How AIIC interpreters band together: responses to the Bizorg survey

The objective is pretty clear: you want to make your presence felt in your market and in order to do so you have decided to set up a group of professionals.

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By pooling your resources you rightly feel that you will attract more clients, provide a more comprehensive service, facilitate administrative tasks and foster teamwork, collegiality and professionalism among members. And of course you want the group to succeed as a business venture.

But how to go about it? Here are some pointers, based on the practices identified in the survey of 30 groups of AIIC conference interpreters carried as part of the AIIC Project on Business Practices and Organisation of Interpreters (Bizorg).

Membership

There seems to be no rule as to the minimum (obviously two!) or maximum number of members for a group to operate successfully. Most of the groups surveyed have fewer than ten, though some well-established groups are considerably larger, with up to fifty members.

It is strongly recommended, and indeed experience backs the idea, that all members of the groups be members of AIIC or AIIC candidates, since that ensures a commonality of approach, notably in regard to ethics and professional standards.

Perhaps the right thing to do would be to establish a very clear set of criteria for membership and set up the group with all the colleagues who are eligible and willing to participate in the enterprise - this might prevent why-not-me situations from arising later on.

Legal Form

Three of the most common ways to constitute a group are as a private company, a non-profit association or co-operative. Creating a separate legal entity certainly facilitates matters in terms of contracting staff and utilities, and allows the group to act as a Professional Conference Organiser (PCO) as necessary. However, the formula of a "virtual" group or de facto association has proven successful in a number of cases: the members share a "brand" name and image but otherwise operate individually. Financial considerations might well make this a good option to begin with.

Premises

In these days of call centres, diverted telephone lines, e-mail and online everything, fixed premises...
may no longer seem to be absolutely necessary. Several successful groups do not in fact have an office and their business is run from the homes of member or staff. However, as for any commercial enterprise, location continues to be an important factor and a good address is always an asset. Though it helps to have somewhere to receive a client, very few of them actually visit you and the main purpose of an office is to serve as the focal point of the group's business activity. Think not just of group meetings but also of the vast amount of paperwork required, the reams of documents you will in all probability be receiving prior to a conference you organise, and the necessary storage space. You should certainly make sure that there is an address where the DHL man can find you!

Staff

More of the same. Though a minority of the groups surveyed do very nicely with no secretarial or managerial help, part-time staff at least seems to be the norm. The important thing, again, is that there is a permanent presence on your side of the phone, fax or computer screen. Quickness of response is vital in a line of business where potential clients may approach several providers at the same time, and given our busy schedules you may just not be able to handle it without at least some secretarial help. For some groups, the figure of the secretary or manager is pivotal so care should be taken in selecting the right person - among other things, it goes without saying that they should be multilingual and computer-literate.

Services offered

The main task is obviously the composition and recruitment of teams of interpreters. It is after all where we have the edge on any other provider. But many groups offer a variety of related services, with written translation being the most common. Some groups also manage availability for non-members. The group should in any case always be able to provide advice on ancillary services such as the hiring of SI equipment, conference venues and so forth, and clients certainly appreciate being offered a package deal by the proverbial one-stop shop. Be prepared as well to offer clients the possibility of centralising invoices, payments and contracts. The group might also be expected to take over the task of copying and forwarding conference papers. A word of warning though, if you are thinking of owning your own SI equipment: the investment involved in purchasing and maintaining equipment can be considerable, not just financially but also in terms of the time, and might perhaps best be left to specialised technicians.

Financing

The ultimate aim, of course, is to generate enough income to cover costs and to re-invest to make sure the group stays competitive. After some time in operation most groups do get there, so don't despair. There will be an initial investment though and it seems reasonable to suppose that it should be covered by all members equally. In many cases, operating costs that cannot be met from organising fees are covered by contributions from members who share expenses either equally or on a proportional basis, for example according to the amount of work generated by the group each member has received. The important thing is that clear criteria be established and adhered to.

Running the group

A number of keywords here: transparency, democracy, accountability, efficiency, participation, trust. Ideally all members should be equally involved in management duties, but fewer hands at the helm do make for effectiveness, so think of a system whereby members take turns in heading the group. Election of these officers can be periodic and/or staggered to ensure continuity and member involvement. All details concerning the ways in which the group operates should be clear and accessible to all right from the start and at all times thereafter. If you have articles of association you should think of ensuring the accountability of elected officers, but do remember that it is always much easier to work in the booth than to do the behind-the-scenes organising. Not everyone, of
course, is cut out for the job of consultant interpreter - there may be some members who can perform other tasks better and more productively.

**Image and PR**

The success of your group will depend not just on the quality of the services offered, but also on the corporate image you project. The more professional and efficient you appear to be as a business, the more trust and loyalty you will inspire in your clients. Right from the start you should think about PR material, brochures, letterhead paper and such. Everything has a logo nowadays and your group should probably have one too. Practically all groups advertise in the yellow pages, and a website, even if very simple, is a must - think of registering a suitable domain name as soon as possible. Find out what you need to do to become a member of the local Convention Bureau or its equivalent. Many groups have tried, with good results, other PR actions such as newsletters, visits to prospective clients, mailings, participation in trade fairs or publicity in conference industry publications. Carrying out a special activity such as organising a seminar can in itself be a splendid PR tool. All this will require vast amounts of time and effort but it will make a difference and help you to become better known.

In your advertising and PR it makes sense always to stress the fact that yours is a group of AIIC conference interpreters. AIIC is *the* quality label in our profession and to back that assertion, make use of the wealth of resources available on this website or use the PR and promotional material available from the Secretariat.

**Recruiting interpreters**

A golden rule to follow here - use common sense and AIIC's Guidelines for Consultant Interpreters, which will shortly be available in an updated version. Although you will obviously want to give preference to members of the group when composing teams, everyone's interests, particularly your clients', will be better served by making quality, specialisation and proximity the prevailing criteria. You will have to work out some kind of system to determine a batting order for cases when all conditions are equal. Likewise, you will have to establish procedures to follow when dealing with members' own clients as opposed to the group's clients. And remember that nobody knows as much about this business as we do, so even if you have full trust in the competence of your secretary or manager to compose and recruit a team, you should supervise the work very closely.

Chances are that you will be recruiting many colleagues from outside your group. Some groups ask non-members for a voluntary contribution to cover recruiting expenses. Whether you decide to do so or not, you should take the utmost care to establish a good working relationship, particularly with those interpreters who work with you more frequently. You can invite them to an occasional open house or to your regular group meetings, or keep them informed of your group's whys and wherefores through newsletters or your website. The important thing is that they too feel a degree of involvement and commitment, which will certainly help your relationship to run smoothly.

**Friends in AIIC**

Frequently you will be asked to organise teams outside your home turf. It makes sense to network with other AIIC groups or consultant interpreters based in other cities or regions. There are plenty of opportunities for networking and you should use them as much as possible. For example, formal arrangements with other groups can enable you to engage in larger-scale PR activities. And remember that experience counts: longer-established groups and experienced consultant interpreters will doubtless be glad to offer support and advice when you need it.

One thing that will happen is that your group will become a pole of attraction for students and aspiring interpreters and newcomers to the market who will approach you looking not just for work
but also for guidance and help. Remember that in many cases the group will in fact be seen as the representative of AIIC in your market - no small responsibility. You should take care to establish a close cooperation with your Regional Bureau and the VEGA group so that you can provide the right advice on schools, AIIC admission procedures, chances of work at international organisations and so forth.

**When the going gets tough**

Finally, some advice for when your group has to make difficult decisions. In your articles of association you should foresee the possibility of some members leaving, or being asked to leave, the group. Provision should also be made for the possible dissolution of the group. The whole situation will be that much easier to handle if there are clear procedures. And if you act as an intermediary between a client and interpreters recruited by the group, you should also know beforehand what to do when a client defaults and you are left holding the baby - and a number of unpaid invoices. Likewise, there are occasions when you might want to refuse to work for a given client and here too clear criteria would be of help to ensure that all members are happy with the decision.

**Good luck!**

The Business Practices and Organisation of Interpreters Project Team and the Standing Committee of the Private Market Sector of AIIC hope that these pointers will be of some help. We will be glad to provide advice and support. Feel free to contact us at business_organisation@qzbsq2uztxs.aiic.net.

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**Recommended citation format:**