

Going it alone

Newly qualified translator **Georgina Collins**
continues our series on how to make it as a freelancer

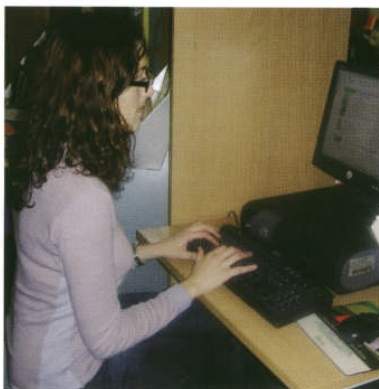
Translation has been likened to a journey where words and messages are transported between languages and from one culture to another, but translators also have to undergo a long and often unpredictable voyage during their working lives. My journey started just over a year ago. Having worked in media and marketing for 10 years, following a degree in modern languages at Durham University, I found myself stuck in a well-paid but unrewarding job.

The decision to move into translation was an easy one. I have always been passionate about languages, and had used French, Spanish and German in previous jobs, sometimes translating press releases and marketing communications documents.

But when I left Warwick University this summer, having completed an MA in translation, the reality of the industry hit me for the first time. Thanks to the work I had done on Francophone African women's poetry for my dissertation, I already had a book deal with Heaventree Press, but I was well aware that poetry translation alone would not pay the bills.

I started to look at how I could break into the more commercial side of the industry. I had been told by a visiting lecturer to Warwick University that the best way of gaining work as a freelance translator is to promote a USP (Unique Selling Point). It seemed to me that, as a chartered marketer, the one way I could differentiate myself from other new translators would be by drawing attention to my marketing and media experience.

I began by selling myself as a translator of marketing communications materials, but when I considered approaching agencies, I



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realised I had some fundamental questions: Firstly, is it possible to break directly into the industry? (Most agencies ask for several years' experience, often as an in-house translator). Secondly, how long might it take before I have enough translation work to go full-time? And finally, how much should I charge?

I needed some expert advice and decided to contact Ros Schwartz, an experienced freelance translator who had guest lectured at Warwick University. Even though we had barely met before, she invited me to London for a chat, and it was

one of the most insightful discussions about the industry that I have ever had. Ros is a firm believer in mentoring within the industry, and she has put several jobs my way. I would definitely recommend that those starting out as translators seek similar support from an experienced translator.

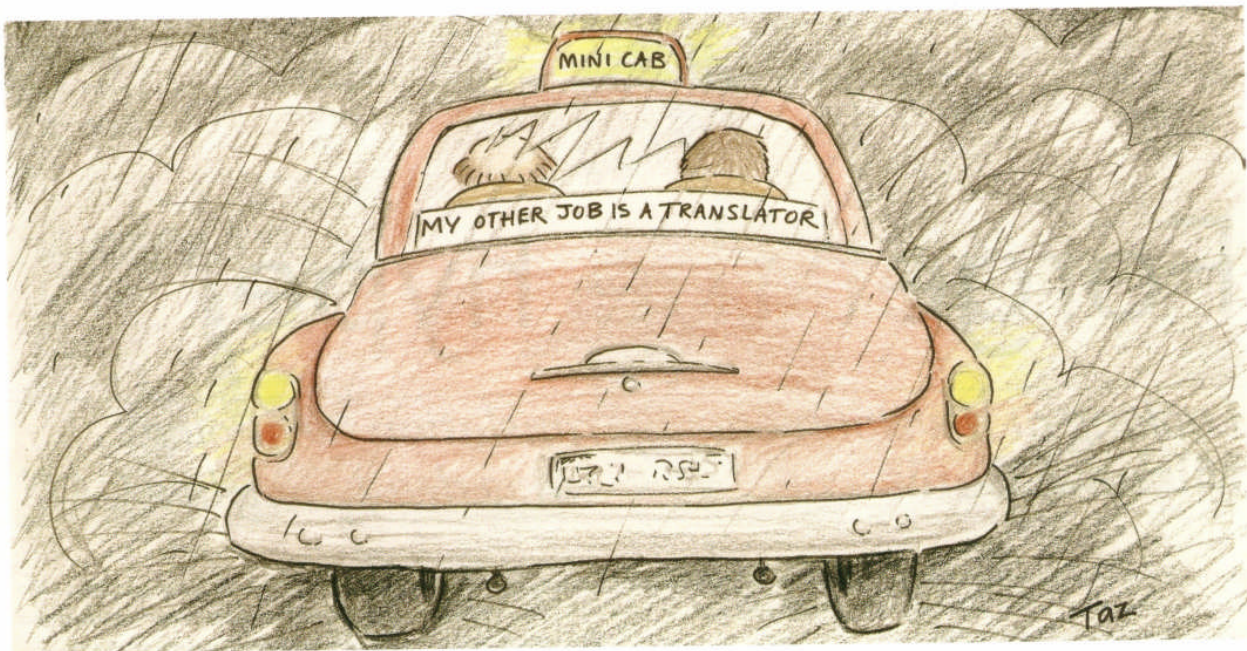
So what makes a successful translator? Ros highlighted four essential characteristics: reliability, good time-keeping, an ability to take criticism and enthusiasm. Obvious, you make think, but clients cannot always take these qualities for granted, so if you've got them, let the agencies know when you approach them for work.

Although it is generally easier to break into freelance translation through an in-house position, it is possible to work as a freelance translator from the outset. I was advised to meet agency representatives face to face, so as to stand out among other hopefuls.

Attending conferences to make contacts, completing courses to improve skills and joining industry organisations such as the IoL and ITI are also useful ways of self-promotion that help to maximise the potential for success.

With regards to charges, I was told not to sell myself short just because I was a relatively new translator. If you can do a professional job, then you should charge a professional rate.

However, I was still very concerned about earning enough money to survive, and it seemed unlikely that I would receive enough translation work to go full-time at first. I decided to look for a flexible job that would allow me to work on translations



when they came in, but would ensure that I had sufficient funds to pay the bills.

I started working for Guide Dogs for the Blind in the evenings. This allowed me to focus on translation work during the day, but also guaranteed that some money would come in when work was quiet.

Another consideration for freelance translators is whether they will be happy working alone, but for me, this was not a problem. In fact, I relished the thought, and have enough social interests outside work to keep me from becoming a hermit.

The most important piece of advice Ros gave me was to be there when someone calls or emails with a job; if you don't respond quickly enough, an opportunity may be lost. Luckily, my mobile phone contract was up for renewal, and I replaced my old handset with a Blackberry, which alerts me when messages come through to my work email account.

I also rewrote my CV, in both English and French, to focus on the language elements of my previous career, and set up a new work email account. I then began to contact agencies for work. Some agreed to put me on their lists; others clearly wanted more experience. However, it wasn't long before my first job came in – to translate a marketing pitch for a new range of beauty products.

I was excited to receive my first piece of work and put in extra hours to really perfect it. But one of the major things I learnt is that, however good a translation appears to be at the end of a working day, rested eyes

TOP TIPS

- 1 **Seek advice from people in the industry: you can learn huge amounts from individuals with experience and they can fundamentally influence your future.**
- 2 **Constantly push yourself: through courses, background reading, attending conferences, etc.**
- 3 **Keep up with your clients: you want to make sure you are the first person who springs to mind when work comes in.**
- 4 **Understand your limitations: say no if a job is too long or not within your area of expertise. I recently turned down a 63,000-word job because I do not have the time, which is far better than doing a bad job.**

the next morning will always find things that need rewording or rephrasing.

I also like to read my translations aloud, or even give them to my partner to read. When you become very close to a piece of work, clarity of thinking becomes much harder. I soon started the practice of inserting comments on my translations as I go along, especially if there is ambiguity in the source text. It is easy to forget elements of uncertainty and this is a simple way of remembering the things you need to double check.

As I started work on my third job, I had a surprise call from Warwick University offering me a scholarship to do a PhD in translation studies – something I couldn't turn down. I was keen to continue my research on the translation of works by Francophone African women writers, but my finances wouldn't have stretched to further study without the scholarship.

I now have the best of all worlds – I have just started my PhD, which fits in nicely with the research I am doing for my book, and I do some translation on the side.

So my journey has taken me a long way in a very short time. Some friends and colleagues thought I was crazy to give up a well-paid job to follow a heady dream, but the risk was definitely worth it. I went out in pursuit of happiness in my working life and now I have it. Just as language evolves, so will the translator, and that's what will make my journey an unpredictable but thrilling one.

Ros Schwartz continues the series in TL46,4.

L Georgina Collins works as a freelance translator and is studying for a PhD at Warwick University.