Business practices and organisation of conference interpreters

"No, I don't work for this company. I'm self-employed and work freelance." "Well, it's not an agency, actually. We run it ourselves..." "No, consultant interpreter doesn't mean that I advise colleagues on how to translate. Let me explain..."

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How many times have we found ourselves explaining to friends and strangers alike how exactly it is that we come by our work? Many of us could provide a blessedly simple answer: "I just wait for the phone to ring". But in a very large number of cases, the job of being a conference interpreter doesn't begin and end in a booth. It takes a lot of time, money and effort to arrange the interpretation for a conference: after the initial contact with a prospective client, a budget has to be prepared, submitted and approved; the interpreters have to be selected, contacted and confirmed for the job; contracts must be drawn up and sent out... Add to this, often enough, other supposedly secondary but equally complex matters such as dealing with travel and accommodation arrangements, obtaining and distributing conference documents, collecting invoices and ensuring prompt payment. Throughout this whole process everyone has to be kept happy: clients' and colleagues' questions and concerns have to be attended to and problems solved. Not to mention the fact that in all probability there wouldn't be a client in the first place if someone hadn't engaged in the energy-draining activities of client prospection, marketing and PR.

So who is the "someone"? None of this is taught at interpreting school but many colleagues have become "interprètes-conseil", i.e. consultant interpreters who deal with all these matters and provide most of the rest of us with the bulk of our work on the private market. In recent years, many of the parameters within which we operate as freelance conference interpreters have changed dramatically. Some markets have developed almost beyond recognition, and AIIC rules have also undergone profound changes. Consultant interpreters have had to adapt and professionalise their activities in order to organise their markets more effectively and to counteract growing "grey market" competition. In many cities or Regions, several freelance interpreters have set up groups -secretariats, cooperatives, limited companies-, while others operate on their own (with their kitchen table as headquarters, as legend would have it). We all know who these groups and colleagues are, and of course they know each other. But in drawing up its plan of activities for the coming three years, the Standing Committee of the Private Market Sector felt that it was time for a closer look at the ways in which consultant interpreters work, whether individually or collectively. We think that better knowledge of colleagues' experiences, good, bad and ugly, would be of help to all of us, and we would like to explore ways in which AIIC could provide support to its members who deal with clients and recruit teams of interpreters.

Our initial intention had been to carry out two separate surveys of a somewhat informal nature on
the activities of groups of interpreters and consultant interpreters respectively. The results would be presented at Private Market Sector meetings for discussion in greater depth and best practices identified. Some kind of minimum standards or guidelines could perhaps be produced which we hoped would be of use to all colleagues who engage in recruiting activities whether by choice or by need. However, in light of Council’s decision of July this year that henceforth all AIIC activities be carried out on the basis of projects, the Standing Committee decided to give its work in this field a more formal structure and to propose it as an AIIC Project, which for want of a better name was given the title "Business Practices and Organisation of Interpreters". Council has accepted our proposal and it is this project which we would now like to present to you.

The aims of the project:

- To obtain as complete a picture as possible of the professional/business practices of consultant interpreters (operating either individually or in groups) and the ways in which AIIC members organise (or attempt to organise) their markets.
- On behalf of AIIC, we would like to provide the membership with a number of tools which they may choose to use in carrying out business activities.

To that effect, a number of actions shall be carried out:

Information will be collected on the basis of worldwide surveys and from other sources, e.g. from Council members on their respective Regions or contributions from individual members. Aspects looked at will include recruiting practices, legal status, financing, publicity, types of services offered, market share and client/interpreter satisfaction, etc. In the case of groups, we shall also consider their composition and the ways in which members of a group share responsibilities, work and costs. The effects of the new technologies on business or recruitment activities, networking, ethics in business and advertising and policies vis-à-vis newcomers on the market will be touched upon as well. We will also ask respondents to tell us what their expectations are concerning AIIC's possible role. For practical purposes, groups of interpreters and consultant interpreters shall be looked at separately.

This information will be processed and the results presented and discussed within the sector, at Private Market Sector meetings and through the website. Panel discussions will be held bringing together experienced consultant interpreters or groups of conference interpreters and some specific in-depth case studies done. Comparisons will be made with the results of the survey carried out in 1984 by the NAS-AIIC Working Party on Groups of Conference Interpreters (a full report of which was published in the September 1984 issue of the Bulletin).

We will attempt to approach the issues of ethics in business and advertising from a more theoretical point of view, possibly with some kind of expert consultation, and recommendations proposed which would then be put to the sector for discussion to see to what extent they match current practices.

The outcomes of the project:

- Recommendations for a code of ethics in business and advertising;
- A set of guidelines and best practices (in terms of forms of organisation, infrastructure, funding, publicity, etc.) for future use, aimed particularly at younger colleagues wanting to set up shop;
- If it is deemed useful, a proposal for the creation of a directory of recruiting contact points to be published with the blessing of the association.

The timeframe:
Summer 2000: Questionnaire prepared and sent out to groups of interpreters. Results processed in late autumn.

October 2000: Presentation of the Project in Communicate! Contributions and comments requested from the sector.

January 2001: Report submitted to the Sector for discussion at the SMP meeting in Amsterdam, which will include a panel discussion and case studies. First conclusions on groups drawn up.

During 2001: Parallel study of ethics in business and advertising. Updates and discussion online.

Summer 2001: Survey of consultant interpreters prepared and sent out, information processed in late autumn.

January 2002: First discussion of consultant interpreters' survey at the Private Market Sector meeting in Montevideo, with the Americas markets looked at in more depth.

Spring 2002: First draft of ethics code, best practices/guidelines and proposal for a list of contact points prepared and put to the sector for consideration at the SMP meeting in July.

July-October 2002: Final conclusions worked out and formal recommendations made to Council and Assembly.

The work shall be carried out by the Standing Committee of the Private Market Sector (D. Grée, T. Selhi, H. Samama, V. Buck, J. Ferreira Ramos) with the support of a number of members of Council (E. Richter-Wilde, I. Scarzolo, L. Hoffmeyer, S. Troula). Danielle Grée, as Convenor of the Standing Committe, is the Project Leader, and Javier Ferreira the Council member responsible. The SC would like the Sector to be actively involved in the project, so all contributions, questions or comments are welcome and we would ask you to contact us if you are interested in joining in the work. Regular updates and proposals for consideration will be posted in the AIIC Extranet, and we count on the necessary feedback from members of the Sector. The whole study will of course be valid only if we have the support and cooperation of as many members worldwide as possible.

We have already prepared a questionnaire which has been sent out to all the groups of conference interpreters that we are aware of. It has also been posted on this site, together with an accompanying letter. Response has so far been steady but certainly not overwhelming - our apologies to any groups we may have missed, and please take the time to reply. You are all cordially invited to the Private Market Sector meeting to be held in Amsterdam on January 13th and 14th next year. The second day of the meeting will be devoted to the theme of groups of conference interpreters and we are hoping for an interesting and lively discussion. We look forward to seeing you there.

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Recommended citation format:
