

Speech

"The future belongs to those who prepare for it today" - food for thought from Malcolm X. I would be willing to bet that most of you, upon hearing the words "future" and "interpreting" in the same sentence, think of one thing: that abysmal word – technology. Obviously, the interpreting profession will be influenced by technological advances in the future. But rather than focus on a topic so often speculated upon, obsessed over and even catastrophized, what if we were to focus on the difference that *humans* could make to the interpreting profession going forwards. Surely that is more worthy of our attention?

My colleagues and I, currently studying for a master's degree in Interpreting at the University of Leeds, are part of an increasingly international "No Nation" generation, with aspirations to travel and experience new cultures. Living abroad, at least for a time, is almost a rite of passage as the "experience economy" is preferred to material possessions. According to MoveHub's 2017 report into global moving trends, the number of UK adults aged 18-34 moving abroad increased by 60% compared to the previous year. Even the British student loan companies have cottoned on: tuition fee loans were previously waived if the receiver settled in a different country. Not any more...

I am no different. After I graduate with my master's degree, I will be embarking on my own significant journey; I am going to move across the world for love. Whilst the no-experience barrier is a challenge for all graduates, lack of connections and a foreign, unfamiliar working environment make this prospect, though exciting, even more daunting. Thus, I am confident I am not alone in pondering the following: how can I, as a young interpreter, build a successful career on a new continent, never mind in a new country or city?

More broadly, how will future generations of interpreters be affected by these new global travel habits? And how, today, can we anticipate the changes they will initiate in the profession, and start to cater for this restless bunch, so keen to fly the nest and explore all the world has to offer?

My solution is an interpreting cooperative model akin to that of a UK Barrister's Chambers. In short, a group of interpreters with varying specialities. A collective reputation, saving on marketing efforts and costs for all. Shared glossaries and research. Jointly employed Administrators, who help market the members of the collective and know their strengths and weaknesses - that leads to a far more personal booking experience for clients, in contrast with booking through a large Agency. Finally, a shared, hired space. Having grown up around a dinner table with two lawyer parents - and more lawyer-speak than I could handle – I see huge potential in applying this model to our profession.

Why?

Firstly, a profession like interpreting relies almost entirely on a good and widespread reputation. This is not a foreign concept to me; my Jewish grandmother has told me for years that "Connections are everything": also, "finish your chicken soup". But what does a young interpreter, like myself, do, fresh off the plane in a new country without connections or a strong network? Professional interpreting organisations do exist, with smaller cooperatives created within them but, rightly, they have a rigorous application system that requires a minimum number of hours worked to join. At the start of one's career, it is simply impossible to meet such requirements. So, our young interpreter cum global adventurer starts off at a disadvantage.

Enter the interpreting “Chambers”. The sole aim of a cooperative such as this is to make things easier for everybody involved. The first way in which it would do so is through connections. 15 people have more and better connections than one person. And 15 people working to a high standard across the city in which they are based, or even across the country, acquire publicity and a good reputation much faster than one. When they act as a collective, the collective becomes the brand. This model leads to financial savings with regards to marketing. Members pool their resources to invest in a high-quality website, professional business cards and physical advertising around the area, as opposed to each individual doing so.

Valuable time can also be saved, with the sharing of glossaries and research findings; a shared database of information concerning past clients and events, for example. In addition, a Clerk equivalent, responsible for making bookings, negotiating pay and dealing with administrative tasks such as financial records, would save freelance interpreters hours of time and energy. Of course, such a team member must be paid. But this is nothing new: the current model of Agency recruitment sees interpreters lose a significant percentage of their pay regardless. A Clerk would simply replace the often distant “Agency”, bringing clients and interpreters closer together, facilitating communication and making for a more personal working relationship.

Finally, let us address the idea of a shared, hired space. Of course, interpreting is not a job requiring a typical ‘office’, but this space could be used for regular practice and training sessions. Each member of the cooperative, recruited, vetted and approved by fellow members, would surely have different skills and specialities to bring to the table, and those with more experience would be able to support and nurture new members. Moreover, in a world in which remote interpreting is increasingly common, investing in this shared space and the relevant equipment for such assignments looks to the future of the profession, which belongs to those preparing for it today. Regarding financial arrangements, they can be flexible, ranging from a fixed cost every month, to proportionate contributions depending on earnings.

In conclusion, I strongly believe in the potential of this model as applied to the interpreting profession. Not only do I believe in its financial viability but, on a personal level, in its value to morale. Interpreters are inherently social beings; we dedicate our days to helping others communicate and bridging the cultural gap, and we are passionate about what we do. Yet the lack of office culture means interpreters rarely have a solid base and support network of fellow interpreters, meeting more than once or twice a year, excluding virtual online forums.

To return to Malcolm X; a successful future for the interpreting profession requires anticipation and adaptation. It is not good enough to stumble across a changing trend in the profession and then react to it. We must examine industry trends and, crucially, growing social trends of young interpreters - the future of the industry - make predictions and prepare for what is to come before it happens. Leopoldo Costa, the namesake of this Award, is remembered for his dedication to providing support to those entering the profession. What better way to honour his character than to include young interpreters, heading out into the big wide world for perhaps the first time in their lives, in a collective structure and giving them a helping hand to ‘make it’.