Watts it all about?

Light on or light off? Not what – or where – you’re thinking – this is a family publication that our mothers might read.

Philip H. D. SMITH.
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I am talking about our working environment, the interpreter’s booth. In my early days I was given to understand in no uncertain terms that it was not the done thing to work with the big light on. We could use the smaller desk lamps, but not the overhead light. Looking back I suppose it was about creating a comfort zone, and much of that comfort sprang from our anonymity. On reflection you have to wonder whether two shadowy outlines in a darkened booth behind smoked glass was the best way to go unnoticed – at times it was probably the most interesting thing to look at.

Our presence can be considered a nuisance. Clearly there are some straightforward cases such as product launches where the company has blown the GDP of a small country on the set design, and a few booths plus contents are not going to add to the grandeur. Even within international organisations it has been said that we detract from the chummy fireside chat that delegates crave. This has been behind several attempts to remove us from the meeting room and put us in another building down the road. But as any interpreter who has worked remotely will tell you, it is very alienating, and certainly no cheaper because we can manage no more than about 3 hours per day. In a roundabout, longwinded way I am saying that our being in darkened booths suits everyone, or as we say in Geneva, all stakeholders.

Yet I now find that booths are getting even darker and I am starting to misplace things like my pen, coffee and phone (switched off please note). I am still able to place colleagues because they dress snappily in visible fabrics and tend to move around, so no awkward moments. At least not yet. Admittedly the eyes are not quite what they were, but even so the Stygian gloom can put the most assiduous professional off her stroke. We can turn on the overhead light, but it bathes us in a shrilly fluorescent beam which is fine for kick starting your eyes first thing but not an option for a full day of work. Or we can switch on the desk lamps. However they have an intense but tiny footprint.

They create a pool of bright light that is about the circumference of a wine glass – an everyday object you can all relate to – but outside the magic circle they have all the enfeebled candlepower of a disgruntled glow-worm. What is more, these triumphs of modern design are not always shaded so unless you place the lamp in one precise position you dazzle either your booth mate or a colleague in a neighbouring booth, and AIIC has told us we have to get on with the neighbouring booths, even if we can’t see them. Delegates have been known to drop by the booth to ask if we could just tilt the lamp slightly in another direction.

The twilight of interpreting
Our working environment has become creative twilight, all smoked glass and subdued lighting which is brilliant at giving us an enigmatic air of mystique, and this combined with a few well turned phrases elevates us to the status of demigods whose remarkable skills are matched by their edgy workplace. I just know you’re nodding in recognition.

Yet the image can wobble. If you drop a pen or book in a booth you will never find it by simply scrabbling about in the dark trying to remember where you heard it fall. And when exploring the lower depths of the booth you’re probably well advised to know where you’re putting your hands, so you have no choice but to switch on the overhead light, thereby putting a face to your disembodied voice - but it cannot be helped. As this is a delicate operation that involves kneeling you should take care to explain to your colleague exactly what you’re about to do before plunging to the floor.

Our booths do look different from down there. So much wasted space where they could surely fit a mini bar, but also all those trailing cables and un-rendered breeze block. With the light on you can generally find what you’ve lost - pen, earrings, ukulele.

There are other reasons to explore the depths. Most of us now work with a laptop so we can look up difficult words (there are such a lot of them) and check the CV of the guest speaker (arrest warrants out in only 4 countries). However the sockets for plugging them in are rarely on the desk, but rather tend to be under the desk next to the trailing cables etc (vide supra).

**Cool lamps**

So again you have to return to the seamier side of booth life. You will remember the lamps I told you about earlier, well they generally work off 9 volt direct current, which requires a transformer plugged into the socket, but the transformer is often 3 times the size of the lamp it feeds, so it blocks access to the other sockets. I hope you are following all this high tech stuff. The reason for the lamps to be 9v DC is that it keeps them cool. If you plug a lamp into the mains (240-250 v in most countries) the lamp will get very hot and heat up the booth and you probably don’t need any more heat as all your synapses are firing and doing a grand job in keeping off the winter chills thank you. Also a cool lamp is a better bet if you lick it. It’s no laughing matter. Some organisations have lamps that look just like mics and you know that your relationship with your microphone is, well, intimate. So be grateful to your technical committee who thought long and hard and did a lot of exploratory licking to protect you.

One day try turning up to work in a dark suit, dark shirt, dark shoes and dark glasses and sit very still. You will win points if after 15 minutes your colleague tells the team leader that you haven’t come to work this morning.

We live in a world of shadows and blinding light, so the consummate professional needs to prepare by packing: a torch, high visibility jacket, fuses, extension lead, sunglasses, electrical tape, electrician’s screwdriver, plugs and adapters for 15 countries. They are our path to the backlit uplands.

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