Six questions for Angela Keil, President of AIIC

Brand recognition, the true worth of professional interpretation, and helping members market their services highlighted by newly elected AIIC chief – but all within a long-term view of professional values.

Angela KEIL, Michelle Renée HOF.
Published: April 21, 2015 Last updated: October 13, 2016

We recently caught up with Angela Keil, the newly elected President of AIIC, to hear her views on the state of the conference interpreting profession, and to find out more about her plans for the association over the next three years.

MH: Congratulations on your election at Addis Ababa - an exotic venue for an assembly! What can you tell us about what was achieved there?

AK: We had a busy time at our last assembly, which was held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Addis Ababa, a regular port of call for many interpreters in the Africa region. Highlights included a tribute to our outgoing Executive Secretary, Josyane Cristina, as well as a general debate on linguistic diversity with a special focus on Africa. In a number of African countries, many people do not speak the official language, usually English or French, and so cannot communicate effectively with public officials. As we interpreters know, we are more convincing when we are allowed to speak our own language! All the more reason to further promote the introduction of interpreting services in national languages at African parliaments.

MH: What drives AIIC's new President?

AK: The same forces that brought me to AIIC in the first place! Joining AIIC helped me to take a more professional approach to work. By exchanging views with AIIC colleagues I learned how to make my mark in a given market, how to better prepare for a conference, how to “sell” my services, and how to negotiate working conditions and remuneration. Like all freelance interpreters, I depend on the reputation of AIIC and its members, and so it is in our common interest to ensure that we all reflect the highest professional standards.

There are many benefits to joining a professional association like AIIC. You become part of a network of likeminded colleagues, your professional competence is recognized and your profile is published in a directory which makes it easier for people looking for interpreters to find you.

MH: What do you see as the main challenge facing our profession today?

AK: The lack of awareness of the value of the work we do. This has two sides to it. First, we...
interpreters tend to place insufficient value on the services we offer; we love our work so much that it feels wrong to put a “price” on it. And second, many potential clients don't make use of interpreters because they don't understand the value we add to their events. We as interpreters know that conferences can be greatly improved if participants are allowed to speak to each other in their own language through interpreters – this especially applies to sales or marketing events, where language-related aspects are key to communication. It's time to make that clear to our potential users, so that they can get the most out of their conferences.

MH: This brings us to the next question: What would you like to accomplish for AIIC during your three-year mandate?

AK: AIIC is much more than the sum of its members. It's worth repeating that as the sole negotiating partner for many international institutions, we represent the interests of all interpreters working in the sectors with which we have an agreement. We have to increase the representativeness of AIIC in these sectors and encourage more colleagues working in them to join us. One aspect of this will involve convincing current members to become more actively involved in recruitment. For example, one simple idea to help grow AIIC's membership would be to encourage members to bring along a blank membership form and fill it out for colleagues whom they would like to sponsor following a meeting where they have worked together.

We also need to increase recognition of the AIIC brand. Despite all the efforts made so far, the AIIC brand still lacks recognition. We need to draw on experience from outside our association, i.e. communication experts who can help us to sell the image of our profession.

AIIC is busy building bridges with our natural allies in the conference sector, i.e. professional conference organizers (PCOs) and equipment providers. One example can be seen in our cooperation with the Congress Rental Network, a sponsor of the Addis Ababa Assembly. Our association, with its global presence, can cooperate with associations and networks representing the interests of PCOs and equipment providers at an international level. These contacts will in turn facilitate cooperation at a national level between their member companies and local AIIC interpreters, not to mention with AIIC groups (e.g. Private Market Sector, ISO, consultant interpreters). It's a win-win situation for PCOs and for AIIC members – not to mention for our clients, since cooperation among conference service providers will lead to benefits on the ground for them.

Finally, we need to highlight the role of our consultant interpreters. They are the ones who offer work to members and should be made more visible on our public portal. Consultant interpreters compete directly with large agencies offering a long shopping list of services. Many conference organizers have already come to the conclusion that it is better to hire experts to coordinate interpreter teams instead of leaving such a specialized task in the hands of generalist agencies that supply a range of unrelated services (making travel and hotel arrangements, hiring caterers, etc.). It is up to us to ensure that when they come looking for the experts they need, they will find AIIC members to serve them.

MH: What recent achievements do you think AIIC can be proudest of?

AK: AIIC celebrated its 60th anniversary not too long ago. Everything AIIC has accomplished over six decades was born of the enthusiasm, dedication and hard work of its members. But we don't have to dig back 60 years to find achievements. Looking at our more recent past, I'd say we can be proud of the fact that we learned to raise our voice and speak out about our profession – and to get people talking about it! – through our online publications, the AIIC Blog and Communicate!/The AIIC Webzine. We also enjoy an increasingly established presence on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Weibo).
We now have an international public web portal that offers information on the profession as well as finder tools to help potential clients locate individual interpreters or consultants for their event. Some of our regions have also launched their own national portals adapted to their local market needs. Then there's the Q&A portal interpreting.info, a platform for offering practical, personal answers to questions posed by interpreting students and newcomers to the profession. This indirectly promotes the AIIC brand and encourages, among other things, university-level training of conference interpreters.

Many AIIC regions organize panel discussions and workshops by outside experts on negotiating techniques. The success of these workshops reflects members' interest in improving their professional profiles. And members are increasingly aware of issues related to the profitability – or lack thereof – of the work that they do. An article published recently on our website on how to make a living as a conference interpreter has proved very popular, probably for this very reason.

MH: What parting message would you like to share with our readers and prospective AIIC members?

AK: I'd say that aside from all of our talk about brand recognition, added value and marketing strategies, important as these things are, we need to remember that what truly defines AIIC is not so much market metrics, but the underlying idea of belonging to a group of like-minded individuals and working together toward a common goal. AIIC members tend not to focus narrowly on “what suits me today, right now", but rather think long-term and focus on the big picture for the greater good. This is what sets us apart from other interpreters who choose not to join an association, preferring to go it alone. I want my actions as President to reflect that long view, and work for the good of the profession as a whole.

Recommended citation format: