

# Time for company

Three ITI Corporate Members tell the story of their growth from single-person enterprises to bigger businesses

**Many translators and interpreters remain as individuals – maybe working in collaboration with others on particular projects, but essentially as one-person businesses. Others find, as time goes on, that they want to take on colleagues or employees, and expand. Débora Chobanian of WordlyWise Interpreting, Raheleh Ghiasvand Ghazvini of Write Co., and Lauren Shadi of Give Me Your Word talk about their own experiences of scaling up.**

## Starting in the translation and interpreting field

**DC:** I was born in São Paulo and moved to the UK in the late 1990s, after years of working in marketing and publishing, to pursue my dream of becoming a linguist. I started as a freelancer back in 1999.

I continued for 14 years and I did enjoy it, but it took me a long time to have enough clients to work solely as a freelancer. It is very challenging and one has to diversify – so, for instance, I've worked as a project manager for large language service providers (LSPs).

**RGG:** I moved into translation during the course of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. In 2003, I passed a number of exams and started my career as a sworn translator licensee. In 2012, I came to the UK and started work here; I went back to my home country in 2016, returning to the UK in April 2022.

I joined ITI as a Qualified Member in August 2022 and continued working as a freelancer for about five months, and during this time, my customers increased considerably in number. I decided to become a Corporate Associate to start providing certified translation in other languages as well.

**LS:** I got a first in French studies at the University of Manchester and went straight on to an MA course in translation at Salford University, as I knew I definitely wanted to use my French in my career. I chose a module in business interpreting, where I got a taste for consecutive interpreting. I started with a job that took me to France every other week, and then registered with Manchester-based translation and interpreting agencies, while I also undertook the DPSI law course at night school.

I worked as a freelancer up till the end of 2021, and I loved it. I enjoyed the variety that each day brought. I loved doing a job that genuinely made a difference to people's lives (particularly

interpreting), and I also loved constantly keeping up and developing my French language skills.

## Deciding to expand from freelancing alone

**RGG:** Customers started requesting translations in other language pairs, and I wanted to explore the possibility of supplying these.

For instance, many of my Farsi-speaking customers had relatives who had emigrated to countries such as Germany, France, Switzerland or Sweden after the revolution in Iran, and had now died – so my customers needed certified translations of personal documents in order to prove their heirship. I realised there was huge scope for providing certified translations, at a time when there is a vast degree of movement between different states and languages.

**DC:** Expansion for me happened organically.

In 2014, my interpreting business had grown to the point where it made sense to incorporate and operate as a company. Clients also kept asking me to organise all aspects of their events, beyond my capacity as an interpreter. I founded WordlyWise and have been operating successfully ever since.


I've had to put in a lot of work, and I've undertaken a number of training programmes focusing on areas like marketing and business models. But I felt that by having my own company, I could give more attention to my clients and have more control over the delivery. It meant I could avoid the kind of challenging situations I had often faced in the past as the result of poor planning or not enough information.

**LS:** I found that I was working all hours (including weekends and evenings) to make a reasonable living each month.

My husband had been encouraging me for years to start my own agency. Taking into account the ever-increasing pressures on freelancers in our industry, when he set up his own property management company I took the plunge too and branched out into a fully fledged agency, with a focus on offering fair rates and fair terms to linguists.

## Getting a bigger business under way

**DC:** I took on a team of people who were already friends and colleagues, who shared the same passion for high-quality service, and had similar frustrations. It was tough putting it together – not least because I decided to hire senior project managers, to



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reflect our position as a premium service provider – but these days we work very well together. We also had to implement tools and operating systems so that we had sound systems in place before we formally started operating as a business.

My management style is quite innovative. We work as a team: most decisions are made collectively and discussed to reach the best outcome. I have an open-doors policy, and my team members know that they can challenge me and express their opinions.

**LS:** At first I was juggling everything by myself, which wasn't sustainable. Then I took on a virtual assistant (VA), who helped with the admin, marketing and interpreter bookings. However, as the workload built up, I realised the constraints of working with VAs and that I needed someone dedicated to our business. I took on my first in-house project manager on a part-time basis and quickly followed up with another in order to have full-time cover.

There were other issues that we needed to sort out as well. At that early stage, everything was done manually, so I investigated all the software options on the market. After approximately six months (and many meetings and trials) I found the packages for us. We have become much more

efficient ever since. We then recruited a linguist relations officer and a project administrator. We are also supported by external services for things like accounting and IT.

**RGG:** There was a lot to do. After registering my company in the UK, I needed a business visa to come and work in the UK and put my initiatives into effect.

As an applicant for an innovator visa, I needed to provide a very detailed business plan (and that took me about six months to research), along with a comprehensive three-year financial forecast, which was an integral part of the business plan package.

After arriving in the UK in April 2022, I had to contend with a lot of new realities, including inflation, strikes and economic recession, and I soon found out that this meant allocating extra capital!

I prepared two websites: one devoted to my own language pair, and another one for all other language pairs. I also needed webmasters and programmers and tech support. Then there were legal and regulatory concerns such as bookkeeping and tax regulations, which are often complex and time-consuming. In addition, I still needed to do market research and become more familiar with industry trends.

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# LinkedIn for translators

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Up to now I have used quite a lot of contracting staff for things like bookkeeping, programming, graphic design, IT, Intellectual Property Office (IPO) registration and so on, but I'm now thinking of offering some suitable people permanent positions in the business.

**The highlights and the downsides**

**RGG:** Expanding a business can be as exciting and rewarding as starting it. One of the interesting aspects is that it naturally stimulates innovation, and I began to seek ways to meet the different customer needs which I could see developing. On the other hand, expansion certainly involves challenges and risks, including increased complexity, financial commitments and wider competition.

I had to be very careful and research a lot of things – including assessing risk and finances – in order to maximise the benefits while minimising potential downsides and ensuring that the business grew sustainably.

**DC:** The highlights include being able to persuade top organisations to take us on as a supplier and prove that we could do as well as or even better than the 'big ones'.

The downside is having more responsibility, less time for myself – and a lot more expense, since being able to manage and deliver larger projects involves higher costs such as software fees, processing payments and many other fixed charges, which are not always appreciated by contractors. It is exhausting not having much time left for myself and my family. And I still work as an interpreter myself for other clients.

**LS:** The highlights include the satisfaction of knowing that I have created an agency that has a focus on offering fair rates and terms to interpreters and translators and guaranteeing a quality service to clients. I'm also very proud to have a great team, who teach me as much as I have taught them.

But yes, there are downsides too. I've gone from being a one-woman band with no major expenses to having to pay over 100 contractors a month, as well as salaries, software fees and many other bills – whether the clients have paid us or not. I'm also dependent on contractors to care as much as I do, knowing that if they don't, it's the reputation of my business that's at stake. And finally, I'm in a market with other agencies that charge lower rates to clients but with whom I simply will not compete, because that would also mean offering low rates to our interpreters, which is against our policy.

**Arrangements in the companies today**

**LS:** We have two project managers, a project administrator and a linguist relations officer. We all work remotely but we come together at least once a week to collaborate.

We communicate throughout the day and we make sure we meet up regularly for team lunches and social events. Although I am very happy working in my own little bubble, I know remote working isn't for everyone, so I make an effort to suggest face-to-face interaction as much as possible to keep the whole team feeling happy.

**RGG:** The company now focuses on providing certified/official translation in more languages, including (but not limited to) Chinese, Spanish, French, German, Pashto and Arabic.

We work with over 12 official translators in various different language pairs. We also have project managers, IT experts and a webmaster to support the business. At the moment,

everyone is working remotely, but I'm exploring the possibility of having staff work on-site at least two days a week.

**DC:** I have a management team of four additional people – all of us trained linguists. Then we have a much larger team of interpreters, who operate in a range of different languages, working with us. We all work remotely, but they are deployed on-site as needed, and I also work on-site when we are setting up equipment or delivering events.



**Reviewing and future planning**

**DC:** Our development and progress have certainly gone well. At the same time – as everyone is very much aware – the post-Brexit, post-Covid environment is extremely challenging for all of us. We are trying to get established and consolidate our growth, which is a bit hard in the current environment.

**LS:** Growth has gone well up to now. Our future plans are to go on developing the business while continuing to promote fair terms for our translators, interpreters and clients. I would particularly like to build our global profile, as well as to tender for more local public projects.

**RGG:** I'm pleased with where we are now, and have plans to add in new functionalities to our business. We are living in a tech era, and language services particularly need to keep adapting to this. In fact, my company has managed to develop a software with certain linguistic functionalities, and I am going to focus on this area.



Débora Chobanian is a well-established Brazilian Portuguese interpreter and translator based in London. She works from English and Portuguese. She specialises in

conference interpreting for international organisations and arbitrations as well as translation and intercultural training. She is a committee member of ITI-LRG as an Interpreters' Representative. She is also the CEO and founder of WordlyWise Interpreting.



Raheleh Ghiasvand Ghazvini started providing official translations as a sworn/certified freelance translator and then as the director of her UK linguistic services company, Write Co. Ltd.

In addition to certified translation, Raheleh has a passion for publishing and editing texts. She is keen to employ technology in linguistic services. She is a Qualified Member of ITI in the Farsi to English language direction, and legal and certified translation is her main area of expertise.



Lauren Shadi MITI is a FR>EN translator and FR<>EN interpreter. She has worked freelance since 2008 and specialises in legal and audiovisual fields and education.

She owns Give Me Your Word Ltd and thrives on interpreting in the criminal justice system.