Career prospects and demographic challenges in the UN Geneva Sub-sector

Problems facing young interpreters in the UN sector examined in brainstorming session.

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In line with the proposal submitted at the UN sub-sectoral meeting which took place in Geneva on May 1, 2013[1], an informal meeting (brainstorming) was organized so that colleagues could discuss “career prospects and demographic challenges in the UN Geneva sub-sector”. The meeting took place on September 30, 2013 from 6pm to 8pm and was attended by a noteworthy number of freelance colleagues of different booths and generations. Also in attendance were two members of the DPU and one UN staff member. The following description first includes a general summary of the discussion and then specific questions and recommendations raised by the participants.

Early in the discussion, one of the DPU members present clarified that recruitment was the exclusive competence of the organizations and everyone would have to tread very lightly through this very sensitive area. This led one of the younger colleagues to wonder out loud if anything could be done about the concerns of young colleagues at all. The DPU member then clarified that although AIIC could not interfere in the actual recruitment policies of organizations, it could still be possible to talk about problems facing young interpreters in the UN Sector from the point of view of our general concern for quality and reputation of our profession, and the common interests of interpreters and organizations (i.e. the interest of interpreters to find work and the interest of organizations to be able to hire interpreters who provide good quality services).

With that the discussion proceeded and led to a number of conclusions, questions and recommendations that reflected the views and concerns of young and experienced interpreters alike who were in attendance.

Conclusions

- There was a general sense of unsustainable precariousness among freelance interpreters in Geneva who work for the UN Sector organizations. This general sentiment was particularly
noteworthy in certain language combinations and booths. The organizations depend on freelancers and vice versa, so such an unsustainable trend would be an existential problem for both.

- Colleagues are having trouble maintaining their residency permits, for which they must obtain a minimum annual income. To receive an annual international official's permit (Carte de légitimation) in Switzerland, an Interpreter-II (beginner) must earn 30,000 CHF (61 UN days) the first year, but then 60,000 the second year (122 days for beginners). This is a totally unrealistic requirement for beginners as even established interpreters are struggling to earn the 60,000 CHF necessary for the Carte. These limits are based on hiring models (i.e. contracts of many months) which have long since disappeared. EU-nationals have the possibility of requesting a B-permit, but this is not guaranteed since organizational income cannot be the sole income taken into account when issuing the B permit and requirements for applying are changing. On the other hand, private market income cannot be the sole income taken into account when applying for the Carte de légitimation. This incompatibility limits the ability of colleagues to work in both private and institutional markets. As one colleague remarked, the inability to maintain a legal status approaches the most precarious labor situation possible.

- Colleagues were concerned about potentially misleading messages being sent to young graduates of interpreter training programs. Colleagues mentioned the disconnect in the training of colleagues in certain combinations when established colleagues of those same combinations do not have enough work to maintain a residence permit. Sometimes the message from organizations even strongly refers to a “shortage” or “scarcity” of interpreters. By way of illustration of this apparent supply-demand disconnect, several recently graduated colleagues spoke about organizations visiting their schools and offering unpaid “internships”, after which they would be invited to sit a freelance test. Another example is the short courses held by one institution dedicated specifically to passing the UN freelance test.

- Colleagues are extremely concerned about the over-reliance on retired UN permanent staff interpreters as freelancers in some organizations, most notably the UN itself. The UN allows its retired interpreters to work 125 days a year within the headquarters (and de facto an unlimited amount in the specialized agencies) without reducing their pension. While there is no legal impediment to a retiree working, the over-reliance on retirees poses many concerns about even the short and mid-term sustainability of the market. One colleague mentioned that according to a 2012 report from the Joint Inspectors Unit on Individual Consultancies in the UN System, language specialists are given an unusually wide margin to work for their former employers when compared with other retired UN officials. Colleagues referred to experience or rarity of skills being evoked by some recruiters as justifications for hiring retirees, and the fact that this creates a Catch-22.

- Some colleagues thought there might be a growing trend of multiple domiciles and local domiciles declared by people living far away, even on other continents. The first trend is a violation of the UN/AIIC agreement and reflects the difficulty in policing the domiciles of non-AIIC members across multiple organizations. The second trend, while legal, may reflect the aforementioned disconnect between the organizations’ encouragement to become accredited and the lack of work available for successful candidates.

- There is a general feeling of a lack of information, communication, formal policies and transparency on the part of organizations. Many colleagues spoke of a lack of information about hiring procedures, lack of information about real needs of the market, lack of coordination between organizations on relevant issues (e.g. domicile, retirees, information on interpreter availability) and even lack of basic logistical information for interpreters (e.g. how to get a badge at some organizations).
Questions and Recommendations

- Both organizations and freelance interpreters depend on each other to function. If every local interpreter disappeared tomorrow, what would the organizations do? There is a need for clarity about market realities, circumstances and legal hurdles faced by young and experienced interpreters alike.

- AIIC should commission a statistical, comprehensive, professional market study on the freelance market in Geneva in order to have more detailed, objective, verifiable information for internal purposes, for the organizations, and the Swiss authorities. This study must include both members and non-members of AIIC to be useful. Funding from the Swiss region could be requested for this purpose.

- What is the organizations' policy for transmitting the expertise of the older generation to the younger generations of interpreters?

- The UN's Memorandums of Understanding with training institutions and related policies seem to be focused on training future permanent interpreters. The message should reflect the full reality of the situation for candidates to freelance and permanent exams alike.

- What is the purpose of the freelance accreditation exams? If the organizations decide to continue holding them, they should be very clear about the work opportunities that candidates can expect.

- There should be greater coordination between AIIC and the organizations, and between organizations to ensure that interpreters (AIIC and non-AIIC alike) have the same domicile at every organization in the UN System.

- Beyond purely practical concerns, organizations should be true to the principles they claim to embody and endeavor to have policies vis-a-vis freelancers which allow them to make a living from their work.

The meeting ended at 8PM with the invitation from the organizer, Jonathan Sanders, to contact him with any further ideas or information. The ILO was thanked for providing the room.

[i] Minutes can be found at http://aiic.net/page/6516/un-minutes-of-the-sub-sectoral-meeting-geneva-1-may-2013/lang/1

Recommended citation format: