Job description

Interpreters translate the spoken word, converting speech from one language to another at technical, political or other meetings. This involves listening to, understanding and memorising content, then reproducing questions, statements and speeches in a different language. Interpreters usually translate into their mother tongue or ‘active’ language from their secondary or ‘passive’ language.

Conference interpreters work at meetings and conferences while a public service or community interpreter functions as a link between two people in public or community institutions.

Community interpreting is an umbrella term for the types of interpreting that take place in Government service provision, such as in Garda stations, during the asylum process, immigration, hospitals, with GPs etc.

There are two main types of interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive. When interpretation is performed simultaneously it takes place at the same time the speaker is talking. These kinds of interpreters usually work with one or more other people in order to segment the interpreting process.

Simultaneous interpretation is common at international conventions and in courts. Consecutive interpretation occurs after the speaker has finished talking. Interpersonal communication often uses this form of interpretation.

There is also ‘whispering interpreting’: when only one or two delegates require assistance, the interpreter sits next to them and whispers into the required language. This technique is strenuous and tiring for listeners and it is only appropriate for short meetings involving a very small number of languages.

Work activities

• Communicating succinctly and accurately not only the content and but also the style of statements
• Reading papers and preparing support materials beforehand
• Emulating the inflections and intonations of the speaker, in order to reinforce the meaning and stresses of the speaker's words (but not emulating the gestures made by the speakers as they have already been seen)
• Reflecting the person's way of speaking as accurately as possible. The community interpreter will interpret obscenities and colloquial language and will not simplify language used.

Work conditions

Travel: travel to various locations throughout a particular region will normally be necessary and can be a regular feature of the working day. Interpreters need to reach a high level of competence and professionalism which, in part, can only be gained by immersion in the native environment of the languages they have studied. The biggest users of interpreters are located abroad: the European Commission, the European Parliament, the World Health Organisation and so on.

Working hours: can be irregular and unsociable, depending on the nature of the work undertaken. Conference interpreting is probably most likely to have more conventional working hours, since businesses and political conferences will usually be held during the course of the normal working day. Many events requiring the services of an interpreter can happen at very unsociable times – hospital emergencies, legal situations in Garda stations and video conferences where some participants are on the other side of the world in different time zones.

Location: opportunities exist mainly in towns or cities throughout the country. Opportunities for self-employment: as a freelance interpreter.

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Interpreter (continued)

Typical employers
Conference interpreters: European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Europe, UN; multi-national companies, language agencies, freelance interpreting.
Community interpreters: hospitals, garda stations, the courts, on Safe Pass courses, driver theory tests, for social welfare, solicitors’ offices, language agencies; freelance interpreting etc.

Career development
Progression can be difficult initially, but at an international level prospects are good. It can be difficult to get established as a freelancer but once established you can be selective in undertaking work.
Interpreting is a highly skilled profession and requires extremely high standards. It can take several years to become thoroughly qualified in the field. Spending significant periods of time abroad improving fluency is an essential part of training. Most interpreters work freelance and getting started is a challenge – the majority register with an agency and are given small, relatively easy assignments to begin with. Depending on success, larger assignments are then taken on. It is very important to become a member of the Irish Translators and Interpreters Association, as your name and profile are then listed.

Salaries
Salaries vary considerably depending depend on setting, type of interpreting required, location and level of demand for the languages. Salaries also depend on whether you are freelance and self-employed, working for a large multinational organisation, employed in a civil service position or employed within EU departments. The best-paid jobs are in Brussels, Strasbourg and Geneva.

Travel allowances are normally paid by employers.
Republic of Ireland: Interpreters can expect starting salary of around €27,000, which can rise significantly with experience. Freelance interpreters are usually paid a daily rate of anything between €200 and €450.
Northern Ireland: Range of typical starting salaries: £19,000–£25,000. Freelance rates vary from £110 to £475 per day.

Entry requirements and training
For all jobs you will need an excellent level of fluency in written and oral English, plus fluency in one or more other languages. Acceptable entry requirements are varied; a combination of a degree in languages and a qualification in interpreting is the most mainstream and conventional route into this profession. Only those with minority languages are likely to get work without a degree (the AICI and most employers of staff interpreters require degree standard). A degree in another relevant discipline and postgraduate training in interpreting is also highly acceptable and, in some cases, could be a requirement.
Language students should consider taking studying abroad, to at least spend a term immersed in their chosen language and the world it has developed in. Vacation work abroad can help to improve your foreign language skills, as can reading foreign language publications including business and trade journals.

Other relevant degree subjects
• Business/management
• Economics
• Law
• Modern non-European languages
• Modern European languages
Interpreter (continued)

• Politics, government, public administration
• Postgraduate study
• A pre-entry postgraduate qualification is not a requirement but is a distinct advantage.

Specific entry requirements
Foreign language fluency is essential. Specialist knowledge, particularly in science, economics, law, politics or a relevant technical area may be helpful.

Training
Irish Translators and Interpreters Association (ITIA) run an annual Continuing Professional Development for Interpreters.

Tips for applications
Applications for positions with international organisations/European institutions involve a rigorous and competitive selection process. Interviews will be very much competency based and situations may be contrived in the interview to find evidence of the required skills. You will probably be required to undertake a sample interpreting assignment. Research and preparation of any special terminology and vocabulary relating to the subject areas of the organisation is advisable.

Skills and qualities
• Impartial and sensitive and considerate to the cultures in which they work.
• Self-discipline and self motivation with the capacity to work consistently and under pressure, independently and as part of a team and to fit into a multicultural working environment.
• An ability to grasp varied and complex issues, react swiftly to changing circumstances, manage information and communicate effectively.
• Confident in speaking in public.
• A good memory.
• A high level of physical and mental stamina.
• Good awareness of current affairs, cultures and politics.
• Knowledge of a specialist area.
• Ability to meet deadlines.
• Willingness to learn.
• The ability to work under pressure.
• Good concentration and accuracy.
• The ability to analyse information rapidly.
• The ability to be intuitive and make decisions.
• The ability to be flexible and adaptable.
• Good communication skills.

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