

Free agents

Companies are increasingly hiring in-house staff for their language requirements, says Yelena McCafferty – but freelancers can still find work if they look for it



Yelena McCafferty MITI, RPSI is a Russian translator and interpreter with a BA (Hons) degree in English and German and a Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (English Law). She specialises in business, trade and legal matters and runs Talk Russian (www.talkrussian.com). Yelena manages a Facebook page for linguists at www.facebook.com/linguistlounge with a focus on language news and events in the UK.

A few years ago at a Russian business networking event in London, someone asked me if there was still business out there for independent full-time Russian translators like me. ‘Everyone is trying to get a member of staff in-house these days, and there is no shortage of applicants who speak Russian, Lithuanian or Latvian, especially in London,’ one attendee remarked. I replied that I do believe there is still work out there for us, despite many companies striving to fulfil their language needs by relying on internal resources.

According to *Helping the UK Thrive*, an education and skills survey published by the Confederation of British Industry and Pearson in July 2017, foreign language capacity is one of the six most important factors considered by businesses when they recruit graduates. Companies understand that you buy in your own language and you sell in your customer’s, so they know they need staff who can talk to customers who speak a different language.

The most commonly mentioned languages in the same survey were French (52 per cent), German (47 per cent), Spanish (45 per cent), Mandarin (36 per cent) and Arabic (26 per cent). However, only a third of the businesses surveyed were satisfied with the foreign language skills of current school and college leavers entering the jobs market. What’s more, the level of satisfaction is declining, and the shortfall of skilled people is increasing.

A job advertisement posted recently by Honda UK caught

my attention. The company was looking for a number of Japanese translators and interpreters to join its International Business Support team. It was offering a competitive salary based on qualifications and experience, with paid overtime, 25 days of holiday a year, private medical care and a dental plan, a pension scheme, childcare vouchers and the opportunity to purchase all Honda products at a generously discounted rate.

Another well-known brand, Expedia, was recently seeking Portuguese, Finnish, Danish and

I do believe there is still work out there for us, despite many companies striving to fulfil their language needs by relying on internal resources

Norwegian translators in London, with editorial and localisation experience. The advert said the job would involve translating a broad range of content from branded websites, HR documentation, training material, user interfaces and mobile apps, as well as social media content for all Expedia brands.

So was I right or wrong when I said during that networking conversation that there was still plenty of work on offer for freelance linguists and specialist language companies? From my experience, there is demand for us in both the

translation and interpreting markets. If we take interpreting, for example, I once had to interpret over the phone for a British business with a Russian subsidiary. The reason was a complaint to be investigated by the HR department, and a few people from the Russian office had to be interviewed. It would have been inappropriate to use a member of staff as an interpreter on that occasion.

On completion of the interview, I was asked by the client whether I had picked up any nuances in the tone of voice of the personnel we spoke to. Intonation can be revealing in different ways in different languages, and when body language isn’t visible over the phone, it’s even harder to sound someone out and come to a conclusion.

Legal requirements

Similarly, I recently interpreted at a series of hearings where grievances were being raised by migrant workers at UK factories. It was against the employer’s policy to use another employee to interpret; and the personnel manager stressed at the time that they needed to follow all the legal requirements to the letter, to make sure the complaints were dealt with fairly. It could have cost them dear if the employee had subsequently disputed the outcome because he couldn’t follow the language of the hearing.

It’s not unknown for British manufacturers to hire people with foreign language skills for prominent managerial positions, such as business development manager. But even so, the world of industrial production still offers opportunities for independent interpreters when familiarisation visits from overseas are arranged. It may not always be practical for the visiting party to bring an interpreter with them or for the business development manager to interpret constantly between the delegation and other managers of his company in addition to doing his main job, which is focused on generating business. My experience shows that this is true even for businesses that have already set up a representative office in a foreign country.

Extra duties

Law firms are increasingly looking to employ paralegals and legal secretaries who speak other languages in addition to English. This makes it easier to communicate with clients on a regular basis, from phone calls to taking instructions. I have seen legal firms advertising for paralegals with Polish, Russian, German, French and Romanian language skills. However, in a busy solicitor's office, the burden of extra duties may mean that staff can get overloaded and may need to use an external interpreter. This requirement is also valid for legal conferences, where many barristers will insist on using a registered interpreter so that no minor detail goes amiss or gets lost in translation.

The most common reason for multinational companies to resort to the services of an external translator is urgency. I've had to translate legal documents which were needed for a board meeting the following morning. With a large volume of papers to go through and tight time restrictions, a freelancer's input is always welcome, and sometimes the time zone difference is on your side as well.

Another aspect of doing legal translations as an external contractor is that you may have a much better understanding of the legal system and its complexities if you are based in the country of the source language, ie in the country of your client. Staff at the company's overseas subsidiary may not be aware of certain intricacies of company legislation, for example. I have previously been tasked with translating UK incorporation documents for a number of clients. Interestingly, sometimes the translation of company documents was required to open an office abroad.

Certified translations

And where do companies go if they require certified translations of third-party documents? There is an obvious potential conflict of interest here, plus the fact that company employees may lack formal language qualifications, even if they

speak the language. This is where language experts with valid credentials can step in.

Liaising with a foreign-speaking team within your client's company may be challenging at times, especially if the project is focused on marketing and the client expects transcreation rather than translation per se. In the case of brochures, for example, some information specific to the originating country may have no relevance to the target country and may need adapting or taking out altogether.

In the event of straight translation, references to specific overseas legislation, for example, might sound out of place. This is where a good brief prior to commissioning translation work can save time and reduce the number of revisions: it's important for us, as translators, to understand what the client wants

The most common reason for multinational companies to resort to the services of an external translator is urgency

to achieve and where our remit starts and ends.

In this day and age, it's very unusual, at least in European and American job markets, for an employee to stay with one company all their working life. People move on in search of better career prospects and working conditions, and to reach personal targets, so employers are left without trusted workers they once relied on for their language requirements. In this case, temporarily at least, they will be looking to use freelancers to fulfil those needs, and this opens another opportunity for us to work with new clients and win their business.

Some companies actively look for freelancers: Farfetch, the online platform for luxury fashion, this year advertised opportunities for Italian, German, Russian, Japanese and Chinese translators. Apart from

fundamental abilities such as language proficiency and writing skills, a love of fashion and an understanding of garment and accessory making were essential. And there was a useful tip at the end of the job description, which would be good for all of us to take on board: 'Have you checked spelling and grammar? We have high standards and you don't want to miss out because of something as easily correctable as a typo.' Quite, especially if you want to stand out as a language professional!

Amnesty International also recently published a job notice for English to Burmese and English to Thai freelance translators, specialising in international politics, human rights and humanitarian law, development cooperation, media and legal texts.

Freelance public service interpreting jobs are out there, too: until 29 September 2017, the Royal Borough of Greenwich will be on the lookout for interpreters in various languages to help ensure access to local services for all borough residents.

Coming back to commerce, the government's current political strategy is to build on wider export opportunities after Brexit, while retaining close trade links with the EU. International communications are an integral part of any export marketing strategy. Culture and language are often considered to be among the main barriers to export success, and it is up to us, translators and interpreters, to help our clients break those barriers and achieve marketing and sales success internationally.

We may choose to do it on a freelance basis, enjoy the flexibility this entails and put our eggs in various baskets. Or we may opt for a staff position and enjoy all the relevant benefits and security that full-time employment gives. My research and experience show that freelance language work is out there, in spite of companies employing multilingual staff whose primary responsibility may not strictly be translation or interpreting. Positive attitudes lead to positive outcomes. 