How interpreter groups are organised: A preview

This snapshot of AIIC consultant interpreter groups shows organisational variety within a context of common goals and practices.

Luigi LUCCARELLI.
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The Private Market Sector of AIIC recently presented preliminary results of its survey of groups of conference interpreters, giving the interpreters present at its semi-annual meeting a first glimpse of a project that aims to elucidate the professional and business practices of consultant interpreters.

This survey is the first of two to be undertaken within the framework of a multi-year project on Business Practices and Organisation of Conference Interpreters. The preliminary results were based on 22 responses to the questionnaire. A number of recent responses will be incorporated into the final analysis to be made in the coming months.

The picture of AIIC groups emerging so far shows organisational variety within a context of shared goals and common practices.

- There is a certain contrast in size. Most of the groups have fewer than ten members, but a few have more than thirty.
- Groups continue to be formed. Three of those responding date back to the 1970s or earlier, 12 were founded in the 1980s and 7 in the 1990s.
- In half the cases members decided to establish a private company. Cooperatives and associations are the other choices reported so far, though some of the groups are de facto associations as they have no formal structure.
- Two-thirds have dedicated office space and/or employ staff.
- A large majority (80%) function as collectives under a group name and provide clients with single invoices, single contracts and/or centralised payment.
- Most of the groups do more than organise teams of interpreters. The contracting of translation services and interpretation equipment is quite common, while some groups also offer availability management to interpreters.
- So far there is an even breakdown in how the groups cover operating costs, with 1/3 covering them through an organising fee charged to clients, 1/3 through member contributions and 1/3 through a combination of the two.
- As for making themselves known, 1/2 carries out promotional activities, 2/3 advertise in the yellow pages and 2/3 now have websites.
- When asked to assess their success, half of the groups say they have achieved the market share they were aiming for. The proportion of work generated by the group and carried out by group members varies considerably, from 25% to 75%.
"What do you think AIIC can do for your group?" was one of the open questions asked. The vast majority of respondents felt that AIIC should play a key role. PR and marketing activities, guidelines and best practices and a directory of AIIC contact/recruiting points were all mentioned by at least half of the respondents. All felt that groups of interpreters should be recognised and supported as such.

From a comparison of these results with those of a similar survey carried out in 1984, it becomes clear that the way groups see themselves has changed. The then-predominate vision of the group as a network of individuals sharing all equally now shares stage with the view that a group can also be a legitimate business/commercial enterprise to which market rules apply.

The final results of the survey will be published in much greater detail in the near future, along with further analysis of data and comments. In a later stage of the project, the Private Market Sector will undertake a survey of individual consultant interpreters to round out this picture of organisational and business practices.

Luigi Luccarelli is Editor-in-Chief of Communicate!

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