

How does a project manager or recruiter select a linguist for a particular project? What qualities of a translator are most valued? How does a new linguist break into a translation company? How does a translator get more work?

At a meet-up of NCATA, a panel of language company representatives shared their perspectives in an open dialogue with NCATA members.

The text below is compiled by Evelyn Yang Garland and taken from an edited transcript of the following panel discussion hosted by the National Capital Area Translators Association (NCATA) in March 2012.

The Business of T&I Series—

Myths and facts about working with language companies

Question: I send out a great number of resumes to many language services providers, but getting very little feedback. Am I doing something wrong? Is there something I can do differently?

Andreas: I get a lot of resumes every day. In some instances, I get an e-mail with an attachment and nothing else. I guess the resume is supposed to speak for itself, but it would be nice to have a little introduction: who you are and why are you interested in working with us. And, looking at some resumes, in some instances, I don't really see the highlight—meaning the experience as a translator or interpreter in the resume. There're a lot of other experiences. If you're planning on working with a language services provider, you should definitely highlight your experience as a translator and interpreter. Don't be too sidetracked with all your other experiences; a very focused resume would help.

Stephanie: As Andreas mentioned, we do receive a large number of resumes. We don't always have the bandwidth to read as many as we would like. My advice would be to follow the directions on an advertisement if you see it. If it asks to send resumes to a certain e-mail address, please do that. Make sure you put the language that you translate on your resume. And if you sent your resume and have not heard anything, please feel free to send an e-mail to confirm receipt.

Blanka: Yes, definitely I can confirm that it's always important to clarify your intention towards yourself and then to ask: what you are trying to achieve, are you looking for short term freelance projects, are you interested in a longer term contract, or both, are you interested in translation, interpreting? What we are interested in these days is also whether you are a US citizen or a green card holder or whether you have security clearance—though this may not apply for some of the new translators.

Kate: Just one other small detail. Bear in mind that—I'm sure none of you would ever do this, but—when you're sending in an application for a job that is related to teaching or translation, proofread. Make sure that everything is spelled correctly and there aren't any major grammar errors. Everybody make mistakes every once in a while.

Question: I do language teaching and translation and also interpretation. The three are equally strong. I was advised that my resume should be either one page or two pages. If I would like to apply for teaching, translation, and interpretation jobs, shall I make separate resumes focusing on language teaching, translation, and interpretation respectively, or can I send a two-page resume emphasizing all three areas?

Kate: This is a good question. I would suggest putting it all in one resume. Quite often, if you have significant experience in translation and interpretation, that makes you even a stronger candidate for the teaching positions and vice versa. So it's all related. I would just break it up in a way that makes sense, but including all the things mentioned.

Blanka: What also works—and this is the usual practice with conference interpreters—they often have a one page resume and then they keep adding specific conferences that they have worked on. And this can work for any freelancer, because, of course, the clients and the companies you have worked on keep changing while the basics of the resume stay the same—so you can keep reformatting only the last page.

Question: Being selected to work on a particular project is a matter of luck to a certain extent. Do you agree? Is this a myth or fact?

Kate: I think it's a balance. I wouldn't say that it is 100% a myth and 100% a fact. What happens is we get very specific parameters for what a client is looking for and then we go to our most qualified linguists to see if they're available and interested. We can work something out so they can work on that project. So we do go with the required qualifications that we do need to go with given what the client has told us; so that's the first priority. Where luck may come into it—at least for our company. We work on very tight deadlines and, if it's a tight deadline and someone comes to us and says "I need a Mandarin translator who can start working on a project tomorrow," obviously we have to work very fast, so maybe we call ten people, nobody answers, we leave ten messages, the first person who will call back, if they're qualified, they will get the position. So that's where luck comes into it. But for the most part, it isn't luck; it's based on how well one's qualifications and experience match what we need from the client.

Blanka: I would say that luck comes into play when you have the luxury of having a dozen of very similarly qualified translators or interpreters whose rates are also very similar. So that truly depends on very small details, but unfortunately this is not always the case.

Stephanie: I agree, it's not necessarily based on luck. We make our selections based on availability, past performance, and reliability.

Question: I have personally heard this from other language service providers that everyone tends to have a favorite linguist to work with. Is that a myth or fact?

Blanka: It's very dangerous for a project manager to have favorites. Quite often at conferences we need only two interpreters per language, but once in a while we need interpreters for breakout rooms and then it's 6 interpreters in the same place at the same time. It's only to my advantage to actually have a whole group of interpreters whom we have already assigned before and we can reach out to them when a big job like this comes around. So, no favorites, really.

Andreas: Well, I have to agree. I encounter at basically on a daily basis looking for qualified translators. We do have our established network, but I still end up looking for new translators daily. I cannot really rely on any kind of favoritism, because the person might not be available. So therefore, it is based on the qualifications and availability.

Stephanie: We don't take favorites. We choose good linguists. My advice to you if you are a new translator with our company would be to accept the first job that you are assigned. It may not be your ideal job, but accept it and get your foot in the door so you can show to the project manager that you are responsive and reliable and available. That will lead to consequent assignments.

Kate: Well, there certainly is, most companies have an established network of linguists that they work with and have proven to be reliable in the past, but as multiple people have said already, they may not be available and we're always looking for new people. Having said that, it definitely behooves you if you have not worked with a company before. It's probably the most difficult thing to get your foot in the door, of course. Part of the reason for that is that some clients have favorites, or not necessarily favorites, but they gravitate towards certain people whom they have worked with in the past and whom they know. But my advice would be to establish a good relationship with whoever your supervisor is going to be, even if they're not a supervisor in the sense of watching your daily work. Establish a good relationship, make sure that you check in every once in a while. In the language services industry, sometimes there might not be a whole lot of work, sometimes there may be a lot going on. But always maintain a good steady contact with your supervisor. That will go miles in helping you stay in there and consistently get as much work as possible.

Question: Isn't it true though, that most translation companies, if they, for example, need a translator or interpreter and multiple linguists apply for the job, they would tend to choose the one who offers the least expensive rate. Could you confirm whether this is true or not?

Kate: No. For us, that is a myth. We do have a range of rates or a set of rates that we do have to comply with due to the contract or the client. But within that range, we're going to go with the most qualified individual. If somebody comes to us and says "Well, I don't have the experience, but I'm willing to work for 3 dollars less than the lowest end of your range is", that's not going to convince us to bring that person on the project. We're not looking to just find the person who's the cheapest, we're looking to find the person who is most qualified, who can do the best work. We do still have to keep an eye on the

budget, obviously, but as long as we can keep within the budget, we're looking for the most qualified individual.

We don't just randomly decide the rates and pay people depending how we feel. They are determined by the client in the contract, where it does come from. We work primarily with Government and Military clients, it does come from that.

Blanka: I would like to add that there are basically two kinds of clients: government and private companies. Like we have already heard, in government language services, the rates tend to be established between the agency and the government client for years at a time. So agencies don't have the flexibility to pay higher rates as opposed to projects for private companies where we do have a bigger adaptability to your rates.

Question: Sometimes translators get a call from a project manager saying "Hey, for this project we really have a very tight budget, can you consider a lower rate than the rate you've been charging?" A lot of translators feel uncomfortable to accommodate such requests because they worry that their rate is going to stay that low and get stuck there. Is this myth or a fact?

Kate: Well, for DLS this is definitely a myth. All of our rates are determined on a contract-by-contract basis. If you are willing to accept a lower rate than you usually make for one specific project, first that does show us that you are committed to the quality of your work and are going to be a little flexible in these relatively tougher times. But we're not going to get you there and then say "OK, we've got you down there, now you can't try to push back up." It's based on a contract basis. Maybe that one project did require that we lower our rates a little bit, but we would not look at that, we would bring you back up to the rates that you would normally be earning on other contracts after you finished that assignment.

Blanka: Definitely in the freelance work, the remuneration is always dynamic; it's not cast in stone. We have interpreters in New York City who work with the United Nations, but we have an annual project there for a low budget NGO and they go lower with their rates because of the nature of the client.

Stephanie: Myth. If you do agree to a lower rate for one project, it does not mean that you won't be back to your normal rate. It's something that you should discuss and negotiate with your project manager if it's a one-time thing. There may be situations where it's an ongoing project, so if you do agree to a lower rate then that may be extended throughout that project.

Question: Is it necessary to include a rate either on the resume or the cover at where were you first send to a translation company?

Blanka: Like we have heard a couple of times here, the financial agreements tend to be project based, so if you do want to include rates, it is helpful, but you may want to include a range.

Question: What do you expect freelancers to do in terms of data security? Do you have specific requirements?

Andreas: It depends on the contract. First of all, we have an existing contract with the USPTO and in this case we have to ensure the safeguarding and the safekeeping of all data that is communicated to us and from us to the USPTO. And it went through a very rigorous evaluation process. In my previous position, we had a contract with the Defense Department and we couldn't share any information via e-mail or fax; we had to use file transfer services or ftp sites, because they are more secure. But like I said, it depends on the project and usually we communicate the expectations with every project to the translators—what to do with the documents, whether they need to be destroyed or returned to us.

Question: What is the general attitude towards a new translator, someone who is brand new in the field and has strong language skills, but may not have much experience in translation other than some volunteer work?

Kate: Well, certainly that is all about getting that first foot in the door, but we do love to work with people who are just starting, to get their career off the ground as well as more experienced translators. There are certainly positions that don't necessarily require 10 years of various specific translation experiences. If you have a strong background, the drive, and the desire, we're certainly more than willing to give you a fair shake as well. Earlier, someone advised new translators to take the first job that you're offered, that's the same advice I would give to somebody in that kind of situation. You just have to prove yourself a little bit and get a little bit of a track record under your belt. Then things will just naturally progress from there.

Stephanie: Schreiber does subject specific new translator testing for all of our translators. We use that as an internal gauge for new translators to be able to show their skills. If someone only has volunteer pro-bono work, you will still be able to get a reference from that or any other professional experience. There are ways to make it work, and we are willing to work with new translators.

Question: What is the value of a translator/interpreter joining a translator's club, such as ATA, NCATA, and NAJIT?

Blanka: I would say that members of ATA, NCATA, NAJIT, even of ProZ or Translator's Café are much easier to find.

Andreas: I also find it to be helpful if you have a certification with ATA or a court certification.

Question: But not all languages are certificated by ATA.

Andreas: I know, but it goes back down to the level of your experience and, for example, for patent translations, you cannot use the ATA certification, because this certification is too general. We couldn't use a court certification. There is no existing certification for patent translators, so it comes back to how long you have been working on patent translations, what's your experience, how many patents have you translated, and so on. This can also apply to the technical field in general. So it's more experience-based than certification-based. But I would still consider a certification to be helpful for a specific contacts or specific project.

Question: When you start out in patent translation, how do you get any experience?

Andreas: Oh, wow! That's a very good question. We test our translators. We do require you to submit a sample. We have a test that we usually send to our translators, and you will be evaluated on your skill. I mean, in a perfect scenario, we would like you to have a lot of experience, of course. But nothing ever is perfect. So we rely very much on the review of our existing patent translators and we test subject matter specifically. In other words, whether you say "oh, I have experience on auto motors," "OK, let's see."

Well, now specifically for technical translations and patent translations, you should have a degree in the field that you translate. Let's say you have a degree in biology or chemistry, an advanced degree. That means that you are already familiar with the terminology and you should be able to take the translation test, but it's very important that you're also familiar with patent terminology. So in this particular scenario, you would have to do your homework, meaning you'd have to look at the existing patents and see what the key phrases you need to be aware of. And also talking to other patent translators would help—that's where certain networks like ProZ come into play and can be very helpful with establishing a terminology.

Stephanie: If you're interested in translating less technical material, my advice would be to start small. We have translators who begin translating newsletters and things like that. It may not necessarily be for pay to begin with while you are still working full time, but this is a way to get experience and to have something to put on your resume.

Question: Suppose you have experience, but you cannot list it on your resume due to the project's non-disclosure requirements?

Blanka: Many of our projects have very strict non-disclosure clauses. However, I really want to see those projects on our translators' or interpreters' resumes, and it can be said in very general terms. It doesn't have to be very specific. You can give even just a very generic term, such as "military technology" or even "military" and nothing more specific. We certainly understand, respect, and work on that premise, because we know that you truly follow instructions. But you can certainly disclose the volume of pages translated. Well, for some projects, this may not necessarily be the case—in that case, you respect that also.

Andreas: We also require all of our translators to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). We also tell our translators to respect their existing NDAs. So we understand if you cannot share a lot of information, but as we said before, you can explain it in very general terms. The last thing I would want is you sending me complete information about something that falls under an NDA.

Stephanie: Just one more thing, it also applies to references. We have a lot of translators with military experience. Often times the references who we speak to can't comment on the particular project, but they can comment on the translator's work ethic, reliability, etc.

Question: What kind of training do you do with the program managers and recruiters before you contact any of the linguists via either e-mail or over the phone? What kind of specific training do you have in your company?

Blanka: Every project is very different, so the approach for the recruitment is always different. When I came on board at ASET International, I actually worked with a senior manager for a number of months and we basically compared our views of specific resumes of interpreters and then once the top management was comfortable with my training, then I started actually assigning interpreters myself.

Kate: At DLS, most of our project managers or coordinators have some experience in interpretation, translation, or teaching. As for the recruiters, it's really as with any other job, having the background already—the background of languages, having the background of recruitment and then going into training once you start at a new company. It's with as any other position, just going through the orientations and the basic trainings and then just diving in.

Question: In your training, are you told that when you select linguists for a certain project, you should keep the goal of maximizing the company's bottom-line?

Kate: No, that's a plain myth. Of course we have to be realistic in the fact that we have to stick with the confines of the contract, we can't be losing money on everything certainly, or we wouldn't be around to get you the work. But as long as we're staying within the contract, what the contract situations are, we do truly care about our linguists and the instructors. We are not just trying to push you down to the lowest rate possible. Believe me, if we could give you as much money as you want, we certainly would. So it certainly is not all about the bottom-line with us. We do actually genuinely care about the linguists whom we work with. That is reflected in the fact that we have very low turn-over. People who start working with us seem to just always try to come back; we always try to keep them working with us as much as possible.

Stephanie: At Schreiber the rate discussion happens very early on. There may be some negotiations required for special projects, but when it actually comes to assigning work, the project managers are looking for quality—that's our number one priority.

National Capital Area Translators Association

www.ncata.org

The National Capital Area Translators Association (NCATA) is a dedicated group of professional translators, interpreters, language services companies, and language-related institutions. We foster quality and professionalism in translation and interpreting in and around the nation's capital.

Panelists:

Andreas Zierold—Landon IP

Landon IP is recognized as the global leader in professional patent-related support. We obtain and deliver international patent information; monitor patent prosecution at major patent offices; perform professional patent searches in multiple languages; analyze patent, product, and scientific information; conduct technical and business intelligence; and translate technical, legal, and patent documents for governments, corporations, and law firms worldwide. Mr. Zierold, in his function as Business Analyst Translations, is responsible for vendor selection and recruitment as well as supporting multiple, ongoing foreign language translation projects from inception through distribution to translators, review of completed documents, through customer service follow-up with clients.

Kate Marden—Diplomatic Language Services

For over 25 years, Diplomatic Language Services has been a leading language services provider to military and government agencies in the Washington, DC metropolitan area and across the U.S. A few of our core capabilities include proficiency-based language training, cultural training, translation & interpretation, and curriculum development. Translation & interpretation has, until this past year or so, been a fairly small part of our business; however, we are expanding this side of our business as we speak and, as such, are always seeking qualified, professional linguists. Kate Marden and Ashly Bauserman represent the DLS Recruiting Team, and they work hard to maintain high quality and timely responsiveness to our clients' ever-changing needs. If you are a native-speaker of any of the over 85 languages we currently work with, Kate and Ashly will be interested to talk to you!

Blanka Novotna—Experis Global Content Solutions (GCS)

Experis' Global Content Solutions (GCS) Practice solves complex business challenges related to content. With more than 20 years' experience employing leading-edge technology, talent, and language capabilities to help clients manage the global content supply chain, Experis GCS delivers innovative solutions that maximize value across a global organization. As part of ManpowerGroup, our resources are vast globally – 4,100 offices in 82 countries – and our solutions are scalable and flexible to meet a client's unique needs. Blanka Novotna, M.A., has worked as linguist manager for ten years. She

manages conference interpreters, recruits government linguists, and also specializes in recruiting speakers of low density languages. She has a background in translating and interpreting Czech and is also fluent in Russian. In terms of working with translators and interpreters, Global Content Solutions builds on the legacy of ASET International; read her interview for ATA Slavic Languages Division: <http://www.ata-divisions.org/SLD/slavfile.htm>.

Stephanie Peace—STI

Established in 1984, STI is one of the nation's leading language service providers, supporting over 101 languages. STI is small, woman-owned business serving more than 500 clients, including numerous Federal and State government agencies, non-profit organizations and private sector corporations. Our customers turn to us because of our proven commitment to providing cost-effective, quality translation services. Our translators turn to us because of our proven commitment to a mutual respectable collaboration and paying our translators on-time, every time. Stephanie Peace works in our Resource Management team whose main responsibility is to recruit and retain the best qualified linguists for our growing needs. Stephanie has a background in Spanish and supports private sector and governments clients. Stephanie's favorite language to recruit for was a recent request looking for the Yup'ik Eskimo language. As of the 2000 U.S. Census, the Yup'ik population in the United States numbered under 25,000.

Author's bio: Evelyn Yang Garland is a Mandarin Chinese interpreter and translator based in the Washington, DC area, and the owner of Acta Chinese Language Services, LLC. She also tutors the Introduction to Translation Studies course offered by the University of Chicago. She is an ATA-certified English→Chinese translator, a Maryland court certified interpreter, and an expert member of the Translators Association of China. Contact: egarland@actalanguage.com.