

A Series:

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE STANDARDS



PROGRESS OR PASSÉ?

Interpreting is a practice profession marked by normative expressions such as “it depends,” to justify decisions no matter where they fall on the professional conservative-liberal scale. The fact that there are little to no occupational barriers to entry allows opportunity for a beautifully diverse range of experiences and skill sets; however, regulation becomes that much more of a challenging undertaking. Even as Interpreter Training Programs (also known as Interpreter Education Programs) continue to graduate work-ready interpreters, oftentimes there is insufficient emphasis focused on preparation as a professional. This creates a dynamic in which much of the onus is placed upon the practitioners to instill professional and ethical values in their emerging counterparts. This can lead to further perpetuation of outdated and unevolved practices.

Our industry’s struggle with progress is evidenced by commonly echoed expressions of ‘how young’ we still are as a profession, while on the same soapbox, exclaiming how long Deaf Individuals, CODAS, and other Community-bred interpreters have been doing this work. Correct, there have not always been delineated best practices, codes of professional conduct, or research to help us best navigate interpreting holistically, and we have readily accepted mechanisms and approaches to further professionalize the field and market it as a legitimate career choice for both Deaf and Hearing individuals. However, have we arrived at an impasse in our professional field of practice? Do we find it easier to be progressive only when it aligns with our personal feelings and expectations, or are we desirous of watching our industry elevate and expand?

COVID-19 initiated an unprecedented shift to the remote provision of interpreting services, while simultaneously opening up the industry to limitless access to interpreters across the globe. These changes seemingly brought about new, unsubstantiated business practices with dwindling in-person requests and increasing virtual requests. The onset of this drastic turn caused economic hardships for many interpreters attempting to navigate a new landscape.

Hiring entities began leveraging potential work volume to manipulate interpreters into accepting terms contrary to known industry standards, pressuring them to make decisions out of economic necessity instead of best practice. This was often strongly implied by suggestive commentary, leading interpreters to believe not accepting these new terms would reduce their opportunity for future work. While enjoying the flexibility of being independent contractors, these capricious changes can have damaging impacts and be counterproductive to progress.

Undoubtedly, the aforementioned will resonate with many contract interpreters as it is their lived experience. However, we challenge the logic that doing the same work remotely warrants a devaluation of the service. Over the last four decades interpreters have been making strides to legitimize and standardize the profession of Sign Language Interpreting, yet, even with the substantial progress the industry has experienced, apparent residual ambiguity continues to cause inconsistent application of established standards.





LET'S INTRODUCE ONE STANDARD FOR ANALYSIS

VRI and the Two-Hour Minimum

Video Remote Interpreting (VRI/Virtual) has opened the door and increased the availability of more qualified and diverse interpreting services, not just nationally, but internationally. Why then, with the introduction of Remote Interpreting as a viable, credible, and reliable avenue for utilizing and requesting interpreting services, would we now question how interpreting through this mechanism would alter billing? How and why would this differ from in-person requests? Where and how do we establish industry standards, or on what do we base their premise?

The 2-hour minimum is designed to counterbalance the financial obligations of the contractor. It is neither unique nor exclusive to the field of interpreting and can be likened to similar stipulations outlined in a contractor's terms and conditions. So, what does the assessment look like for an interpreter determining whether accepting an assignment is financially viable? Whether in-person or virtual, the individual practitioner must come to this conclusion on their own factoring in the following:

- The necessary time allotted for preparation
- Arrival to and from assignments
- Transition between virtual and in-person assignments
- Setup for virtual assignments
- Job-specific attire

Unlike in-person assignments where mileage and/or travel time is an expected billable expense in addition to the 2-hour minimum, the same cannot be said for expenses attributed to remote work, such as, but not limited to: ADA¹ mandated high-speed internet, the need for multiple devices and/or monitors, webcams, headsets, and fluctuating power bills. Additional factors that often go unconsidered are the costs associated with maintaining professional credentials, certifications, permits, and licenses at both the state and national level, coupled with the payment of 2-3 taxes depending on their place of residence. All of the above would suffice, yet often trivialized by hiring entities are the increased mental and physical impacts, along with the technical demands placed upon interpreters now working in a digital, 2-D environment. Interpreting agencies, sadly, can be the biggest culprits in this situation, instituting huge shifts in pay rates and adjusting terms, leading to mistrust and confusion among contractors when asked arbitrarily to accept less pay for essentially the same work.

¹ If VRI is chosen, all of the following specific performance standards must be met:

- real-time, full-motion video and audio over a dedicated high-speed, wide-bandwidth video connection or wireless connection that delivers high-quality video images that do not produce lags, choppy, blurry, or grainy images, or irregular pauses in communication;
- a sharply delineated image that is large enough to display the interpreter's face, arms, hands, and fingers, and the face, arms, hands, and fingers of the person using sign language, regardless of his or her body position;
- a clear, audible transmission of voices; and
- adequate staff training to ensure quick set-up and proper operation





So, if seemingly every attempt at advancement is met with resistance, how do we cross over this impasse?

WE SUGGEST THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION AND PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSION:

- 1 What will become of our professional standards in the next 5-10 years?
- 2 Should we continue to strive for standardization?
- 3 Where and how do we find the middle ground between innovative change-makers and those who are comfortable with the current state of the profession?
- 4 How do we incentivize those who are not legally held to industry standards, due to varying geographic regulations, and simultaneously prevent regression?
- 5 How do we approach arbitrary professional fees that are incongruent with an interpreter’s qualifying experience and professional credentials?
- 6 How do we remain financially competitive without being cost-prohibitive for the communities we serve?

It’s incumbent upon us as professionals, practitioners, and educators to truly analyze our current industry standards as we know them and strive towards continuous evolution. We are the change agents. Said evolution cannot happen by way of endless superficial discourse or gatekeeping. We cannot operate in silos and expect collective sustainable reform. As Sign Language Interpreting receives more attention due to the increased visibility of the Deaf Community, legitimacy is ever more essential. Professions go through maturation phases and naturally experience growing pains. Even with varied state-level requirements, we all have an impact on what the profession can become and how it will be recognized. Upholding unified standards of practice is mutually beneficial for practitioners, hiring entities, and the communities we serve. Progress does not have to be passé.

PLEASE SHARE THIS ARTICLE WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS TO CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE, AND LOOK OUT FOR MORE ARTICLES IN THIS SERIES.

