

Part I: Love learning languages? Make money at it!

Kiran Patel has been in the business for 22 years. She has 300 translators working for her in 17 languages. She is a graduate in Economics and Statistics. She then went on to do her Masters in French - Magistere, which is commercial French. She talks about what the job of a professional translator/interpreter requires, the scope and the opportunities available. She also shares some words of advice for those looking to make a career for themselves in Translation.

Skills set

So what does it take to be a successful translator? The earlier you start the better, says Patel. It is easier to pick up a new language when you're young. You need to know at least two languages very well to be a translator. It does not have to be a foreign language; there is a lot of work in Indian languages too.

Patel's firm Lingua International deals with translation with Indian languages accounting for nearly half the work. Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi is the only Indian university that has a Masters programme in Translation. Pune University and Hyderabad University also offer Translation as a subject.

When choosing a language, an important point to remember is: the rarer the language, the higher the pay. Any company that deals with countries that have a different language needs a translator. While there are a few companies that have translators on their staff, but prefer to use freelancers on a project-to-project basis.

Most agencies require you to have in-depth knowledge of the language and that means studying it for a minimum of five years before you try your hand at translation. Translators start on a salary of about Rs 800 a day, which can go up to Rs 20,000 a day as you gain experience and skill.

However, it is not only knowledge of the language that agencies look for, cautions Patel. You should be familiar with the economics, commerce and politics of that country (President, Prime Minister, the ruling and opposition party), technical and general awareness also helps. This has become increasingly necessary as the scope of operations of companies needing translators grows.

Apart from studying the language for five years, watching TV channels in that language are a huge help, as is a daily newspaper in that language.

The more knowledge of that country you have the better will be your interpretation. You will better your understanding of their requirements and the different nuances of the language and communication. Another prerequisite is you have to be well organized. You should know how to store data and also how to access it quickly. In this job, time is at a premium.

Your people skills should be top-notch too. You should know how to handle people and become your client's confidante. Patel relates an on-the-job experience, where her client had become very angry in the course of a business negotiation. He said, "I am walking out of this room". She asked him quietly "You want me to say that?" Since he was upset, he said "Yes!" She however did not do that; she just waited for him to cool down. In the meantime she made small talk with the other side. Her client eventually calmed himself and then carried on with the negotiations.

You should think of yourself as the cultural ambassador of your country, says Patel. She recounts another story where a French national had kissed a school principal on both cheeks in front of the school kids. The kids had burst out laughing and embarrassed her. He did not know that in India we do not kiss people we meet the first time and almost never in public.

What was needed at that point was knowledge of the cultural norms of the country whose language you are translating and transmission of the same to the client. For instance, in India we nod sideways for yes. In France [Images] that means No! Remember to warn your client about local ways and traditions.

Ethics

Never breach ethics. For instance, when translating for an importer, his Indian counterparts wanted to know what prices others were quoting. You cannot take it upon yourself to share information without your client's knowledge.

In that situation, not wanting to offend them by refusing to divulge the information, Patel diplomatically replied, "The prices quoted were in dollars and he (the client) knows that, I don't need to translate that information, so he doesn't share that information with me."

Appearance

Nowadays, they want the interpreter to look good. You don't have to be gorgeous, but you should dress smart and be presentable.

Patel deals with English, Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Polish, Japanese, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada and Punjabi translations.

Normally, the translation is done by one person and edited by another. The editor always reads the translation first and then the original.

The job of a professional translator or interpreter is hard work, needing sincerity and a high level of commitment. Remember, if you are good at what you do, it could mean a pay of Rs 20,000 a day and you don't even have to go to the office.