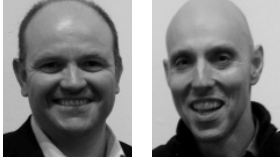


Interpreters: what are you worth(less)?



Building on their successful workshop, **Ben Phillips** and **Darren Townsend-Handscomb** speak to *Newsli* about why interpreters need to think about how they run their business, and talk more openly about fees

In December 2011, Benjamin Phillips and Darren Townsend-Handscomb delivered a short workshop to members of the London & South East Region with the challenging title 'What are you worth(less)' (WAYW). Given changes in interpreting procurement and perceived downward pressure on fees and T&Cs, the aim of the workshop was to bring together interpreters who worked in the area to discuss issues about fees and working with agencies, and generally share thoughts and ideas. Since the first event, Ben and Darren have travelled to a number of regions to deliver this workshop to interpreters (both ASLI and not), and have helped many to think about how they run their business now and into the future.

Newsli editor Rachel Malcolm caught up with them to discuss their thoughts on WAYW.

RM: Can you tell us where the idea of WAYW came from?

BP: Darren and I have been working together for a very long time, not just in interpreting but also in training, coaching and mentoring interpreters. During 2010 we both noticed that things were changing within the interpreting

world. The issues that were being brought to us by interpreters in training or in 1:1 sessions were starting to be more about business issues, terms and conditions and fees. Many capable and confident people were feeling pressurised and unsure of whether they wanted to even continue in interpreting.

We both have worked as employees for agencies, as freelance interpreters and have undertaken consultancy work for agencies in a freelance capacity around professional practice and standards. We felt that we had a good understanding of 'both sides of the fence'. However, we had noticed informally that some agencies were 'testing the waters' to see how people responded to changes in contracts, or simply taking advantage of increasing numbers of registered interpreters in and around London.

For example, one interpreter told us how they had reluctantly agreed to a lower than 'fair' fee for an assignment, on the basis that the agency would have to drop their charges to get the job. Later they found out that the agency had charged the client four times the reduced fee the interpreter had agreed! This



Darren encourages interpreters to really think about themselves as a business

left them feeling worthless, and inspired our workshop title.

DTH: These individual experiences were reflected in the conversations in peer groups, on ASLI forums and in E-Newsli. There were conversations about spoken language agencies, super-contracts (for example, the Ministry of Justice court interpreting contract) and downward pressure on interpreters’ pay and T&Cs. These conversations tended to be

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‘From discussions it became clear that many interpreters have just adopted the fee that agencies have told them is the local rate’

negative about the consequences for Deaf people and interpreters, pessimistic about the future, and increasingly hopeless about our ability to influence things.

At the same time there were often comments, both in person and through e-groups and media, from some Deaf people about their perception that interpreters were ‘raking it in’, which left many interpreters feeling under attack from both sides.

I felt the effect of this, both practically and psychologically/emotionally. Practically I stopped working for a number of agencies that no longer paid what I considered to be a professional fee. Psychologically/emotionally I found myself more risk-averse, taking work as soon as it was offered, regardless of interest or whether it was the best use of my skills, and accepting fewer half-day bookings, worried that I wouldn’t be able to fill the rest of the day. Ben and I met to talk about these issues, and WAYW was born.

BP: Also, throughout my career, I have felt supported and guided by many experienced interpreters. One person who really helped me with thinking about interpreting as a business was Hannah Manesse, who was the first person who talked openly to me about fee structure and how to do back office functions (invoicing, accounts, etc). Plus, of course, it was Hannah who introduced me to ASLI – she gave me an application form at the start of an interpreting job, and made me fill it out and give it back to her at the end of the job with a cheque! So taking WAYW to ASLI seemed the right thing to do.

RM: From the workshops has there been anything that has surprised you?

BP: For me it’s two things. Firstly, it has surprised me how many delegates have not worked out how much it costs to deliver their

service. From discussions it became clear that many interpreters have just adopted the fee that agencies have told them is the local rate. This is regardless of the distance travelled, type of job and other factors. So if a job is a one-hour assignment and is close to me, then a £60 inclusive rate might be fine. On the other hand, if it's going to be three hours return travel, a train ticket costing £15, and I can't do or am unlikely to get another assignment within that day, then £150 or more might be what I need to charge. Obviously this is just an example, but the reality is that viable businesses regularly review the cost of providing services, and many use full cost recovery or similar models.

In the workshops it was clear that this was the first time that many freelance interpreters had thought of themselves in this way, or considered what they needed or were really earning, even though this should be a business basic. And if they don't decide what they need to earn or charge, then they're choosing to let other businesses decide it for them!

Secondly, we ask the delegates to work out how much they have spent on marketing in the past year. The average amount is £40! Usually this cost is business cards. When we discuss websites very few delegates have one (although that has started to change now), and they haven't got on board with business networking (physically or via the internet) either, even though they use social media sites like Facebook privately. I believe that the web gives us a real competitive edge when it comes to potential clients seeking an interpreter. The issue is how we utilise this, get on the radar in a public way and work together as an entire body of interpreters, regardless of membership of professional associations. Technology is changing how we communicate and where people look for services and advertise, and

ultimately is likely to further change how sign language interpreting services are delivered in the future. Getting 'tech savvy' is a necessity which we all must have a basic understanding of NOW!

DTH: Given that we found most interpreters hadn't talked openly with their colleagues about what they charge, what they earn, or about their specific business concerns, I've been surprised in the workshops at how quickly they have opened up to doing just that. I've also enjoyed how surprised they are at what they find out and, once they have started being open about fees etc, they are keen to continue being so.

Ben and I were also stunned to realise that we have delivered WAYW to 147 interpreters across the UK.

RM: In your view, what two things could an interpreter do now that could make the greatest impact on their business?

BP: First, buy a Mac and really understand how to use all the features and built-in software. There are millions of useful apps and other web-based resources out there that can help you with marketing and the organisation of your business. (Note: other computers are available!)

Second, read at least one business or self-development book a month. They are usually fairly short at 100 pages or so, and

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'Technology is changing how we communicate and where people look for services and advertise, and it is likely to further change how sign language interpreting services are delivered'



Ben tells WAYW workshop attendees to make the most of internet resources

cheap at about £6.99 each. A good place to start would be the WH Smith bestseller business list, which lists the top 20 each month. Obviously they are not about interpreting, but they can give you good ideas, and understanding of how businesses work and the challenges that are being experienced and overcome. Oh, can I just add that they can be quite fun to read as well!

DTH: First, book some time to really think about yourself and your service as a business. Put the numbers on a spreadsheet – including charges, income, tax, NI, travel, business admin, pension, sick pay, etc. Come back to it every now and again, so that thinking about these things becomes comfortable and natural.

Then find and make opportunities to talk to colleagues about these things. How do your

business decisions compare (fees, travel, minimum session, terms & conditions, etc)? What can you learn from each other? How do the decisions you make impact on each other?

Second, implementing two important business strategies can reduce the feeling of pressure that often contributes to our poor business decisions, eg accepting work at a lower than sustainable rate:

1) Put money aside until you've built up a three-month buffer in your bank account, then put that money aside and forget about it. If you put aside 10% of your income each month, you'll have the buffer in two and a half years. This will also be the buffer you need from illness, accident and family crisis, as a self-employed person.

2) On top of this, put 10-20% of your income aside as it comes in, and then forget about it. That way, when your tax bill comes in, you won't struggle. Rather than have debt while trying to find your tax money, you'll probably have money left over.

Feeling financially secure really contributes to good decision-making.

RM: Following your workshops, some agencies have felt that you're 'out to get them', that you don't like them. True?

DTH: I neither love nor hate agencies. I understand that they're a business meeting a variety of needs, as am I, the interpreter providing the service.

I'm happy to recommend good quality agencies to people who need them. However, I do have issues with agencies that appear to do a disservice to their customers (honesty, quality and/or cost of provision), or whose business model seems to be based on the professionals providing the service doing so for unsustainable fees.

There is also a tension where downward

pressure on costs means that in some situations there doesn't appear to be enough money available to pay the interpreter a realistic fee, and for the agency to make sufficient margin on top.

In such situations, interpreters and agencies move from being complementary to competing businesses (remember the interpreter who was negotiated down earlier in the conversation?) and other business models need to be explored. This could be seen as being anti-agency. I'd rather see it as business sense.

BP: I have worked with many agencies in my career as an employed and freelance interpreter. Many trusted colleagues run good agencies and I regularly talk with them about how they are getting on. However, as mentioned, the number of agencies that I work for has decreased, as most of my work is direct, from both Deaf people and other organisations that use interpreters.

One of the main pieces of feedback we have from the workshop is that delegates benefit from sharing local knowledge and looking at publicly available resources such as the Anonymous Interpreters blog at www.interpreteranon.wordpress.com. This contains useful information about how agencies' rates vary for different types of bookings.

Having this information helps delegates to be more confident in their negotiations, knowing that they are not over- or

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'One of the main pieces of feedback we have from the workshop is that delegates benefit from sharing local knowledge'

undercharging and, in turn, ensuring that their business is viable in the long term.

RM: You mentioned earlier about reading widely on the subject of business and personal development. Do you have any recommended books or websites to look at as a starting point?

BP: I really enjoyed these three books (don't be put off by the titles!):

S.U.M.O. (Shut Up and Move On) by Paul McGee (Capstone, 2010)

How to be brilliant: Change your ways in 90 days! by Michael Hepell (Pearson Life, 2011)

Funky Business Forever by Kjell Nordström & Jonas Ridderstrale (Prentice Hall, 2007)

And for web resources, take a look at www.pickthebrain.com.

DTH: There's a fantastic series of workbooks on <http://positiveacorn.com/shop/workbooks>, which are available through Amazon for about £11.50 each. They cover positive psychology (positive and negative emotions, strengths, hope and optimism), mindfulness, happiness, motivation (an absolute master class on current thinking about motivation) and identity. They're really accessible, written by key researchers as real workbooks, with articles to download and read, questions to think about, tests of your learning, and lots of suggestions to try out on yourself and willing others.

Working through any of them will be personally and professionally useful.

RM: Any last thoughts?

BP / DTH: We believe the biggest challenge currently facing us, our Deaf and Deafblind consumers and agencies are the AtW changes being implemented, especially with many Deaf people using 30 hours or more interpreting being told to employ an interpreter!

There are several things we can do at the



TRAINING FEEDBACK

‘Many of us operate in the complex and confusing world of freelance interpreting. The LSE Region has been fortunate enough to find two people who can explain to us how it all works. We take our hats off to Ben and Darren and thank them for being so kind as to share their knowledge and experience with the region, hopefully the world will now seem a little less confusing for those who attended.’

Tom Mould, London and South East Region

‘The training was fantastic. I’d never properly considered full cost recovery... I do now. Why? Because I’m worth it!’


Attendee, Midlands and South Coast Region

moment to support them. Tell them that they can complain (even if AtW seems to be saying they can’t). Point them to www.DeafATW.com, which has resources to help them do that in both English and BSL.

Sign the 38 Degrees petition (you’ll find it at <http://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/stop-changes-to-access-to-work>), and ask all of your friends and family to do the same, explaining why it matters. Get it to go viral, and even the DWP will sit up and take notice.

Share, with permission, anonymised customers’ stories on the ASLI AtW Forum.

This helps ASLI, the AtW group, and www.DeafATW.com to understand the issues, the prevalence of issues and how they are affecting interpreters.

And we’re sure we don’t have to say this, but if you have Deaf customers who no longer have sufficient hours to even do their work, offer to support them pro bono to translate the materials they need to access, and to write their letters of complaint. 

Contact Darren and Ben through their training website, www.bedazled.co.uk