One of the many discussions within the UK interpreting profession right now concerns procurement agreements, the practices of some agencies and other factors that drive down interpreters’ wages, terms and conditions and threaten our profession’s sustainability. One principle that often underpins these conversations, but that is rarely explicitly mentioned, is corporate social responsibility, also known as CSR.

This article highlights the social responsibility inherent in procuring and providing interpreting services to ensure that the profession remains sustainable for practitioners and so continues to meet its clients’ needs.

Social responsibility in SLI provision

The provision of interpreting services is undergoing a transformation. Dong and Napier (2016: 39) refer to this shift as a merging of traditional values with business principles and market tenets. In this merging, however, it is important that traditional values are not lost in the drive for maximum profit; such values may be professional standards such as interpreter competence and suitability for a particular assignment, interpreter-client fit and client choice, among others (Collins 2016). A happy fusion may be achievable by adhering to CSR principles – a balanced melding that is, in fact, already sought by some in the industry.

Interpreting service providers are able to successfully combine a ‘commercial agenda and social objective’; in one case, an objective was not only aligning business practices to professional standards but actually striving to raise the professional standards of interpreting (Dong & Napier 2016: 24). In order to best recognise this type of successful merging, it is important to first have an understanding of CSR.

CSR is broadly defined as ‘a company’s sense of responsibility towards the community and environment (both ecological and social) in which it operates’ (BD 2016). Social responsibility encompasses a business’s ‘consideration of, and response to, issues beyond the narrow economic, technical and legal requirements of the firm… (to) accomplish social benefits along with the
traditional economic gains which the firm seeks’ (Davis 1973: 312). Crowther and Aras (2008: 11) add that ‘social responsibility also requires a responsibility towards the future’.

Good CSR ‘drive[s] measurable social change’, focuses on achieving objectives and works with experts to realise CSR goals (Allen 2011). Basic CSR tenets include sustainability (applied here to mean professional sustainability), transparency, respect for human rights, compliance with regional, national and international laws, fair employment and work practices, protection of consumers’ interests and contribution to the local community (SSIF 2010).

**CSR: a framework**

In applying CSR principles to the context of sign language/English interpreting services provision, I propose specific considerations for a basic CSR framework:

- **Procurement stipulations and business practices align with professional standards**: Such professional standards include using fully qualified interpreters, providing the appropriate number of interpreters for assignments and providing information about assignments to interpreters for preparation.

- **Sustainability of the profession**: Practitioners are paid a wage which is linked to the investment of time and resources spent on becoming fully qualified and from which the profession can remain financially viable as a livelihood, so that the Deaf and Deafblind communities have continued, sufficient access to trained and experienced interpreters.

- **Adherence to legal mandates**: Knowledge of laws relevant to SLI provision, educating stakeholders about these laws and following the laws appropriately.

- **Transparency regarding business practices**: This applies to agency practices and procurement practices.

**Is our profession sustainable?**

In a recent survey of BSL/English interpreters, 62 per cent said that they were not sure that the profession would remain financially viable (Best & Turner, unpublished). This uncertainty has led Hale (2016: 3) to call on ‘those responsible for commissioning and delivering SLI services’ to consider the impact of fully qualified interpreters and trainees leaving the profession, as this affects the Deaf and Deafblind communities’ ability to exercise their citizenship rights.

The call for those purchasing and providing SLI services to exercise social responsibility is bolstered by Wood’s explanation (1991: 697) that businesses are responsible for solving problems that they have caused, and... ‘helping to solve problems and social issues related to their business operations and interests’.

Adherence to CSR principles not only benefits clients and practitioners; it also typically garners long-term business benefits because it brings positive publicity, enhances corporate reputation and increases public trust (Barnett 2013; Hirai 2013; Rochte 2016). CSR helps to ensure our professional sustainability because businesses can continue filling bookings with skilled and qualified practitioners, enabling them to continue offering a quality service. Fostering the symbiotic connection between the communities served is good business.

Sometimes businesses need encouragement to prioritise long-term benefits and professional sustainability. McWilliams, Siegel and Wright (2006) cite one example where stakeholders in an
industry took collective action to discourage one firm from launching a product that would increase the firm’s short-term profits but might damage the entire industry in the long run. The firm responded to pressure and withdrew the product (McWilliams et al 2006: 9). Similarly, while bidding for contracts at unsustainable rates may seemingly bring short-term gains to an agency, it has long-term damaging implications to both the profession and the community and, ultimately, the longevity of the agency.

**Ethical agencies**

Agencies provide a needed service and can offer both clients and interpreters many benefits. Several agencies do operate with an ethical business model, and many may strive for socially responsible business practices but find it increasingly difficult in the current economic climate. Further research and collaboration on best practices, such as the proposed ASLI Agency Standards document, may standardise expectations and help purchasers, the profession, clients and the community at large to identify agencies operating ethically and sustainably.

Researchers found that, while many interpreters interviewed in one study attributed worsening working terms and conditions to unethical conduct by agencies, further results revealed that even agencies striving to maintain an ethical business model are ‘struggling to offer clients better treatment in practice’ (Dong and Turner 2016: 21). This suggests that agencies may simply be a cog in a much larger wheel of change rather than an instigating factor.

However, agencies are seen as integral to setting the expectations of those who purchase language services (Ozolins 2007). Researchers have found that ‘there remains a tacit rule in the market that quantity supersedes quality’ and ‘some agencies thrive on tendering for and securing procurement contracts’ (Dong & Turner 2016), often prioritising ‘cost-saving before quality’ (Norström, Fioretos and Gustafsson 2012). These agencies often lower what they pay interpreters to compete for contracts (Norström, Fioretos and Gustafsson 2012). While the aim of a business is to earn a profit, this must not be done to the detriment of society. If interpreting becomes non-viable as a livelihood for practitioners, this negatively impacts both society and those supplying services. CSR practices focus on long-term gains for the business, even if that is difficult to prioritise in the short-term.

**Trust, power and responsibility**

Agencies are seen to wield great influence over several aspects of interpreting service delivery, including allocating qualified and appropriate interpreters for assignments, interpreter pay rates, working terms and conditions and the quality of interpretation services that clients receive (Best 2016). As the adage goes, with great power comes great responsibility. Since agencies are perceived to hold considerable power, it is important for the community and for the
‘A lack of transparency around some agency practices affects trust, regardless of whether certain perceptions are well founded’

businesses themselves to be seen as using that power responsibly.

However, some studies have found that interpreters generally mistrust agencies (Best 2016; Dong & Turner 2016). A lack of transparency around some agency practices affects trust, regardless of whether perceptions are well founded. Consistency in adhering to CSR principles, such as transparency and prioritising ethical business practices, however, builds public trust in a business, ultimately benefiting it (Barnett 2013; Rochte 2016).

A recent concern is that ‘organisations advising the government are potential suppliers and have commercial interests’ (NUBSLI 2015). However, this concern itself speaks volumes about perceived trust in these suppliers. Suppliers (agencies) have a corporate social responsibility to properly educate procurement entities on the social and economic value of professional interpretation services, and what appropriate providing of these services entails. Of course, this requires that agencies understand effectively delivering SLI in alignment with professional standards, but researchers have found that agency decision-makers – particularly those at larger agencies such as spoken language agencies who tack on SLI and who may be more likely to bid for contracts – may have scant knowledge of interpreting, especially SLI (Ozolins 2007; Norström, Fioretos, Gustafsson 2012; Feyne 2012; Collins 2016; Dong & Turner 2016). They need to work with experts (Allen 2011).

The uncertainty surrounding the profession’s sustainability may be largely due to changes in procurement arrangements for sign language interpreting services (Hale 2016). Hale reports that these changes place more cost-reducing pressure on agencies, pushing down interpreter rates until ‘they have fallen significantly below the market rates for skilled and experienced’ interpreters. Dong and Turner (2016) found that agencies striving for ethical business practices struggle to offer better services in the current economic climate. Procurement, then, is crucial.

Socially responsible procurement includes community engagement, ethical stewardship, respect for human rights and health and safety (Stanly 2009). Community engagement is particularly interesting because end users and practitioners have often not been consulted in developing procurement frameworks for interpreting provision (PIA 2015; Stop Changes 2015), resulting in service provision stipulations that are not fit for purpose (NUBSLI 2015).

Special considerations may be necessary for public procurement, a classification that may largely include SLI services. Some researchers have said that: ‘The implementation of socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) is still in its infancy, but good progress is being made in some areas’ (Santos, Hooper, Evans & Dannenmaier 2012: 4).

One solution is to make social considerations on a par with core deliverables in the contract, especially if the social considerations are ‘conditions relating
to delivery’ (Buy Social n.d: 13). These types of social responsibility considerations do not currently seem to be stipulated or mentioned by those procuring services. This may be due to lack of knowledge. While Allen (2011) recommends partnering with experts to ensure that appropriate CSR objectives are set and met, those purchasing interpreting services, and particularly those setting framework agreements, are either failing to seek this expert advice or may be unknowingly consulting with inappropriate representatives.

**Collective responsibility for collective effort**

CSR is a self-regulatory mechanism incorporated into a business model, meaning that public attention, accountability, recognition and reward are vital in setting

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**REFERENCES**


Davis, K (1973) ‘The case for and against business assumption of social responsibilities’ in *Academy of Management Journal*, 16 (pp312-322).


CSR expectations. The CSR concept and implications must therefore be widely disseminated, recognised and expected by those purchasing interpreting services, those providing services and clients.

Collective pressure via collective education is the first step for those purchasing, providing and using the services. In this way, CSR is on the radar of all stakeholders via knowledge of relevant legislation surrounding SLI provision, professional standards, an accurate understanding of what appropriate professional SLI provision entails and comprehension of the societal implications of threatening the sustainability of the profession. Social considerations must be on a par with core deliverables in procurement practices, and we all have a social responsibility to act to help this happen.


