

# How to succeed as a freelance translator

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator Corinne McKay How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator by Corinne McKay ISBN 978-1-4116-9520-7 First Edition ©2006 by Corinne McKay. All Rights Reserved. Published by Two Rat Press, a division of Translatewrite, Inc. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review, without permission in writing from the author. For information, contact[[email protected](mailto:[email protected])]com.

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Introduction I decided to write this book because I love my job, and because so few bilingual people are aware of the high demand for qualified translators and interpreters, or of the lifestyle benefits of being a language entrepreneur. In 2002, I was looking for a new career after eight years as a high school French teacher, and hoping to find a work-from-home job using my language skills. I thought back to a translation internship that I had done in college, and remembered how much I had enjoyed it.

At the time, I had almost no knowledge of the translation industry nor any job contacts, so I started out by calling every company listed under Translators and Interpreters in the local yellow pages. Over the next few months I became involved with my local translators association, the American Translators Association (ATA), and began getting some calls for translation work. A year and some 400 resumes later, I passed the ATA certification exam in French to English translation, and my business continued to grow, while still allowing me to work from home on a flexible schedule, earning a healthy income and spending plenty of time with my family. Although I spent most of that first year marketing my fledgling business, the effort paid off; after three years as a freelance translator I earned my highest gross income ever (including when I worked full-time as a teacher) while working 20-30 hours a week from home. I developed specializations in legal, financial and marketing translation, edited my local

translators association newsletter, presented seminars at the annual conference of the American Translators Association and often found myself exclaiming, " This is so interesting! while working on a translation—in short, I had found my niche. At the same time, the path from that day with the phone book to the day I told a client, " Sorry, I'm booked for the next two weeks" 9 10 INTRODUCTION was harder than it had to be, because there is a real shortage of training materials on how to run a translation business. Most translators enter the field because they love languages and writing, not because they love marketing and bookkeeping, but many translators' businesses fail because they lack basic business skills.

If you'd like to succeed as a freelance translator, it's definitely important to pursue training in translation techniques, translation software, and other tools of the trade, but these types of courses are easier to locate. Part of the reason I decided to write this book was because, having never run my own business before, I struggled so much with these basic business questions: how and where to find prospective clients, how to pursue translator certification, how to decide whether expensive computer software would help my business, how to set my translation rates, and so on.

This book is based on the article Getting Started as a Freelance Translator, which first appeared on my website and was picked up by several translation websites. Later, I expanded that article into an online course that has continued to be very popular with aspiring translators. Following the success of the course, I realized that there must be many more people out there wondering how to use their language skills to break into the translation industry, and the idea for this book was born. The good news about

translation If you're considering a career as a translator, there's a lot to look forward to.

Given the global reach of businesses in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, translators are employed in almost every conceivable business sector, from banking to museums to healthcare to high-tech. If you have a special skill or interest in addition to being bilingual, you're almost sure to find clients who will pay for your services, and you'll get to work on materials that interest you. Overall, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics <http://bls.gov> projects that job prospects for translators and interpreters will increase faster than the average until at least 2014.

Translators are usually well paid for their work, with the most recent compensation survey by the American Translators Association reporting 11 that the average self-employed full-time translator earns over \$50, 000 per year. Most translators, even if they work 40 hours a week or more, live a very self-directed lifestyle and can tailor their work day around other interests or commitments such as families. The good news about virtual work In publicizing their work-from-home newsletter The Rat Race Rebellion, the e-entrepreneurship specialists Staffcentrix <http://staffcentrix.com> estimate that " There is a 30 to 1 scam ratio among home-based work 'opportunities. ' " Although there are definitely some unscrupulous translation clients out there, translation itself is a great example of a legitimate work-from-home opportunity. The vast majority of translators in the U. S. work from home, so translation agencies are used to this business model, and don't think it's odd to employ translators who work from home. Home work has a lot of advantages for you as the home worker, and for your community as a whole.

By working from home, you'll probably experience greater job satisfaction and less stress, since a relatively minor disruption like a dentist appointment or furnace repair won't derail your entire work day. Most of the time, you'll be able to structure your work day around your peak energy times and your family's needs, rather than your employer's policies. Your commute will be as long as it takes you to walk from your bedroom to your office and fire up the computer while still in your pajamas. Not surprisingly, most home workers experience a greatly improved quality of life.

Likewise, working from home often has a very positive effect on your community and the world as a whole. Less commuting means less traffic congestion, less fuel usage and less need for parking areas. Home-based workers are around during the day, allowing them to volunteer for school and community activities and to be available for their families. A study by the International Telework Association and Council (ITAC) found that home-based workers are absent from work less than half as often as office-based workers, leading to greater work productivity in general. 12 INTRODUCTION

Is freelance translation for you? Despite all of these positive reports, it's very important to do some realistic self-assessment to determine if a career as a freelance translator is for you. Translators need a lot of skills besides fluency in at least two languages; translators need to be excellent writers in their native language and need to be interested in and skilled at terminology research using both paper dictionaries and the Internet. Translators also need to be avid readers in their native and non-native languages in order to keep up their language skills and their knowledge of world events.



Equally important, and the subject that we'll focus on in this book, is a translator's ability to run a business. When you work full-time for an employer, you have one job title. When you work for yourself, you're not only the translator, but also the department head for sales and marketing, technical support, customer relations, accounting and facilities maintenance. Unless you're willing and able to pay someone to do these tasks for you, you'll be doing them yourself, in addition to your regular job. Before you launch yourself into a translation career, it's important to ask yourself a few questions. Are you the type of person who is often described as highly motivated, driven, a go-getter; or do you have trouble following through on a plan once the exciting idea stage is over? Are you consistently able to meet deadlines with almost no supervision or direction, or do you head off to shopping websites as soon as the boss disappears? Do you have the multi-tasking skills necessary to manage multiple clients and deadlines at once, or does this type of work leave you feeling overwhelmed and wondering where to start?

In addition, it's important to factor in a start-up period of at least six months to a year when launching your freelance business. Of course this is just an estimate, and the length of everyone's startup period will vary, but for translators who work in a relatively common language pair (for example French, Italian, German, Spanish or Portuguese paired with English), it's best to budget on at least six months of doing a lot of marketing and working less than full-time. For some people, for example parents of small children or full-time students who are looking for some supplemental income, the spotty cash flow of a startup period may not be a huge concern. If you're planning

on translation as your full-time income, you'll need to either continue your current employment while your translation business gets up to speed, or plan on living off your savings or a loan during this time. It can help to focus on the fact that with a consistent and reasonably aggressive marketing effort, you'll have years to enjoy your freelance lifestyle and income after your startup phase ends.

So to all of you out there wondering, "What exactly does someone with a degree in foreign languages do for a living?," I wish you happy reading, and hopefully, happy translating! Acknowledgments Very few books are truly solo endeavors, and this book is no exception. Special thanks go to the people who lent their enthusiasm to this project when it was just an idea to toss around over coffee or e-mail: Eve Lindemuth Bodeux, Beth Hayden, Thomas Hedden, Bruce McKay, LaNelle McKay and Karen

Mitchell for their insights and encouragement, and the students in the first two sessions of my course, Getting Started as a Freelance Translator for their excellent feedback on the course materials that this book is based on. My colleagues in the Colorado Translators Association, the American Translators Association and Boulder Media Women, and the readers of my e-newsletter Open Source Update are an ongoing source of knowledge and inspiration that every translator and writer should be so fortunate as to have. And Dan Urist... where to start... spent more hours than a recovering computer systems administrator should have to on the layout, design and editing of this book, learning at least two new pieces of software in the process and lovingly hounding me until the last word was written. 15 1 An overview of the translation business 1. 1 What is a translator? In a nutshell, a translator is

a human being who changes written words from one language to another. If this sounds obvious, take another look! First, it's important to note that although computers play an important role in translation, professional translators are humans, not computers.

Second, a translator works with written words, unlike an interpreter, who works with spoken words. If you're new to the industry, you've learned something important right here; that the phrase "speaking through a translator," contradicts itself, since translators work in writing. While some people work as both translators and interpreters, most concentrate on one or the other. Translators are also, by definition, fluent in more than one language. In the industry, these are referred to as the source, or "from" language(s), and the target, or "into" language, which is almost always the translator's native language.

So for example, a translator who is a native English speaker and learned Portuguese and Spanish might translate from Spanish and Portuguese into English. If you work in the most common language pairs, such as English paired with French, Italian, German or Spanish (known as FIGS in the translation industry), chances are that you will never translate into your second or third language. If you work in a less common language pair, you might find yourself as the exception to this rule.

A client might need a document translated from Thai into English, a job that would usually be handled by a native English speaker who has Thai as a second or third language. However in practice, it's often easier to find a native Thai (or 17 18 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS Lingala, Malayalam, Fulani, etc) speaker who has English as a second language since

there are many more native Thai speakers who also speak English than the other way around. In this case, the job might be handled by a native Thai speaker, and then proofread by a native English speaker.

In the United States, most translators work from one or two source languages; it's extremely common for translators to have only one working language pair, like Spanish into English, or Japanese into English. In other areas of the world where foreign languages are more widely studied, most translators work from at least two source languages, and often many more. It's not at all unusual to find Europe-based translators who work, for example, from English, Spanish and French into German, or from Norwegian, Swedish and English into Danish. 1. What does it take to become a translator? Being multilingual isn't the only skill a translator needs, but it's certainly the most important. Translators learn their languages in many different ways; many grew up in bilingual households or countries, some learned their second or third language in school and then pursued experience abroad, some took intensive language courses or worked in a foreign country for several years, and it is also quite common for translators to become freelancers after working as military or government linguists.

Almost all translators working in the U. S. have at least a Bachelor's Degree, although not necessarily in translation. As a rule, most professional translators have at least some experience working and/or living in a country where their source language or languages are spoken; many translators lived and worked in their source language country for many years, or pursued higher education in their source language(s).

In-country experience is a big asset for a translator, since translation work involves knowing not just the structure of the language to be translated, but the cultural framework that surrounds it. This isn't to say that classroom study doesn't produce excellent translators, but it's important to realize WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BECOME A TRANSLATOR? 19 at the outset that to be a successful professional translator, you need near-native proficiency in your source language(s); if you're starting from scratch, a few semesters of part-time language class won't be enough.

As a point of reference, the U. S. Government's Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center offers a program to teach Middle Eastern languages to government employees, and the basic program involves 63 weeks of full-time study. Many people wonder how to tell if their language skills are good enough to work as a translator. While there are various language testing services that can tell you where you stand, probably the easiest way to get a feel for your translation readiness is to translate something.

Go on the web and find a legal document, newspaper article or press release in your source language, then try to translate it. As we'll discuss later, professional translators make constant use of reference materials such as print and online dictionaries, terminology databases, etc. , so when you look at your practice document, don't assume that you should be able to whip out a perfect translation on the spot. The key points are: can you understand this document on both a word-for-word and a conceptual level, and can you convey its meaning in your target language?

Translators today work in almost every conceivable language pair; while the market in the United States has historically been very strong in Western European languages such as French, German, Italian and Spanish, there is an increasing (and increasingly lucrative) market for translation in Asian and Middle Eastern Languages like Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Arabic, Farsi, Pashto and Kurdish; Central and Eastern European languages like Serbian, Czech, Slovene and Macedonian; as well as the "languages of smaller diffusion" like Nepali, Hebrew or Somali. In most language pairs, the amount of work available is proportionate to the number of translators in the language. While there is obviously a great deal of English to Spanish translation work in the U. S. , there is a correspondingly large number of translators in this language combination; and while there may not be a great deal of work in Indonesian to English, there 20 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS re also not many translators in this combination, resulting in a correspondingly small amount of competition for work. In addition to near-native source language proficiency, translators need other skills too; probably the most important are excellent writing skills in their target language, in-depth knowledge in one or more areas of specialization, and business management skills. Some would-be translators are in practice not very successful because they have weak writing skills in their target language, making their translations difficult or unpleasant to read.

Highly specialized translators are among the highest-earning members of the profession; for example a bilingual intellectual property attorney, stock broker or biomedical engineer may earn many times the per-word rate of a "

jack of all trades" translator with a B. A. in German. Some translators turn a previous career into an area of specialization, while others take additional courses in areas of specialization or learn specialized terminology from more experienced translators.

Paradoxically, specializing can also lead to more work, not less, as the specialized translator becomes known as the go-to person in his or her area of expertise, whether it's environmental engineering, textile manufacturing or stage sets. The translation industry in the United States is moving more and more toward an independent contractor model, where the vast majority of translators are self-employed and work for a variety of clients; in 2005, approximately 70% of the members of the American Translators Association were self-employed independent contractors.

As such, translators need business management skills such as the ability to find and retain clients, work on tight deadlines with little supervision or management, handle increases and decreases in work flow and cash flow and perform tasks such as bookkeeping, tax planning and computer upkeep and maintenance. In fact, most self-employed translators spend 25-50% of their time on non-translation work, largely involving management of the day to day tasks of running a business, so these skills are just as important as translation-related skills in succeeding as a freelance translator.

IMPROVING YOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS 21 1. 3 Improving your language skills If you'd like to work as a translator but your language skills are not yet up to par, you have a few options. The best, but most difficult, is immersion: living and working or going to school in a country where your source language is spoken. If you want to improve your French, without a doubt the fastest way

to do it is to move to a French-speaking country for a year, work or go to school with native French speakers, and speak only French while you're there.

If this isn't possible for you, university programs in translation and interpretation do exist in the U. S. , although they are much less common than in other countries. However, nearly all medium or large colleges and universities will offer advanced courses in the more widely spoken foreign languages. The American Translators Association [http : //atanet . org](http://atanet.org) sells several publications listing translating and interpreting programs, and also has a mentoring program for its members, although the program is geared toward professional, not linguistic, development.

If you're trying to improve your language skills, be realistic; although it's certainly far from impossible to learn a new language at age 30, 50 or 70, it's also not going to happen with a few semesters of night classes. If you're starting from a beginner level or close to it, two to three years of intensive language study in a college-level program is probably a bare minimum. However, if you have a solid foundation in a second or third language, for instance you studied it in school for 10 years including several trips to a country where the language is spoken, you might be ready to start translating right away.

As mentioned before, simply knowing more than one language isn't enough to guarantee your success as a translator. While requirements for different translation jobs vary, nearly all translators have at least a Bachelor's degree, and often more education than this. If you would eventually like to earn certification from the American Translators Association, you'll need either a <https://assignbuster.com/how-to-succeed-as-a-freelance-translator/>



Master's degree or higher, or several years of work experience as a translator. The rapid expansion of the translation industry, flexible work possibilities and high earning potential have made freelance translation an attractive career for bilingual lawyers, accountants, doctors and scientific professionals, and many translators feel that specialization is extremely important to their success. This is especially true as the Internet has opened up work opportunities for translators who live in countries where the cost of living is relatively low, and where educated professionals may be able to make more money by working as translators over the Internet than by practicing in the professions they were trained for.

1. A translator's working environment

The translation industry in the United States is moving more and more toward the independent contractor model. In the past, many large companies and even many translation agencies had staffs of in-house translators, but these jobs are now few and far between, and when they do exist would rarely be given to a beginner. In contrast to other professions where newcomers are expected to pay their dues as in-house employees and then enjoy the "reward" of freelancing, the translation industry usually works in the opposite way.

Most translators start out as freelancers and may even remain self-employed for their whole careers, while most wellpaid in-house translators are hired with years or even decades of experience. It's important to be realistic about whether the life of a freelancer is for you. While you'll have a great degree of control over where, when and how much you work, you'll also give up the

security of a steady paycheck, benefits, paid time off, and a pension or employer-sponsored 401K. Most freelance translators in the U.

S. work from a home office, and there is no stigma attached to working from home; translators who rent office space outside the home are definitely the exception rather than the rule. The vast majority of a translator's work is done on the computer, using either a word processing program or text editor, and possibly a computer-assisted translation program. Translators make extensive use of reference materials such as print and online dictionaries, terminology databases, and discussion with other translators.

The almost constant use of a computer A TRANSLATOR'S WORKING ENVIRONMENT 23 makes repetitive strain injury one of the few work-related injuries that translators are at risk for. There are many positive sides to a translator's work environment. Compared to other work-from-home jobs, translation can be very interesting and well-paying. Although you probably won't get lavishly rich working as a freelance translator, translation industry compensation surveys report that the average self-employed freelance translator earns about \$52, 000 per year.

Translators who are highly specialized in technical fields, or work with in-demand language pairs may earn much more than this, and in-house translators for certain branches of the U. S. government or international financial institutions may earn \$70, 000 a year and up. At the same time, it is important to be realistic about the time and effort involved in reaching this level of income.

Unless you work in a language pair and/or specialization that is extremely in demand, it may take a year or more to develop a regular client base that will allow you to replace the income from a previous full-time job, and you will probably need to send out several hundred resumes during that time. Before starting your freelance translation business, it's important to determine if you have the financial resources, time and energy to get through the startup period to the point where you are earning a reasonable and steady income.

Starting a translation business is a fairly inexpensive proposition. If you already have a home computer and high speed Internet access, you might make do with business cards, computerized fax service and a modest reference library, for a startup cost of only a few hundred dollars. To a large extent, freelancers can determine when and how much they want to work. While it probably makes good business sense to accept as much work as possible from your regular clients, on a day-to-day basis many translators work on their own schedule rather than from 9 to 5.

A translator's eight hour day might run from 7: 30-11: 30 AM and 4: 30-8: 30 PM. This flexibility makes translation an excellent career option for people who have young children, are semi-retired, or just want to work part-time. Today, most translation work happens remotely, and translators can live almost anywhere. The up and down nature of most freelancers' work loads also lends itself to using free time to take classes, pursue hobbies, travel or spend time with family. On the downside (and of course there are some downsides to all of this! , as with other consulting or freelance work, some aspects of translation can be stressful and difficult to manage. Many translators describe their work as

feast or famine, with months of little work and months of working every waking moment and more than a few moments that should be spent sleeping. Worldwide business acceleration has affected translation turnaround times, with agencies eager to have translations returned as soon as possible, sometimes within a few hours for a short project. Clients who pay late or don't pay at all can cause major financial problems, especially for translators who live paycheck to paycheck.

Translators who work in common language combinations like SpanishEnglish may face pressure to lower their rates in order to remain competitive, especially if the client can find qualified translators in countries where pay rates are much lower. In addition, working from home has its ups and downs; even for an introvert, the life of the home office can be lonely, and time spent on (unpaid) non-translation work like accounting, marketing and maintaining computer systems can become frustrating when you'd much rather be translating!

If you've never worked for yourself before, succeeding as a translator demands a high degree of self-discipline. With no boss in the next cubicle and a list of household errands to finish, it can be hard to focus on your work, and if you have a family or housemates, equally difficult to find a work-friendly time and space in your house. However, most translators enjoy their work and like to talk about what they do and how they got started. The ever-changing nature of the job appeals to many people, since no day "at the office" is exactly like another.

Another positive aspect of the job is that most translation clients value their translators and treat them as professionals who deserve to be fairly paid for

<https://assignbuster.com/how-to-succeed-as-a-freelance-translator/>

their work. Even in the most common language combinations, the supply of qualified and capable (emphasis here! ) translators often cannot WHAT KINDS OF WORK DO TRANSLATORS DO? 25 keep pace with the industry's demand, resulting in a generally positive employment picture for translators and interpreters. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that employment prospects for translators and interpreters should grow faster than the average for all occupations until at least 2014. . 5 What kinds of work do translators do? As cross-cultural and multilingual communication become more important to the worldwide flow of business, translators and interpreters are employed in almost every conceivable business and government sector. From law to health care to finance, entertainment, information technology and advertising, translators and interpreters enable global communication. Some translators, especially those with specialized professional or technical training, might concentrate on only one subject area, such as pharmaceuticals, corporate finance, computer software or legal contracts.

There are even translators who specialize in seemingly obscure areas like fisheries management, shopping mall construction, stamps, or groundwater hydrology. Still others position themselves as "jack of all trades" translators with concentrations in certain areas. In general, the more translators there are in a given language pair, the more specialization is required, and the smaller the translator pool, the less incentive there is to specialize. German to English translators in the U. S. almost certainly have specializations, but the same isn't necessarily true of the few Bosnian to English translators doing business in the same markets.

Translators sometimes work in collaboration with other linguists, particularly if the work involves a large project that needs to be translated in a short amount of time. Today, translation teams almost always work together over the Internet, rather than in person. The size of translation projects can vary widely, from a single line of text such as a company slogan, to an entire book or website. Most translators who are self-employed work from project to project, with the average project taking anywhere from 26 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS n hour to several days, and some longer projects mixed in as well. Most translators working in the United States today work on business and technical documents, rather than literature. Although most translators in the U. S. are independent contractors, full-time jobs for translators and interpreters do exist, particularly in areas such as court and health care interpreting, web content translation, software localization, and translating and interpreting for the United States Government's various agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency.

Translators who are experienced and/or qualified to work in more than one language pair may have a greater chance of being offered an in-house position. Literary translators (translators who work on books, poetry or short stories) make up a relatively small segment of translators in the United States. This is because literary translation is typically not very well paid, and because Americans don't tend to read literature in translation, so there is a small market for the work of literary translators; in 2004, only 891 of the 195, 000 new books printed in

English were adult literature in translation. If you translate into a language other than English, there may be a larger market for literary translation services, especially if you are qualified to work on textbooks, technical manuals, and other "non-literary" book projects. Localization translators are a rapidly growing group in the industry. Localization, or the complete adaptation of a product such as a web site, product marketing kit, software program or advertising campaign into another language, used to be confined mostly to computer software.

Now, software localization is probably the largest segment of the localization market, but it's certainly not the only segment. Businesses may hire localization agencies when they want to take a new product global and need culturally-targeted marketing advice in addition to translation services.

WHAT KINDS OF WORK DO TRANSLATORS DO? 1. 5. 1 Software Localization  
27 A sub-specialty within the translation and localization industry is software localization, the process of translating software user interfaces from one language to another.

For example, when a large software company produces multilingual versions of its applications, every piece of text displayed by the software must be translated into the target language, and in many cases the graphics must be altered as well. Software localization involves both bilingual software developers and document translators specialized in information technology, since the software's user interface, help files, readme files, screen shots and incidental files (such as warranty information and packaging) must all be translated.

Software localization is an enormous industry in its own right, largely because computer users throughout the world now expect their software to be in their own language, and will naturally be more interested in purchasing software or visiting websites that they can access in their own language. Therefore, the software localization industry is a source of a large amount of work for bilingual software developers and for translators, and is currently one of the fastest-growing sectors within the translation industry as a whole. In addition, localization breeds localization; a localized web browser automatically creates a need for localized websites; a localized piece of software demands a localized manual to go with it. Two useful resources for localization professionals are the Globalization and Localization Association. <http://www.gala-global.org> and the Localization Industry Standards Association <http://www.lisa.org>. Software localization is often completed using different tools than those that are used for document translation; some computer-assisted translation tools can cross over between these two types of translation, and some cannot.

So, it is important to investigate what tools will be required if you would like to look for software localization work. 28 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS 1. 6 Who do translators work for? 1. 6. 1 Working for translation agencies For a freelance translator, there are typically two types of clients: translation agencies and direct clients. First, let's look at how translators work through agencies. A translation agency, which may also refer to itself as a localization agency, translation company, or translation bureau, has its own roster of clients and sub-contracts their translation work to individual freelance translators.



The agency handles the project management end of things, interacts directly with the translation client and (hopefully) pays the translator and deals with any collections issues. Ideally, the translation agency should pay its freelance translators when their invoices come due (normally 30 days after the agency accepts the translation) whether the agency itself has been paid by the end client or not. A translation agency is not an employment agency, and there is no fee involved for a translator to register with an agency.

However, an agency normally cannot guarantee a steady flow of work to any one translator, and will normally pay the translator a good deal less than the per-word rate that the agency is charging the client, in many cases up to 50% less. Freelance translators are often required to sign a confidentiality and non-competition agreement which states that they may not work directly for any of the agency's clients for some period of time, or may not disclose who the agency's clients are, or the nature of the assignments that they work on.

Like translators themselves, translation agencies can be either very general, "all languages, all subjects," or highly specialized, for instance translating only for the medical industry, or only translating between English and Korean. In the uncertain world of freelancing, translation agencies provide some measure of job security. When you work for an agency, you don't normally have to communicate with the end client directly, and in many cases the agency may even forbid you from contacting the end client. Instead, you translate the documents that the agency sends you, which means that you spend your time

WHO DO TRANSLATORS WORK FOR? 29 working instead of managing the project and handling the client's questions. Also, an agency that becomes a regular client may be able to provide you with steady work, and will often pay you even if the client is late in paying them. A good agency project manager understands the nature of translation work, and asks the client in advance to clarify potential questions, for example should currency amounts in Euros be converted to dollars, saving the contract translators a great deal of time. Many of the best agency project managers are or have been translators themselves.

Agencies also provide some amount of "disaster insurance" in the event that you get sick in the middle of the project, suddenly find yourself in over your head on a very technical document, or another type of unforeseen event. If something like this happens, the agency can often find a replacement translator or editor to step in, which is a responsibility that falls upon the translator if an agency is not involved. In exchange for the services the agency provides, you will give up some freedom. The agencies you work for may have fixed pay rates, or may ask you to reduce your rates to stay competitive with other translators.

When an agency becomes a regular client, you want to keep them happy, so it will be hard to say "No!" when they call you on Friday afternoon with a big project due Monday, disrupting your planned ski trip or home improvement project. Also, agencies vary in quality. While a good agency can effectively hand you work on a platter and deal with all problems that come up between them and the end client, in practice this doesn't always happen. An agency may claim (rightly or wrongly) that you did a

substandard job on a project for them, and then ask for or just go ahead and take a "discount" on the payment you agreed on.

Or, an agency may not have much cash in reserve, and might not be able to pay you if the end client doesn't pay them. Agencies also have their own set payment terms, and in most cases the terms aren't negotiable. For example, agencies in the U. S. generally pay within 30 days from the date of the invoice (referred to as Net 30), or 30 days from the end of the month (30 Days EOM), while agencies in Europe take longer to pay, sometimes as long as 60 days from the end of the month or 30 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS 0 days from the date of the invoice. 1. 6. 2 Working for direct clients The other main option for a freelancer is to work for direct clients, meaning working directly for translation customers without a "middleman" involved. A direct client might be a shoe manufacturer in Sweden that wants to market its products in the U. S. , a patent law firm in Japan, a university in the U. S. with non-English speaking visitors, or an individual who wants her high school diploma translated into French so that she can study abroad.

The income potential of working for direct clients is attractive; in many cases double the income of working for an agency. Direct clients may also be able to provide large volumes of work if their turnaround time allows for it. Whereas a translation agency will often split a large project between several translators to get it done faster, a direct client might be willing to let you translate their entire 50, 000 word annual report, resulting in more income and less administrative overhead for you; or they might be willing to let you act as a "mini-agency," subcontracting work to other translators you know

and keeping a percentage for yourself. With a direct client the translator is often more in control of the payment terms involved; for example, the translator might be able to request payment in advance for certain services, an option that almost never exists when working through a translation agency. There are some disadvantages in working for direct clients as well. When you work through an agency, it's the project manager's job to explain the ins and outs of the translation process to the client.

If the client doesn't know what source and target language mean, or the difference between traditional and simplified Chinese, or whether they want the company's name in all capital letters throughout the document, it's the agency's responsibility to deal with this, not yours. When you work for a direct client, for better or worse there's no one between you and the client. In cases involving a small project such as a birth certificate translation, it might take more time to explain the process to the client than it does to complete the translation.

If the client has an unrealistic A BIT ABOUT INTERPRETING 31 deadline, keeps changing his/her mind about the project specifications, or wants additional services such as desktop publishing, it's up to you as the translator to deal with it. If the direct client doesn't pay, there's no one else to lean on for the money—you simply have to handle it yourself, or hire a collection agency if things turn really sour. All of these aspects are worth considering before you decide whether to work through agencies or for direct clients.

Somewhere between an agency and a direct client is a small but growing group of freelance project managers. These individuals function somewhat

like one-person translation agencies, and may be handling outsourced translation for a larger corporation. This style of business combines some of the advantages and disadvantages of the agency /direct client model. Probably the most significant item to discuss up front is what happens if the end client doesn't pay or is late in paying the project manager who hires you, since unlike a large translation agency, this individual probably doesn't have the cash reserves to cover a large bill that goes unpaid.

1. 7 A bit about interpreting As you explore a career in translation, it's worth considering whether you would like to focus your business exclusively on translation, or include interpreting in your range of services. Like translation, the market for interpreting depends largely on your language pair(s), and unless you do over the phone interpreting, is more location-dependent than translation since you need to be in the same place as your clients.

Interpreting has several " modes," the primary ones being simultaneous, where the interpreter talks at the same time as the speaker; consecutive, where the interpreter listens to the speaker and takes notes, then interprets what the speaker said; and sight translation, where the interpreter reads a written document in another language, for example taking a court document in English and reading it to a defendant in Spanish. Simultaneous interpret-

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AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS ing is probably the most common mode, since it is used at the United Nations, in court, and in various other conference-type settings. Interpreting demands very different skills than translation. While translators are stereotypically detail-oriented introverts who don't mind spending an hour finding the perfect translation

for a word, interpreters must be able to think on their feet and work with little or no advance preparation.

Translators most often work alone at home, while interpreters are often literally in the spotlight, standing next to a court witness, hospital patient or head of state and communicating for him or her. Until the advent of conference calling, interpreters had to be in the same place as their clients, and court and conference interpreting is still heavily dependent on on-site interpreters. However, over-the-phone interpreting is becoming more popular, especially in areas where it's hard to find on-site interpreters.

Many translation agencies also schedule interpreters, and courts, hospitals and schools may employ in-house interpreters. One major difference between interpreting and translation is that interpreters often work in both "directions" of their language pair, so must be highly proficient in speaking their non-native language; many high-level conference interpreters consider themselves to have two native languages, rather than one native language and one or more second languages. Interpreters are paid by the hour or by the day, and pay varies widely. In some areas of the U. S. English-Spanish court interpreters might make less than \$15 an hour, while conference interpreters who are members of the elite AIIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters) might make close to \$500 a day. If you are interested in interpreting, one excellent way to assess your skills is to go spend a day as an observer in court. Most courts in the U. S. are open to the public, and you can sit in the viewing area and try to interpret as the proceedings go along; better yet take a notebook and make a list of words and expressions that you need to research.

The major employers of interpreters in the U. S. are courts, health care settings and schools, so these are all good places to focus on if you would like to explore interpreting. HOW DO TRANSLATORS SET THEIR RATES? 33 1.

8 How do translators set their rates? Translators are generally paid by the word, with some variation in whether the word count is based on the source or target language, for a single word (most common in the U. S. ) or per thousand words (most common in the U. K. ), although payment is sometimes made by the line as well, with a line being comprised of a certain number of characters.

For projects where charging by the word would result in a ridiculously low payment, for example translating an advertising slogan, translators are often paid by the hour. Translations of official documents such as birth certificates may be billed by the page. Many translators have a minimum charge for small projects, for example a flat fee for projects up to 250 words. It's also common for translators to add a premium for a rush project, or to offer a discount for a large project or ongoing work. The actual per-word rate depends on your language c)oamndbispe-tlz(), and sowhtyurcliensa willing to pay.

Asking " How much do translators charge? " is like asking, " How big is a ball of yarn? " The variation in translation rates is enormous; if you visit online translation marketplaces such as Translators Cafe <http://translatorscafe.com>, or ProZ. com <http://proz.com>, you'll see an abundance of translators willing to work for just a few cents a word, while a highly specialized medical, legal or technical translator working for direct clients might make mid-double digits (cents, not dollars! ) per word.

In addition, many translators are reluctant to publish or even discuss their rates for fear of being targeted by antitrust actions. If you work for translation agencies, there may not be much room for negotiation on rates, and "setting your rates" may be more a matter of finding agencies that are willing to pay what you would like to earn. Agencies will often ask you what your rates are, but just as often the agency already knows what it can or will pay for a typical project in your language combination, and is unlikely to give you work if you charge more than the "standard" rate.

Some agencies will also tell you up front that 34 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS you're welcome to specify your rates, but that the agency prefers to work with translators who charge less than a certain number of cents per word. Still, translation agencies as a group are not usually out to get translators to work for an absolute rock-bottom price, and will usually offer a fair rate for a project. Reputable agencies may even look askance at translation rates that are more than about 10% below the average or standard rate in a certain language combination.

1. Professional Associations for Translators and Interpreters Professional associations are an excellent resource for both beginning and experienced translators and interpreters. At the international, national, and local levels, professional associations allow you to network with colleagues, pursue continuing education workshops and attend conferences related to the field. They also improve your credibility as a linguist. As one agency manager comments, "If a person is a member of a professional association, it shows that he or she has a network of colleagues to draw on and is willing to invest some time and money in the profession. Especially if translator or interpreter



certification isn't offered in your languages, belonging to a professional association shows that you're serious about your work. Following is an overview of professional associations for translators and interpreters working in the United States.

1. 9. 1 American Translators Association The American Translators Association <http://atanet.org> is the largest professional association for language professionals in the U. S. , and offers membership to both individual linguists and translation companies.

The Association also includes various language or specialization-specific divisions that members can choose to join. Benefits for ATA members include a listing on the ATA website, a subscription to the monthly magazine *ATA PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS* 35 Chronicle, reduced rates to attend ATA conferences and seminars, and various professional benefits such as credit card acceptance, retirement programs, etc. The ATA holds a large annual conference each year in the fall, and information about upcoming conferences is also available on the ATA website.

The ATA administers its own certification exams, which are probably the most widely recognized translation credential in the U. S. As of 2006, candidates for the certification exam must also be members of ATA. For more information on certification exam dates, see ATA's website. 2006 individual dues are \$145 per year.

1. 9. 2 National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators <http://najit.org> is a professional association for court interpreters and legal translators.

NAJIT holds an annual conference, publishes the newsletter *Proteus*, and advocates for positive changes in the court interpreting and legal translation

professions. NAJIT's website also includes a helpful list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about court interpreting. 2006 individual dues are \$105 per year.

1. 9. 3 Translators and Interpreters Guild The Translators and Interpreters Guild [http : //ttig. org](http://ttig.org) is the only national (U. S. ) union of translators and interpreters, operating as Local 32100 of the Newspaper Guild-Communications Workers of America.

The Translators and Interpreters Guild operates a translator referral service that is open to members, and offers additional membership benefits such as a union credit card, life insurance, and legal services. 2006 individual dues are \$120 per year.

1. 9. 4 American Literary Translators Association The American Literary Translators Association [http: // literarytranslators. org](http://literarytranslators.org) is dedicated to serving literary translators and " enhancing the status and quality of literary translation. Members receive a variety of publications about literary translation, such as Translation Review and ALTA Guides to Literary Translation, and ALTA also holds an annual conference on literary translation. 2006 individual dues are \$65 per year.

1. 9. 5 Federation Internationale des Traducteurs The Federation International des Traducteurs [http: //fit-ift . org](http://fit-ift.org) is an " association of associations" for translators, which gathers more than 100 professional associations for language professionals from all over the world. FIT does not accept individual translators as members, but does hold an annual conference open to translators and interpreters throughout the world.

1. 9. 6 International Association of Conference Interpreters Membership in AIIC [http://aiic. net](http://aiic.net) is open only to experienced conference interpreters who have worked a minimum of 150

days in a conference setting, and must be sponsored by three active AIIC members who have been in the association for at least five years. The AIIC website contains many helpful articles and links for aspiring and experienced interpreters. 1. 10 Certification for Translators

As we discussed in a previous section, for better or worse, you don't have to have any type of certification to call yourself a translator or interpreter in the United States. Various organizations offer certification, but the list of language combinations is far from comprehensive. For example, organizations in the United States offer certification only in language combinations that involve English, so if you translate or interpret German into French or Japanese into Korean, there simply is no certification available in the U.

S.. Reliable and uniform certification is one of the most CERTIFICATION FOR TRANSLATORS 37 important issues facing the translation and interpreting professions today. Since no standardized certification for translators and interpreters exists, there is little agreement on what makes a "certified" translator or interpreter. In some cases, linguists who have earned a certificate in translation or interpreting refer to themselves as "certified," while to others, "certified" means having passed a nationally standardized examination.

There is a great deal of controversy over whether certification is a reasonable guarantee of a quality job, or whether non-certified translators and interpreters are to be avoided. As a linguist, especially in a common language combination such as English with French, Spanish or German, becoming certified is one way to distinguish yourself from the pack of

questionably qualified people offering translation or interpreting services in these languages, and certification may be required for certain types of work.

In some court systems it is now difficult to find work as an English —Spanish court interpreter if you're not certified, and some translation agencies may insist that for certain end clients or certain types of translations, you have to be certified if the option is available for your languages. In addition, the American Translators Association's most recent compensation survey (published in January, 2006), found that certified translators earn approximately \$6, 000 per year more than their non-certified colleagues.

On the downside, there are numerous translators and interpreters with excellent qualifications who have failed certification exams, or don't feel that they want to take them at all. As one translation agency manager comments, " Certification doesn't mean that the person can meet a deadline, work well with other translators or respond to client input and questions, and all of these are crucial to winning and keeping clients. " More practically, the certification exam itself represents a somewhat artificial environment in which you're asked to demonstrate your skills.

For instance, although the ATA is currently pursuing the possibility of offering computerized certification exams, the exam currently must be handwritten, something a practicing translator would seldom if ever do. Hopefully, the computerized ATA certification exam will become a reality in the near future.

38 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSLATION BUSINESS Following is an overview of the main certifying organizations for translators and interpreters in the United States. If you work in a language combination that doesn't involve English, an Internet search can help you find certifying organizations in a

<https://assignbuster.com/how-to-succeed-as-a-freelance-translator/>

country where your languages are spoken. . 10. 1 American Translators Association The American Translators Association <http://atanet.org> offers certification (formerly called accreditation) to translators in 27 language pairs as of 2006; passing the exam earns you the right to add the designation "ATA-certified for X to X translation" to your credentials. As of this writing, the available certifications are ( indicates that the test is available in either