



*A Sign Language Interpreting Resource, Inc.*

The Business of Interpreting: Then and Now

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Published in the RID Views

July 2002

As the interpreting profession has evolved from that of **helper**, to **conduit**, to **cultural mediator**, so has the business of interpreting moved through a number of stages to its present state. As a business model changes, so do the expectations. The purpose of this article is to look at where we have been and where we may be going in the future.

The early days, interpreting was not considered a professional role, but that of **volunteer**. In this role, interpreters were called upon by family, friends and others to help with communication, often without compensation, at least not in monetary terms. While the old adage “you get what you pay for” comes to mind, these services were provided with the best of intentions and in the spirit of community support.

As the profession of sign language interpretation began to be recognized, and performance standards developed, some interpreters were paid for their work. While this was an improvement over strictly volunteer service, most of us held secondary or “real” jobs and **interpreted on the side**.

Federal recognition of the rights of Deaf, Deaf Blind and hard of hearing people through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and later the Americans with Disabilities Act changed the field of interpreting immensely. Interpreters now found themselves in a variety of settings, from schools to hospitals to courtrooms, and believe it or not, could earn a living at it! Not necessarily a lucrative living, but a living. Not only were interpreters now working full time in the field, they found themselves handling a small business, dealing with billing, scheduling and **self-employment** taxes. Often this meant feast or famine; working without a safety net and hoping for the best.

With **full-time employment in interpreting**, our own expectations and those held by others changed. With standards come accountability; credentials have become important to those who pay for our services as well as for our own professional growth. As Deaf, Deaf Blind and hard of hearing professionals gain access to steps higher on their career ladder, the expectation is that interpreters are prepared to go along with. We now work together in teams more than ever before, and what it means to work in a cooperative environment is becoming more apparent.

And as the task of interpreting itself has become more complex, **interpreting as a business** has as well. Agencies, for-profit and non-profit, Deaf owned, interpreter owned or those referring spoken languages with a small sign language element have come into the fore. These businesses offer a wide range of service to customers and to interpreters who work for them. Now things like paid time off, regular paychecks, and insurance are not out of the question for working interpreters. At the same time, for interpreters moving from self employment to entrepreneur, a new skill set is required. Business development, marketing, financial planning, contract negotiating and personnel management skills have been added to our already full mental hooks. Instead of being seen as friends, family and community members, there is the danger of being seen as the “smell-money” interpreters.

Those of us who came into the field in its infancy did so for love of language and community. Still, as we become more sophisticated in the business of interpreting these are the values that make it all worthwhile. These values will be what guide us into the next professional phase. With new technologies on the horizon, our scope of work is expanding while our geographic circles narrow. How will video interpreting effect the business of interpreting, and interpreters themselves? How can we shape the world we work in, to maintain ties to the language and people who drew us to the field? These are the next challenges that we face, and I look forward to continuing a dialogue on what comes next!