Off-mic with Phil Smith: Safety first

Ensure you aren’t sitting in a draught, in danger of falling or exposed to high levels of external stress before reading these handy hints for interpreters. Have some fruit handy.

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We live in a world where hazards lurk in even the most unexpected places. It is important that all interpreters take particular care when going about their daily work; an accident could bring the wheels of international diplomacy juddering to a halt.

Your association is working hard to protect your health. AIIC’s Accident Prevention Group reports to the Policy Techniques Project which reports to the Intersectoral on Wellness. So everything is under control.

Leaving the house or hotel

Make sure your shoe laces are correctly fastened. The chronically forgetful should consider purchase of slip-ons. If dealing with luggage allow plenty of time to avoid limb sprain. If cycling, don’t forget your helmet.

At work

Introduce yourself to your colleagues and ascertain whether they have any contagious diseases. Gloves may help.

Prevention is better than cure, so you should make sure you have the following within easy reach at all times:

- Cold cure
- Tablets for sore throat
- Swiss herbal sweets
- Eucalyptus oil
- Mint essence
- Night Nurse
- Flu cure
- Mosquito net
- Plasters
- Sutures
- Anti-septic cream
- Malt whisky (medicinal uses only)
- Insect repellent
You should begin your headphone disinfection routine in good time, placing your cleaners, solvents and polish on a flat, non-staining surface. It is considered polite to offer to clean your colleague’s set, but don’t be surprised if this elicits a dusty response from people who’ve invested heavily in their own swanky light-weight earpieces.

Do take care with documents. Paper is heavy, inflammable and has sharp edges. Dangers lie in wait for the imprudent. It is a good idea when lifting documents to bend your knees, so as to reduce the strain on your back. If colleagues ask what you’re doing, you can simply explain it’s part of your fitness regime. Do be careful not to hold naked flames near documents; poor lighting in some booths can be most trying and make it difficult to follow the presentation, but we cannot stress too strongly that you should not strike matches, however great the temptation to shed light on the subject. We suggest you pack a handy torch.

Finally, a word on staples. If you need to photocopy documents you’ll have to remove the staples. There are special tools for this purpose, but most European countries appear to have used up their quota. Use a metallic object to bend the staple straight before removal. A broken nail is enough to spoil anyone’s day and distract the most assiduous linguist from the job in hand.

Despite the dangers, continue to ask speakers for their papers.

Your booth contains electrical equipment. As we all learned at school, electricity and water don’t mix. Therefore try to complete all ablutions before arriving in the booth. You should also take care when pouring water. There are legendary tales of colleagues of old who gaily splashed water all over the booth, console and colleagues. However it is generally held to detract from team building.

Task lamps in the booth can get very hot. Try not to lick them.

Interpreters should prepare themselves for the onerous task of microphone management. It involves pushing a button. Your microphone lighting up red will denote successful completion of this task and give the practitioner a warm glow of accomplishment. If working on relay you will need to activate two buttons, and we suggest you rehearse this manoeuvre, because missed relays are bad for spiritual equilibrium.

A booth is a small environment, so take care to guard against sudden and exaggerated movement – which under some circumstances may include standing up or waving your arms about as you give it your all. The possible consequences are:
Spilling the water
• Falling off your chair
• Collapsing the table
• Clattering your colleague
• Falling into the neighbouring booth
• Demolishing the booth

We want delegates to take in our sleek efficiency, not our penchant for slapstick, so should any of these befall you, remember the consummate professional keeps talking throughout.

It is easy to trip in any meeting room. There are many trailing wires, dangling feet and rucked carpets. Be vigilant and don’t rely on industrial amounts of gaffer tape to keep you on your feet.

Eyestrain. We all like working in daylight, but at times bright sunshine can dazzle us, with low winter sun a particular hazard. It’s a good idea to have sunglasses in your kitbag. Not only will they protect your eyes, they will also help you look seriously cool. Avoid mirror glasses as you may risk being taken for a bodyguard.

Travel

We are all aware of the pitfalls of air travel: ear popping, peanut overdose and dehydration. It is important to moderate your alcohol intake (including flights to Scotland) at all times. Interpreters are clearly seasoned travellers, but any additional information you might need is contained in the useful booklets:

• “Upgrade – a right not a privilege”
• “Getting to Strasbourg; a modern odyssey”
• “How to find a seat in an airport lounge – Brussels, Geneva, Chicago and London editions”

Conclusion

Adopt good posture and steady, oxygen-rich breathing.

A healthy lifestyle will help you deal effectively with all of life’s hazards. Have you eaten that fruit?

Phil Smith is a UK-based freelance and is currently having a little lie down.

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