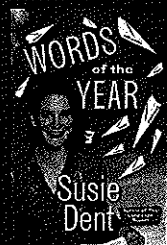


STAR LETTER: PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETING



Lynn wins a copy of *Words of the Year* by Susie Dent, published by OUP Oxford at £8.99

I am very glad that the topic of Public Service Interpreting is being discussed at the ATC and ITI as I feel we must comment on some very dubious practices by companies bidding for and securing tenders.

These involve the police areas mentioned in the Hansard report, but also concern interpreting provision for hospitals in NW England.

It has been brought to my attention that these companies are bidding for interpreting tenders, then writing to qualified freelance interpreters to inform them of their success in winning the tenders and indicating that as proof of their 'commitment' they are imposing reductions in hourly rates of up to 60%! Some agencies are paying as little as £10/hr to freelancers, and to add insult to injury, are refusing to pay travelling time.

The immediate impact is that many professional interpreters are effectively going on strike and refusing to work for these companies. Since the 'strike' results in a shortage of qualified interpreters to meet the tender requirements, the question arises of who IS actually turning up at police and hospital appointments? On several occasions when our own interpreters have been working in

courts or hospitals they have been approached by supposedly 'qualified and vetted' interpreters and asked how to 'get qualified'.

In recent months we have been inundated with phone calls from freelancers begging us to go after every tender because we do actually look after our interpreters, paying proper rates and travelling time and abiding by professional codes of conduct. It's frankly appalling that certain companies can treat these vital resources with such little respect. The only possible outcome is lasting harm, both to the professionalism of the interpreter base and to the customers' perception of our industry.

I believe strongly that, as language professionals, we cannot ignore this situation or allow it to continue. The purchasers of interpreting services don't speak the languages and so cannot judge the quality of the interpreting, while the user of the services can only communicate via the interpreter – who's unlikely to pass on any criticism. This unusual procurement situation makes the purchaser totally reliant on the trustworthiness of the vendor.

It can be only a matter of time before an incident occurs. Just one

major criminal acquittal due to poor interpreting will I'm sure bring the media spotlight onto our industry and tar each one of us with the same brush.

Were such an incident to occur we can all expect press investigations, swingeing new legislation, and a mass of resulting red tape, which many members are ill-placed to survive. There's also the resulting public opprobrium to consider, as well as the knock-on to commercial and private sector interpreting procurement, which we could expect to tighten up considerably. It is in all our interests to make everyone aware – in particular the public services themselves – of these practices and to eradicate them as a matter of urgency.

At the end of the day our profession must decide. Do we wish to be perceived by these public services and the public as opportunistic vendors, eager to rip off an unaware client for as much and as long as possible?

Or would we prefer to be seen as trusted partners to the public services, providing this essential communication reliably, securely, and to the highest standard? I know where my company intends to be.

Lynn Everson MITI, Managing Director
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