

B2B advice for ASL students and newbies

I hope to share some advice and insight to those of you about to embark upon the journey of sign language interpreter as a career path. You may have been taught some this already either through an ITP program or learned from a mentor. If so...kudos to you! You are one step ahead of the pack! If not, then these points should raise lots of questions. Go out and do your due diligence to answer those questions and arrive at your own thoughts. What I present here is merely my opinion based on my experience.

First and foremost, it is *critical* to recognize that you ARE a business. Be sure to approach everything you do in your future career with that in mind. Even if you plan to work for other companies, you will still enter into contracts that will directly affect what you may or may not be able to do in the future (more on that in a bit). Throughout this document (and your career as an interpreter) consider yourself a "business" providing B2B services!

Now that you will soon be completing your NIC certification (or have done so already) AND you consider yourself a business, what next? Well, there are lots of things to think about. One of the first things to consider? Marketing!

Before you complete your ITP and obtaining NIC certification you can be preparing everything you will need to market yourself....*your business*! I recommend becoming a licensed business like an LLC. It gives you an added layer of protection from lawsuits and gives more opportunities for tax savings. (Discuss your options with a CPA). The tradeoff is there are more responsibilities for you along with more paperwork and tax preparation.

Now that you have a business name, obtain all the critical things a business needs: email address, website, established social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, etc), create a flyer template, a fax template, business cards, brochure, and phone/fax numbers. All of this can be done for free or nearly free. Start networking to leverage your social media for your business launch.

"Wait a minute! I should have all of this done BEFORE my certification?" Well...yes! At least most of it. You have spent a ton of money and time getting your education. You WILL pass your NIC exam. It is just a matter of wanting it badly enough! So, why is it important to do this so early on in your career? Why is *this* the 'first' thing I should be focusing on? The short answer is job security and avoiding conflict of interests and/or future breach of contract.

Immediately after graduation and obtaining your NIC certification you will start getting offers to work for a variety of agencies. (Sometimes they offer to employ you 'before' you are certified...be careful!) Your first reaction will be to send out resumes immediately! You are proud of your achievements and rightfully so! You want to see your hard work come to fruition in the form of a good job with a great paycheck!

DONT DO IT!!!! Let me rephrase..... **DO NOT DO IT!** Please, read the rest of this first.

Virtually every interpreting agency will have a non-compete clause in their interpreting agreement. Some can be reasonable, others can seriously overstep the bounds of being

reasonable. The basic premise of a non-compete clause comes from a much older business model when companies would spend thousands and thousands of dollars in direct marketing, mail campaigns, TV and radio ads, and basic meet and greets... To get one....customer...at...a...time. That is expensive! They don't want you to just poach their clients and consumers! However, technology has greatly changed the landscape of advertising and how to reach new clientele. It is far easier and less expensive to find exactly your client and consumer without leaving your own home! These archaic non-compete clauses often stipulate you cannot directly or indirectly market to their clients or consumers. Sometimes it will also stipulate a time period AFTER you stop working for them. This time period could range from a few months (reasonable) to several years (completely unreasonable). If it is many years, you may only have these options: work for another agency and sign yet another contract, or if there are no other agencies...consider moving!

Here is where your early planning and organizing really pays off... As long as it is done BEFORE you sign any agreements! Do your networking and marketing first! Email, social media campaign, letter campaign, fax campaign, even some guerilla marketing. The point is... Reach out to ALL of the obvious clients and consumers that you can where interpreting may be prevalent. Since you created a 'first contact' to every: hospital, doctors office, dentist office, educational place, trade school, college, large warehouse, factory or any other large employer in the area... You can continue your marketing without a conflict of interest or breach in contract because you can document your efforts occurred prior to hire. Now, let me clarify a point. I am NOT suggesting that while you are working for an agency that it is 'OK' to market your own personal services while you are on the job. Ethically that is inappropriate. It is NEVER OK to market your services on a job to undermine the agency who sent you there. However, IF businesses seek out more information about your company on their own... you may certainly respond appropriately because the contact came through more organically because of your previous marketing. It is my belief that agencies *should* be able to build bridges in working together for the benefit of the Deaf community.

Now let's move on. Imagine if you will, a magic box. Every week this magic box printed out hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars. What would you do with it? Would you protect it? Care for it? Nurture it? Insure it? Well, that magic box is YOU! You should do all of those things! Most importantly is the insurance, and there are several kinds to consider. I do not suggest putting it off until later because of the expense. You are a business and this is a cost of running a business to make sure it is running as smoothly as possible. First, get health insurance. You need to be proactive in keeping yourself healthy to keep long term costs down. Second, get professional insurance to protect you from things like lawsuits from errors and omissions. Thirdly, get life insurance! Presumably, you just finished an ITP or soon will graduate and are new to the business, therefore likely young. Get life insurance now while it is inexpensive for your age and health. You never know what life has in store for you, make it easier for your family. Lastly, get a good disability policy. It is amazing how many people who pursue interpreting as a career are then stricken with carpal tunnel syndrome or some other debilitation where they can no longer perform their job. Protect your educational investment!

Hold the bar of ethical excellence very high. Do not take every job that comes your way because you 'need the money' or 'need the experience'. You will eventually be offered work from agencies that you may not yet be qualified for. Sometimes it can feel as if they are pushing the job upon you. Not all agencies are created equal... Be aware of that! Some may routinely put their clients (paying customers) before their consumers (the Deaf community we serve). The tenet with the highest priority in the code of professional conduct is 'Do no harm'. Think of that while you are determining if you should accept a job or not. When self assessing to see if you are good fit for the job, err on the side of the consumer. Ask yourself if you were the consumer in this scenario, would you want 'you' to interpret? If the answer is no...turn it down. You will garner more respect by giving thoughtful choice to the assignments you accept.

You are now establishing yourself in 'private practice'. I prefer that term over 'freelance'... I believe it elevates the profession. It also eliminates the word 'free'. You will be surprised to find how many businesses that you will encounter who believe you do this work out of the kindness of your heart. Of course we like to feel good about our work, but we all must work hard in educating the clients that we are paid professionals, with a certain mastery in our field, not volunteers. Whenever possible, we must also take time to educate businesses about the possible dangers of using volunteers, family, 'signers', or those not registered with the state of Pennsylvania.

Every interpreter will run into some bumps in the road when working with clients and agencies. Keep in mind that not everything is worth fighting or complaining over when things go wrong. Life happens! If you want mutual respect you must learn to be flexible and pick your complaints carefully and present them in a firm but professional way.

Always keep your eyes on your cash flow! Since you ARE a business, you must be sure that your bills are being paid in a timely manner. Be sure you know with absolute clarity how often and when an agency or client intends to pay you. Every 2 weeks? Twice a month? Once a month? (I do not recommend once a month. Too much time has to pass before you realize that the place you are working for has a cash flow problem of their own and you may not get paid for your month or more of labor). If a payment is late, it is absolutely fine to inquire about it to ascertain what the delay is. Once you get an answer, it is up to you as a business owner to decide what to do! Do you keep working and hope you get paid? Do you suspend all work with them until payments are caught up? Do you reduce your work with them and increase your work with another source? There are many options, but the bottom line is you must make a decision and have a backup plan for when things get difficult. Be consistent with your policy and how you enforce it. Keep in mind that your policy must be logical and fair and your discussions held with the utmost of diplomacy. In this way you can minimize your cash flow exposure due to nonpayment.

Another critical thing to watch are your 'numbers'. This will help you evaluate how much your time is worth. You do not need a fancy program like QuickBooks when you are just starting out. However, that is something you should consider learning as you grow your business since it is more or less the accounting standard for small business. I have a simple excel spreadsheet that gives me a thumbnail view of monthly totals.

April 2010	Date	# Jobs	Total Hours	Total Pay	miles	Avg/Hr
Monday	1	1	7	282.29	66	\$40.33
Tuesday	2	3	6	361.63	148	\$60.27
Wednesday	3	2	4	201.55	93	\$50.39
Thursday	4	2	4	247.08	78	\$61.77
Friday	5	1	7.5	340.8	70	\$45.44
Saturday	6	1	6.5	312.27	81	\$48.04
Sunday	7	0	0	0	0	#DIV/0!
Monday	8	1	2	84.09	9	\$42.05
Tuesday	9	3	6	274.51	77	\$45.75
Wednesday	10	3	6	327.43	91	\$54.57
Thursday	11	2	9.5	402.63	75	\$42.38
Friday	12	2	4	417.94	354	\$104.49
Saturday	13	0	0	0	0	#DIV/0!
Sunday	14	0	0	0	0	#DIV/0!
Monday	15	3	6	240.87	21	\$40.15
Tuesday	16	4	8	451.13	216	\$56.39
Wednesday	17	4	11	614.23	342	\$55.84
Thursday	18	3	9.5	439.53	158	\$46.27
Friday	19	1	8.5	358.3	70	\$42.15
Saturday	20	2	9	479.62	171	\$53.29
Sunday	21	0	0	0	0	#DIV/0!
Monday	22	2	4	166.44	22	\$41.61
Tuesday	23	3	6.5	337.11	167	\$51.86
Wednesday	24	1	2	84.09	9	\$42.05
Thursday	25	1	2	162.99	69	\$81.50
Friday	26	2	4	177.29	66	\$44.32
Saturday	27	0	0	0	0	#DIV/0!
Sunday	28	1	6	305.46	84	\$50.91
Monday	29	1	2	84.09	9	\$42.05
Tuesday	30	2	4	179.43	45	\$44.86
GRAND TOTAL		51	145	7332.8	2591	
			AVG/HR	\$50.57		

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In this way I can easily see what my cumulative hourly average is and my monthly mileage.

Most importantly, it will help me identify patterns. For example, when I identify a month that may be consistently slow I could: market myself more to pick up more work during that time, save up money to cover my expenses during the slow period, or use that time to take a vacation. When you identify patterns like which days and months are busiest, how many jobs a month you average, how much mileage you book per month... You can make better decisions on reaching personal goals for long term growth.

Now that you have systems in place to get paid on time and you understand what your numbers are telling you ... Do your part! Think about all the steps an agency needs to go through in order to give you assignments and to pay you on time. You need to be efficient so they can do exactly that.

Let's look at something as mundane as submitting an invoice when work is completed. Do you use their invoice? Or do you use your own creation? Do you submit your work daily? Weekly? Biweekly? Monthly? Do you send it electronically? By fax? Snail mail? If it is e-mail, do you code your subject line so it is easily searchable? Do you keep your records electronically? Which do you keep only on your home computer? Which do you make accessible on any device? Do you keep hard copies?

Think about it. These are questions just about one single document! It is important to look at this through the perspective of the agency. What would they prefer? Could you accommodate their preferences? Why or why not? What would make it easier for them to process your invoice? What would increase their accuracy in calculations? In other words, what can YOU do to help them free up their time and improve their efficiency?

Keep in mind that agencies could have anywhere from 10 to 100 interpreters subcontracting for them! What if everyone waited until the last possible day to submit all their work? Do you think the person in the agency processing it all would appreciate that? Do you think payroll will be accurate? If you are not sure what works best for them...ask! Also, ask them what are the things regarding interpreter invoices that they find annoying...then avoid doing those things!

Here are the choices I personally make to give you an example. I try to submit my completed paperwork every night, or at the very least within 24 hours of completion of the assignment. I do this because the job details are fresh in my mind and there is no carry over of work from one pay period to the next. This process makes for cleaner accounting. I utilize 'their' forms so they can have uniformity in their office. Although I could submit my own, I do not do so. I believe it slows down their processing because the layout of information is different than what they are used to seeing. I scan and e-mail my invoices AND keep a hard copy on file. Hard copies are married up to the paychecks when they arrive to verify accuracy. I use a program like Carbonite to back up my entire computer system. In this way I have redundancies in place so that I do not lose any information should my system go down. When I submit my emailed invoice I put the job number in the subject line. This way it is easily searchable from any computer, tablet or mobile device should there be a question about it.

Another key thing to do is...read! I do not mean read about sign language or interpreting. You should be doing that anyway to continue developing your personal growth. What I mean is keep current on what is happening all around you! That means reading things that may not be of personal interest but could be helpful to know in future work. Keep current on world, state and local news. Follow what is happening in the entertainment world and pop culture. Familiarize yourself with trends in business and finance. Most importantly, follow closely what is happening in the tech sector. For it is here that a disruption to our profession can and will occur. Adaptation in the tech field moves swiftly and can impact how you intend to grow as a professional.

Read books that are thought provoking, books on leadership, books on leaders and what makes them great, and books on self improvement and inspiration. Then give yourself goals and deadlines to accomplish this reading until it becomes a habit. To begin this ritual of enriching your mind is not an easy task to master but the rewards are great! You will find

that after reading only a few of these types of books, that there are numerous places to apply this newfound knowledge within your role as an interpreter and also within your personal life.

Some of you may say "Gee... I just don't have the time to read". OK. You are a busy person. However, do you think you could cut out at least one hour of TV each day? That is 30 hours a month...more than enough time to read a book! Hmm...no? You don't have an hour a day of TV time to give up? OK. Then go to the library and rent audio books! Download podcasts to your smartphone...then utilize your drive time to accomplish those goals! No reading required! We all have the same 24 hours in a day...what will you choose to do with yours?

Lastly, ask lots of questions. There is no such thing as a dumb question. Then ask those same questions of lots of different people. No one person has all the answers. In fact, getting a variety of viewpoints on your question will be good for you to be able to assess and deal with dilemmas that come up in the future.

You will most certainly have professional dilemmas and ethical quandaries in your career. It is OK to talk about those things with your professional peers, but keep the discussion about the work. No discussion of names or places. Doctors and Lawyers talk about their difficult cases, interpreting is no different. You do not have to feel as if you are alone in your struggle to become a better professional.

Tap into the wisdom and experience that is all around you. You will find there are many different ways to approach the dilemma you are currently experiencing. The interpreting career path is usually not black and white but instead many shades of grey. Where a common answer for a problem will be "It depends....."

I hope that my ideas and opinions I have shared here have been thought provoking in a way that enables you to maintain a high standard of excellence in this field.

"EQUALITY IN COMMUNICATION"

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