Managing availabilities: your sidekick on the web

Make sure it doesn't take recruiters too long that you are free for the days they needs you.

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You are a freelance interpreter. How long do you spend managing your time? How long does it take a recruiter to figure out that you might be available for that special assignment where your language combination or your expertise would make all the difference? Probably too long.

Let's take your side of the relationship first. You have been in business long enough to know whom it is worthwhile to send availability information to. Assume that there are six or seven such key recruiters: a couple of consultant interpreters, a couple of big Professional Conference Organisers or groupings, and the regulars in the European Union or United Nations sectors.

Now let's do the drudgery:

- You must keep track of when you last sent an updated card to each of your pet recruiters;
- You must remember how regularly each prefers to get an update;
- You must take heed of the format. In practice this means dusting off one or two of those antique AIIC-labelled calendar cards, because that is the only format that will fit into the consultant interpreters' shoeboxes. But it will have to be e-mail for the big PCO, because they say it is so much more convenient, and would you please do your calendar in state-of-the-art Word 97 with embedded Excel? And fax, of course, is how your calendar is to be sent to the big boys of the agreement sector, probably because they assume that as a non-local you like to pay long-distance;
- You realise that you may want to customise your availability information, including options in some cases only, excluding whole months in others, etc;
- You can now start writing your individual cards, emails, attachments, and faxes. By the time you send them all, you have probably missed dinner.

On the recruiter's end, how is the information processed?

- If they have an IT system and a formal structure in place, their staff will manually enter your dates into a management database. But in many cases their system will be defeated by the heterogeneity of the information that they receive, as many interpreters will fill in their card following their own logic;
- Most of the time, recruiters will not have a computerised recruitment system with built-in time management, and your fax, card or e-mail will hit the paper tray, stacked vertically for future reference;
- In some cases your information may even get lost, or end up in the wastepaper basket.
And what happens when a meeting comes up?

Not much if it is a normal day, a regular client, a standard language regime, and there is a decent lead-time. Human memory works wonders in such situations. But if it is a busy day, a new or difficult client, or a tricky language combination and all ten interpreters have to be in the booth at 9 a.m. tomorrow—or all of the above—the recruiter will wish they did not have to browse through 100 availability cards, leave 50 urgent messages on colleagues' answering machines, and pray that they are free when they eventually call back.

By now you realise that the time and effort you spent on compiling and sending individual availability information in all possible formats was in vain, because the data could not be used when it really would have made all the difference between a contract and no contract.

Should we leave it at that? Or is there a way to make the recruiting side of the profession as a whole both more efficient and more effective?

Solving this conundrum means reconciling some seemingly contradictory objectives: facilitating time management for individual interpreters and improving their chances on the market, and providing recruiters with meaningful and immediately usable information whilst allowing interpreters to retain full control over their diaries and securing confidentiality.

In other words, what we want is a world-wide availability exchange that both interpreters and recruiters can tailor to their own needs to exchange private information.

**System description**

The system we are looking at exchanges interpreter availabilities over the Web, and does only that, albeit centrally and systematically. It is *not* an electronic booking system and could not be. Since most freelance interpreters have multiple clients, they can be booked only after confirming with them personally that they are ready and willing to take a given assignment.

Using any Internet-enabled device (computer, Web-TV, PIM, or any other hand-held gadget) the interpreter logs on to the system. His workspace is a simple calendar, where dates can be left open or marked as "busy" or "have option", for instance.

You're often out of town and are concerned that regular updating will be difficult? You have just accepted an offer, or one of your options has just been cancelled, and you would like to refresh your calendar but you have no computer or Internet connection at hand? Your mobile phone is all you need. You will be able to call the system and update your details using your mobile phone's keypad. The technology is there to do that right now.

For the more sophisticated, we could also imagine a dual offline/online system. Similar to how home banking often works, a personal time management application running on your computer would allow you to edit your availabilities and other settings offline, and when you're through the programme would briefly connect to the Internet to update the online database.

That information is then made available to recruiters, but according to an individual profile defined at least once by each interpreter. Recruiter profiles could include various options such as:

- Who can consult my availability information? (Anyone on the Web, any interpreter participating in the system, all registered recruiters, selected registered recruiters, etc.);
- What can individual recruiters see? (Available dates, available dates and options, available dates if the assignment is in the interpreter's home base, etc.);
- For each recruiter, what time-frame should the calendar cover? (Information as above for the next week, two weeks, month, quarter; no information between dates X and Y, etc.)
Recruiters can be any consultant interpreter, PCO, secretariat, co-operative or international organisation. To access the system for the first time, they must register. They can also set up personal interpreter profiles, filtering in or out interpreters from the recruiter's own workspace, for example, or including or excluding interpreters based on their languages or geographical distribution, etc. If you recruit for the German market, chances are that colleagues in, say, Latin America will be of little interest to you. Then, using a Web interface similar to AIIC Extranet's (see figure 1) with an add-on calendar, they can shortlist interpreters on multiple criteria, including availability on certain dates.

Figure 1: Interpreter Search Interface. Available to AIIC members at http://extranet.aiic.net/database/languages/

To make the system even more efficient, large recruiters using in-house recruitment packages can incrementally download the availability information to which they are entitled to refresh their own databases at regular intervals. How much information recruiters get by interpreter and even whether they get the information in the first place depends on the individual profiles defined by both parties. Confidentiality is tamper-proof. The system itself is hosted and managed by a third-party.

Figure 2: With an add-on calendar to further narrow down the search, interpreters could also be shortlisted on certain dates, depending on their availabilities, as shown above in this recruitment software package.

New technologies and work processes are a desirable option only if they benefit all parties involved,
and are accepted as such. Automating the exchange of interpreter availabilities appears to be a perfect choice in this regard:

- Once managed centrally yet in a customisable format, availability information is turned into a real asset for the interpreter;
- Recruiting interpreters is made more efficient across the board and less costly;
- The profession approaches technological change in the driver's seat.

The road ahead

The suggestion of an AIIC-sponsored, world-wide interpreter availability exchange was first put forward at a joint meeting between AIIC and the chief interpreters of all major international organisations in May 1999. AIIC was encouraged to explore the matter further.

AIIC interpreters are still being consulted on the matter. When the consultation process is over a couple of months down the road, we will carry out a market and feasibility study.

By the way, the proposed system would not necessarily be restricted to AIIC interpreters only, so feedback from any of you out there is most welcome.

Recommended citation format: