A further talk with new members

Why do interpreters join AIIC? What misgivings may they have about it? What do they expect from their professional association? An assembly is a good place to single out new members and ask them these and related questions.

Mary FONS I FLEMING.
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The respondents

Geographically speaking our sample had a heavy European bias, as was to be expected as we were in France. All but two of our interviewees were based in EU member states, with another in Turkey, an official candidate for EU accession.

The 14 new members covered six A languages, mainly German and French. Most of them joined AIIC six or seven years into their working lives, while a smaller proportion waited twelve to eighteen years.

All but one had heard about AIIC at their interpreting school: the outlier was once an eager youngster who sought to learn about our profession and heard about us at the tender age of fifteen! Two respondents report thinking of membership as an impossible goal when they first heard of AIIC.

What they like about AIIC

Six of those interviewed stressed ethics, working conditions and/or standards, often in the same sentence. The words international and global also appear a total of six times, and reputation is referred to seven times through words like prestige, excellence, quality, professionalism, reputation, and credibility.

AIIC's negotiating role and union-like function are highlighted by three respondents, to whom we might add two more who list "solidarity" as an attraction of our association. Finally, networking is also listed by a couple of them.

A few select quotes:

- "I like the way we try to keep standards high."
- "It is my professional home."
- "We can have a debate about professional issues with colleagues from other countries."
- "I like being a member of a group of people sharing the same ethic, working conditions, etc., and the same goals, regardless of where we come from."

The most important things a professional association can do

Some of the themes identified above are echoed in answers to this question. For instance, standards, ethics and working conditions are mentioned a total of ten times. Solidarity is also mentioned by
three respondents who had not listed it as one of the qualities they like about AIIC; to a certain extent this concept may be equated with "defending members' interests" (listed by six).

Other recurrent themes: promoting the image or raising awareness of the profession is listed by seven respondents; communication, specified as including both internal and external communication is referred to by three, as is networking (two explicitly speak of providing a networking platform), and the idea that an association serves as a "professional home" is an interesting one that came up twice.

Negotiating agreements is also underlined by a number of the respondents - in one case carried as far as negotiating on behalf of staff interpreters!

**What could be improved**

Communication is emphasized by many respondents: internal communication, explicitly or by reference to "transparency" or the need to put a halt to "misinformation" (the latter popping up five times); external communication through references to "PR" (one person specifying "PR outside of Europe"), "visibility", "raising awareness" and "getting young colleagues to understand why they need to join."

Consistency ("walking the talk", "raising awareness of rules among members" or "elimination of double standards") is stressed by five respondents. Three explicitly call for tightening up of disciplinary measures (there was a disciplinary hearing during the Assembly and a proposal to establish a standing Disciplinary Committee was approved).

Attitude is highlighted by six, with references to "the need to explain the meaning of openness," and "the attitude to young colleagues and new members."

Other isolated comments (one mention each) included a call to attract more staff interpreters, a jab at the sponsorship system, and the desire to see new approaches to ongoing challenges.

**Main challenges facing the profession**

Increasing use of English or "Globish" in meetings is decried by four respondents; in one case even "English plus one foreign language" was lamented. (Yes, we do realize that no interpretation is not the same as bilingual-only interpretation, but still we feel it is legitimate to group these.) I particularly appreciate this thought: "We have to make people understand the added value of using their native languages."

A call for greater solidarity and unified action can be heard in the interviews. Unprofessional and/or unfair competition is highlighted by five of our interviewees, one citing "agencies owned by non-interpreters" as a specific challenge. One respondent felt that non-AIIC members need to respect and acknowledge AIIC’s representative role and standards, and another mentioned ethics as an issue of importance for the profession.

In contrast, cost-cutting measures (presumably by conference organisers) are explicitly cited by only one respondent (then again, this survey was carried out in January, not April!). Inappropriate use of technology (e.g. infoport or a videoconferencing tool where a booth is called for) is mentioned in a couple of responses - and one is tempted to assume such choices are mainly intended to reduce costs. Another advocated realistic attitudes to market realities and segmentation.

**Suggestions for AIIC**

Several of the new members interviewed made specific proposals regarding AIIC when addressing the question on challenges to the profession. I take this to mean they think AIIC is good for the whole community of language professionals.
Communicating with potential clients, a significant theme throughout the survey, is sometimes described in more specific terms: "explain better to potential customers why hiring AIIC interpreters is worth it", "more marketing for the profession" and "become a professional board/certifying body" (the latter is far more specific in scope, of course, but it doesn't seem too far-fetched to fit it in here).

Reference to solidarity and inclusiveness can be seen in comments such as this one: "the need to set a positive example instead of defining ourselves as 'we're not like those people.' Negative stereotypes are hardly helpful to enhancing our profile." Perhaps related to this is the call for greater efforts to attract *fresh blood* made by two respondents.

**Summary**

It's hard to draw conclusions from this interesting but nonetheless unrepresentative, non-random sample, and one's own views are bound to color any report, even through the seemingly harmless exercise of grouping responses. Still, a desire for better communications - internal and external - and new attitudes does seem to exist among these new members, while solidarity and the defense of ethics and proper working conditions seem to be common expectations of a professional association worthy of the name.

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