

Public tenders  
for **conference interpreting services**

# VADE MECUM

for authors  
of tender specifications

A joint initiative by the  
Belgian Quality Translation Association (BQTA) and the  
Belgian Chamber of Translators and Interpreters (CBTI/BKVT)  
in collaboration with Freelance Interpreters United (FIU)





# CONTENTS

- 1. Introduction..... 4
- 2. Concepts..... 6
- 3. Actors..... 7
- 4. Specific characteristics of an interpreting activity..... 8
- 5. General provisions of the tender specifications..... 13
- 6. Selection criteria..... 14
- 7. Methods of evaluating tenders..... 17
- 8. Price ..... 18
- 9. Confidentiality ..... 20
- 10. Disputes ..... 20
- 11. Notification of assignment ..... 20
- 12. Finally..... 21

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*If you talk to a man in a language he understands,  
That goes to his head.  
If you talk to him in his language,  
That goes to his heart.*

*Nelson Mandela*

Interpreters have become an integral part of our modern, global society. From negotiations between heads of state and government to technical consultation platforms for actually putting political decisions into practice, from strategic discussions in multinational companies to consultations between the social partners of those same companies, from cross-border cooperation projects to inspiring meetings between renowned scientists from all corners of the world: interpreters ensure that the message is perfectly understood in other languages as well.

More than parrots, walking dictionaries or strange multitaskers, it is a profession that offers great added and indispensable value, contributing as it does to smooth and accurate communication and the efficient running of multilingual meetings.

This vade mecum is mainly intended for public bodies that purchase interpretation services: it describes the essential concepts for drawing up a set of specifications aimed at ensuring good cooperation with the contractor and maximum satisfaction of the contracting government service. Of course, any organisation, association or company may read it if they wish to make an informed choice of an interpreting service provider.

This reference document will discuss only profession-specific aspects. Legal or financial matters will not be addressed.

A set of tender specifications is effective if it provides clear answers, which meet the specified needs of the contracting government service.

This requires precise formulating of these requirements, in a terminology known and understood by both parties. Moreover, the requirements must take into account the capabilities and limitations of the professionals addressed.

In addition to this vade mecum, authors can also draw inspiration from the best practices of the sector to make realistic demands on the interpreting world. In view of the sustainability of the profession, these best practices were brought together in the **Charter of best practices and relations amongst colleagues** for interpreters, which can be found on the CBTI/BKVT website. ■

## 2. CONCEPTS

**Terminology in a public tender needs to be clear and unambiguous to all parties involved. Here are some frequently used terms in the profession.**

### Interpreting

**Intellectual activity** involving the oral conversion of the content of an oral message from a source language to a target language.

### Source and target languages

The source **language** is the language of the message to be interpreted, the **target language** is the language to be interpreted into, and the **language combination** refers to the combination of source and target languages for a given interpreting assignment.

### A, B and C languages

A, B and C refer to the working languages of the interpreter. In most cases, the interpreter only has one **A language**, his mother tongue. The A language is the main target language during interpretation. The interpreter masters the **B languages** at a level comparable to that of a native speaker (near-native) and these are his/her secondary target languages. **C languages** are 'passive languages', languages which can only be source languages for the interpreter.

### Simultaneous interpreting

An interpreting technique in which the interpreter listens to the speaker and simultaneously transfers the spoken text into the target language.

### Consecutive interpreting

An interpreting technique in which the interpreter first listens to the speaker, taking notes if necessary, and only interprets into the target language at the end of each segment of speech. ■

# 3. ACTORS

There is a wide variety of suppliers in the interpreting world.

Most interpreters operate as freelancers.

They can offer their services for different kinds of meetings and events. To this end, they have available an extensive network of colleagues and suppliers for technical support.

In addition, most interpreters also work as subcontractors for interpreting agencies or companies specialising in conference solutions.

Those agencies also have at their disposal a database with a wide variety of language combinations. They generally work with Project Managers, who are responsible for coordinating the teams and the communication with the client. ■

## 4. SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INTERPRETING ACTIVITY

Every profession has its possibilities and limitations. Knowing what they are is useful for a correctly tuned set of specifications.

### Procedure

As mentioned before, there are two types of interpreting: simultaneous and consecutive.

### Simultaneous interpreting

Simultaneous interpreting is possible on site or remotely, with or without interpreting equipment. In the first three situations described below, the interpreter is at the same location as the speaker(s) and the audience, whilst in the fourth situation this is not the case.

#### In a booth

The interpreters work in teams of two, in soundproof interpreter booths. These booths may be permanent, as a fixed part of the meeting infrastructure, or temporarily installed in the meeting room by a specialised company. In this procedure, the interpreters see what happens in the auditorium and hear the speaker(s) through their headphones. If, exceptionally, the booth cannot be installed in such a way that the interpreters can see the speakers directly, it is recommended that one or more viewing screens be installed so that the interpreters can see the speakers and, where appropriate, the documents projected into the room.

Simultaneous interpreters in a booth simultaneously interpret what is being said, so that the attendees can follow the presentation via a headset in their own language. This way, large audiences can be reached, no time is lost and all those present can participate in the discussion. For everything to run smoothly, the presence of a technician is imperative.

*Interpreter booths should comply with ISO 2603 if they are fixed and ISO 4043 if they are mobile. These standards define the requirements and recommendations for interpreter booths, including with regard to minimum dimensions and ventilation.*

### Using portable equipment

For small groups, for example during a site or company visit, a professional, reliable and standardised portable system (Tourguide) can be used. These 'interpreter kits' are usually offered with 20 headsets. The interpreters are not in a soundproof booth, but in a place where they can see and hear the speaker(s) well. They talk through a hand microphone and the audience receives the translation through their headset.

In this way of working, the interpreters themselves usually do not have headphones and therefore hear not only the voice of the speaker(s), but also all the extraneous noises in the room. Therefore, in certain cases, it may be useful to provide sound amplification for the speakers. An additional disadvantage of working with portable equipment is that the interpreters, even when whispering, can be perceived as disruptive by those present who are listening directly to the speaker(s). For these reasons, it is also recommended that this interpreting technique should only be used when interpreting between a maximum of two languages, in order to avoid too many people speaking at once and to limit the noise pollution for the participants. Moreover, it is recommended to go to the location beforehand and check whether on-site electronic devices do not cause any interference.

*For radio and transmitting equipment, please refer to the European Directive 2014/53/EU. Various EN standards indicate that the requirements of the directive are met in Europe, e.g. with regard to frequency management.*

*Section 8 of the international standard ISO 20109 also deals with portable interpreting systems.*

### Whispered interpretation without equipment

If only one or two listeners need translation, the interpreters can sit next to or behind them and interpret simultaneously while whispering.

The disadvantage is that, here too, their whispering can be perceived as disruptive by others present. Moreover, the interpreter must be seated within earshot of the listener, which is not always practically feasible (e.g. during a panel discussion). When the people for whom the interpretation is intended wish to speak, the interpreter often switches to consecutive interpreting, which takes more time and depending on the circumstances may be considered less appropriate.

### Remote Simultaneous Interpretation (RSI)

The interpreters are not at the same location as the speaker(s) and the audience, and provide simultaneous interpretation via an online platform. RSI can be a good solution for short working meetings or for meetings and conferences in contexts where speakers, listeners and interpreters cannot be physically present (e.g. this way of working was found very useful during the COVID lockdowns).

In the case of remote interpreting, the various actors become highly dependent on the technology (quality of the Internet connection, use of headsets with a microphone). This type of simultaneous interpretation therefore leads to an increased cognitive load and (even) more mental strain, both for the participants and for the interpreters. You will find a **document** (in Dutch or French) with more detailed information on the

technical requirements, civil liability, etc., on the CBTI/BKVT professional association's website.

The offer has become quite complex in recent years, partly due to the emergence of all kinds of hybrid solutions, whereby some participants meet physically, but others follow the event remotely, and the interpreters sometimes do not all work on site, but use an online interpreting platform.

*When using remote simultaneous interpreting, it is essential that each active participant has a stable internet connection and a high-quality microphone. It is also recommended that participants turn on their webcams when speaking. If, due to poor sound or image quality, the interpreters are unable to continue interpreting, they can report this and may interrupt interpreting. Furthermore, interpreters cannot be held liable for technical malfunctions or breakdowns.*

## Consecutive interpreting

For consecutive interpreting, no interpreting equipment is needed.

The attendees have more time to think and possibly take notes, but the downside is that your meeting or event will last twice as long and the conversations will be less interactive.

## How many interpreters will you need?

Interpreting is a profession that requires high levels of concentration and mental effort. Numerous studies with brain scans have shown that interpreting is a particularly intense mental activity. Consequently, an interpreter generally works in 20- or 30-minute turns, which means that you need to employ two interpreters for each language combination so that they can take over from each other.

In a conversation situation where the interpreter does not work simultaneously or for less than 45 minutes, one interpreter can be sufficient, but here too fatigue takes its toll after a while, also on the part of the participants. In all cases, sufficient breaks are absolutely necessary to prevent fatigue and stress from affecting the quality of the interpretation performance.

## Preparation

Proper preparation is essential. Professional interpreters prepare themselves thoroughly for their work on the basis of the information provided by the client or contracting authority. It is therefore important that you give the interpreters the right information about the exact work situation, the audience and the topics to be discussed.

It is recommended that the speakers' presentations, possibly supplemented by validated reference documents in the source and/or target language, be provided to the interpreters prior to each meeting. This can only benefit coherence and thus the quality of the interpretation. Reference material should preferably be delivered to the interpreters at least 3 days in advance. ■

# 5. GENERAL PROVISIONS OF THE TENDER SPECIFICATIONS

In order to be able to assess the professional and technical qualities of a candidate, the specifications must be clear and complete.

The tender specifications may give a clear and detailed description of the intended assignment (simultaneous interpreting in a booth, simultaneous interpreting with a portable system, consecutive interpreting, remote interpreting; required equipment and technical support), but also an open, functional and performance-oriented description is possible. In the latter case, the candidates are given the space to put forward what they consider to be the most suitable services or solutions.

In any case, the specifications must include precise information on the number of meetings, the desired language combination, the venue and the dates.

It is recommended that the exchange of information between the contracting authority and the contractors should, as far as possible, take place by electronic means and that sufficient time be allowed for the contractors to prepare their tenders. The possibility may also be provided for candidates to ask any questions they may have.

The use of a standardised tender form provides the candidate with a clear overview of the requirements of the specifications, while making it easier for the contracting authority to evaluate tenders in a systematic way. ■

# 6. SELECTION CRITERIA

The majority of interpreters work on a self-employed basis in one-person businesses or through a legal entity. As freelancers, they work directly for end customers or as subcontractors for interpreting agencies or fellow freelancers. The candidate may be a natural person, a legal person or a group of physical and/or legal persons.

Thanks to their on-the-job experience, interpreters have a lot of practical know-how: they know the field very well because they are immersed in it on a daily basis and they have a good idea of the different possible solutions.

Both freelance interpreters and agencies also have their own network of experienced colleagues and installers/technicians. In this way, they can always fill in the different language combinations in the booths.

In addition, interpreters often exchange the necessary glossaries so that a quality team is always ready for the start of your meeting. This is always done with respect for any applicable confidentiality agreements.

Some criteria that can be applied:

## Qualifications

- » Being professionally active as **(conference) interpreter**
- » **Language combination** provided by the interpreter
- » **Quality guarantees** provided (e.g. consistent way of sharing meeting documents and/or terminology lists with colleagues)
- » Having a **diploma or proof of experience** (in interpreting or another relevant field)
- » Having the necessary **experience**
- » Being able to provide **professional references**
- » Regular participation in targeted **training**
- » Membership of a **recognised professional** association may be an asset (e.g. access to in-service training, networking, peer support, etc.)

## Deontology

- » Adherence to the aforementioned **Charter of Best Practices and Relations among Colleagues**
- » Adherence to the **deontological code** of a recognised professional association

## Quality

- » Adoption of quality processes and **quality management**
- » **Making sure** that the interpreters whose CVs were submitted with the tender are actually those carrying out the assignments

## Economic criteria

- » **Solvency**
- » A correct **relationship** with any subcontractors (e.g. payment terms, correct remuneration)
- » Engaged in **local anchoring** and **corporate social responsibility**

The federal government has also drawn up a charter to increase the access of freelancers and SMEs to public contracts. This charter states, among other things, that the criteria used must be related to and proportionate to the subject of the contract. For more details, please refer to the charter (available in Dutch and French):

<https://economie.fgov.be/nl/publicaties/charter-toegang-van-kmos-tot>

The role of governments in promoting fair and sustainable business practices should also be highlighted here. Providing opportunities for local, self-employed interpreters or SMEs will also strengthen and sustain the much-needed national economic fabric. You also have a precise notion of who it is you're working with.

## Certificates to be provided by the tenderer

In the case of certificates relating to exclusion criteria (non-bankruptcy, payment of taxes, VAT, social security, etc.), it is recommended that the contracting authority request only documents that it cannot obtain itself.

## Alternatives to awarding the contract according to the "winner takes all" principle

It is possible to divide a contract into several lots and then assign them to one or more contractors. This possibility is e.g. provided for in the regulations on public procurement. In this way, the work is spread more rationally, which can provide more security.

Furthermore, it is possible to work with a cascade system, whereby different contractors are ranked according to the score obtained. Each assignment is always awarded first to the first-ranked contractor, but if the latter does not accept the order within the predetermined period, the order automatically goes to the next contractor.

Another possibility is a system of alternating between two or three contractors, which on the one hand guarantees in principle that the client will always be supplied, irrespective of the number of days and deadlines requested, and on the other hand spreads the pressure over several contractors and provides them all with experience. ■

# 7. METHODS OF EVALUATING TENDERS

The evaluation criteria of the tenders must be clearly and objectively defined. In order to ensure quality performance of the contract, it is advisable not to select primarily on the basis of price, but also to pay particular attention to quality, methodology, approach to technical support, professional experience, useful references and local anchorage. It is recommended that, after assessment, the price be given a maximum weight of 50%.

Once the contract is awarded, regular contacts between the contracting authority and the contractor can ensure effective cooperation. A permanent evaluation of performance can be a way of ensuring stable and consistent quality throughout the duration of the contract. ■

## Good to know!

### ISO Standards

*In 2022, the ISO 23155 standard was published. It specifies requirements and recommendations for the provision of conference interpreting services.*

*ISO 20108 and IS 20109, in conjunction with either ISO 2603 or ISO 4043, provide the relevant requirements both for the quality and transmission of sound and image provided to interpreters and for the equipment needed in the booths.*

*Work is also underway on the ISO 24019 standard on simultaneous interpreting delivery platforms.*

# 8. PRICE

The tender specifications shall preferably define the basis for calculating the price (or the rate) according to the following points:

- » Fee per **interpreting day** per requested language combination
- » Fee for possible **overtime**
- » Supplements for **evening and/or weekend work**
- » **Travel allowance**
- » Conditions applicable to the **cancellation** of a meeting
- » Overnight accommodations, travel time allowance and daily allowance (**per diem**)
- » **Renting** of technical equipment (booth, RSI platform, portable equipment)
- » An **extra charge** if interpretation is recorded and/or broadcast
- » For multi-year contracts, it is best to take into account the expectations regarding **price evolution** (for fees, travel expenses, equipment, etc.). ■

*Interpreter's fees are calculated on the basis of a day worked. An interpreter day includes regular breaks, including a lunch break, and does not exceed 8 hours (or 6 hours in the case of RSI), breaks included.*

*A half-day fee is possible for assignments with common languages in Belgium, on condition that the assignment lasts no longer than 4 hours (or 3 hours in the case of RSI) – including breaks–, and on condition that the assignment ends before 1 pm or starts after 2 pm, leaving the rest of the day available for another assignment in Brussels – taking into account the travel time. In such cases, the fee amounts to at least 70% of the fee for a full day of interpreting.*

## Good to know!\*

### Cancellation fee

*When the client or his contact cancels a confirmed interpreting assignment, the market practice is to apply the following minimum conditions: if the assignment is cancelled less than one week in advance, the fee is paid in full; if the assignment is cancelled between one and two weeks in advance, 50% of the fee is paid.*

### Indexation

*For multi-year assignments, it is recommended to adjust the fees annually, taking into account at least the evolution of the health index.*

### Recording

*The interpreting service is exclusively intended for immediate and direct use by the audience during the interpreting assignment and should be considered a communication aid.*

*Recording or broadcasting the interpreting service is not allowed without prior consent from the interpreters involved. In the case where the recording is broadcast or distributed, the market practice is to apply a supplement of at least 30% of the fee.*

\* These and other elements can be found in the **Charter of Best Practices and Relations amongst Colleagues** for interpreters on the CBTI/BKVT website.



# 9. CONFIDENTIALITY

Interpreters have a duty of confidentiality. The information available to interpreters by virtue of their profession shall be regarded by them as confidential and treated as such. ■

# 10. DISPUTES

It is recommended that disputes regarding implementation and quality be submitted to an independent and impartial arbitration board, e.g. from a recognised professional association. ■

# 11. NOTIFICATION OF ASSIGNMENT

At the end of the procedure, the contracting authority publishes an award notice containing the following information: number of tenders received, successful tenderer(s) and the prices awarded, where permitted by the applicable legislation. For the sake of transparency, the price must be stated as quoted by the tenderer.

Each tenderer must be given access to the assignment report.

Non-retained tenderers shall receive adequate and timely feedback with reasons and factual considerations on which the decisions taken are based. ■



## 12. FINALLY

The Belgian Quality Translation Association (BQTA) and the Belgian Chamber of Translators and Interpreters (CBTI/BKVT) are committed to working together to achieve excellence in interpreting. After all, all the parties involved will benefit.

To this end, they wish to engage in a dialogue with the authors of public tenders and tender specifications in order to gain an adequate understanding of the specificities of interpretation activities.

We are therefore always receptive to anyone who would like to discuss this in further detail. ■

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In collaboration with **Freelance Interpreters United FIU**.

This guide is available in English, Dutch, and French.

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More information  
on the websites  
of BQTA and BKVT

[www.bqta.be](http://www.bqta.be)

[www.cbti-bkvt.org](http://www.cbti-bkvt.org)

# PUBLIC TENDERS FOR CONFERENCE INTERPRETING SERVICES

**VADE MECUM** for authors of tender specifications



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