SOS: consultant interpreter adrift

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Published: April 11, 2001 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Do you remember that film a few years ago where the posters and trailer used the tag "in space no-one hears you scream"? I know the feeling. Very occasionally, probably when everyone else is busy, I have to put together a team of interpreters for a very important meeting.

This means that I'm a consultant interpreter, and I'm probably not getting the respect that is my due. Well perhaps I am pro-rata because I probably only qualify as a mere dabbler. I know there are people who have a real office with secretaries and a coffee machine. I have a room in the house that has an office sign on the door that one of my children picked up at a jumble sale (the sign, not the house - you must concentrate). Act global think local!

I have to admit that my office is a tip. None of this of course is my fault. When I'm away doing my bit for international understanding my family thinks that the empty office is a great place to dump all sorts of things: junk mail, books, homework, day-old toast.

So whenever I come home and try to sit down to do some work, I first have to clear armfuls of newspapers, old tea cups, school reports, bicycle inner tubes and occasionally the cat. The cat is cute, but she loves walking across my keyboard and it ocg?zz_fgb_y_pgh_meg...

See what I mean? Anyway once the room is clear and I've sat down at my computer I'm exhausted and wondering when the next meeting is coming up so I can get some rest.

Finally the computer is switched on, the room, er, tidy and I am able to tackle the quote that I've promised for aforementioned very important meeting. It's a big product launch and allied junketing in Little Mushie in the Highlands. You know, it's famous for selective haggis breeding and its generous bingo jackpot amongst other things.

My wife's calling me because the cat's teeth need cleaning, so I hurry to produce the quote. Don't these people understand I'm a link in the wealth creation chain? To cut a long story short (for the full version see Danielle Gree's piece in this organ a couple of months ago): The quote goes to client; client checks back on a few things (why can't the interpreters all wear lycra boob tubes?) and finally you get the contract. Now comes the best bit. You can ring people to offer them work.

I still remember the first time this happened. I was so excited at being able to offer a contract to the great and the good. As I recall my juvenile bubble was quickly burst by a laconic voice saying "looks like I'm in Africa that week". In those days a trip to the fleshpots of Schaerbeek was a day out for me.
So I start phoning around. You are all educated people and familiar with the laws of thermodynamics, Boyle's law, somebody's right and left hand laws, the law of fundamental cussedness. Well there is a law that says that any interpreter you would like to talk to is not going to be at home. I mean, is it worth the money of buying a house and planning a window box? They are never there. Absentee landlord and tenant all rolled into one. This means that when you phone all you get is the answering machine. Outgoing messages probably warrant study in their own right: Some are crisp and to the point but others like the Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

"Hallo. This is Tarquin. Sorry not to take your call right now. Do leave a message after the tone if you can stand these terrible machines. You can try me on my mobile at three score and ten minus the number of the little pigs divided by Snowwhite's dwarves- or leave a message with my diary service at the following garbled number - or you can try my "en cas d'absence" number, or any of the thirteen alternatives taking up the whole of page 360 in the AIIC book. I will get straight back to you".

"This is Phil. Are you free next Tuesday fortnight. Please ring me ASAP".

Now the fun begins. You have left a message on the machine, with the diary service, sent e-mail. And nothing happens. Not a whisper. Yoohoo, anybody out there? After all it's not every day you are offered work in Little Mushie.

Tarquin keeps radio silence.

I am now in a quandary. Don't mock, you would be too. You've offered the work to Tarquin and others, but the little rascals don't reply. Do you assume they are not free and therefore offer the meeting to others who occasionally visit planet earth? Of course you all know what will happen, as soon as you go to the next person on your list, number one gets in touch all breathless because they've just arrived from the Amazon and have to dash to Lubljana in ten minutes time. What do you mean you don't need them any more? They'd been really looking forward to a trip to Little Mushie (famous for its well kept privet hedges) and three weeks is a pretty good response rate for someone in such high demand...

You, the readers, must decide. Should Tarquin get the gig? What is a reasonable time to wait? Send in your answers, and if our panel of experts agree you can win a stenographer's notebook (unused).

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