



## Seven Things a Chief Interpreter Wishes You Knew

*By Ewandro Magalhães*

**There are arguably** some disadvantages to being a chief interpreter. One does not get to interpret as often. One has a clock to punch, reports to write, long staff meetings to sit through, and scores of managerial chores that are not necessarily fun. And while one free-rides occasionally on collective success, failure is no longer circumscribed to one's own mistakes. If an interpreter on my team falls flat on her face, I have a lot of explaining to do.

Obviously, the job comes with many perks. You are suddenly cleared into circles you did not know existed, where guidelines are discussed and decisions are made that have a direct impact on working conditions, technology transfer, and the overall pace of progress in the industry. The opportunity to help shape the field of

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interpreting and leave the profession better than you found it is real. And did I mention the welcome promise of a steady income to weather the seasonality of freelancing?

But beyond the evanescent elite membership privileges and pecuniary incentives, what I like most about my job as a chief interpreter is the amazing learning experience it provides. Being on the other side of the counter brings a completely different

perspective, but I still know full well what it is like to be a freelancer. This position has taught me a lot about diversity and human nature, while revealing many attributes of my own personality, some reassuring and some I would rather sweep under the rug.

Now, just over two years into the job, I realize many things I wish I had known in my days as a freelancer. Knowing then what I do now would have greatly improved my perform-

ance and earned me an extra buck in the process. So, for the benefit of those interpreters who do not aspire to become chiefs, I thought I would share some important lessons learned along my professional journey.

### 1. Quality Is a Package

One's interpreting abilities, accuracy, and smooth delivery rank high up on any chief interpreter's checklist. But so do punctuality, teamwork skills, flexibility, and, most importantly, manners—both in and out of the booth. The best interpreters are the ones who get the job done unassumingly while making it easier for everyone to do the same, including the chief. They work diligently on their languages as well as their people skills. By contrast, arrogant, over-demanding colleagues make it all about themselves and risk having relative gains in performance (if any) overcast by the toxic atmosphere they end up creating. All things considered, I guess any chief interpreter would prefer a really good interpreter with a great attitude over an excellent interpreter with a poor attitude.

*Take-home point: be good, but be nice.*

### 2. It Is About Peace of Mind, Not Razzmatazz

You have every reason to be proud of your skills and achievements. You worked hard on yourself and attained a reputation as a reliable, competent linguist. You interpreted for J.K. Rowling, Harry and Dumbledore, and got a standing ovation at Hogwarts. Kudos to you! Your VIP list will earn you extra credits with a prospective client and is certain to be a sensation among your Facebook friends. Yet being on a first-name basis with Lord Voldemort does little to impress chief interpreters. They have been around

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the block once or twice on that broom, too, and can quickly see through the self-promotion blabber.

To really leave a mark, review the attributes discussed in the previous section. Prepare and deliver as a dependable professional. Get in, get it done, and get out. Do so consistently and let your work speak for itself.

*Take-home points: drop the hocus pocus and sell the steak, not the sizzle.*

### 3. A Fusillade of Questions Will Backfire

There are some valid questions an interpreter might consider asking before an assignment if the requirements have not been communicated effectively by the chief interpreter. Dropping a line to flag an important omission or to seek clarification on the venue, the time, or the subject matter shows professionalism and conscientiousness. Overdoing it will convey the opposite impression, though, and you will come across as an inexperienced or, worse, insecure interpreter. To make sure this does not happen to you, here is a quick guide to getting the information you need in a manner that conveys professional competence.

- Think of all the questions you want to ask and then refine the list, mentally or on a sheet of paper.
- Strike out from your inventory any questions you might find the

answers to somewhere else. (Unless a Sandy-like storm is forecast, I have no idea what the weather will be like in Geneva next week, and I am not the one to tell you what to pack in your suitcase.)

- Drop the awkward requests. (No, I cannot get you a window seat on your upcoming trip to Moscow.) Also, refrain from asking questions to which answers have been promised. (“You said the program would be forthcoming. Any chance I could have it now?”)
- Do not ask questions a chief interpreter might prefer not to answer, like who your boothmate is going to be or why you have not been assigned to interpret at the closing ceremony. You may end up with a vague answer or one you do not want to hear.
- Most importantly, in the event you receive a notification canceling the assignment (which can happen abruptly), be careful not to ask for reasons based on unproven assumptions. (“Did I do anything wrong?”) Rather, reply with a short, assertive note to acknowledge the cancellation and reiterate your willingness to be of assistance a second time around.

If you need to rely on e-mail, please do your share to keep message

traffic to a minimum. E-mail is an incredibly time-consuming tool. Keep your notes short and concise. If reacting to a group e-mail, do not copy everybody by clicking the “Reply to All” button, and by all means never blind copy anyone. Whenever possible, present all relevant concerns in a single, concise e-mail and make it such that no reply is necessary. (“If I do not hear from you by Monday, I will assume ...”).

*Take home point: do not seek and ye shall find!*

#### **4. Ask and You May Well Receive**

On the bright side, interpreting just may be a recession-proof occupation. The deeper the crisis, the more people talk about it. In every language. On the not-so bright side, conference interpreting is seasonal by definition. Conferences follow a predictable ebb and flow pattern. Few people will be willing to meet over the holiday season, and come August, it will be too damned hot (or cold) to talk about anything. You might as well close the talk shop for a good 30 days and be out playing golf or skiing.

If you are a well-established professional in your area (geographically or otherwise), you can rely on a rather steady flow of contracts and income from February to mid-July and from September to early December. During those peak periods you will probably run into a different type of problem: receiving too many work offers. Despite appearances, this is not a good problem to have. Save for occasional double-dipping, you can only service one conference a day. Unless you run a business where you capitalize on somebody else’s labor, a sudden downpour of gigs after a long dry streak might get you wet but it is unlikely to leave you dripping with

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gold. Somewhere along the line you will have to sacrifice a full week of meetings for a conflicting two-day conference.

Regardless of how good you are, there will eventually be unwanted holes in your calendar. That is just a fact of life; a freelancer’s life, anyway. While this situation just has to be accepted, that does not mean you have to take it lying down. During the low tides, most interpreters respond passively, sitting by the telephone with their fingers crossed and wondering why it will not ring. They are either too shy or too proud to make their availability known, and only a few will break the inertia and ask their employers for work. Guess what? These selected few who take initiative are the reason *your* telephone is not ringing.

A chief interpreter will typically draw from a pool of hundreds of interpreters who are screened constantly for quality, teamwork ability, and availability. In times of plenty, everyone gets their share. But when conference days start to dwindle, you will need one extra attribute to keep the offers coming: visibility. I can only hire you if I “see” you. To be in my booth, you need to be on my radar screen. To keep coming back, you need to be top of mind.

There is nothing wrong with flagging your readiness to an employer. The trick is doing it nicely, without imposition. Do not ask funny questions and do not kiss up. Simply reit-

erate your willingness and availability in a concise, straightforward e-mail, with no attachments. You are not begging for work. You are simply presenting yourself as a viable option. In so doing, you increase your chances of landing another contract while helping the chief interpreter in the process.

*Take-home point: out of sight, out of mind.*

#### **5. Nobody Likes Whiners**

In an ideal world, presenters speak slowly, bring extra hard copies of their presentations, and throw candies to interpreters from behind the podium. Schedules are announced in advance and kept unchanged. Travel conditions are great, the sound system works to perfection, and everyone around you is cool, calm, and collected. But save for Shangri-la, that is certainly not the norm anywhere, and the ensuing uncertainties often drive interpreters to the edge.

Some colleagues react to the added stress by going into chronic whining mode. Their frustration mounts and is often misdirected at teammates or the client. This leads to poor team spirit and puts people off fast.

As a conscientious colleague, you will want to keep a constructive attitude despite any perceived risks and would do well to put the client first. Be transparent. Address problems directly and be sure to target behavior, rather than people. Be part of the solution or be neutral. Not getting in the

way is sometimes the greatest help of all and the kindest thing to do. Cursing the darkness may feel good and temporarily appease your anxiety, but lighting a candle works a lot better for all concerned.

*Take-home points: reach for those matches and do not put oil in the fire.*

## 6. Appreciation Goes a Long Way, Both Ways

The words “thank you” are among the first and last ones to ever come out of an interpreter’s mouth in the booth. They are also the first and last words interpreters will hear as speakers open and close their presentations. Repetition alone should have by now engraved in our brains the self-evident truth that appreciation ought to precede and succeed all of our actions. Sadly, however, that awareness is lost to many amongst us once we step out of our glassy working cubicles, and many interpreters leave those powerful words unsaid.

These colleagues waste a golden opportunity to experience a superior emotion and the promise of more good things to come. They overlook and eventually banalize the many blessings involved in bringing another day of work to fruition. They deny themselves the gift of joy and snap back into anxious anticipation for what tomorrow will bring. And tomorrow keeps bringing more of the same.

According to most ancient traditions, our universe runs on thoughts and feelings, and what we call reality is a mere reflection of what we project. In less esoteric lingo, science points in the same direction, with expectations dictating results in high-level experiments in physics. Whether or not you believe in the magnetic pull of gratitude, adopting a more appreciative stance is guaranteed to

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make you happier. It will also bring you more jobs and ultimately money. Another simple principle is at play here: reciprocity. Appreciation acknowledges the circumstances that bring freelancers and employers together, mindful that both parties could have chosen otherwise. Appreciation operates from the premise that both sides *want* to get it right. Appreciation acknowledges one’s honest efforts, albeit imperfect, as steps in the right direction. It makes visible and reinforces that which need not be fixed. It feeds back on itself and keeps mutually appreciative players engaged in a long, self-sustaining virtuous cycle.

Unless you cannot possibly accommodate any more prosperity or happiness than you have currently, you may consider increasing your thankfulness. Train yourself to feel grateful for—not entitled to—the offers of work you get. Acknowledge them with gratitude or decline with grace. Reinforce the behavior you want to see more of. Make it a habit to send a thank-you note to those who help you materialize the wonderful life you create for yourself in your chosen field. The trick is doing it sincerely, with conviction yet without the expectation of receiving anything in return. No need to get carried away or say much. Those two simple words will do.

*Take-home point: just say the words.*

## 7. It Is Not About You

Interpreting is a communications business. As an interpreter, you are part of a broader conversation, and complete neutrality remains a lofty yet elusive aspiration. Try as you might, you cannot help but bring into the picture some of your true essence. It will show through in your intonation, your word choice, and even the length of your pauses. You are certainly not at liberty to share your opinions in the booth, but the interaction will be different because of you. That is okay, but only as long as you can shift the focus away from you.

You are not a machine. Think communicate, rather than interpret, and do not be afraid to contribute the attributes that make you a unique enabler. But remember that good communicators make it all about their interlocutors. Good interpreters take genuine interest in those on the receiving end.

*Take-home point: they are happy you are there, but they are not there for you.*

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