

## **FIT Position Paper on the Wellbeing of Professional Translators, Interpreters and Terminologists**

What is threatening the mental health and wellbeing of professional linguists such as translators, interpreters and terminologists, and what can be done to protect it? FIT, as the voice of associations representing those professionals around the world, demands immediate attention to the current situation and, in this paper, outlines necessary measures that professional associations and other relevant stakeholders can take to address these challenges effectively.

### **1 Background/Setting**

Several recent developments and rapid changes in the translation environment are increasingly challenging the mental health and wellbeing of professional translators and interpreters: falling rates in a competitive market, decrease in quality in the provision of services, de-professionalization, de-humanization resulting from the advent of portals automating project management, the emergence of artificial intelligence –which has resulted in a paradigm shift in terms of customer requirements–, and the fragmentation of roles, amongst other factors. These factors affect different segments of the profession in varied ways: some industry segments are experiencing growth (e.g., localisation services), while others have shrunk (e.g., routine business translation). According to the European Language Industry Survey (ELIS, 2023), successive crises, global inflation, and recent developments in language technology and artificial intelligence have reshaped the industry landscape. These changes have led translators and interpreters to express increasing negativity regarding fair remuneration and work-life balance.

While translation and interpreting services continue to be in demand, the rapidly changing environment requires language professionals to develop a strong set of soft skills, such as stress resilience and self-motivation (FIT, 2022), and to have the ability to leverage their strengths to be successful in today's world. For example, professional translators must be willing to adapt and use their creativity to develop business models that make the most of the latest technologies (FIT, 2017). They must accept that there will be less work in some areas of activity and proactively seek new opportunities (Downie, 2016). Professional interpreters will need to find ways to assert their value and autonomy if engaging in digital platform work, or other forms of supply-demand intermediation, where existing power dynamics can serve to perpetuate unethical practices (Giustini, 2024).

Some language professionals will more readily embrace change than others, and it is essential to prepare all future professional translators and interpreters for a turbulent market in order to maintain the ongoing sustainability of this workforce.

## **2 Factors influencing translators' and interpreters' mental and physical health and wellbeing**

Factors relating to (1) the wider environment in which they work, and (2) the core or central aspects of their job, all have the potential to impact the mental and physical health of translators and interpreters, their wellbeing, and the quality of their work.

As context shapes experience, how professional linguists feel, think, and behave can be influenced by several situational factors, including –but not limited to– social relationships (e.g., with clients), situational goals (e.g., competitive environment), physical ergonomics (e.g., intensive use of technology tools), and structural factors (e.g., pay rates). While some professionals thrive within their environments, contextual and systemic factors can lead others to experience isolation, pressure, uncertainty, dissatisfaction and ethical stress, amongst other impacts.

In itself, the work content that language professionals engage with (texts, speeches, audiovisual material, and other outputs) can also affect their mental and physical health, for instance, by triggering specific emotions, straining or putting pressure on their bodies, or making additional cognitive demands (Ferreira et. al., 2020). While some derive great satisfaction from their work (e.g., Ruokonen et al., 2020), for others, the work may at times be repetitive, lead to frustration or generate headaches, eyesight issues, hearing loss, and even trauma or burnout.

It is worth noting that these core and contextual factors will, on occasion, also affect translators, interpreters and terminologists who are otherwise generally healthy and satisfied.

## **3 Stakeholder support for language professionals' wellbeing**

This section provides some examples of actions that different stakeholders can take to support language professionals. The actions listed below are illustrative and not meant to be comprehensive. FIT calls on all stakeholders to consider how their practices affect mental and physical health and what initiatives they can undertake to further enhance the wellbeing of language professionals.

### **3.1 Translator and interpreter associations**

Personal, health and wellbeing concerns remain key issues identified by language professionals in industry surveys, such as the one conducted by CIOL in the United Kingdom and the one conducted by CTPCBA in Argentina, which are based on a series of open and closed questions on the working environment of professional linguists, combining quantitative and open-ended responses. In response to this, professional associations need to raise awareness, both among the language professionals themselves and other relevant stakeholders, around mental and physical health risks and actively protect translators' and interpreters' wellbeing so they can carry out their work safely and effectively. Associations can play a crucial role by offering support, advice, and training opportunities on stress management, coaching and mentoring, and other areas relating to the psychology of wellbeing.

Translator and interpreter associations can also provide their members with supportive structures, such as coffee and professional group chats, 'linguists' online exchange sessions and support groups, e.g., modelled after the Balint group method (Roberts, 2012) which offer tremendous value in terms of peer support and collegiality, and may help expand the professionals' capacity and repertoire for handling difficult situations. The purpose of these groups, where accessible, is to provide professionals with a safe space in which to give and receive support for challenges they encounter during assignments, thus preventing their burnout and reducing the likelihood that they will leave the profession. Research over the years shows that peer support groups can help prevent stress and compassion fatigue across a range of professions working in high-stress environments (Benson and Margaith, 2005; Huang et al., 2020).

Professional associations also have a role to play in terms of increasing the visibility and value of the profession externally. They should take concrete steps to raise awareness of the complex human emotions involved in translators' and interpreters' work and seek to influence legislation to improve working conditions by engaging with government officials, legislators, and members of regulatory agencies. Furthermore, they should collaborate with public sector agencies and corporate entities, and assist with training their personnel on how to work with translators, interpreters and terminologists so that better outcomes can be achieved for all involved in the process.

In sum, professional associations should work with all stakeholders, including language service providers (LSPs), to ensure optimal working conditions for language professionals, which will undoubtedly have a positive impact on their health and wellbeing.

### 3.2 Universities and other educational institutions

Bearing in mind cultural and location-specific differences, universities and other training institutes also have a role to play in educating future translators and interpreters on the growing importance of so-called soft skills as a means of responding and adapting to the changing working environment, such as flexibility, self-motivation, tolerance to ambiguity, and coping mechanisms. The paucity of training materials in these areas in the current curricula threatens the psychological sustainability of the next generation of professional linguists (Hubscher-Davidson, 2024). Tackling these aspects before students enter the workplace or before they engage in realistic assignments in the course of their studies could prepare them for what lies ahead.

There are different ways in which soft skills and professionalisation in training can be introduced and discussed: industry and academic guest speaker programmes, access to a developed employer network, events/fairs to meet potential employers and discuss placements, internships, and graduate jobs. Another method is the *simulated translation bureau (STB)* model ([INSTB | International Network of Simulated Translation Bureaus](#)), where students work on realistic assignments and learn to manage translation projects holistically, including all the soft skills involved. Such simulations teach a variety of valuable competencies, including negotiation and recognising one's strengths, which can help empower students to seek meaningful work and speak up for themselves. Furthermore, training institutes should foster networking and collaboration among students to combat the fragmented nature of the work. Facilitating mentorship programmes and collaborating with professional associations

would also help students integrate into the professional community and seek support from senior colleagues. It is also worth noting that many academic skills that are a part of a university education (e.g., critical thinking, information retrieval, time management, project planning) are invaluable professional competencies that serve to provide a good foundation for a sustainable career.

Academic researchers also have a role to play, via empirical work and other research activities, in highlighting the issues that negatively impact the health and wellbeing of language professionals, encompassing both mental and physical aspects. This involves conducting systematic research to obtain empirical evidence which sheds light on the specific needs of language professionals in their working environments. Furthermore, researchers may investigate the conditions and settings within the workplace that most significantly contribute to the overall performance of language professionals, and seek to uncover the most effective strategies for creating supportive working environments. This may involve interdisciplinary research and collaborations where necessary (e.g., with government agencies, international organisations). Researchers should also shoulder the responsibility of advocating for the implementation of their findings. This involves working closely with educational institutions, professional organisations, and policymakers to ensure that the insights gained from research are translated into practical policies and interventions that can improve the day-to-day experiences and long-term career trajectories of language professionals. Moreover, by publishing their findings in academic journals, presenting at conferences, and sharing their research with the broader public through non-academic publications and active public engagement, researchers may contribute to a broader awareness and understanding of the critical issues faced by language professionals today.

One illustrative example of wellbeing-related research that has foregrounded public engagement and practical impact is the research project *The Ethical Demands of Translating Gender-Based Violence. A Practice-Based Research Project* (Bosseaux, 2023), which has produced guidelines for working conditions and for translating emotional content in documentaries. Thus, researchers have the potential to play a key role in stimulating discussions and debates among stakeholders, which can lead to innovative solutions and widespread changes in how the health and wellbeing of language professionals are supported across different sectors.

### 3.3 Language service providers (LSPs) and other employers/clients

Language service providers and other employers of translators and interpreters should positively contribute to the professionalisation, interests, and public understanding of the profession. Their contribution includes promoting and implementing sustainable price-setting principles, effective quality assurance processes, favourable terms and conditions of service, and other ethical practices (accreditation, subscribing to a code of conduct, membership in professional associations) that support these aims. They can also cooperate actively with institutions that advocate for translators, interpreters and terminologists, such as universities and other relevant bodies. One such example would be to offer opportunities for internships or small-scale projects to students registered in translation and interpreting programmes. In this regard, another important group of stakeholders to take into consideration would be the developers of translation and interpreting tools and platforms, who should involve language

professionals in the development process, rely on their expertise, and prioritise their needs and preferences.

In addition, it is the responsibility of LSPs and employers to support translators' and interpreters' wellbeing by adopting practices that allow language professionals to feel like valued colleagues who are fully integrated into the workflow, rather than being treated simply as resources with little power. Language professionals are experts not only on their working languages but also on professional practices and on what tools are best for each task. Therefore, having a say in how the work is carried out supports their wellbeing.

Two factors that facilitate language professionals' integration are trust and transparency. Building mutual trust can reduce stress caused by uncertainty and unpredictability, and this trust can be built through transparency. As Kristiina Abdallah and Kaisa Koskinen (2007, 677-678) point out, "Trust-building [...] entails that the perspectives and interests of each stakeholder are addressed, knowledge is shared, and information is clear, accountable and legitimate as far as all parties are concerned." Thus, open and transparent communication contributes towards creating a positive and safe working environment where language professionals feel that they can trust their client or employer and that they are trusted in return (<https://safeaitf.org/>).

Professional translators, interpreters and terminologists can contribute towards building trust by adhering to, and promoting, codes of ethics established by their professional associations.

### 3.4 Individual practitioners

To lead a happy and fulfilled professional life, it is essential that translators and interpreters have a good degree of self-awareness and self-management. Developing and honing self-management skills is essential to keep one's mental and physical health and to support growth as a person and a reflective practitioner. Being aware and taking charge of one's wellbeing means that one can ultimately find the answers and resources within oneself to eventually forge a pathway to reconciliation with oneself and with others. Various reliable and established support resources may be available to professional translators and interpreters, from preventative measures in the form of practitioner appointments, self-help and self-coach tools and literature, to remedial measures such as therapy and counselling sessions. While individuals will discover what works best for them, the following possible steps are recommended.

To prevent or remedy specific health issues encountered by translators and interpreters at some stage during their working life, they may be well advised to learn and implement different strategies to stabilise and improve their mental and physical wellbeing. Translators and interpreters should take particular care to monitor symptoms linked to injuries that are likely to affect them, such as repetitive strain injuries (RSI), voice strain, or eyesight and hearing loss issues, as these constitute significant occupational health and safety risks (e.g., Woodcock and Fischer, 2008).

Beyond formal health services, of particular interest to professionals are scientifically backed methods such as somatic therapy techniques, polyvagal exercises, mindfulness, breath work, visualisation, meditation, relaxation and yoga, which may help to relieve stress and improve mental focus and energy levels. Physical exercise can also help alleviate relative immobility and correct bad posture during work, which can improve the blood flow and oxygenation of

the whole body, including the brain, which in turn improves intellectual performance. Regular, moderate-intensity exercise improves all aspects of human health and is widely accepted as a preventative and therapeutic strategy for various diseases (e.g., WHO, 2021). Worth noting here is that physical exercise must not necessarily be sustained for a long time, e. g., lengthy walks, bike rides, etc., but can also consist in following specific preventative and corrective exercise routines prescribed by physiotherapists, or in taking short exercise breaks during the working day, helping to improve ergonomics and increase wellbeing at work (e.g., the *Snack on Exercise - Boost Your Mind, Body and Mood* by Lauren Parsons approach; or computer and mobile applications that can be used to introduce exercise breaks to a work day, some of which are free of charge). Language professionals should also consult relevant physicians where appropriate.

To cope with isolation and stress, translators, interpreters and terminologists should be proactive and may find it useful to join, where possible, a professional association that can provide advice, training, mentorship, as well as other support groups and networks, both professional and personal (coworking sessions, social events). Engaging in professional development workshops and activities is another way to connect with like-minded professionals while also developing a sense of professional growth and belonging.

For help with legal advice (e.g., on contracts) and other issues linked to working conditions, language professionals should also join relevant organisations that can advocate for their interests, or request that their professional association provide this service. Additionally, whenever possible, translators and interpreters should make their needs and concerns known in professional surveys and participate in research studies, as this kind of active engagement will enable their voices to be heard and raise visibility around issues affecting the profession.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Given the turbulent working environment in which professional translators, interpreters and terminologists have to function, their health and wellbeing are continuously threatened and are contingent on the ability to leverage specific professional, psychological and physical skills. This situation calls for increased awareness of the risks associated with certain working practices and contexts, as well as for the creation and delivery of new and suitable development/training opportunities.

In addition to the individual actions mentioned in this document, language professionals, translator and interpreter educators, employers, and professional associations should also collaborate on the organisation of conferences or events, and the drafting of policy and other documents that would contribute to disseminating vital information regarding issues of work-life balance, occupational stress, and professional wellbeing. These activities, tailored to particular contexts and cultures, would promote or encourage the establishment of healthy working practices and psychological support for both current and future professional translators, interpreters and terminologists.

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### **Further reading (a selection)**

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