



To Be or Not To Be...An Employee

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The nature of our work as sign language interpreters in the United States has changed greatly in the past 25 years and radically in the past five years. Just as the model of HOW we do the work has changed from that of helper to ally, the conditions under which we perform our services have evolved and broadened. The days when interpreting was done around a 'real' job, or as part of an 'interpreter/X position because there wasn't sufficient work out there to actually make a living interpreting full time have gone. Now, for many interpreters the question isn't whether there's enough work; it's what type of work do I want to do? Where do I want to work? And what is my relationship with the company that hires me?

The breadth of settings that interpreters encounter as 'freelancers' has always been wide and varied. Now opportunities for part-time and full-time employment have expanded from mostly academic and non-profit work to include specialized settings (hospitals, courts), business (as companies hire and promote Deaf professionals), community interpreting (as interpreting agency staff), and of course, video (VRS/VRI). Interpreters have more choice around what types of work they do, and also about for whom and how they perform the work.

In settings where the company provides required equipment, specific protocols and set schedules, self-employment status may not be an option according to the Internal Revenue Service. The table below goes beyond the IRS definitions and looks at some of the other considerations interpreters should look at when deciding which type of work is the better fit.

	Employee	Self Employed Interpreter
Business	I don't mind forms and timesheets, but would rather not deal with the details of maintaining a business	I am organized and disciplined in maintaining my business: regular invoicing, bookkeeping and paying taxes and collecting on bad debt
Marketing	The agency or company I work for maintains a customer base and develops connections and contracts	I prefer to find and maintain my own work, developing a customer base

Income	I prefer a regular, predictable income, paid time off with taxes taken out. I would rather not deal with self employment.	I have the cash flow to handle seasonal down turns and can set aside a percentage of each hour for taxes and benefits
Benefits	I want to access group benefits for medical, dental and retirement.	I maintain individual health policies and/or access benefits through a spouse or partner. I set aside part of my income for future retirement
Scheduling	I can rely on my employer to fill and maintain my schedule; I am willing to fill in for others when needed and appreciate taking sick and vacation time knowing customers are still served	I want full control of my schedule, and can find subs when needed; I can easily fill cancellations and find last minute work.
Teaming	I enjoy working with a consistent team of players, knowing their strengths, weaknesses and teaming styles.	I don't mind not knowing my team interpreters; I work it out as I go along
Peer Interaction	I enjoy the ongoing relationships that develop by working and playing with co-workers. I can work with a diverse crew and get along with various personalities.	I don't care for the 'group thing' and prefer more varied short-term interactions.
Professional Development	I am evaluated annually and use that opportunity to identify areas for professional development. I see employer-offered workshops and/or stipends for training as a valuable benefit.	I am disciplined in continually assessing my skills and seeking opportunities for continuing education.

The chart above represents some of the issues an interpreter takes into consideration when choosing self vs. company employment. One other major factor comes with a leading \$. 'Freelancers' in most industries charge a higher billable hour than is paid to staff. This is certainly true in our profession. That additional amount covers almost 30% of taxes and benefits that are otherwise covered by the employer (see figure 1).

As interpreters make the decision whether or not to affiliate professionally with an agency or company, another factor comes into play. Does the company have a mission/vision statement that aligns with yours? Is its

reputation for quality and integrity one that you would like to identify with? Are the owners and management knowledgeable about the field and the community? Do they treat both internal (staff and employees) and external customers (Deaf, Deaf-Blind, hard of hearing and hearing) in a way that acknowledges their needs?

Our choices as professionals are greater than ever before. Hopefully this information will be helpful to interpreters making the choice between self-employment and becoming an employee by raising issues to consider in making this important decision.

Figure 1	% of Pay
SE Taxes	-7.50%
Paid Time Off	-3.97%
Bad Debt 5%	-5.00%
Health Ins	-5.95%
Business Liability	-0.58%
Errors/Omissions	-0.19%
Business License	-0.12%
B&O Tax	-2.00%
Pager Fees	-0.42%
Scheduling and Accounting Support	-3.87%
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Benefit Percentage	29.60%