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The One Source for a World of Translation Services

So You Want to be a Translator or Interpreter?

In order for one to become a translator and/or an interpreter, he/she must be able to fulfill many requirements within the academic field, the state or region in which he/she desires to practice, as well as develop a positive reputation among colleagues and clients.

Currently, more than half of interpreters and translators have a Bachelor's degree or higher within this field and most choose to do freelance work due to a flexible schedule, higher wages, and the ability to work fewer hours with greater pay than most in-house translators and interpreters.

These individuals must be aware of the competitiveness of this field and are encouraged to become certified within an specific area as well as joining organizations such as the American Translators Association, taking advantage of the many divisions by language they may choose to specialize in.

At this time, the languages in which translators and interpreters receive the highest pay are Japanese, Arabic, Danish and Chinese; where Italian and Portuguese are the lowest paying languages due to the increase of those speakers who are able to converse in English because of living in the United States for several generations. The languages that remain in demand for translation are Spanish, French, German, and most of the Middle Eastern and Asian languages, especially because of the current increase of immigration in the US.

The average annual income for in-house translators and interpreters is slightly less than \$60,000 a year, whereas freelance translators and interpreters could earn more than \$60,000 annually. Most translators and interpreters prefer to do freelance work because of the flexible hours and a slightly higher income. Usually salaries are based on the demand for a certain language, as well as the level of education and/or certification that a translator or interpreter holds. Most often, freelance interpreters receive an hourly rate where freelance translators receive a per word rate with a minimum charge.

Currently, most translators and interpreters are located in Europe with the least amount working in Australia. Surprisingly, only 12% are located in the United States.

Translators and interpreters are required to have complete fluency and an intense comprehension of one or more language pairs as well as good understanding of the topic in which they are assigned to interpret or translate. Many often specialize in one or more fields of study such as medical, pharmaceutical and finance where they are required to be extremely knowledgeable of the vocabulary and concepts as well as being sensitive and understanding of the culture in which they are assisting. Many translators have worked previously for companies in various industries in technical capacities and now specialize in different areas such as financial, legal, pharmaceutical, bringing expertise to their resumes.

The difference between these two skills is that translators translate the written word (documentation) and interpreters interpret the spoken word (conversation). However, both are charged with relaying specific concepts and ideas in order for others to fully understand in the target language. Interpreters also need to have skills in analytical fields and must be able to concentrate on a particular topic for a long period of time. This requires excellent memory skills.

Presently, there are two major forms of interpretation, simultaneous and consecutive. The difference between these two types is that simultaneous interpreters are required to listen and interpret concepts simultaneously. Usually, this form of interpretation is used in training settings, conferences and within the courtroom. There is usually a soundproof booth set up and the interpreter wears headphones for input of sound and will speak simultaneously into a microphone outputting to the headphones of attendees what he is hearing. Two interpreters will switch off at approximate 20 minute intervals to stay fresh.

Consecutive interpretation occurs after the speaker has delivered several words or phrases and then the interpreter repeats what has been said in the appropriate language. These interpreters often take brief notes in order to assist them in remembering specific concepts that are spoken and then they interpret what has just been said. This form of interpretation is often used in healthcare situations, hospitals and school systems and sometimes is done by phone.

Interpreters must relay as accurately as possible the meaning of the messages being presented, including the nuances of feelings and attitudes conveyed by the participants, whether those messages are in spoken English or ASL or other types of signed communication.

Translators must be experts in editing with good research skills in order to provide a better understanding of the material they are translating. Translations should be culturally sensitive, and translators need to be savvy in knowing how to translate or perhaps not translate, alerting a client of possible problems with some idiomatic phrases, expressions or slang that will get lost in translation and make no sense to the target audience. Literal translations usually do not work well with marketing materials while in a legal document, sticking closely to the text is important.

In addition, translators must know how certain languages differ in written form. For example, in English phrases are longer and more descriptive, whereas in Spanish phrases are more concrete and avoid any form of run-on sentences.

Improvements in technology have enabled the translator's job to become more efficient, productive and consistent. Computers have permitted translators to work from home and improve the process of sending and receiving jobs. Also, programs such as TRADOS have assisted translators in working within a more technical and productive approach providing tools for consistency in terminology and re-use of already translated segments of text. Online resources like articles, dictionaries, and the internet have provided translators numerous resources about a subject which they are translating. The internet also provides job opportunities for translators where they can post their resumes on sites such as ATA, Translator Directory, Translators Café and PROZ.

Although freelance translation and interpretation seems the most promising due to flexible hours and higher income, the dilemma remains that one must try to either contract ongoing work with specific clients or constantly be searching for more jobs. On the other hand, in-house translators and interpreters have the advantage of a set schedule and a steady salary, including benefits.

Obviously, experience is essential for translators and interpreters. In fact, most agencies or facilities refuse to hire translators and interpreters who have less than 3 years of practical experience. Many receive their experience by interning or working behind the scenes in an office that deals with translation and interpretation in order to develop a better understanding of technical concepts, policies and vocabulary within a very serious profession.

Currently, the majority of translators and interpreters work in school systems, medical offices, hospitals, and courtrooms, and about 20% are self-employed. Over the past decade, the need for translators and interpreters, especially within the medical, judiciary, political and education settings, has increased due to immigration and companies wanting to reach limited English speaking markets, especially within the United States. The areas in America with the most jobs for these fields are New York City, Washington, DC, and California.

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