

Reprint

Summary of first findings of the ADÜ Nord earnings survey of freelance translators and interpreters working with German

Helke Heino on behalf of the ADÜ Nord Survey Team; updated 30 January 2006

Purpose

As an association of translators and interpreters, ADÜ Nord wishes to provide the entire profession with up-to-date market data on the earnings situation of freelance translators and interpreters (T/I). Its aim is to improve the information situation in the T/I sector and to create transparency and provide comparative data that will offer practical guidance to help both beginners and experienced colleagues make their way within the profession.

Target group

The survey addressed all translators and interpreters worldwide working with German who were active on a freelance basis in 2003.

It was expressly not a representative survey in the strict statistical sense, since the universe of such translators and interpreters is not known.

Method

The survey was conducted using a questionnaire which the respondents completed on their own, either on the Internet or on paper. It was publicized in the international T/I community with the assistance of relevant associations, members' magazines, Internet portals and mailing lists, and also thanks to the great commitment and dedication of individual colleagues.

The questionnaire was designed by the four members of the ADÜ Nord survey group under the leadership of external marketing consultant Dr. Thea Döhler (Triacom Unternehmensberatung).

The paper and online versions of the questionnaire were tested and optimized in several runs with the aid of a panel of experts and two groups of testers. The questionnaire comprised 35 questions, some of which

were further differentiated by means of filters and follow-up questions.

Implementation

The online survey was created by the Hamburg market research institute PhoneResearch, which also collected the data and produced tabular overviews of the raw data.

The survey was available for completion online on the Internet from 15 October 2004 to 31 January 2005; any questionnaires completed on paper were also accepted during this period and the answers entered in the electronic data capture system.

Analysis and interpretation of the data by the ADÜ Nord survey team is divided into two phases: during the first phase in February and March 2005 the team analysed and collated the answers to the questions and attempted an initial interpretation. The results are set out in this short report. Work on detailed analysis of the complex data material started in April. By examining correlations between specific questions we hope to reveal interesting cross relationships. The detailed results will be published in the full report in late summer 2005.

Anonymity of the participants was assured by keeping data capture (PhoneResearch) separate from data analysis (ADÜ Nord), and the fact that the respondents were able to take part without having to disclose data permitting their individual identification.

Response

A total of 819 translators and interpreters took part in the survey. Most of them (95%) answered the questions online. This figure and all percentages stated below are rounded.

Demographic data

The answers to the demographic questions about age and gender confirm the distribution generally found in the professional associations: more than two thirds (71%) are women, 73% are in the middle age bracket from 30 to 49, and only 1% of respondents are less than 25 years old.

It is not surprising that 69% of the respondents gave Germany as their country of residence, because one of the requirements for taking part in the survey was German as a working language. Also the initiative for the survey came from a professional association in Germany.

The fact that 93% of the respondents described themselves as individual translators or interpreters without business partners or employees is probably also due to the target group of this survey ("freelance") and does not necessarily reflect the actual distribution on the market.

Qualifications and experience

Replying to the question about qualifications in translating/interpreting, 67% of the respondents confirmed that they possessed such a qualification. For the purpose of this question, "qualification" included not only relevant university qualifications, but also non-academic examinations such as "state-recognized translator/interpreter", the "Diploma in Translation" of the Institute of Linguists and other similar qualifications.

The answers to the question about how long they had been working as freelance translators or interpreters revealed a broad even spread of around 20% in each of the four categories covering the range from 3 to 29 years. An interesting difference emerged when the categories 1 to 2 years and 30 or more years professional experience were correlated with the qualifications in translating and interpreting: more than 77% of the respondents with 1 to 2 years professional experience have a qualification in T/I, whereas fewer than 54% of the respondents with 30 or more years experience claimed to have a T/I qualification.

Professional associations

69% of the respondents said they were a member of one or more professional associations. Multiple responses were permitted when specifying the associations that these 69% of the respondents belonged to. In view of the large proportion of respondents resident in Germany, it is hardly surprising that the largest German professional association, BDÜ (around 5100 members at the time of the survey) was by far the most frequently named association with 50%. This was followed by ADÜ Nord with 14%. It is interesting to note that third place, with 11%, was taken by the ATA (American Translators Association). In fourth place came the VdÜ (German association of

literary translators) with 8%, followed by the British ITI (Institute of Translation and Interpreting), the international interpreters' association AIIIC, the German association of technical writers (tekomp) and the British Institute of Linguists (IoL), each with 3%. The German association Aticom and the German terminologists' association DTT both recorded just over 2%. The Berlin-based VÜD and the Austrian association Universitas reached only 1.4%.

Mother tongue and direction of translation

Multiple responses were also possible for the mother-tongue question, as the translating and interpreting community includes a relatively large number of individuals with two or more mother tongues. 71% of the respondents gave German as their mother tongue; English ranked second with 14%. Other major European languages such as French, Italian and Spanish recorded between 5% and 3%, closely followed by Dutch with 2%, which corresponds to 14 responses.

A further 30 languages were mentioned as mother tongues, including such "exotic" languages as Chinese, Kurdish, Afrikaans and Persian, though these were only mentioned by one person in each case.

Asked about their main working language, most respondents mentioned German. The reason is of course that German as a working language was one of the requirements for taking part in this survey. Translations from and into English accounted for the largest proportion (en → de 35%, de → en 23%). These were far ahead of fr → de and de → fr with 5% each and de → es with 4%.

None of the other main translation directions mentioned reached 4%. These amounted to a total of 69 different language pairs, which together accounted for the remaining 28%.

Sworn/certified translators

Some 43% of all respondents (349 persons) said that they were sworn or certified translators for German. Of these 349 sworn translators, 82% said they were sworn or certified in Germany.

Translation memory systems

The question "Do you use translation memory systems?" was answered in the affirmative by nearly two thirds (64%) of all respondents. The question of the systems employed and the types of discount in common use will be investigated in the detailed analysis.

Professional development

It was encouraging to note that 68% of the respondents (557) said that they took advantage of professional development (further training) opportunities in the form of seminars, conferences,

lectures etc. The great majority of these 557 respondents (79%) indicated that they spent less than 500 EUR per year (net, excluding travel) on their professional development; 15% spend between 500 and 1000 EUR; and only 6% are prepared to invest more in professional development.

Subject areas

It goes without saying that multiple responses were possible here. It was possible to choose from 10 pre-defined answers, but respondents were also able to specify other subject areas under "Other". 61% of the respondents specified "Industry and Technology", followed by 53% "Commercial and Finance", 49% "Legal", 49% "Marketing and Advertising" and 44% "Information Technology".

In a separate question the respondents were asked whether they also worked as literary translators, and 13% answered yes. This also explains the relatively frequent mentions of the literary translators' association VdÜ with 8%.

Working hours

The question about average time spent working as a freelance translator or interpreter (including incidental business-related tasks) reveals the breakdown of the respondents into part-time and full-time workers:

- under 20 hours per week: 17%
- 20 to 39 hours per week: 35%
- 40 or more hours per week: 48%

When asked how their weekly working hours as a freelance translator or interpreter were broken down among the various activities, the respondents' answers averaged out at 65% for "Own translating", 10% for "Correcting and editing", 8% for "Administration and Accounting", and 6% for "Own interpreting". The categories "Marketing", "Project management", "Job placement", "Business travel" and "Miscellaneous" accounted for the remaining 11%.

30% of the respondents stated that they had other paid work in addition to their freelance work as a translator or interpreter.

Client structure

44% of the respondents have only 1 to 5 regular clients, 28% have 6 to 9 regular clients, 20% have 10 to 19 regular clients, and 8 percent have 20 or more regular clients.

The respondents' average customer portfolio is made up of 51% direct clients, 39% agencies and 10% colleagues. It is interesting to note that with growing professional experience the proportion of direct clients increases and the proportion of agencies decreases. There are at least two possible explanations for this trend: as their professional experience grows,

translators and interpreters increasingly look for direct clients because they can usually earn more in this segment. Or it may be that there were fewer agencies in the past, with the result that colleagues who have been active for longer have always had more direct clients for historical reasons.

In the client category "Colleagues" it is striking to note that beginners in particular said they received jobs from colleagues – indicating that networking pays as a means of getting a foot in the door.

A more detailed look at the direct client category reveals the following picture: trade and industry (mechanical engineering, import/export, etc.) take first place with 38% among the respondents' clients. Service providers (advertising agencies, insurance companies, banks etc.) follow in second place with 22%, and private individuals actually rank third with 14%. This probably reflects the sizeable proportion (43%) of sworn translators among the respondents, as the types of text that require certification, such as job testimonials, examination certificates, marriage and birth certificates, tend to be in the private sector. In fourth and fifth place, with 10% and 9% respectively, come public authorities and publishing companies.

The great majority of respondents (657) work for two or more of the three client categories, and 88% of these charge different prices for the different client categories.

Interpreting

The question "Do you work as an interpreter?" received the answer "yes" from 33% and "no" from 67% of the respondents. Thus one third of all the respondents work at least part of the time as interpreters, and the following information on interpreting relates to this subgroup of 269 respondents.

The categories for the question "What types of interpreting do you do?" were pre-defined, and multiple responses were possible:

- Whispered interpreting: 73%
- Court interpreting: 50%
This figure too is presumably associated with the large proportion of sworn translators in the survey.
- Conference interpreting, simultaneous: 44%
- Conference interpreting, consecutive: 47%
- Trade fair and escort interpreting: 48%
It is noticeable that beginners in particular work in this field. The detailed analysis should reveal what influence this has on prices in this segment.
- TV interpreting: 11%
- Sign language interpreting: 4%

The follow-up question regarding fee categories (per day, half-day or hour) and price ranges for individual types of interpreting brought a wide range of different answers. These are analysed in a 23-page section of the full report.

Translating

The question "Do you work as a translator?" received the answer "yes" from 98% and "no" from 2% of the respondents. Thus nearly all the respondents work at least part of the time as translators, and the following information on translating relates to this subgroup of 805 respondents.

For the question "How do you usually charge for your translation services?" the categories were pre-defined and multiple responses were possible:

- Per line: 67%
This is the traditional basis for charging in Germany, and it is evidently still in widespread use. The great majority (84%) of this subgroup charge on the basis of the target language. For 77% of them, a line has 55 key strokes.
- Per word: 45%
This is the usual method of charging in English-speaking countries, and in many other countries as well. Presumably the effects of globalization are making themselves felt here. More than two thirds (70%) of this subgroup charge on the basis of the source language.
- Per hour: 26%
- Per page: 14%
This is the method used by literary translators when charging publishing companies, and it correlates with the 14% of respondents who also translate literary texts.
- Per keystroke: 8%
In the open question "What is your range of fees (net, in EUR) for the relevant method of charging?" the respondents stated their maximum and minimum prices for the different client categories. Only a few examples of the price ranges are quoted here, and it must be stressed that these relate to undifferentiated data that have not yet been filtered in terms of direction of translation, line length, target or source language, location of translator and similar criteria.

Charging per word reveals an absolute range of between 0.03 and 0.40 EUR for direct clients, and between 0.02 and 0.35 EUR for agencies.

The mean minimum and mean maximum values calculated from these figures result in a range of between 0.12 and 0.16 EUR for direct clients and between 0.09 and 0.12 EUR for agencies.

When it comes to charging per line, the absolute range is the same for both direct clients and agencies (0.29 to 5.00 EUR). The mean minimum and mean maximum values calculated from these figures result in a range of between 1.11 and 1.53 EUR for direct clients and between 0.94 and 1.09 EUR for agencies.

As well as translating, 72% of the translator subgroup also offer revision, editing and proof-reading services.

Surcharges and min. charge per order

More than half of the 819 respondents (52%) make a surcharge for weekend work and/or rush jobs or make surcharges based on some other system.

More than two thirds of the respondents (70%) make a minimum charge for small jobs.

Annual profit before taxes

The central question in this study was: "What was your pre-tax profit for the year in 2003 from your freelance work in all languages as a translator/interpreter?" The question defined »pre-tax profit« as sales revenue less business expenditure (the latter including any fees paid for external translations), but before deduction of taxes and personal insurance.

	Working hours per week		
	40 or more	20-39	under 20
Loss	3%	5%	10%
00 to 10,000 €	7%	22%	66%
10 to 20,000 €	13%	26%	13%
20 to 30,000 €	17%	24%	10%
30 to 40,000 €	21%	9%	-
40 to 50,000 €	13%	6%	-
50 to 60,000 €	10%	4%	-
60 to 70,000 €	6%	3%	-
70 to 80,000 €	3%	-	-
80 to 90,000 €	3%	-	-
over 90,000 €	4%	-	-

Above this level the air is very thin: only 5% of the respondents made a pre-tax profit of over 70,000 EUR in 2003. Presumably most of the 27% respondents in the two lowest categories are beginners or part-time translators/interpreters.

What people have to say about their profit trends comes as a surprise: 49% of the respondents say their profit increased from 2000 to 2003, another 30% say their profit remained roughly constant, and only 21%, in other words one fifth, report a decline in profit. So it looks as if most colleagues have found ways and means of getting around the economic crisis and coping with the widely lamented pressure on prices in our business.

The full report on the findings of this ADÜ Nord survey has now been published, in German only, as »Auskommen mit dem Einkommen?« (172 pages including colour graphics, ISBN: 3-8334-3343-4, price: 45.80 EUR).

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