Off mic with Phil Smith - booths

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Published: December 4, 2006 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Please stand up if you know what the ISO is. Okay, sit down. We can't have la crème of the profession making airports and Internet cafes untidy.

The answer of course is the International Organisation for Standardisation, and they have worked with interpreters to write international standards for our booths, which should - if they comply with the standard - be roomy, airy and just the place to hang out for a day's work.

Imagine a booth: by about three in the afternoon there is little oxygen left, and your greedy colleague wants her share. The task lamps have become hot to even look at (spit on one and it will sizzle), and you can only see the screen for today's 59th power point (and 89th golf joke) by arching your back and borrowing a telescope from one of the more nautically inclined booths - the Portuguese are pretty good because of Humphrey the Navigator. Such contortions could well put your spine out for a week, and try explaining a sudden onset of a bad back to your significant other when you get home. Questions - you can bet on it - will be asked.

Booth standards look rather good on paper, so many metres width, depth, vision and pathos. They even remembered to make sure there is a metre clearance behind the booth so we can get out - clearly we need to get home to update the family on the back situation. And while on the subject of backs, booths need supportive and comfortable chairs so we can keep the wheels of globalisation turning. The world can't afford our missing work- just think of the chaos.

I like to think that my environmental footprint is rather dainty and topped by a well-turned ankle. The trouble is that an interpreting booth is a small place for any feet or their owners, and as you may have noticed, the air does not circulate very well. Very occasionally it circulates too well and we all get colds, flu, housemaid's knee and ingrown toenails. But generally it's like the doldrums in there, although without the albatross.

A few years ago AIIC hired a company of experts to come and check on how we were affected by the environment we work in (meaning the booth, not whether we perform better in Paris than Hamburg - although I may ask AIIC for some money to research such weighty matters). They measured our stress levels and the air quality, and found that although with time the air got soupier and we got more stressed, we rose to the occasion and translated with dash and aplomb. The downside was that we left the building in a comatose state, but as the customers couldn't tell the
difference (such is our devotion) there is unlikely to be any improvement.

I've carried out my own research - it involved buying a pen and notebook - to bring you news from the oxygen-starved coalface. The plucky colleagues interviewed gasped that we need:

- Air
- Deeper desk-tops for all those documents and our laptops
- Sockets so we can plug in the laptops
- Hooks to hang our coats
- Air
- It would also be nice if we all start to leave the booth tidy, throw away old documents and remove used coffee cups so that those working the afternoon shift will find their workplace welcoming and pristine. Encountering a pigsty can throw the most diligent professional...
- Fresh air
- If you bring your own headset, please plug the usual one back in when you leave or the next shift will think the unplugged headset is broken.

There is a certain mythology attached to the interpreter's booth. Some say that interpreting as an art came to an end when we retreated to our anonymous existence on the periphery. In my early days in the job - just a few short years ago - people spoke in hushed tones about the booths in the basement of the Berlaymont building in Brussels, a place of such Stygian gloom and airlessness that they had been abandoned after a strike (yes, a strike!) by Commission interpreters. We newbies were kept docile by the old lags telling blood-curdling stories about the scary sous-sol.

I have also heard that some buildings took the air into their ventilation systems directly from the underground car park. Can any of you confirm the story? I once thought I was about to crack the case but then had three weeks off with a respiratory disorder, my sleuthing days over.

Our booth is really our office but we have little chance to decorate it. Apart from seven dictionaries, a lap top, newspapers in five languages, knitting, Ipod, maps, some fruit, a rucksack, briefcase and my vanity case. And there's generally a colleague in there somewhere. This may sound like a lot of clutter, but it is all vital to the interpreter on the move. It's a kind of nesting instinct, an effort to recreate our disorderly home environment at work.

We do well to remember that a booth is glass-fronted and that people can see us. Therefore it is wise to maintain a certain amount of decorum; clearly when you are working you do just that, but if your booth has a moment or two to switch off it is advisable not to laugh uproariously in full view of the treasurer who is recounting the association's financial woes to the sound of violins. And while I'm on the subject, it's probably not a good idea to eat in the booth, even discreetly. We all look faintly gormless when we chew.

Booths are supposedly sound proof, but only if you close the door. Doors in many booths hang at a rakish angle and will only close if hit hard, which kind of defeats the soundproof thingy I just mentioned. Once you have got the door closed the booth temperature will rise, and you will be sitting in a small box filled with carbon dioxide, at which point you will just have to open the door again. I think this may be what we call the cycle of life.

Booths are built into some conference centres as architectural flourishes, all moody angles and smoked glass. Sexy looking, but no place for the imperfect subjunctive.

There are colleagues who spend every waking day thinking about these things. You may think they should get out more, but they are working to get you and me a decent place to work. No more contortion, CO2 headaches, heatstroke and chilblains (on the same day), or banging your knees on the desk or getting grubby trousers from cruddy undersides.
People have now started bringing their own headsets to work. They look very swanky and work an absolute treat. A kind colleague explained to me that it's all to do with impotence (I may not quite have grasped the principle here). Anyway I tried some the other day with a colleague's permission and it's marvellous. You can hear the delegates' tonsils click.

The booth is your work place. Cherish it, leave it tidy and treat it with care. And buy a drink for the colleagues who have spent a lot of time poring over detailed international standards for our benefit.

Early work began in the early 17th century, and William Shakespeare hints in Sonnet 18 that he was on the early drafting committee:

"So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see..."

*Phil Smith is a UK-based freelance who is in need of some air.*

**Recommended citation format:**