



Translating pro-bono

A win-win situation

The term 'pro bono' comes from the Latin phrase 'pro bono publico', for the public good. It is a practice fairly common, particularly in the legal profession, where services are offered for no financial remuneration, to the public or to particular individuals or associations. The service provider may be doing this purely out of goodwill, or for a variety of other reasons - to receive payment in kind, for professional experience or recognition, or as part of a subsidised but voluntary service, as for example by solicitors working in partnership with Citizens' Advice Bureaux.

As linguists, most of us have done this as a matter of routine. In the UK, the ability to speak, write, read or translate a foreign language is sufficiently rare to ensure that those who have such talents are frequently called upon by family and friends to make themselves useful. It might involve helping with holiday bookings, or property purchases abroad, finding foreign placements for students, or simply helping children with homework.

There are two main reasons, as professional translators or interpreters, for providing our services at a professional level, free of charge.

First of all of course, there is the feel-good factor. We are fortunate to live in a relatively stable, peaceful society, where we have access to education, material goods, and a reasonable standard of living. So to be able to give something back, perhaps to agencies or charities trying to assist people in less advantaged societies, gives us a sense of rightness, justice, the natural human desire to help those in distress.

From a practical point of view, in addition, working in this way can also be beneficial to us in our professional development, in a number of aspects.

As professional translators and interpreters, we know it is important to work on our skills constantly, keeping them sharp, up to date, and improving constantly. Particularly at the start of our careers, however, this is not always easy. We are in a 'bootstrap' situation, needing experience to move on, but unable to gain experience because we have little or no work. Offering services on a voluntary basis to individuals or organisations who cannot afford to pay for them is of mutual benefit.

Translating pro bono therefore has the following benefits for the practitioner.

Firstly, he or she can gain experience of working for a reputable organisation, under conditions similar to those for a commercial user, working to deadlines, researching terminology and delivering a well-finished, usable product to the customer's specifications.

Secondly, even experienced translators and interpreters can use pro bono work for personal and professional development, perhaps by working in new or unusual fields, or with a different kind of client or text, in order to branch out into new specialisms, or develop new skills.

What is more, they can do this in a sympathetic environment, for users ready to forgive minor errors and be understanding if the service provider asks for more help than would normally be acceptable from a commercial customer. If the work is being done out of goodwill and generosity, for no payment, the end user is more likely to accept a finished product requiring a little more care in use than that from a paid service provider.

However, despite this it is vital to work for pro bono clients in exactly the same way as for paying customers. The translator or interpreter must be professional, efficient and thorough in the service he or she provides. The specialist subject areas and of course the languages must be those in which the translator or interpreter normally works. If the intention is to develop new areas of expertise, this must be made clear to the customer, so that allowances can be made and precautions taken where necessary. It is also very important to keep records of work done in the same way as for paying customers, noting the customer, the dates, the hours or number of words completed and with reference numbers.

Working in this professional way means that the experience can be used in a number of ways in the future. First of all, keeping a personal record of this work enables the translator or interpreter to observe their own professional development. The clients, even though they do not have to pay for the work, should be asked beforehand if they are willing to provide professional references to commercial customers in future. This is one of the most valuable results of doing pro bono work. If a pro bono customer, a reputable agency or charity for example, provides reference of the translator or interpreter's professionalism, expertise and satisfaction, even though no money is involved, it is a priceless recommendation for future, paying customers.

For professional organisations, such as the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI - www.iti.org.uk), records of pro bono work, if kept properly, can be treated as evidence of commitment to the profession, experience and continuing professional development (CPD) when considering applications for membership. The award of Chartered Linguist status, promoted by the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CioL -) and ITI, also requires evidence of CPD, for which pro bono work, duly documented, can be counted.

In my own experience, I have worked pro bono throughout my career, for a number of clients, from private individuals to large, international charities. Apart from the experience and variety of the work, a welcome leavening of the daily fare, I have received some very pleasant rewards, not least friendship and professional relationships that have enhanced my sense of wellbeing in my working life. I have received gifts ranging from flowers, plants and wine, to chocolate and a large piece of Parmesan cheese. I can feel satisfaction in my involvement in a number of projects that have improved the life situation of people in the most distressing circumstances, or that have an impact on the political or social situation in my own country or elsewhere. Most importantly, I know that I have enabled communication among people who would otherwise have remained isolated and unable to tell others their message, I have helped to build bridges of mutual understanding among people through my gifts and my willingness to assist in a small way with a big project.

Finding pro bono work is not difficult. A good CV helps, demonstrating your knowledge and abilities in language, experience, your particular interests and educational background, as with any other job. Once you have expressed your willingness to work pro bono, you may not need to look for work, it will come to you. Most of the major aid organisations and NGOs have databases of translators and interpreters to call on when required.

Local groups, such as twin town organisations, may be glad of the services of linguists in organising events, visits, mutual exchanges.

Sports clubs, uniformed organisations and other young people's groups might be glad of linguistically-accomplished adults to help with foreign trips, and the interpreter might even get his or her fare paid. A number of suggestions for contacts are given at the end of this document.

Your own interests, such as a hobby or leisure activity, like sport or music, might lead you into opportunities of translating or interpreting in a field in which you are very knowledgeable already, and could even lead to paid work. Such activities are rich fields for networking.

There are some pitfalls, despite the attractions of this activity, but they are relatively simple to overcome. Some organisations, particularly charitable bodies, may seem to spend relatively little of their income on the claimed end purpose. These are often charities which use a lot of celebrity promotion to draw attention to the good cause. They may well do a great deal of good, but some people might find it less attractive to provide their services free to such organisations, which for example spend a lot of their money on corporate-type entertainment.

It is easy to check on this, via the Central Register of the Charities Commission (<http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/registeredcharities/first.asp>), which provides information on charity accounts for a nominal charge. It is also worth using personal contacts to establish the credentials of anyone asking for pro bono services, which is why it may be better to work for an organisation of which you have personal knowledge.

'Pro bono omnium', for the good of all - translating and interpreting in this way can offer significant benefits to both parties, for the user it gives access to professional services they could not otherwise afford, while for the service provider it gives wider opportunities, good experience and the opportunity for career development, the feel-good factor and sometimes, the unexpected - some pleasant company, a nice gift, or the chance to visit new places. And every now and again, a new, paying customer.

So for both sides, it is a win-win situation.

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Contacts for pro bono translation and interpreting

Translators without Borders: <http://www.tsf-twb.org/index-en.shtml>

ProZ: <http://www.proz.com/translation-articles/articles/78/1/Sources-of-Pro-Bono-Translation-Work>

Scottish Refugee Council (have been recruiting recently): <http://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/support/Volunteer>

Volunteering in Spain: <http://www.accem.es/programas/voluntariado.htm>

ICVolunteers: <http://www.icvolunteers.org/vol>

London2012, volunteer programme launches in 2010: <http://www.london2012.com/volunteering>