DISTANCE INTERPRETING

Survey Results

As a first step towards “developing and adopting evidence-based working conditions that provide for both quality of interpretation and interpreter wellbeing” (Executive Committee, 2018), the Task Force on Distance Interpreting carried out an association-wide online survey on the frequency of use of different Distance Interpreting modalities in early 2018. To that end, 2772 active members, 82 candidates and 188 pre-candidates received an invitation to participate in the survey. Data were collected from January 8, 2018 to February 1, 2018 using a questionnaire comprising 66 questions relating to four different types of Distance Interpreting (i.e., Videoconference Interpreting VCI, Audioconference Interpreting ACI, Video Remote Interpreting VRI and Audio Remote Interpreting ARI). Of the 737 answers (which corresponds to a response rate of 24.2%), 664 complete data sets were retained for analysis. Consequently, the survey results have a margin of error of 3.36% (at 95% CI).

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

The age of respondents ranged from 25 to 80 years ($M = 52.86$, $SD = 11.5$). Age was non-normally distributed (see figure 1), with skewness of -0.03 ($SE = 0.45$) and kurtosis of -0.56 ($SE = 0.45$). The majority of respondents identified as female (74.5%); 24.7% as male and 0.8% as other. They had between 1 and 57 years ($M = 25.22$, $SD = 11.62$) of experience as professional conference interpreters (see figure 2) and had worked between 0 and 330 conference days ($M = 93.77$, $SD = 54.04$) during the previous year (see figure 3). The analysis is based on data from respondents domiciled in 56 countries (see figure 4) and is mainly made up of freelance interpreters (86%) (see figure 5). While 90% were active members, 2% were associate members, 1% were candidates and 6% were pre-candidates.
Figure 1: Age distribution (grouped)

Figure 2: Mean age and mean experience
Figure 3: Mean number of days worked during the previous year (2017)

Figure 4: Countries highest response rates (abridged)
Figure 5: Professional profile of respondents
VIDEOCONFERENCE INTERPRETING

Videoconference Interpreting (VCI) was defined as “Information and communications technology-enabled interpreting of one or more distant speaker(s)/signer(s), where the interpreter has a video-mediated view of the speaker/signer and a direct view of some or all the other participants at a given event”.

Illustrative example provided in the survey: A conference takes place in New York. Participants and interpreters are in the conference room in New York. A guest speaker from Sydney could not attend in person. She gives her presentation from Sydney – her image is projected on a screen, her voice broadcast over speakers and fed into the interpreters’ earphones. Interpreters in New York interpret the guest speaker from Sydney for the conference participants in New York.

Of the total sample, 80% report having provided Videoconference Interpreting before. This DI modality is mainly used for simultaneous interpreting ($M = 7.17$, $SD = 13.18$) and much less so for consecutive interpreting ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 13.7$) (see figure 6), whereby the frequency of use has remained the same for most interpreters (63%) increased for some (26%) and decreased for a small minority (11%) from 2016 to 2017 (see figure 7).

![Figure 6: Mean number of days worked in Videoconference Interpreting (VCI) in 2017](image-url)
Most staff interpreters report that their working conditions (or contracts) mostly remain silent on the use of Videoconference Interpreting (69%), only sometimes explicitly allowing it (29%) and almost never ruling it out (2%) (see figure 8).

Figure 7: Frequency of days worked in Videoconference Interpreting (VCI) in 2017

Figure 8: Information provided to staff interpreters on the use of Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)
In the case of freelance interpreters, the picture is much more heterogeneous (see figure 9). Data suggest that the majority of freelancers are rarely or never explicitly informed about the use of Videoconference Interpreting (43%), although almost as many (38%) report being informed often or always. The remaining 19% only sometimes receive this information upfront.

![Information provided to freelance interpreters on the use of Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)](image)

**Figure 9: Information provided to freelance interpreters on the use of Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)**

When videoconferences are used during an interpreted event, they tend to last between 15 minutes and two hours (see figure 10). Whereas in most cases (73%) the duration of the overall workday for conference remains unaffected by the use of videoconference interpreting, in some instances (27%) the use of this technology seems to go hand in hand with shorter events (see figure 11). Overall, wo/manning strength, in other words the number of interpreters assigned to any particular booth, does not seem to be affected by the use of this technology (see figure 12).
Figure 10: Duration of interpreted videoconferences (VCI)

Figure 11: Change in duration of workday at event with Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)
In terms of equipment, respondents report using traditional interpreting consoles much more often (90% of respondents use them always or often) than computers (31%) when providing Videoconference Interpreting (see figure 13). Having said that, visual input is provided on computer screens (in or outside the booth) almost as often (59%) as it is provided on giant screens outside the booth (65%). Surprisingly frequently (40% always or often), visual input is provided on both (see figure 14). While about half of respondents (48%) indicate that the likelihood of receiving the (manuscripts of read) texts during Videoconference Interpreting is the same as during ordinary in-situ conference interpreting (see figure 15), about half of them report that the chance of receiving such text in advance is lower (46% somewhat or much lower).

Figure 12: Change in wo/manning strength at event with Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)
Figure 13: Equipment used for Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)

Figure 14: Type of screen used for visual input during Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)
Figure 15: Availability of (manuscripts of read) text for Videoconference Interpreting (VCI)
AUDIOCONFERENCE INTERPRETING

For the purpose of our survey, we defined Audioconference Interpreting (ACI) as “Information and communications technology-enabled interpreting of one or more distant speaker(s), where the interpreter has no view of the speaker but a direct view of some or all the other participants at a given event”.

Illustrative example provided in the survey: A hearing takes place in Rio. Participants and interpreters are in the courtroom in Rio. A witness from Stockholm could not attend in person. He gives his testimony from Stockholm – his voice is broadcast over speakers and fed into the interpreters’ earphones but no image is projected. Interpreters in Rio interpret the witness from Stockholm for the participants of the hearing in Rio.

Overall, 37% of our sample indicated having provided Audioconference Interpreting before. Once more, this particular DI modality is used much more often for simultaneous interpreting ($M = 5.65$, $SD = 15.6$) than for consecutive interpreting ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 7.01$) (see figure 16). The frequency of use of Audioconference Interpreting has remained the same for most respondents (66%) from 2016 to 2017, whereas it increased for 20% and decreased for 13% of them (see figure 17).

Figure 16: Mean number of days worked in Audioconference Interpreting (ACI) in 2017
Most staff interpreters report that their working conditions (or contracts) do not address the use of ACI (64%). Sometimes, (24%) it is explicitly allowed, while at times (12%), albeit less often, it is ruled out (see figure 18). Freelancers report being informed about the use of ACI somewhat more frequently (46% always or often) than not (42% rarely or never) (see figure 19).
Figure 19: Information provided to freelance interpreters on the use of Audioconference Interpreting (ACI)

The majority of audioconferences last between 15 minutes and two hours (see figure 20) and although the duration of the overall workday remains the same for most interpreters (61%) some 39% report a reduction in workday duration (see figure 21). The number of interpreters assigned to events with audioconferences is usually the same (88%) as for an in-situ event (see figure 22).

Figure 20: Duration of interpreted audioconferences (ACI)
When providing Audioconference Interpreting, respondents report working mostly with traditional interpreting consoles (80% always or often), followed by phone (57% always or often) and computers (39% always or often) (see figure 23). In this DI modality, the likelihood of receiving the (manuscripts of read) texts is viewed as the same as during ordinary in-situ conference interpreting by just under half of respondents (45%), but as markedly lower by just over half (54%) (see figure 24).

Figure 21: Change in duration of workday at event with Audioconference Interpreting (ACI)

Figure 22: Change in wo/manning strength at event with Audioconference Interpreting (ACI)
Figure 23: Equipment used for Audioconference Interpreting (ACI)

- Console: 66% always, 14% often, 11% sometimes, 3% rarely, 0% never
- Computer: 37% always, 4% often, 21% sometimes, 16% rarely, 0% never
- Phone: 22% always, 7% often, 14% sometimes, 20% rarely, 0% never

Figure 24: Availability of (manuscripts of read) text for Audioconference Interpreting (ACI)

- Much higher: 45% always
- Somewhat higher: 2% often
- The same: 17% sometimes
- Somewhat lower: 3% rarely
- Much lower: 37% never
VIDEO REMOTE INTERPRETING

We defined Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) as “Information and communications technology-enabled interpreting of one or more distant speaker(s)/signer(s), where the interpreter has a video-mediated view of that speaker/signer but no direct view of the other participants at a given event”.

The example provided in the survey: A conference takes place in Dakar. Participants are in the conference room in Dakar. Some interpreters are in Paris, others in Mexico. The image of conference participants is projected on a screen, their voices fed into the interpreters’ earphones. Interpreters in Paris and Mexico interpret all conference proceedings for conference participants in Dakar.

Of our respondents, 26% had provided Video Remote Interpreting before. VRI is used more often for simultaneous interpreting ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 4.01$) than for consecutive interpreting ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 1.36$) (see figure 25). Overall, the frequency of use of Video Remote Interpreting has remained the same for half of respondents (51%) from 2016 to 2017. It increased for 30% of them while it decreased for only 19% (see figure 26).

Figure 25: Mean number of days worked in Video Remote Interpreting (2017)
The working conditions (or contracts) of just over half of staff interpreters do not address the use of VRI (53%). However, just under half (42%) report that their working conditions explicitly allow it. Very rarely (5%) is Video Remote Interpreting explicitly ruled out (see figure 27).
Freelancers report being informed about the use of VRI much more often (69% always or often) than not (27% rarely or never) (see figure 28).

The duration of the overall workday is shorter during Video Remote Interpreting (43% much or somewhat shorter vs. 2% much or somewhat longer) (see figure 29), whereas the number of
interpreters assigned to VRI events is usually the same (85%) as for an in-situ event (see figure 30).

**Figure 30:** Change in wo/manning strength at event with Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)

For VRI, respondents report mostly being located at the conference venue (75% always or often). Much less frequently are they at interpreting hubs (29% always or often) or at a private location.
(23% always or often) (see figure 31). They are usually in the same place as their booth mate(s) (86% always or often) but less often with the entire team (72% always or often) (see figure 32).

Figure 32: Interpreters’ physical location during Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)

Figure 33: Interpreters’ workspace during Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)

Soundproof booths are very often provided for VRI events (69% always or often). Yet, frequently there is no soundproof equipment available (38% always or often) while sometimes interpreters work in soundproof rooms rather than booths (22% always or often) (see figure 33).
When providing Video Remote Interpreting, respondents largely report working with traditional interpreting consoles (81% always or often) and less frequently with computers (40% always or often) (see figure 34). Visual input in Video Remote Interpreting is most often provided on one
screen (82%) and more rarely on multiple screens (39% always or often) (see figure 36). These screens are most often computer-screen sized (74%), although frequent use of giant screens is reported at 35%. The use of both types of screen simultaneously is reported at 29% (see figure 35). As for the visual input presented, most frequently this comprises the speaker (83%) and slides (61%) while listeners and speakers’ texts are most frequently not shown (60% and 79% respectively) (see figure 37). Finally, the likelihood of receiving the (manuscripts of read) texts is viewed as the same as during ordinary in-situ conference interpreting by the majority of respondents (59%), but as markedly lower by 33% and markedly higher by only 8% (see figure 38).

Figure 36: Number of screens used for visual input during Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)
Figure 37: Type of visual input provided during Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)

Figure 38: Availability of (manuscripts of read) text for Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)
AUDIO REMOTE INTERPRETING

In our survey, Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI) was defined as “Information and communications technology-enabled interpreting of one or more distant speaker(s), where the interpreter has no view of the speaker nor of any other participants at a given event”.

The illustrative example provided in the survey: An interview takes place in Vancouver. Interviewer and interviewee are in Vancouver. The interpreters are in New Delhi. The voices of the interviewer and interviewee are fed into the interpreters’ earphones but no image is projected. The interpreters in New Delhi interpret the entire interview for the participants in Vancouver.

Of our total sample, 17% had provided Audio Remote Interpreting before. Once more, this particular DI modality is used much more often for simultaneous interpreting ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 18.15$) than for consecutive interpreting ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 9.89$) (see figure 39). While for half of respondents the frequency of use of Audio Remote Interpreting has remained the same (52%) from 2016 to 2017 for almost a third (28%) it has risen while for about a fifth (20%) it has fallen. (see figure 40).

![Figure 39: Mean number of days worked in Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI) in 2017](image-url)
The working conditions (or contracts) of the majority of staff interpreters (69%) rule out ARI. In around a fifth of cases (23%) ARI is explicitly allowed; in 8% it is not mentioned (see figure 41). Freelancers report being informed about the use of ARI in most cases (86%) (see figure 42).
Figure 42: Information provided to freelance interpreters on the use of Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)

Figure 43: Change in duration of workday at event with Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)
The duration of the overall workday is shorter during Audio Remote Interpreting for most respondents (79%) and the same for the rest (see figure 43). The number of interpreters assigned to ARI events is the same as for an in-situ event for 56%, lower for 36% and higher for only 9% (see figure 44).

Figure 44: Change in wo/manning strength at event with Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)

Figure 45: Interpreters’ workplace during Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)
For ARI, respondents report mostly being located at a private location (65% always or often). Much less frequently are they at interpreting hubs (40% always or often) or at a conference venue (20% always or often) (see figure 45).

![Physical Location (ARI) Diagram]

**Figure 46: Interpreters’ physical location during Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)**

They are located in the same place as their booth mate(s) (44%) as often as they are not (44%) and generally not in the same place as the rest of the team (70% rarely or never) (see figure 46). They always or often work in non-soundproofed environments (72%) (see figure 47). When providing Audio Remote Interpreting, respondents largely report working with phones (65% always or often) and less frequently with traditional consoles (48% always or often) or computers (34% always or often) (see figure 48).

In ARI, the likelihood of receiving the (manuscripts of read) texts is viewed as markedly lower than during ordinary in-situ conference interpreting by the majority of respondents (58%). 33% of respondents report the likelihood to be the same, while for 9% it higher (see figure 49).
Figure 47: Interpreters’ workspace during Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)

Figure 48: Technical equipment used for Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)
Figure 49: Availability of (manuscripts of read) text for Audio Remote Interpreting (ARI)
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The direct comparison (where possible) of our data across the four Distance Interpreting (DI) modalities reveals interesting similarities and differences. For example, our data show that while for about half the interpreters surveyed the frequency of Distance Interpreting has remained the same in 2017, there is a general growth in the use of all four DI modalities (see figure 50). Similarly, simultaneous interpreting seems to be used most often, regardless of DI modality. Having said that, in absolute numbers, the average number of days worked in DI remains relatively low. For simultaneous, participants report providing VCI most often (just over 7 days on average), and VRI least often (just under 3 days on average). Both ACI and ARI were performed between 5 and 6 days on average. For consecutive, absolute figures are negligible for the video-based DI modalities (less than 1 day on average) and very low for audio-based DI modalities (between 1 and 2 days on average) (see figure 51). If the general growth trend continues, however, absolute figures can be expected to rise fairly rapidly.

Figure 50: Frequency of days worked in Distance Interpreting (DI) in 2017
Unlike VRI and ARI, where the duration of the “link” corresponds to the duration of the entire event, VCI or ACI are merely a part of a conference. Interestingly, the duration of both VCI and ACI do not usually appear to exceed two hours. In fact, both cluster around the one-hour mark (see figure 52). This appears to support the view that VCI and ACI are principally used to enable the temporally limited remote participation of a small number of individuals.

A comparison of the overall duration of the interpreters’ workday across the four DI modalities shows that this duration is either the same as for an ordinary in-situ assignment (without the use of such technologies), or shorter. In the case of ARI the result is particularly clear, indicating that almost 4 times out of 5 (79%) the event is shorter. We conclude, therefore, that currently ARI is associated with the shortest remotely interpreted events (see figure 53).
The extent to which interpreters (both staffers and freelancers) are made aware of the use of DI technologies (in their staff regulations, contracts or general working conditions), varies not only across employment status, but also across DI modality. Freelance interpreters, for example, know that they are expected to provide remote interpreting (VRI or ARI) much more often than that they will be teleconference interpreting (ACI or VCI) (see figure 54). This might suggest that the use of
teleconference interpreting has become more customary among conference organizers and perhaps more acceptable among conference interpreters. When it comes to staff interpreters, it is interesting to note that, more often than not, the use of VCI, ACI and VRI are not mentioned in their working conditions (see figure 55). When they are mentioned, these modalities are usually explicitly allowed. This is not the case for ARI, which staff interpreters’ working conditions almost systematically address – mainly to explicitly rule it out. These data (both from freelancers and staffers) might suggest that Audio Remote Interpreting is currently viewed as the most exceptional of the four DI modalities, and that it is therefore either ruled out entirely or explicitly mentioned in individual contracts. This might partly relate to the data gathered on wo/manning strength, which appears to be unaffected by the use of DI modalities, with the exception of ARI, where lower wo/manning levels are reported by 36% of respondents (see figure 56).

Figure 54: Information provided to freelance interpreters on the use of Distance Interpreting (DI)
As teleconference modalities (VCI and ACI) are part of a traditional conference event by definition, data on the physical location of interpreters were only collected for remote interpreting. These data show a very different picture for VRI and ARI. While interpreters providing VRI are generally located at the conference venue, those providing ARI usually work from a private location, while remote interpreting hubs are used relatively infrequently for either remote interpreting modality.
(see figures 57, 58, and 59). These data tally with those collected on the physical location of team mates and booth mates.

**Figure 57: Interpreters located at conference venue in VRI vs ARI**

**Figure 58: Interpreters located at remote interpreting hub in VRI vs ARI**
In VRI, 86% of interpreters are always or often located in the same place as their booth mates, while 72% are always or often in the same place as their team mates. Conversely, in ARI only 44% of interpreters always or often work in the same location as their booth mates, while 44% do not. What is more, 70% report only rarely or never working in the same location as their team mates (see figures 60 and 61).
With the exception of ARI, which is often provided over the phone (see figure 64), interpreters usually work with traditional consoles when providing DI (see figure 62). For the time being, computers are not the main interface for any of the four DI modalities (see figure 63).
In VRI, interpreters usually receive the visual image on a computer-sized screen; additionally, giant screens or a combination of computer-sized and giant screens are used about equally frequently (see figures 65, 66 and 67).
**Figure 65: Frequency of use computer screen for VCI vs VRI**

![Chart showing the frequency of use computer screen for VCI vs VRI.](image)

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<th>VRI</th>
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<tr>
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<td>sometimes</td>
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<td>rarely</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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**Figure 66: Frequency of use of giant screen in VCI vs VRI**

![Chart showing the frequency of use of giant screen in VCI vs VRI.](image)

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<td>sometimes</td>
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<tr>
<td>rarely</td>
<td>6%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>never</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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</table>

- VCI: Virtual Court Interpreting
- VRI: Virtual Remote Interpreting
Finally, and importantly, our data show that the likelihood of receiving texts (or manuscripts of prepared speeches) is lower during DI than it is during ordinary in-situ conference interpreting (see figure 68).
CONCLUSION

The objective of this first AIIC survey on the use of DI was to map the landscape and better understand the type and frequency of distance interpreting modalities used by members. The first yet perhaps not the most surprising conclusion might well be that all Distance Interpreting is not the same. Not only are the four DI modalities under scrutiny rather different from a technical point of view, they also differ with regard to their frequency of use and their implementation. Consequently, these differences need to be acknowledged and should guide the discussion on working conditions governing different Distance Interpreting modalities. We have also found that Distance Interpreting is often not addressed in conference interpreters’ working conditions. While we do not yet have universal standards governing DI technology, conference interpreters should at least be informed about their workplace and their workspace (including the kind of technology employed) prior to an assignment. The workspace for remote interpreting, for example, ranges from conference venues (mostly for VRI) to specialized interpreting hubs to private locations (mostly for ARI). Although we can assume that the former two are (or should be) equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and connectivity, promoting remote interpreting services in home-to-venue setups means deliberately relinquishing control over crucial technical aspects of DI. Given that in the free comments one out of twelve interpreters indicates having experienced poor sound conditions in different DI modalities, it would appear that albeit technically possible, appropriate sound and image quality are not yet consistently offered. It is interesting to see that the equipment mostly still comprises traditional interpreting consoles across most DI modalities with the exception of ARI, which is mostly provided over the phone. The number and type of screens used to provide conference interpreters with visual input, on the other hand, differs considerably. Finally, staffing levels seem to remain largely unaffected by the type of DI technology used with the exception of ARI, where they are sometimes lower than for comparable face-to-face interpreting assignments. This suggests that DI is often seen as equivalent (and therefore a substitute) for face-to-face conference interpreting even though research points towards earlier onset of fatigue and burnout symptoms.
Seeing the increase in the frequency of use across all types of Distance Interpreting, we conclude with a call for additional systematic research into the cognitive ergonomics of DI to establish minimal standards and best practices.

This report was compiled by Prof. Dr. Kilian G. Seeber on behalf of AIIC’s Task Force on Distance Interpreting.
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