

Lost in translation? Not for these professionals

By Jack Kazmierski

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Even though we may speak the same language, many of us occasionally have trouble understanding our own spouses or co-workers. Throw a foreign tongue into the mix, and the need for an interpreter becomes obvious.

Living in a multicultural city like Toronto, one would assume that a career in interpretation would be encouraged and easily cultivated; that work would be abundant, and people with language skills most highly rewarded. The truth, unfortunately, is that many interpreters can't get the training they need, or the work they seek.

"It's a problem in Canada because there are not many interpretation schools," says Fabrice Cadieux, certified conference interpreter, and president of the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario (ATIO). "There is a conference interpretation program at the University of Ottawa that is practically designed to meet the needs of the federal government. They graduate maybe three interpreters a year, so it's a very small program. The whole profession is maybe a couple of hundred people in Canada of conference interpretation. So if 20 people came on the market every year, they wouldn't have any work."



Conference interpreters, as the name implies, provide simultaneous interpretation at conferences, and their work "is only feasible in a few languages," Cadieux says. "English and French, with Spanish, German, Japanese and Chinese far behind."

For training in these other languages you'd have to go abroad, because only French and English interpretation is offered at the University of Ottawa.

As far as work opportunities go, a minimal number of conference interpreters are employed on a full-time bases, working for the federal government and the Ontario legislature. All others work on a freelance basis.

Ema Dantas, right, CEO of translating and interpreting service Language Marketplace, with a colleague, says those interested in the field can approach government ministries, the Immigration and Refugee Board, hospitals and more.

According to Ema Dantas, chief co-ordinator and CEO of Language Marketplace, a Toronto-based firm providing translating and interpreting services, conference interpreters are the best paid, making "a minimum of \$450" for a day's work.

Another avenue of opportunity for interpreters is that of court interpretation. For this, a university degree in interpretation is not necessary, and the number of languages in demand is far greater.

"Call the Ministry of the Attorney General and tell them you want to be an interpreter," Dantas explains. "They will ask what languages you speak, and will probably ask you to forward a resume. If you speak a language they have a need for, they'll tell you to come in for a language assessment test. If you pass, they will train you and provide accreditation, making you an accredited (court) interpreter."

A few court interpreters work full time, in French only. All the rest are freelance. Some can make a living; for others it's a part-time activity. The following excerpt from the October 2003 issue of InformATIO, the Newsletter of the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario, encapsulates working conditions for court interpreters:

"In Ontario, freelancers who are accredited by the Ministry of the Attorney General provide almost all court interpretation services in scores of languages. The ministry pays for interpreters' services. On the average, court interpreters earn \$20 per hour. In the course of a typical working day, they may be called on to travel from courthouse to courthouse, over distances of up to 79 kilometres one way with no payment for time spent

travelling. Offers of work are sporadic; advance notice is sometimes less than an hour. Even the few freelance court interpreters who get enough assignments to work full-time (five days x six hours x \$20) can hope to earn only about \$600 per week. Finally, there has been no increase in rates paid to freelance court interpreters since April 1, 1993, a period of over ten years.

To make ends meet, some court interpreters have been driven to choose other occupations.

The third avenue of service for interpreters is that of community interpretation. Working for hospitals, school boards, the welfare office and other government agencies, not too many make a living as a community interpreter.

"For many, this is a volunteer calling; for others, it's a sideline," Cadieux says. "That's too bad. If there were more funding and more resources ... these are very important types of interpretation where you don't want someone untrained doing the interpretation."

To get started as a community interpreter, contact one of the ministries that provides accreditation for interpreters.

"The Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation has agencies that provide training for a fee," Dantas says. "The Immigration and Refugee Board will train and test you for free."

Some institutions do hire and train community interpreters. "A handful of hospitals hire interpreters full time," Dantas says. "Trillium Health Centre just started a program where they hired a couple of interpreters. University Health Network also trains their own interpreters."

The Ministry of Citizenship provides a course on the code of ethics of an interpreter, what to do in certain situations, how to do your job, and when it is a conflict of interest for you to be interpreting, Dantas adds.

Languages in demand in the GTA for court or community interpreters include Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin and Tamil. In downtown Toronto Portuguese and Spanish are most in demand. In Peel, it's Punjabi and Hindi. Reading from a list of recent clients, Dantas adds "French, Farsi, Urdu, Polish, Persian, and Croatian" to the list.

Cadieux offers sobering advice for budding interpreters: "Knowing languages is not enough. Curiosity is essential because in this business, you have to be interested in all sorts of stuff. The work can be boring sometimes, but you have to be interested in people and their problems.

"You have to work hard and be prepared for every assignment, look up terminologies, read a lot, and it never lets up. You're at the forefront, in the sense that people discuss the latest things in conferences and courtrooms, and you've got to know what's going on and what they're talking about.

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