

## Chapter 3: The Businessperson

**Jiri Stejskal:** Past president, American Translators Association; founder and CEO, CETRA Language Solutions; Czech translator; Philadelphia



Working as a professional translator, you never know what will come across your desk. You're always working on something different. With each project, you learn something new. Translators enjoy that; they're like sponges, and it can be an exciting field. Sometimes you get to interact with people from different countries and different cultures, which makes the work fun and interesting. Also, it is not a 9-to-5 job. Many aspects of the job inspired in me a fondness for the translating profession.

For more than 20 years, I freelanced my services: translating documents, primarily for international litigation clients, from English into my native language, Czech. I arrived in the United States in 1988 as a political refugee from the former Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic). I was going to school and working as a freelancer, and at that time, I found out about the American Translators Association. I joined the ATA, which helped me to launch my career. Although I enjoyed it enormously, after many years working on my own I started my own language services firm. It took many years of building it into what it is today: a company that contracts with more than 1,000 translators and interpreters around the world, offering services in more than 100 languages. The work served me well during my years transitioning from a Czechoslovak refugee to U.S. citizen, but I translate very little now because I run my company, which keeps me busy.

In the early years, I worked for other language services companies as an independent contractor to supplement my income as a Czech language lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania. At that same time, I worked busily to earn my doctorate in Slavic languages and literatures. The last couple of years, I've been on sabbatical, but I've taught the Czech language there for almost 20 years. As a translator, you spend so much time alone at your desk, but teaching gave me an opportunity to be around other people. The pay is not that great — especially compared to what I could make as a

translator or owning my own company — but I enjoyed it. It was more of a hobby than a job.

Having now worked on the other side of the fence — as a company owner who hires freelance translators and interpreters — I can tell you what businesses and clients expect. Typically, a good translator can complete about 3,000 words per day. Tools exist now that can maximize output. There are essentially two main tools. One is called CAT, or computer-aided translation, which helps recycle any content that has been translated before — a kind of translation memory. If you come across a sentence that you have translated before, it just plugs it in for you. These tools have evolved, so, for example, if you have a similar sentence but a number is different, CAT will plug it in and highlight the number for you. It can really boost your productivity. The second tool is machine translation. The machine translation output can be in the tens or even hundreds of thousands of words per day, but the translation can be very substandard quality. Sophisticated translators and companies use a combination of translation tools and human translation.

As a company, we prefer to work with translators who are already trained, and we do test them. In addition to checking their work history, we require that prospective contractors translate some small sample. One of our trusted contract translators reviews their work and provides feedback so that we can assess the quality of the translator. A good indicator that the professional is serious about the industry is a translator or interpreter who has been certified by an acknowledged and well-respected organization. For example, the ATA's certification test for English to Spanish is so difficult, it has a fail rate of about 95 percent. It's a fairly serious test. That certification gives us an indication and security that the people who pass are competent translators. Also, all members of ATA agree to follow the organization's established ethics code. This is important. Discretion is a core component of this business. And it's not just about confidentiality: as a freelancer, you agree that if you take on the work, you will not subcontract it out to someone else.

This is a great field to enter right now. Translators and interpreters are in demand. My company is having a very good year, and we've been growing in the double digits for 12 consecutive years. Some years we have 80 percent growth; some years we have 10 percent growth. On average, it's about 25 percent. My company works a lot with the federal government on projects. For example, we were one of the few companies that the government hired to translate the Saddam Hussein trials. We would get the DVDs — dozens of them — and we would produce transcripts of them in both Arabic and English. That contract lasted about 18 months. We also translated reports about mass graves in Iraq and things of that nature.

As I have said, most language service providers work for themselves, so it is important to either have natural business acumen or get educated in business. Some freelancers become company owners, as I did, and make this big transition to being a businessperson, which is different entirely. Most translators enjoy the creative side of their work and have no desire to employ other people. Professional translators and interpreters who build their niche make good money and find fulfillment in their work. And that is not too shabby.