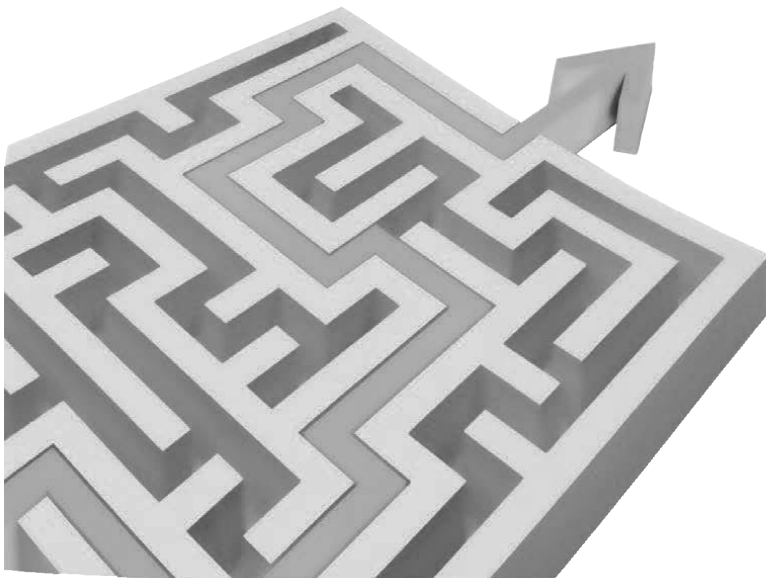


Perspectives

Navigating the maze of interpreting and certification



Interpreting is an inherent part of the evolution of societies across the world. And what was once a profession reserved for the staff of dignitaries and merchants traveling from empire to empire has expanded in proportion to immigration and the globalization of modern communities in developed nations.

As an Arabic interpreter in the Bay Area with over a decade of experience, I have seen this need grow, resulting in greater demand for the screening and certification of interpreters. I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to be in the forefront of this process. A few years ago, I had a couple of one-week assignments as a consultant in New York and Dallas; I was trained in evaluating the linguistic level of government employees, contractors and medical interpreters who were trying to become certified. Enjoying the travel opportunity to both cities included the added benefit of meeting interpreters from all over the country and connecting with their ideas.

The pay was lower than an interpreting assignment, but I still saw it as a great opportunity. Ultimately I was not contributing my time and expertise for financial gain, but because I felt that the certification framework had been inadequate in providing effective interpreters. By contributing to this



Afaf Steiert

Afaf Steiert is the president and cofounder of Afaf Translations LLC. She works as a conference Arabic interpreter and oversees all medical translation services at Afaf Translations. She has an MS from the University of Basel, Switzerland.

work, it was my expectation that I would also obtain the certification, as it seemed appropriate that the license consultant would be knowledgeable enough to qualify.

At the start of the consultant assignment, the evaluation appeared easy in that all levels of linguistic capability would have to be quantified and rated in some manner. By the end, however, I questioned the inefficient implementation of the certifications, and it seemed to me a listless assessment that only touched on the bare minimum of linguistic capabilities.

To add insult to injury, the certifying association chose not to certify the initial group of testers and evaluators, which meant that the people designing the programs being implemented were initially barred from access. Although this only impacted a small percentage of interpreters, it exposed a certain lapse in the logic of the association's guidelines. It seemed both unreasonable and ironic that the bureaucracy providing certification for newcomers would exclude

experienced interpreters instead of modifying the process so they could remain in the market. I began to consider that certification is not the only benchmark for qualification, and that interpreters across all languages must be able to present and defend their knowledge and experience against the competition.

Although there are insufficient criteria to properly grade the value of linguists, the markets for certain languages, especially Arabic, have become saturated. People displaced from wars, political asylum seekers and refugees who have qualifying educations and adequate language skills in both English and Arabic have come to seek work as interpreters in California's market. While it is wonderful that these interpreters can make a living, they also benefit from a certification system rife with issues.

While it may be good for them and better for the market, it is worse, I believe, for the quality of the industry. For example, existing certifications for Arabic medical interpreters can serve a good purpose in vetting the interpreters who are fit for service; however, dependence only on certification leads to organizations that underutilize those who may be better qualified for high demand jobs, as opposed to those who merely obtained the certification. This creates a culture of interpreting that depends on certification results when everyone in a mediocre playing field becomes a certificate holder and interpreters with valuable expertise do not stand out in the market.

Now that a few years have passed for reflection, I have discovered some simple steps to rise above this paradigm in any language field. First, as an interpreter, it is important to maneuver into a niche market such as medical interpreting. If the market is saturated, ask: why spend money and time on

continuing education and renewal fees instead of focusing efforts elsewhere? Also, networking and developing consistent work with an agency offers continued security despite interpreters entering and exiting an ever changing market.

Try to avoid complacency, and continually market your name and résumé. Remain active in professional networking sites and make sure you are recognizable. Finally, maintain a flexible and competitive price if you are planning to work across various fields. One price does not serve all sectors, and as an interpreter you must develop a healthy pricing schedule in order to reap the most benefit for the cost of your time.

I recall how long it took me to establish myself as an interpreter. There were many workshops and unpleasant assignments at the start of my career, which eventually helped me fine-tune my pricing and assignment choices. Through years of traveling, learning and loving the profession, I have realized that to keep working in this competitive market requires trainings, certification and a decrease in my rates. Some of my colleagues (court-certified, medical interpreter-certified) who have been interpreters for much longer than I, are of the opinion that perhaps the career is a dead end because the market demands ever lower rates for assignments.

In the end, while certification remains an important measure of qualification, ultimately it is the client who will decide your worth as an interpreter. The fact remains that in-person interpreting is a gifted talent requiring many skills to perform well, with or without certification. It does need devotion and hard work experience to reach the level of professionalism required in our industry market. [M]



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