



Hanging up the headset

There comes a time in a freelance interpreter's life when he or she considers retirement. But is now really the moment?

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As I get older and retirement looms the certainties of youth are now less clear cut. This talk considers retirement of interpreters who have always worked as freelances – I am not tackling the sensitive subject of UN pensioners working on the freelance market.

In this discussion we must keep in mind that our markets, place of work, residence, language combination and training mean none of us are directly comparable.

Exhaustion and experience

Retirement age was established when people did physically gruelling work. By 60 or 65 they were exhausted and life expectancy was much shorter. These conditions do not apply to the sedentary service jobs we now do.

It is said that as an interpreter – as any freelance – you are only as good as your last job. You have to meet exacting professional standards, and that is independent of age. It's an ability to do the job that counts, so does a statutory retirement age make sense? If you're not up to it the organiser will stop hiring you. Senior citizens have to re-sit their driving test once they reach a certain age. For us every meeting is such a test.

Experience counts for something in the booth. The older generation has robust core skills because they cut their teeth at a time when there was greater demand for our services, arguably we date back to a time when people actually communicated. Like all arguments there is a flip-side, how can the new generation acquire these lauded skills if the older generation doesn't step aside?

This is compounded by the fact that markets are shrinking so it is increasingly difficult for new-comers to gain a foothold. They believe their careers would progress more quickly if the older interpreters retired, thereby standing aside so demand could shift to the younger generation.

The financial imperative

Everyone's story is different but there are some clear reasons why people don't want to retire.

The first is money. They may have neglected to save enough, or their life circumstances may have

precluded their saving for retirement. Life is not kind to everyone.

When he was AIIC President Albert Daly said that membership should be contingent on the applicant's having a pension arrangement, that something should be done to counter what in some cases had become a kind of systemic improvidence.

We do have the two funds CPIT and CPIC and they have been a great support – I won't go into the two financial models – but we all know that a major failing is that the UN Agreement does not force us to place the money in a fund. The reason given is that people wanted to make their own arrangements. But did they? AIIC and the UN have just concluded a new agreement – this time it's evergreen, so nothing is going to change soon.

A sense of purpose

There are other reasons that people want to keep working, not necessarily financial. Work gives our lives structure and it can be difficult to lose that. Not for nothing have we heard it said that retirement is a killer.

You hear some colleagues comment that so-and-so won't stop because interpreting is all he has in his life (the suggestion being that the speaker lives a life of endless interest and creativity).

In interpreting – we are blessed: colleagues, the work, mental challenge, even a feeling at being at the centre of things.

The levitational certainties of youth

When we were young interpreters in the late 1970s and early 1980s some of us swore that we would tell each other when it was time to stop. We were all aware of those who'd gone beyond their "best before" date and, full of the insouciance of youth, we didn't want that same fate to befall us. Assuming that group were still in one place instead of spread thinly across several continents, would we really keep that early promise? As I said, the levitational certainties of youth have over the years lost something of their doctrinaire conviction.

My own view is that as you age you grow less tolerant of things like poor public speaking (and boy, it is now poor), of the aspirational compunction to speak English, of changing air tickets (that was a lot easier 30 years ago).

We are self-employed freelances so nobody owes us a living, but by the same token if an employer likes our work, they can hire us. The age of the interpreter is irrelevant – it boils down to can she do the job or not. The older generation does bring experience to the booth – hard won from the pre-computer days – and we remember times when the English booth worked flat out. Such quaint memories must be worth something.

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