A statistical portrait of AIIC: 2004

A look at the International Association of Conference Interpreters through statistics.

Vincent BUCK, Luigi LUCCARELLI.
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Introduction

Earlier this year the association undertook a survey of members to collect the raw material needed to create a portrait of our profession. Using the expanding number of resources and tools available on the members-only section of this website, supplemented by a paper questionnaire where needed, information was collected on a variety of variables.

The responses received were checked against the AIIC database of members, candidates and pre-candidates on the following factors: professional status, AIIC status, gender, A language(s) and regional membership. The 931 valid responses obtained out of a total of 2903 eligible interpreters (a 32% response rate) proved to be representative of the AIIC population as a whole, making the overall likeness certainly good if not hyper-realistic.

Respondent profile

The age of respondents varied between 24 and 90, with a mean of 49. One in two respondents was under 49, but very few were under 30. The age pyramid was similar for both men and women.
For every man who submitted a questionnaire, 3 women did – a faithful reflection of the gender distribution in the association. Close to 90% of all those responding are active members.

Freelancers outnumbered staff interpreters by nearly 9-to-1, also a ratio that reflects the overall distribution of members. Freelance interpreters were asked whether they belonged to a group of interpreters offering recruitment services (as opposed to offering availability management services only); over 25% did, although such affiliation shows great variation among regions. The largest number of staff interpreters participating in the survey was employed by the European Union, followed by the United Nations or other UN agencies.

**Getting started**

The average period between graduation and entry into the profession shows surprising inter-regional variation, going from about 5 months in Germany and the Nordic Countries up to about 3 in Portugal and 4 in the Netherlands.

The number of people entering the profession has been rather stable over time, with peaks in the late 80s and in the early 90s. The largest number of respondents (32.72%) started working as an interpreter between 1981 and 1990.
On average, respondents had 9.5 years of professional experience when joining AIIC. The gap is smaller (between 6 and 7 years) for France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland and UK & Ireland. It is greater (between 13 and 15 years) for Brazil, CECO, Mexico & Central America and South America.

Newer AIIC members responded actively, with those joining since 2000 making up 28% of the total number of respondents. Over 60% of respondents joined AIIC in 1991 or later.

**How much did they work?**

About 34% of freelance respondents worked between 51 and 100 days, and 27% between 101 and 150 days. At the upper and lower extremes, 15% worked between 11 and 50 days, and 10% over 150 days. One out of 5 members also reported doing 1 or more days of volunteer work in 2004.
Market trends

Respondents were asked to compare their 2004 workload to the previous year. About 40% declared that it had remained stable, while 26% reported more work and 34% less work. The trend is negatively correlated with age: respondents over sixty were more likely to be affected by a decreasing workload whilst respondents under forty benefited proportionately more than other age groups from a higher workload.

There is also a correlation between work volume and specific market sectors. Respondents with fewer than 100 days were more likely to report a downturn. In general, freelancers for whom work in the Agreement Sector represents a large proportion of total days also reported a decrease. Respondents working between 100 and 150 days mainly in the EU or UN sectors were more likely to report a decreasing workload.

On the other hand, freelancers with a strong presence in the Private Market sector were more likely to report an increase in days worked. This was especially the case for respondents with clients of their own (as opposed to those who get most of their work through intermediaries).

Modes of interpreting

Simultaneous in the booth was assumed to be the main type of interpretation world-wide, but for comparison members were asked to indicate how many days were spent doing pure consecutive, bidule, chuchotage with or without some consecutive, and liason. Only information submitted by freelancers was taken into account.

Nearly half of all freelancers (49%) had worked in consecutive at least once during the year, but the figure varies significantly across regions. Between 60 and 80% of respondents based in CECO, Brazil, Italy, Israel, France, Spain and Greece reported at least one day of consecutive. This contrasts with fewer than 30% in Switzerland, South America, Belgium and the UK & Ireland.

Roughly 26% of freelancers used bidule at least once. Here again regional variations are significant
(min 7% for Austria, max 54% for France, with Germany a close second at 53%).

Some 41% of freelancers used *chuchotage* at least once, likewise with strong regional variations (16% of respondents in Luxembourg against 60% in Greece).

About 29% of respondents performed *liaison interpreting* during the course of the year. Israel led all regions in this category with 55% of freelancers reporting at least one day in this mode. At the other end of the scale, the figure dipped to under 10% of freelancers based in Austria, Belgium, Switzerland and the UK/Ireland.

**Languages**

Data collection on the AIIC Extranet made it possible to present potential respondents with a customised questionnaire for their specific language combination. Respondents’ AIIC A-B-C language combinations were automatically transoded into passive-active language pairs. Under AIIC rules, an A-B-C combination can be transposed as: A>A, B>A, C>A, A>B, B>B and C>B.

The average size of the language combination was 4.45 theoretical passive-to-active pairs. Africa is the only region where the average number of pairs is under 3. The top of the league is composed of Portugal and Spain with over 6 pairs and Brazil with over 5 nominal language pairs per respondent on average.

However, major differences appeared between the respondents’ nominal language combination and how they used it in practise.

About 35% used all their passive-active pairs, some 50% reported using over ¾ of their pairs, and 13% used fewer than half.

75% of respondents used less than 4 pairs frequently. The vast majority of respondents worked mainly with 2 or 3 language pairs, i.e. slightly over 66% of their nominal language combination.

Little used pairs are usually those in which the active language is a B. For instance, only 10% of all C>B pairs were used at all, as compared to 72% for A>B pairs.

**Demand**

In the survey the top language pairs (by number of days) were EN>FR and FR>EN. Both were equally in demand, with a slight advantage to the former. There was a 2:1 demand ratio between the top two and the third, EN>ES. This went to 3:1 for the following pairs in the ranking: EN>DE, ES>EN and DE>EN.

**Continuing education**

Respondents were asked whether they were learning languages with a view to working from and/or into them at some point. They were free to choose any language, including those already present in their official language combination.

38% reported learning languages. There is a positive correlation between the utilisation rate of the existing AIIC language combination and learning languages: Interpreters with a good leverage of their current languages were more likely to learn new languages. About 41% of respondents learning other languages used 100% of their current passive-active language pairs. One of two interpreters with between 3 and 4 passive-active pairs in their combination reported learning at least one...
That nasty stress

Members were asked whether they suffered from the following stress factors “a lot”, “regularly”, “infrequently” or “never”: Fast speeches, Unintelligible speakers, Obscure jargon, Highly technical matters, Difficult relationship with colleagues, Lack of space in booth, Lack of job security, Long working days, Low remuneration, Poor accommodation conditions, Poor air supply in booth, Poor sound, Poor travel conditions, Poor vision from booth.

The most stressful factors were, in order: “Fast speeches”, “Unintelligible speakers”, “Highly technical matters”, “Poor air supply in booth”.

On the other hand, “Poor accommodation conditions”, “Poor travel conditions” and “Low remuneration” had low scores.

Over 96% of members participating in the survey considered “Relationships with colleagues” not to be a stress factor at all.

A cluster of interpreters emerged with similarly high scores for the following stressors, thereby indicating that they could be related: “Fast speeches”, “Unintelligible speakers”, “Highly technical matters”, “Obscure jargon”.

Satisfied?

Overall job satisfaction was high in 2004. 81% of staff interpreters and 70% of freelancers declared themselves highly satisfied with their work.

There was a positive correlation between the overall job satisfaction and the work trend and work volume. Satisfaction increased in step with workload, but the satisfaction threshold clearly depended on the respondents’ main market: 88% of interpreters reporting 100 days or more on the Private Market were very satisfied. And 84% of interpreters reporting 150 days or more on the Agreement Sector were very satisfied.
Job satisfaction is paradoxically extremely high despite (or because of?) what everybody agrees is a difficult job and a stressful life-style. Low satisfaction is generally related to not having enough work. Respondents nearing the end of their professional career regret having to quit. Job satisfaction remains high even for respondents who are most affected by the job’s often unpredictable nature, such as interpreters with young children or dependents.

When expressed, dissatisfaction is primarily related to pervasive changes in the working environment restricting the interpreters’ ability to do their job properly. The top dissatisfaction factors are the rise of Global English that leaves many interpreters frustrated – and/or bored, if they happen to work in the English booth - and the lack or tardiness of materials to prepare properly.

Conclusion

The 2004 survey was the first time AIIC undertook an exercise of such magnitude and it proved to be a rich source of reliable data.

A multi-variate analysis was conducted with a view to identifying potential success factors measured in terms of work days, remuneration and overall job satisfaction. No conclusive results were obtained, probably because positive outcomes are strongly influenced by micro-markets that escape statistical analysis. However there were indications that entrepreneurship (measured by the proportion of direct clients on the Private Market) was a success factor for freelance interpreters.

A more focused analysis of the data is possible, provided that precise questions can be formulated ahead of time. AIIC Regions, sectors and committees are invited to think about how statistics could be of help in their work and report their conclusions.

Many thanks are due to all AIIC members who took the time to participate in the 2004 survey and to all AIIC groups and individuals who contributed their ideas for the questionnaire.

The full 49-page report can be consulted on the AIIC Extranet, which is accessible only to authorised AIIC users (active or associate members, candidates and pre-candidates) after successful identification (username, password).

[i] The 2004 questionnaire was designed by Vincent Buck on behalf of the Standing Committee for the Private Market Sector. Feedback was received from the Research, Training and Staff Interpreters’ Committees and the German Region. The final version of the questionnaire was tested online by a dozen AIIC volunteers representing all sectors. The primary collection method was via an online questionnaire in a secured sub-set of the AIIC Extranet. Data was collected between January 19th through to March 15th, 2005 and analysed by a professional statistician at Ebullio sprl.

[ii] Including travel, rest and other paid non-working days

Recommended citation format: