

Advice for aspiring public service interpreters

In spring 2016, NRPSI Practitioner Board member Silvina Katz spoke with Hanna Galindez and Ewa Lison, undergraduates of the BA Hons Interpreting and Translation degree at Middlesex University London, for their research project. The aim of the project was to produce a practical guide for anyone considering a career in public service interpreting. We would like to share an edited version of the transcript of that conversation. Many thanks to Hanna and Ewa for giving their permission for us to do this.

Q. What advice would you give to someone who's considering a career in public service interpreting?

Silvina: Firstly, I strongly recommend that anyone who is considering entering the profession does their research regarding what it involves.

For the majority of practitioners, being an interpreter means being self-employed and working on a freelance basis. Consequently, you don't work for a single organisation or employer. Thinking that you will be employed by one organisation is a common mistake.

Q. Is having a qualification as important as having experience?

Silvina: Both are equally important. However, the first thing you must do as a public service interpreter is meet the required professional standards. And to do this you must have the necessary qualifications. When you are qualified, you can then begin to gain your experience. The fact that both are considered of equal value is borne out by the National Register of Public Service Interpreters' entry criteria. To register a language at Full status with the National Register, you not only need to possess the right qualification but to have accumulated 400 hours' practical interpreting experience in that language as well.



Q. Would voluntary interpreting or interpreting for your family count towards the hours of experience required to register with the National Register?

Silvina: Unfortunately, neither would count. You would need to demonstrate that you have spent time working for one of the public services. The hours you've spent working would need to be documented.

Q. What is the hiring process for those who've recently graduated from university with a public service interpreting qualification?

Silvina: It doesn't work quite like that. You don't tend to get hired or recruited in the usual sense. Your services would normally be retained through a third party – for example, a language agency. You would typically apply to sign up with a number of language agencies that would then contact you about assignments that they've received. It might be that agencies advertise for interpreters and that you respond to this ad by applying to sign up with them. Some agencies may ask you to take a test before accepting you onto their books, others may not – the point being that one agency's requirements in terms of the qualifications and experience they expect you to have can differ from another's. They might also accept you onto their books at a particular level based on your qualifications and experience. It is also worth noting that by signing up with a language agency you agree to abide by their terms and conditions of service including their hourly rate. Signing up with an agency, however, is no guarantee of work.

Registered Interpreters, on the other hand, can be approached directly with assignments via the National Register. Such interpreters must have met NRPSI's registration criteria in terms of qualifications gained and experience held in order to be registered. Potential employers looking for a Registered Interpreter can search the online Register for free. They can search for the language they need interpreted and by the location of the interpreter to identify a practitioner based near to where the assignment needs to be carried out. While the Register is not a recruitment service, being on the Register is a means of marketing yourself to prospective clients.

Q. How can a graduate enter the public service interpreting profession?

Silvina: Firstly, you need to obtain an appropriate qualification. The level of qualification you will need will depend very much on the type of interpreting work you wish to do and the public service or services you wish to work for. For some types of interpreting work, it is only necessary to hold a Level 3 qualification. To work in the health sector, a Level 5 qualification can be required. If you wish to work with the police or courts, you must have at least a Level 6 qualification. I think that having the right qualification is your entry point into the field of public service interpreting. Of course, the better qualified you are, the better equipped you're going to be to practise as a public service interpreter.

Q. What advice would you give to students who are thinking about public service interpreting as a career?

Silvina: That's difficult. I think that the decision to become a public service interpreter is a personal one. I think of public service interpreting as a vocation. It is extremely rewarding. However, working as a public service interpreter is not easy. Your working hours can be unpredictable. You could get called to a job at any time of the day or night, and it could be some distance away. With fewer than 2,000 Registered Interpreters servicing the whole of the UK, travel is often part of the job. Indeed, where you live can have a huge bearing on the demand for your services. The call for interpreters is, as you might imagine, greatest in the London area.

These are also challenging times for the public sector. It doesn't have a lot of money and is under increasing pressure to reduce its costs. However, if you choose to enter the profession and invest time, money and effort in becoming appropriately qualified, then you want to charge and be paid a fee appropriate to your level of professionalism. You don't want to, and neither should you, accept the lowest possible pay. I think this is a dilemma for all of us working in the profession today.

My advice to students would be to join the Chartered Institute of Linguists and to get to know exactly how the profession works – warts and all. You can also carry out your own online research to

discover whether public service interpreting is the career for you. There are now lots of social networking groups for interpreters where they discuss ideas and issues that could be helpful too.

Q. Do you think it is possible to start to build a career while studying at university? Or do you think it is better to concentrate on getting an interpreting qualification first?

Silvina: I think it is best to qualify first. While you might be able to sign up with a language agency and to get work, I wouldn't advocate doing this until you are qualified.

When you are qualified and become a Registered Interpreter, you must adhere to a code of conduct. The code not only protects the public from poor practice, but you, the interpreter, as well. It provides you with a guide for how you must behave and what you can do. For example, you can't simply take any job because you need the money. You must ensure you have the right skills and knowledge; that you are the right person for that job. If you are the right person, you can rest assured that you are going to be able to cope with the demands of the assignment and deliver what is necessary. If you stick to the code, you can't go far wrong.

The difficulty with building a career or seeking work before you are even qualified is that you are unlikely to know whether you are equipped to undertake a job.

That said, I don't think it hurts from the beginning to look around to see what skills you will require to work for a language agency or organisation when the time comes.

You could also look for opportunities to see other interpreters in action, at a court hearing for example.

Q. Would you advocate that undergraduates should shadow an experienced practising interpreter?

I'm often asked by aspiring interpreters if they can shadow me at work. The difficulty with this is that, as interpreters, we aren't in control of the environments that we work in. We are also often

working in sensitive and pressurised situations. We would need to get the permission of all the parties involved to have an observer present, and often there just isn't the time or opportunity to do this.

Q. You mentioned before that as a professional interpreter you should know your strengths and only undertake assignments that you are equipped to take on. Is it therefore better to qualify in a specific area – in either health or legal interpreting, for example?

Silvina: As ever, it depends. For instance, if you take the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) exam you would qualify in one of three areas: law, health or local government. Those are the three options and with any of these qualifications you can apply to become a Registered Interpreter. However, just because your DPSI qualification is in one area, this doesn't stop you from taking an assignment in any of the other areas. What specialising does provide is a particular competence in the area that you plan to work most in. My advice would be to choose an area that you will enjoy working in, but to also look at what the employment opportunities are likely to be in the area.

Our yearly review of the National Register database last year highlighted that 75% of Registered Interpreters have an interpreting qualification in law. This would indicate that competition for work in this area is high. However, it should also be noted that the police forces are the biggest users of the National Register. In other words, there is a greater demand for Registered Interpreters in this area.

Q. Why is the DPSI in law the pathway chosen by most Registered Interpreters?

Silvina: It's possible that it's because the police and courts require interpreters to have the necessary competence in their sector and to be qualified to the highest level. You shouldn't be able to work for either the police or courts without the necessary level of proficiency.

Q. How can you get a foot on the ladder once you've graduated if you don't have the hours of practical experience?

Silvina: As previously mentioned, you can apply to sign up with language agencies. You can also apply to become a Registered Interpreter. If you don't have the hours of practical experience but you do have the right qualification, your language could be recorded at the relevant Interim status. Once you are on the National Register, your record will be publicly available to those searching the database for an interpreter. You could therefore be contacted with assignments, providing you with the opportunity to build up your hours and skillset.

I would also advise that you develop your professional profile online by having a website and/or LinkedIn page, etc.

Q. Do language agencies and professional organisations check interpreters' qualifications?

Silvina: Absolutely, yes. When you apply to become a Registered Interpreter, for instance, you have to provide the original version of your qualification certificates. Certainly, you would not be able to be on the National Register without the right qualifications. A lot of employers and some language agencies source interpreters using the National Register. They trust the fact that in order to be on the National Register your qualifications, experience and security clearances have been checked. They are also reassured by the fact that you adhere to a code of conduct. Consequently, a number of national public sector organisations that use contract interpreters require them to be on the National Register.

Q. How important is it to know the NRPSI Code of Conduct?

Silvina: It's of vital importance, because when you become a Registered Interpreter you demonstrate your commitment to best practice and the highest professional standards by signing the code. In order to uphold it, you must understand what you are allowed to do and what is

expected of you. As long as you abide by the code and the limits of your competence, you are protected and so too are the public and public services you work for.

On those relatively rare occasions when things do go wrong and a Registered Interpreter is thought to be in breach of the code, the client has an opportunity to seek redress. They can make an official complaint that is then managed via a rigorous and, most importantly, an independent process. It is the independent and transparent nature of this process that also protects the interpreter.

Q. Are qualified interpreters recognised as professionals? Are their services appreciated?

Silvina: For me, being an interpreter is probably one of the most rewarding things that you could possibly be. You provide two parties that want to communicate but who don't share a common language with the means of doing this.

In situations where, for instance, someone has suffered a terrible accident or is accused of a crime, you enable them to tell their side of events. In this way, the police can gather the evidence they need to ensure justice is done.

I think that interpreters are privileged to be present at such critical times in people's lives. However, it is often the case that people on both sides are under enormous amounts of stress on these occasions. In such emotionally charged circumstances, you don't necessarily expect to have your contribution appreciated. However, you must maintain a professional approach throughout the assignment. You must remain totally impartial and interpret accurately only what is said. You must uphold the high professional standards that are expected of you as a Registered Interpreter. In the long run, this will be appreciated.

As important as it is that others value your professionalism, it is perhaps more vital that you know and believe in your worth as a professional. As previously mentioned, costs are always under pressure in the public sector. However, that doesn't mean that you should accept any price for your services. In fact, to the contrary. For by accepting the lowest possible fee you can undermine your

own value as a professional with unique knowledge and expertise. The result were enough interpreters to do this would be a race to the bottom in terms of professional standards. Many qualified and experienced interpreters would most likely be driven to leave the profession. Indeed, we have already seen some evidence of this happening.

That said, there are situations when accepting a lower rate of pay might be acceptable to you. For example, if you are in the early stages of your career, or are qualified but don't have enough practical hours of experience, you might be prepared to accept a lower fee. Also, some organisations have fixed tariffs. If you wish to work with them, you must accept their fees.

Q. Are there instances when unqualified interpreters can be used?

Silvina: There are instances where you might consider using an unqualified interpreter. For example, if you're holding an event for a delegation of non-English speakers and need someone to welcome them and provide directions to their accommodation. But this isn't really interpreting.

I would never consider using an unqualified interpreter for more serious matters, where it's absolutely critical that the right information is delivered in the right way. I would also never ask anyone in a family to interpret in a medical context, for instance. I wouldn't imagine that medical professionals, unless the circumstances are absolutely exceptional, would wish to engage anybody other than an expert interpreter when dealing with an emergency either.

ENDS