

Getting started as Freelance Translator

by Corinne McKay

A freelance translator's experience

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Background

I became a translator via a series of happy accidents. After taking French in school since seventh grade, I studied abroad at the University of Grenoble, France, for my junior year of college. There, a professor recommended me for a part-time job as a trainee translator at the University's graduate school of business. This ended up involving work on an international marketing textbook that was subsequently published by Prentice-Hall. Back in the U.S., I taught high school French for 8 years, did a few translations on the side when people asked me, and earned an M.A. in French from Boston College. After relocating to Colorado and having a child, I wanted to find a career that would allow me to use French and work from home, so I decided to try to make a go as a professional translator. Several years later, I'm certified by the American Translators Association and happily employed by a growing list of regular clients. I hope that these tips will be helpful to aspiring translators! Please note that the examples provided here reflect my personal experience; everyone's mileage will vary depending on your language pairs, professional background, geographic location, etc.

First Steps

Although the translation industry is booming, it's hard to find well-paying work if you don't have either a degree in translation, some translation experience, or excellent language skills plus training and/or experience in a technical field.

The easiest way to get samples and references is either to volunteer/intern, or work for low-paying agencies who will hire beginner translators. Organizations such as the American Red Cross, Translators Without Borders, refugee assistance programs, and public health clinics are often looking for volunteer translators and interpreters. In addition, many translation agencies offer unpaid or paid internships, and some low-paying agencies are willing and even eager to work with beginners. For example I was recently contacted by an agency looking for interpreters with "at least some college" and paying - an hour, or about half to one quarter of what an experienced, professional interpreter would probably charge. These are all good places for a beginner to start.

In addition, although many people think that anyone who is familiar with two languages can be a translator, this isn't the case, for several reasons. First, translators are also writers. Your translation might be correct "word for word," but sound horrible when read as a whole, which won't make the client happy. Second, there are some conventions in the profession that beginners are often ignorant of. For example, when you translate an official document like a diploma or birth certificate, you need to format the translation as closely as possible to the original, not just type up the translation in paragraph form. Last, but possibly most important, in order to translate subject-specific documents, you need subject-specific knowledge in your own language. If you're translating a computer hardware document and you don't know the difference between a hub and a router in English, you'll be even more lost when reading this type of information in another language.

Once you have a degree in translation, some work experience or some translation samples, it's time to look for clients. Some of my best suggestions, with examples from my experience, are:

Be realistic. When you're looking for a full-time job, all you need is one offer. To work full-time or close to it as a translator, you need a sizeable list of regular clients. Unless you have very marketable skills in an in-demand language pair, it may take a year or more until you are working full time. In my case, I contacted about 400 translation agencies (not a typo) over the course of my first year in business, and it was about 18 months until I was earning an amount equivalent to my previous full time job.

Never quit marketing. Once you have steady work, it's tempting to think that agencies will keep contacting you, freeing you from the hassle of contacting new prospective clients and touching base with previous contacts. However, this is a bad assumption. Work flows go up and down, agencies go out of business, the project manager who loves you quits and is replaced by someone who brings in his/her own person, etc. Plus, you never know when an "out of nowhere" project offer will be perfect for you, and/or allow you to raise your rates. Even though I usually have about as much work as I can handle, I still send my resume to 3-5 new agencies per week just to keep the ball rolling. Recently, one of these agencies (in Europe) contacted me with a multi-thousand dollar project because I was the only U.S.-based French to English translator in their database, and a client wanted a project translated into U.S. English.

Don't ignore the local market, especially if you present yourself better in person than on paper. My first clients, who I still work for today, were local agencies who I contacted and offered to meet with to show them a portfolio of my work. Check the yellow pages or Internet under "translators and interpreters." Even if the agencies say that they don't hire beginners or don't have work in your language pair, go visit them anyway and find out what they do. You'll understand more about what your potential clients want, and they'll know you for when your skills are more in line with their needs.

Join some associations. The American Translators Association and its local chapters (a list is available on the ATA website, or Google "translators your state," replacing "your state" with your actual state) are a great way to establish your seriousness as a translator, and to meet other translators.

Ask for advice. While it's somewhat risky to contact a translator in your own language pair for risk of sounding like you're trying to swoop in on his/her clients, most translators enjoy their work and like to talk about their jobs and how they got started. A freelancers group I'm in (for women only) has a tradition called "Take a successful woman to lunch," where an aspiring translator/writer/web designer/artist, etc. offers to buy lunch for a more experienced person in exchange for a conversation about the profession.

Orient your resume toward translation. Especially for people who are native speakers of a language other than English and have specialized professional skills, this is key. Highlight specific skills right away, such as "Spanish-bilingual software specialist," "Native speaker of Arabic with mechanical engineering background," etc. rather than expecting the agency or client to see that you have these capabilities.

Offer services that more experienced translators probably don't. The translation industry is booming, and many experienced translators with a full house of regular clients don't have a financial need to work nights, weekends, rush jobs, etc. Make it clear to prospective clients that you can fill in in a pinch, and be willing to actually do this!

Get certified. Certification by the American Translators Association isn't a must, but can lead to a big increase in business as the credential becomes more recognized. In my case this happened when, shortly after I passed the certification exam in French to English, an agency I work with was requested by a major client to use only certified translators on certain projects.

Be realistic your earning potential. While translation is definitely well-paying as compared with other careers that allow you to work from home in your pyjamas on projects that are often very interesting, remember that 25-40% of your income as a freelancer will go to things that your employer normally pays for when you have a full time job. Most people count in the biggies- taxes, health insurance, retirement plan contributions and vacation/personal/sick time, but over the years other expenses like dictionaries, office equipment, continuing education and professional travel add up too.

Over the course of the 8 years I worked full time, my employer paid for literally thousands of dollars of "extra" stuff like this, including half the tuition for my M.A. degree and two trips to France. These days, I spend about a thousand dollars a year just to attend the annual conference of the American Translators Association, plus various other workshops. Remember also that the time it takes to do non-translation activities like accounting, collections, billing, updating computer systems, even cleaning your office, is "off the clock."

Find the economic advantages to freelancing. As a corollary to the tip above, freelancing is far from all bad news when it comes to earnings. You may be able to take significant tax deductions for business related expenses, unlike when you have a salaried job (talk to a tax professional about this). Furthermore, if you work from home you won't be paying commuting expenses, lunch out, work clothes, etc. Depending on your particular situation, there may be even bigger hidden benefits. In my case, I have a small child; if I worked 30 hours a week at an employer's office, I would need at least 35 hours of child care, and high-quality child care in my area is - an hour. As a freelancer, I'm able to work about 30 hours a week with 15 hours of child care by making up the rest of the time at night or when my child is with a friend. This savings alone, plus the additional time to spend with the family, makes freelancing a very attractive option if you have small kids.

Keep in touch. As you apply to agencies, keep a file of the person you talked to or e-mailed with, and what his or her response was to your inquiry. As you get more experience, periodically contact these people again to let them know a) you're still there and b) you have some new projects to tell them about.

Show an interest in the profession. Once you explore the tip of the translation iceberg, you'll be amazed at the number of translation-related websites, magazines and newsletters out there. Contributing to them allows you to both educate yourself and present yourself as someone who's really passionate about the industry, not just someone who likes to work in your pyjamas!

Never (never) take on work you can't handle. Especially in a small community of translators and translation consumers, the surest way to sabotage your emerging freelance business is to take on something that's too technical, too long, or too complex. Clients will appreciate your honesty and use you for projects that you can handle. Sometimes this involves protecting clients from hiring you for work that *they* think that you can do, such as translating into your second (third, etc) language. Politely explain that this work is best handled by a native speaker of that language and offer a referral.

Keep your clients happy. While this could be an article in itself (when I have time!) it's worthy of mention. Finish every project on time and on budget, and NEVER miss a deadline without notifying a client as soon as you realize that despite your good planning, the project won't be done on time. Return all phone calls and e-mails as soon as you can, always within one business day. When you're not available, help solve the client's problem by referring them to a colleague. In all of your dealings with your clients, remain professional. If you encounter a problem, it hurts to have your skills or qualifications questioned, but remember that the client is already in high-anxiety mode if they're not happy with your work, and you need to remain calm rather than making the client more upset. Probably one of the best pieces of advice I've ever been given is "don't hold onto your clients by charging less, hold onto your clients by charging more and proving that you're worth it." Of course there are some agencies and direct clients who only care about getting the work done for one cent per word cheaper than the last translator they used, but most clients care just as much about quality as they do about price. Keeping a good relationship with the client and doing outstanding work proves to them that often, you get the level of service you pay for.

These tips reflect my experience as a translator and my own opinions, not those of my clients. Feel free to use them in your own work, and let me know if they are helpful!

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