want to design a fee structure that allows you to serve smaller organizations. One option would be to allow for a lower minimum for nonprofits, which is my approach. But I would strongly suggest that we don't fall into the trap of billing by unreasonable segments. (I've even seen by-the-minute billing, which should be avoided at all costs.)
- Cancellation fees have always been part of interpreting services price quotes, but they are now more important than ever. What happens if the event is cancelled because the speaker can't connect properly? Who gets billed if the participants can't receive the live stream for technical reasons?

Keep in Mind

While this short checklist is by no means comprehensive, I hope it gets you to start thinking about some of these new elements that, for better or for worse, are part of our online interpreting world. One quick note about



technology in general. Technology per se is not necessarily good or bad, although there's plenty of subpar technology. As a profession, I think it's key for us to separate technology from business practices. As I mentioned earlier, now is not the time to relax our standards or make concessions. We have an unprecedented opportunity to work with clients who may not have worked with interpreters before, so it's good to explain the standards to them if necessary. Interestingly enough, none of my new online interpreting clients have questioned team interpreting for events that exceed 30 minutes.

And finally, remember that you do have an ethical and professional obligation to know the technology that you'll be using to deliver the services the client is requesting. If you don't have a good handle on the technical side of the platform that will be used, you should decline the

assignment, recommend a colleague who is proficient at it, and learn the technology so you can use it next time. Luckily, our community is always there to help and there are plenty of free and low-cost

trainings available. On my end, I paid my free Zoom training forward with my colleague Anabella Tidona. We trained (both for free and for a small fee) more than 100 colleagues, which felt great. 

NOTE

- ¹ ATA Translation Job Model Contract, <http://bit.ly/ATA-model-contract>.



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