

# Work in progress

**Kathrin Harrison** is a 27-year-old German conference interpreter and translator at the start of her freelance career. She asks our three experts, what next?



Kathrin Harrison is based in Bristol and is looking to kickstart her freelance career

**I**n 2003, I completed a five-year MA course in conference interpreting at the School of Applied Linguistics and Cultural Studies in Germersheim, Germany. I achieved a "Diplom" (MA equivalent) of 1.6 and am now a fully qualified conference interpreter for English-German-English and French-German. In addition to my interpreting qualifications, I have a degree in Finnish into German translation (I started to learn Finnish during my high school year in Finland in 1995/96 and have since been able to develop that skill).

I undertook the third year of those five at the University of the West of England in Bristol, where I gained a BA (Hons) (1st) in Modern Languages and European Studies.

I came back to England after finishing my degree in Germany, eager to get going and do lots of work. But however much I wanted to do interpreting/translating straight away, I found it very difficult to make a start as a freelancer at the time. The fact that there are hardly any permanent posts for interpreters did not exactly help and was rather an eye-opener after all those "cushy" years at university. My disappointment was even more poignant as I had been recommended for a high-profile interpreting job for the German government by one of my former lecturers, the late Dr Hönig, which of course fell through when I decided to go to England instead.

I then started a vaguely language-related customer service job in a European-wide company (Business Travel International, BTI)

and although I have learnt a lot of new things, such as improving my IT skills, dealing with clients, insight into the travel industry, I feel that I have been wasting my interpreting talents. I began doing this job on a part-time basis earlier this year and I am just about to leave BTI for good (July) in order to take the plunge into the freelance market.

I am really excited about this because now that I have worked in a totally different area, I am even more keen to do interpreting and translation work. With all my qualifications and general enthusiasm for interpreting and translation, I feel well equipped and confident to take on work.

I have thoroughly enjoyed all the interpreting jobs I have done so far which were mainly for different German trade unions. It is hard work and you feel absolutely exhausted after a long day of interpreting, but it is truly rewarding, especially when conference or seminar participants come up to you afterwards saying "Well done" or just "Thank you for interpreting for us".

I also enjoy the variety of text types and topics you come across when freelance translating. I love finding the perfect way of expressing source-language concepts in the target language.

One of my better career moves has been joining ITI and some of its e-groups. This helps me feel more in touch with colleagues and has taught me that I am not the only one taking a while to be fully established.

The other thing I have been doing is to offer my services to a lot

of different agencies. This has been both encouraging and frustrating. On the one hand, most agencies have shown great interest in my CV and put me on file, but on the other hand, this is usually the last thing I hear from them, ie none of these applications have produced tangible job offers!

Here are the questions I would like to ask more experienced members of the profession:

■ Should I consider taking a DPSI in addition to my MA in order to be eligible for public service interpreting?

■ I don't think it would be wise to learn another language (even though I would love to), but how can I specialise in terms of subject areas? (My specialist subject at university was economics and due to past work experience, I am very familiar with trade unions and European Works Councils, for instance.)

■ Should I relocate (I am currently based in Bristol, which is not exactly the hub of international conferences), so would a move to London or even Brussels do the trick?

■ Should I try and upgrade to be a MITI in order for me to be visible to clients on ITI's Directory of Members?

■ Are there any other pieces of advice people would like to give me?

## Expert panel

**Kirsty Heimerl-Moggan, Kirsty, MA, MITI, MCIL, RPSI, is a lecturer in Conference Interpreting at the University of Salford**

'In answer to your first question, doing a DPSI course would be a good idea, as it will give you 'another string to your bow', so to speak.

I do both types of interpreting – Conference and Public Service Interpreting – and find they complement each other and give me a wider spectrum of experience and knowledge. My public service experience has come in very handy when

covering legal topics at conferences.

'Regarding the London issues, I would say that there is probably more work in London because it is a huge cosmopolitan city; however, there are also a huge number of interpreters for German based there and you require more income to live in London. Being based in the North-West of England – as I am – where there are fewer conference interpreters also means that you are called for most work in that region and your cost of living is far lower. So London is not the perfect solution to lack of jobs.

I would say that you have to give it all time. Setting up as a freelancer does not happen overnight – it takes a good few years to establish yourself and even then you have to cater for the quiet times, which can never be predicted.

'Becoming MITI will definitely help you as any membership of a professional body does.

'CPD (Continuing Professional Development) is something I am sure you already do, but it cannot be emphasised enough, especially as you not only deepen your knowledge but meet other colleagues etc – a lot of work we get in interpreting is by colleagues suggesting us as someone they would like to work with!

I hope this information is of use to you and I wish you the best of luck with your future career!

## Hugh Keith

**Hugh is a freelance translator and conference interpreter**

I sympathise very much with Kathrin's predicament – there are virtually no permanent jobs as an interpreter in the UK and it is quite difficult to break into the established freelance market.

'She shouldn't relocate to London just to chase interpreting jobs – there are also more interpreters chasing them! In Bristol she can carve out a niche as a translator, and for interpreting she is well placed to serve the Southwest and the Midlands, as well as London.

'She should make it clear when

contacting interpreting agencies that she is flexible about travelling to jobs outside her area.

'Finnish-German translation is also well worth pursuing. The fact that she is living in Bristol should not prevent her from working for translation clients in Finland or Germany. There are plenty of translators in the UK who work partly – or wholly – for foreign markets.

'She may have to go to both countries to do some initial marketing, but once she has clients over there she can easily work per email from Bristol.

I recommend that she should network intensively – join the local ITI group and contact other German interpreters. Personal contact and recommendation seems to be the best marketing tool for freelance interpreters over here.

'She should also get on the books of the major agencies for interpreting services – including

## 'Contacting other translators is a good idea – successful freelancers often suffer capacity bottlenecks and are glad to hand work on'

Braehler UK. Unlike in Germany, the majority of interpreting jobs in the UK come via agencies.

'Translation is rather different – as a German native-speaker she should be able to establish herself (without the need to move to London) by contacting local companies and industries. The response she has had from agencies is typical – they have so many people on their books that she should not hold out any great hopes of getting much work from them. Anyhow, she can earn a lot more from direct clients.

'Again, contacting other translators is a good idea – successful freelancers often suffer capacity bottlenecks and are glad to hand work on to someone else.

'As far as her specific questions are concerned – yes, adding DPSI to her qualifications is definitely worth doing; yes, upgrade to MITI – being on the ITI list with her specialisms could well bring in some work (but don't expect miracles).

'Lastly, no DON'T relocate to London – there are more interpreting jobs there, but also more interpreters chasing them!

## Heather Al-Jawad

**I'm a freelance conference interpreter in the German-English booth**

'I'm afraid your letter is one that could have been written many, many times over the years, since most freelance interpreters find as you did that *'aller Anfang ist schwer'*.

'A DPSI might indeed be useful, but German is not the most frequently needed language in public sector interpreting.

'Specialising in subject areas is not as relevant for interpreters as it is for translators, more a case of deciding which subject(s) you definitely want to avoid! I'm afraid most of us freelancers would claim to be very familiar with European Works Councils. Any speciality should be chosen with an eye on a potential niche client – or two. Keep a lookout for new companies or clients you can approach.

'Relocation depends on personal circumstances. I was fortunate enough

to have established a good client base in the home counties, before my husband moved us north 20 years ago. Most colleagues in London, let alone those of us north of Watford, find it useful to have more than one string to our bow, or clients outside Britain, to earn a living wage!

'For many years one of the London agencies used to tell the summer arrival of eager graduates from British universities to keep travelling, as Brussels was the best place to start with a chance of getting established quickly. On the other hand a former colleague in the French booth was based near Bristol, and used to do at least a week's translating in Strasbourg most months.

'Being upgraded to MITI might indeed make you more visible, but I always think you want something which sets you apart from other colleagues in the same booth. If you were able to interpret from Finnish to German, that would be a very big attraction for companies in those markets, and presumably an unusual combination for Brussels.

'It'll take time, but stay with it and good luck.'