

Title:

How to become a successful freelance translator?

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Summary:

After completing their translation training programmes at higher professional education or university level, many students can't wait to set up as a freelance translator. However, gaining a foothold as a freelancer in a very competitive translation market may turn out to be a pretty complicated business. Translation agencies are not usually keen on contracting inexperienced translators, business clients are difficult to find without commercial tools, and the tax authorities won't just accept anyone as a self-employed person. So what do you need to do to set up shop as a successful freelance translator?

Keywords:

translation agency, translator, translations

Article Body:

After completing their translation training programmes at higher professional education or university level, many students can't wait to set up as a freelance translator. However, gaining a foothold as a freelancer in a very competitive translation market may turn out to be a pretty complicated business. Translation agencies are not usually keen on contracting inexperienced translators, business clients are difficult to find without commercial tools, and the tax authorities won't just accept anyone as a self-employed person. So what do you need to do to set up shop as a successful freelance translator?

Translation agencies

Most translation agencies are wary of admitting new freelancers into their networks. After all, it takes a while before it really becomes clear whether a freelancer can live up to their expectations: does he/she stick to agreed deadlines, offer a consistent level of quality, consult relevant reference resources, deal effectively with various registers and specialisations (commercial, technical, medical, financial, IT, etc.)? Many translation agencies begin with a 'trial period' in which they closely monitor the work submitted by new freelance translators. To reduce the risk of a fiasco - and avoid the associated costs - translation agencies normally only accept applications from freelance translators who have had at least two or three years' fulltime experience in the translation business.

Business clients

In their attempts to introduce themselves directly to companies, freelancers usually find it difficult to gain access to the people that matter and, once they are there, to secure orders. Companies tend to prefer outsourcing translation services to partners that are able to offer comprehensive solutions. They look for agencies that can fill their translation needs in a range of different languages, are always available, can take on specialised texts and have the procedures in place to ensure that all deadlines are met. In view of their need for continuity, capacity and diversity it is hardly surprising that many companies select an all-round translation agency rather than individual freelancers. An agency may be more expensive than a freelancer, but the additional service and quality guarantees justify the extra investment.

Tips to achieve success as a freelance translator

What steps will you need to take after graduation to develop into a successful freelance translator?

1. After completing your studies, it's best not to present yourself on the market straightaway as a freelance translator, but first to find employment at an all-round translation firm and spend a couple of years there to gain the necessary practical experience. As a salaried employee your income will be less compared to what you might potentially earn in a freelance capacity, but don't forget that without experience you're never going to be successful in the first place. In many cases, you will be assigned to a senior translator who revises your translations, monitors your progress, and makes you aware of your strengths and weaknesses. This will enable you to acquire the skills and baggage you need on your way to becoming a professional translator, and will give you the opportunity to experiment with various types of texts and disciplines.
2. If you can't find a position in paid employment, try to find a post as an (unpaid) trainee. A translation agency may not have the capacity or resources to take on new staff, but it may still be able to offer you an excellent training post to help you gain practical experience in a commercial environment. A traineeship may serve as an effective springboard for a career in the translation business, perhaps even within the same agency that offered the traineeship.
3. After having whetted your skills at a translation agency for a number of years, you may decide that the time has come for you to find your own clients. Ideally, you should move on to a part-time contract so that you have enough time to recruit clients and work for them, and enough money to live on. It is important to make clear arrangements with your boss at this stage, to avoid a conflict of interests. The best strategy is to send your personal details and CVs to a selected group of professional translation firms and translation departments within companies and governmental institutions, explicitly referring

to your work experience. Don't forget to highlight your willingness to do a free test translation.

4. Make sure to register as a self-employed person with the relevant tax authorities and seek their advice if necessary.

5. Once you have managed to find enough freelance work to keep yourself busy for around 20 hours a week, you might consider terminating your employment contract and devoting the extra time to attracting new business. In 20 hours most experienced freelance translators tend to earn around as much as a full-time translator in salaried employment.

These are obviously very general guidelines, and your personal career may evolve along quite different lines depending on your preferences, skills and personal conditions. Whatever your circumstances, however, you will find that experience and a certain amount of business acumen are the things that matter most in a successful freelance career.