

GUIDELINES FOR USING INTERPRETORS

The Interpreter – tips on how to work with them

Overcoming the language barrier is the key to ensuring all stakeholders contributing and benefiting from meetings and conferences. The interpreter is an integral cog in the wheel of cross cultural communication. Knowing how to hire and work with an interpreter is a must for international humanitarian workers.

Working with an interpreter offers challenges. Interpreters on the whole have a stressful job. Unlike translators they do not have the luxury of breaks and time to think. Interpreters have to perform 'live' and in front of an audience. In order to ensure you get the best out of an interpreter, good communication is necessary.

By way of offering some tips on working with interpreters the following guidelines may be of some use:

1 – Establish and agree ground rules with an interpreter. For example, try and communicate how you want a meeting run, the number of sentences to be translated at a time, the confirmation of jargon or idioms before they are translated, when breaks will be taken and seemingly trivial matters like seating arrangements.

2 – Try and brief an interpreter prior to any face to face meetings. Familiarise them with the whos, whats and whys. If there is any specific terminology to be used ask them if they understand it. If you foresee any tricky issues or tense topics, prepare them for it.

3 – If you plan to give a speech or read from a script, give the interpreter a copy. The more familiar they are with the subject matter, the better a job they will do.

4 – While speaking through an interpreter always engage with your counterpart directly. Even though you cannot understand what is being said, show interest, keep eye contact and remain focused. If you start to converse through an interpreter you lose any chance of building trust, rapport or confidence.

5 – Try and avoid humour. Most interpreters will agree that jokes do not translate well. If you are giving a speech and plan to start it off with a joke, it is advisable to consult the interpreter first to see if they think it will work.

6 – Plan your time carefully. Conversing through an interpreter makes conversations twice as long. For example, if you are making a presentation remember that anything you say will first be translated, so the likelihood is that a one hour presentation will take two. Compensate for this by either cutting down your presentation or speaking in shorter, sharper sentences.

7 – Do not rush. Interpreting is a taxing job and is mentally exhausting. To alleviate the pressure as much as possible, speak slowly and clearly. If you rush the interpreter is more likely to become stressed and the quality of the translation may drop.

8 – Interpersonal communication, by its nature, involves emotion. An interpreter should never translate emotions. If the speaker is annoyed this will be obvious in their body language and tone. Never involve the interpreter at a personal level in any discussions and if you see an interpreter translating your emotions, ask them to stop. The interpreter is there to purely translate what is being said.

9 – Make sure the interpreter is clear that they are never to answer questions on your behalf. Even if the answer is simple, the interpreter should still convey this to you. If an interpreter starts to speak on your behalf, this can have numerous negative consequences such as undermining your position or even losing face.

10 – Ask interpreters not to change or alter what you say even if they think it may cause offence. If you plan to talk about a controversial issue let the interpreter know. Before discussing it with an audience announce that what will be said is not the opinion of the interpreter but your own. This then frees the interpreter of feeling uncomfortable and nervous.

These guidelines should enable you to get the best out of your interpreter and consequently your business meeting, presentation, conference or event.

Interpreters - FAQs

Below are some of the frequently asked questions about interpreters and interpreting services:

Do I need an interpreter?

Firstly, an interpreter and translator are two different people. An interpreter deals with spoken languages whereas a translator only deals with the written word.

An interpreter can be used for a number of reasons and situations. The basic reason an interpreter will be used is because of a language barrier. Interpreters are therefore used for business meetings, conferences, presentations, court hearings, police questioning and many other situations where one or more people can not understand each other due to speaking different languages.

How much does an interpreter cost?

Costs vary and depend upon factors such as language combination, the length of the assignment, the nature of the subject matter, the location and the number of people involved.

Consider an hourly rate for interpreters and then also allow for travel time and travel expenses.

How many interpreters do I need?

This really depends on the nature of the work. Interpreting is mentally exhausting work so an interpreter should never work for more than 45 minutes at a time without a break.

For simultaneous interpreting the guidelines are a lot stricter in that you should hire two interpreters for a whole day, with each interpreter taking turns of 20 to 30 minutes each.

For face to face/consecutive interpreting the requirements differ according to the nature of the assignment.

What kind of interpreter do I need?

There are two kinds of interpreter:

Simultaneous – this is where an interpreter sits in a booth and relays the translation of what is being said through a microphone to listeners. This type of interpreting is used at conferences and large meetings.

Consecutive – this is where an interpreter listens to a segment of speech and translates. This is used at face to face meetings and speeches.

What information do I need to give the interpreter?

Initially they will need the following information:

Date:

Start/ Finish Times:

Place:

Attendees:

Nature of meeting:

However, to get the best out of an interpreter you need to give them as much background information as possible. For example, if the meeting involves some delicate issues they should be informed accordingly so as to prepare for them. If a presentation involves some specific terminology the interpreter must be given a copy of the presentation in order to prepare. In short, if the interpreter goes into a meeting 'blind' they may find it difficult to accommodate your needs.

Some advice for those using interpreters

- Speak slowly, clearly and concisely at all times. The interpreter may, otherwise, have to ask you to repeat parts of what you have said.
- If negotiations become heated, do not forget to pause for the interpreter – the longer you keep going, the more likely it is that there will be omissions.
- Ensure that all the people involved in the meeting are aware of the interpreter's needs before the meeting commences.
- Tell participants to pause after every few sentences, point out that if everyone speaks at the same time, the interpreter will not be able to interpret.
- Send detailed company information to the interpreter in advance and as much information as possible about the content of the meeting they will be interpreting in. Let them know about websites (your own and related websites) so they may do their own background research on your company terminology and topical issues.
- If you are using equipment, ensure it is working in advance and does not have to be tested just before the event. If you are using a tour-guide kit, you will need a fresh microphone battery every day, for optimum performance, and the headsets will need recharging daily.
- Ensure that the interpreter is seated in a place where s/he can hear everything they have to interpret without any disturbing background noise.
- The interpreter also has to be able to see from where s/he is sitting PowerPoint presentations, other large screens, OHPs, etc, that form part of the meeting. If possible speakers' faces should be visible to the interpreter as well (this will help the interpreter to concentrate better).
- Be aware of the fact that your best source of information and advice will often be the interpreter as s/he can point out to you where to place the delegates s/he is interpreting for, and where s/he should be seated to be able to be most effective, as well as other important details.
- Interpreters will need coffee breaks and lunch breaks to recharge their batteries and should not be expected to interpret throughout them. If interpreters are asked to interpret through meal breaks they are unlikely to be able to eat (as they are either listening carefully or interpreting what is said). They need time to rest and eat when no demands are being made on them.
- Travel expenses are paid in addition to the fee. Accommodation (if required) and meals for the interpreters are provided by the client, preferably at the venue itself.