

**BEING A SUCCESSFUL INTERPRETER. ADDING VALUE AND
DELIVERY EXCELLENCE BY JONATHAN DOWNIE. OXFORD
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When ordering this book for the University library, I wrongly assumed that it would prove useful for trainees. I should have read the blurb which makes it clear that its target audience is professional interpreters, showing ways “in which they can adjust their business and professional practices for the changing market.” Not a bad thing in itself and definitely something worth telling future interpreters about in the classroom. But in spite of this admirable aim, I found the key concept of ‘added value’ that runs through the book difficult to fathom. Unfortunately, however enticing and laudable “add[ing] value to our clients and add[ing] value to our profession. [...] leading us to better relationships with our clients, better pay and more helpful conditions” (pp. viii-ix) may seem, the book falls short of the mark and fails to deliver.

Encapsulated in rather self-evident axioms such as “To be a professional interpreter *means being an interpreter*. [...] To be a professional interpret also *means being a professional* [...] To be a freelance professional interpreter means *being a business*” (pp. ix-x, italics in the original), the focus is squarely set on the business side of the profession, something undoubtedly lacking in the field, as the author quite rightly indicates. But it nevertheless remains difficult to grasp what exactly is meant by ‘adding value and excellence’ above and beyond the concepts of quality, and interpreting as a user/client-oriented activity on which a wealth of published research is already available. And while some of the contributions made by guest specialists

do prove enlightening at times, the questions posed and the overly-succinct interview format do not provide scope for any real, in-depth discussion.

The overall flavour is reminiscent of self-help books and pep talks, perhaps due to the author's background as a preacher (see his blog), especially the quirky aphorisms that comprise the *Key chapter concepts* sections, such as: "We are the lever that makes the world go round" (p. 43); "Break down the walls. Make a difference" (p. 72); "We need to start where we are" (p. 80); and "Look after your kit and it will look after you" (p. 80). Personal anecdotes also abound, including a visit to the physiotherapist about his knees (p. 74) and interpreting while traipsing through mud (p. 82), bolstering what one reviewer describes as a "breezy and at times laugh-out-loud funny wring style" (back cover) which tends to smack gratingly of dumbing down interpreting, with the light-hearted, jocular approach verging on the facetious, e.g. "All the note-taking classes in the world won't help you if your memory is like a broken sieve and your problem-solving skills stop at opening chocolate bar wrappers." (p. 75)

The author's brief, thirteen-page introduction is followed by ten, equally all-too-brief chapters dealing with a medley of loosely-related subjects supposedly held together by the thread of 'added value'. The professional slant of the book is reflected in the disproportionate ratio of practitioners to academic interviewees, all of whom are presented in the most glowing terms, although there is room to doubt that "all but one of [the chapters, i.e. Chapter 10] being based on solid research by established experts" (p. x).

Each chapter closes with a series of would-be practical *Questions to ask* and *Actions to take*. The former evoke the 'please discuss' type of high school exam papers, with sweeping questions such as: "Do you agree that interpreting needs a rebrand?" (p. 43), and conundrums: "If researchers could discover one thing about interpreting, what do you think it should be" (p. 72) or "What does your ideal client look like? (p.

98), the answer to which, in my experience, would be one who pays well and on time, secures presentations beforehand and ensures that everything works properly on the day. Actions, on the other hand, include individual tasks such as “starting a cartoon about the funny side of interpreting” (p. 89), with most collective activities revolving around setting up local groups to discuss various aspects of the profession and the market, not to mention keeping fit together...

The title of Chapter 1 *From neutral conduits to committed partners* adopts a clear-cut stance on the old chestnut of invisibility and impartiality which the interpreter is later described as “hiding behind” (p. 26), positioning itself in favour of breaking away from what is repeatedly described as the interpreter’s “traditional” role in order to become “partners”, “rather than mere ‘language service providers’” (p. 2) or “dictionaries on legs” (p. 3). But while such ‘partnering’ (as and when feasible) may well be one possible means of adding value, it is by no means new. Indeed, what is referred to a “clear conflict” (p. 3) on the part of the clients who require impartiality and a certain level of cultural intermediation is a false dichotomy, long ago eschewed in the literature: how interpreters interact with the people they are interpreting and their clients depends upon a complex interplay of specific conditions, ranging from the technique used (face-to-face liaison and consecutive providing greater leeway for direct interaction than simultaneous and remote interpreting), to the setting and topic, for instance, when interpreting for victims of violence against women (see, for example, Toledano Buendía et al., 2015) and/or migrants (mentioned in passing on p. 6), as opposed to formal speeches, technical presentations, television interpreting (also mentioned in passing), etc., a sentiment echoed in the closing interview. This and the broader question of ethics raised in this chapter have been widely dealt with at much more complex levels in the available literature which is overlooked in this practically black and white presentation of the situation described in terms of breaking away from view that: “Almost since interpreting was born, it has been thought that neutrality was the most ethical way to work” (p. 5). Apparently “There

is no one in the world better qualified to be interviewed on this topic” (p. xi) than Penny Karanasiou, the owner of no fewer than 15 (!) translation agencies (p. 10) whose PhD on the subject and experience in the field qualify her as a “leading expert in business-negotiation interpreting” (p. xi). The substance of the interview dealing specifically with the area of business interpreting is interesting in itself, but offers nothing particularly new, tending to reiterate much of what had previously been said by the author.

Given the similarity of the topic, the following two chapters could be dealt with together. Chapter 2 discusses formal interpreter training, focusing almost exclusively on Master’s Degrees, “examin[ing] what it really takes to go from a gawking interpreting newbie to established professional” (p. xi). The potted description of the evolution and the current situation of interpreting is characteristically over-simplistic, sweepingly generalising the author’s own personal experience of “traditional” training specifically for international organisations (p. 16 and p. 25), as opposed to the apparently imperious need for a more up-to-date, practical training, while grudgingly acknowledging certain advances over ‘recent’ years. I cannot vouch for other institutions, but undergraduate interpreter training at the University of Vigo has had a strong focus on practical training since it first began over 20 years ago, preparing students to enter the local freelance market rather than aspiring to work in international institutions. And while the author may well be right to emphasise the need to incorporate aspects of business management into interpreting courses, the type described in the interview with Kirsty Heimerl-Moggan is already covered to a greater or lesser extent by many courses that I am aware of. The call for professionals to do more to help integrate novices stressed in the interview is to be welcomed, although the practical obstacles involved in implementing mentoring are glossed over.

Continuing in a similar vein, the next chapter involves “mov[ing] us on the journey from established professional to expert” (p. xi), covering the need for

continued professional development or “growth”, which could be summed up as the need for interpreters to set goals to improve their language, business and technical skills, ideally with a mentor or coach, based on the fairly obvious need to keep up to date. The interview is conducted with Dr Elisabet Tiselius, conference interpreter and senior lecturer at Stockholm University, one of the few truly academic contributors who has published extensively in the field and whose PhD thesis is said to “include[s] some of the most shocking results I have ever seen. [...] she found that none of the [three staff interpreters for international organisation] had shown any improvement over that time [15 years] – in fact, one even seemed to have gotten worse!” (p. 27). Shocking indeed, but hardly necessarily applicable to all professional as a whole... Indeed, Dr Tiselius herself goes so far as to challenge and nuance this over-simplistic reading of her dissertation (p. 28). The interview itself offers a series of detailed and helpful insights into the field of life-long learning.

Chapter 4 hinges around the need for better public relations and marketing. While the need to improve one’s professional image is often undoubtedly overlooked, the emphasis on ‘adding value’ not by providing accuracy which, the author fairly points out, is usually taken for granted, but which he unfairly describes as “drivel” (p. 36), favouring instead “help[ing] people achieve what they want to achieve” (p. 38) is far from clear. And while admitting that this may not always involve increased corporate profits, it is extrapolated to other fields such as court interpreting where interpreters should apparently help ensure justice and fairness. Presumably the client in question is the justice system rather than the accused, in which case the interpreter should presumably strive to secure a not guilty verdict come what may... As in much of the rest of the book, the subjects are broached far too superficially and from a far too biased, a priori stance. The interview with Valeria Aliperta, described at the ripe old age of 35 and with 10 years’ experience (from her site) as the “*doyenne* of marketing and branding for the language industries” (p. xi), contains a series of useful, albeit rather general, branding tips, some of which apply

more to agencies than individual interpreters, but nothing that could not be found elsewhere, including the books cited in the chapter, although it is altogether baffling why an Italian novel is included in the recommend reading...

Chapter 5 on professional associations reads like an ode to the free market, driven exclusively by clients' needs, whereas seeking to maintain decent working rates and limiting access to the profession based on agreed standards (p. 48), even going so far as to plead for amateur language brokering by family members to be admitted (pp. 47-48) on the dubious grounds that "the moment we insist that professionals always be used, we run the risk of adding to the feeling of powerlessness", is likened to medieval guilds with practices little short of racketeering. The answer, once again it would seem, is 'added value', entailing "moving the focus from how we can force clients to do things and onto how we can help them achieve things" (p. 49), together with individual and collective 'humility' (pp. 49-50). All of the local freelance interpreters I have spoken to are struggling to keep their heads above water due primarily to very low rates, and the kind of unbridled market self-regulation ascribed to (p. 51) has done nothing to improve this situation over the last two decades, something which it is unfair to lay at the door of interpreters themselves failing to convince clients of their true worth. The supporting interview with Iwan Davies, chair of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting "one of Europe's leading professional associations" (p. xii) is of limited interest.

It is unclear why Chapter 6 is presented separately from the previous chapter, arguing essentially for the need for interpreters to join forces above and beyond the hierarchy associated with different types of interpreting, indicating that "one of the most fruitful ways to increase the unity in our profession is to actually work in more than one setting" (p. 58), which is exactly what all of the freelance interpreters (cum translators for the most part) that I know at least have been doing anyway in order to scrape a living. The work done by the interviewees, Judy and Dagmar Jenner,

authors of the “groundbreaking book *The Entrepreneurial Linguist*” (p. xii), in defence of professional working conditions and rates is to be applauded, but has more in common with traditional trade-union practices than the free market whose virtues are extolled in the previous chapter.

Again opening with a personal anecdote, the chapter entitled *Melting the ivory tower* (can ivory be melted?) deals with the need to bring research and practice together in order to ‘add value’ because, amongst other things: “If research needs you, that gives you power” (p. 72). While there is undoubtedly a need to encourage practitioners to become more aware of research, at the same time Professor Ebru Diriker, one of the few genuinely academic guest specialists to grace the pages, explicitly acknowledges that “most researchers are practicing interpreters themselves (p. 70) and that “most research on interpreting [is] highly relevant for the profession and the professionals” (p. 71). This contrasts with the introduction by the author which scathingly begins with the premise that research does not reflect real life (p. 65), before going on to list several anecdotal examples to the contrary (pp. 66-67), but still falling well short of any sort of general overview of the current vast and varied state research in interpreting, some of which is theoretical but much of which is practical, as in any other field. The recommended actions involve professionals contacting the nearest university to offer themselves as subjects for experimental studies and reading research papers and writing to the authors with their thoughts.

Even as a dedicated amateur swimmer and professional interpreter myself, I found Chapter 8 on health and nutrition the most disconcerting of all. Here, the guest specialist is Kamil Celoch who, despite being described as someone who “has made a name discussing these subjects” (xii) and is apparently “most well-known for [his] ongoing work on interpreter nutrition” (p. 71) “[who] has dedicated his spare time to researching how to enhance our brain power using food and supplements” (p. 76), I have been unable to locate any papers on the subject by him. His

recommendations of “beef jerky” (where available...) and “cocktail prawns” (no other shellfish come close...) among the “good options” (p. 79) are surprisingly specific to say the least and many claims are unsupported by documented sources. The chapter as a whole veers wildly from the banal with general advice on healthy-eating, e.g. “Exercise: ideally at least 20 minutes every day, both anaerobic and aerobic exercise” (p. 78) and “Plan your meals ahead to avoid overreliance on sugary foods – your body and mind will thank you later!” (p. 80), to highly specialised supplement tips for budding body-builders, with no mention of any possible side effects or contraindications, e.g. “Energy production: a combination of mitochondrial supplements: Alpha-Lipoic Acid, Acetyl-L-Carnitine, Creatine, Resveratrol, Co-Enzyme Q10, Magnesium” (p. 79). Despite the author’s claim that “[...] if we want to interpret efficiently and well [...] we need to start going to the gym or running the track regularly” (p. 75), the specific relevance of any of this health and fitness advice to interpreters is not overtly apparent.

Chapter 9 deals with the off-beat topic of “how to fill one’s belly and get belly laughs [...] focusing not on how to handle jokes but on how to make them” (p. xii). It is quite honestly hard to see the point of this chapter and its relevance to interpreting other than just like any other demanding profession it has its funny moments. The very brief interview with Matthew Perret, Freelance Interpreter at the European Parliament, makes for easy reading, but I would recommend his collaborations on Lourdes de Rioja’s vlog for which he is best known.

The final chapter appears to hold out the promise of the keys to attract new clients, but freelance interpreters will probably feel let down by the mainly self-evident advice, revolving around the nebulous concept of ‘adding value’, underpinned in turn by the need to “work *with* clients instead of just *for* them” (p. 93, italics in the original). Largely owing to the questions posed, barring a passing mention of the business-to-business approach and the provision of multi-service

one-stop solutions primarily applicable to business interpreting, the interview with Esther Navarro-Hall “who almost needs no introduction” (p. 94) adds little to what has gone before. I leave it for the readers to decide for themselves whether Sim-Consec™ actually constitutes a “new interpreting mode” (p. 94).

Despite some occasional useful insights, all in all the book is disjointed and disappointing and while it is already short, it could have been even shorter, summarised as: train and prepare as best you can to fulfil your client’s needs which you first need to identify, building a solid client-base and publicising yourself properly, working together with other interpreters and honing and improving your linguistic, entrepreneurial and technical skill while keeping fit and healthy and having a laugh from time to time.

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