
Interpreters: Certified or Qualified?

by Beth Schoenberg and Karen Carlson, December 1999

Many companies, when faced with the task of hiring a sign language interpreter for a deaf employee, customer, or job applicant, find few resources available. Colleagues, friends, or family members may know of someone who "knows some signs." Agencies that work with deaf people may be able to provide lists of interpreters. But how does one make an appropriate selection?

To make matters worse, there is the question of certified vs. qualified, terms which are poorly defined and understood in the lay community. This article will attempt to define these terms, and help you make informed decisions about who to hire to provide you with interpreting services.

The term "certified" is a logical place to start, as its meaning is clearer and less ambiguous. A certified interpreter is one who has taken and passed an examination administered by a knowledgeable authority. In Washington State, there are two testing systems available: one administered by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID), the other by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). There are various different certificates awarded by these two bodies, but all indicate that the interpreter was able to perform interpreting tasks in a testing situation with at least a minimal level of competency. (For more information on various certificates and what they represent, see "What do all these letters mean?")

One caveat regarding certified interpreters: many interpreter training programs grant a "certificate of completion" to people who fulfill the requirements of their program. These requirements are for the most part academic, not skills-based, and do not indicate skills at the level required to work independently as an interpreter. Thus, if an interpreter states that s/he has a certificate from a training program (not from RID or NAD), this is not professionally equivalent to "being certified." Parallels could be drawn with an M.D. who has not completed residency and internship requirements, or a lawyer who has not yet passed the bar exam.

The issue of who a "qualified" interpreter is is a more difficult one. And, unfortunately, it is this more ambiguous term that is used in legal mandates - with no definition of its meaning, or means to evaluate whether or not an interpreter "has it."

One potential definition of "qualified" would be "able to perform the tasks of interpretation appropriately and accurately in a given situation." This definition would require that an interpreter be fluent in the two languages being used, that s/he understand the role of the interpreter, and that s/he be able to perform in a situationally appropriate manner. Not coincidentally, these are some of the factors tested for in the certification process.

Now the question arises: what is the intersection - or the divergence - between certified interpreters and qualified interpreters? Certainly, it is possible to be both certified and qualified; it is also possible to be both uncertified and unqualified. However, an interpreter can be one but not the other, greatly complicating the task of hiring interpreters.

A certified interpreter may not be qualified for a particular assignment for a number of reasons. The subject area or vocabulary may be unfamiliar to the interpreter; there may be a cultural context which is unknown or uncomfortable for him/her; the deaf consumer may have particular idiosyncratic communication needs which the interpreter cannot meet. As was mentioned before, the granting of certification indicates only that an interpreter has attained a minimal level of competence in performing the tasks of interpreting in general - not that s/he can perform stellarly in all situations.

On the other hand, an uncertified interpreter may be qualified to interpret in some situations. Some people, through family, deaf community involvement, or training, have good interpreting skills, but have either not taken or not successfully passed a certification exam. However, because of specialized knowledge, or extensive background with a particular deaf consumer, an uncertified interpreter may be able to perform better than a certified interpreter in some situations.

So how does one make a decision about who to hire for an interpreting assignment? There are some strong reasons to make it a policy to hire only certified interpreters. Although a certified interpreter is not always qualified for a particular assignment, the fact that the interpreter has passed an independent, professional examination provides you with some assurance of a minimal level of skills. Additionally, both RID and NAD have grievance procedures in place to protect consumers, should an interpreter fail to perform adequately. An uncertified interpreter provides you with neither of these safeguards.

In order to ensure that your certified interpreter is qualified for your particular assignment, there are several tools you can use. One very important one is to solicit feedback from the deaf consumer(s). Consumers may prefer one interpreter over another for a variety of reasons, skills being only one. There are also more intangible factors, such as how well the interpreter adapts to and blends in with the environment, or how well the interpreter's emotional tenor captures the mood of the assignment.

You may also make use of an interpreting agency, such as SignOn, to gather information about an interpreter's experience, background, and advanced training that might contribute to his/her qualifications. Finally, you can interview interpreters to gain insight into how much experience they have in your environment, knowledge of specialized vocabulary they may need to be familiar with, or areas of advanced study. Don't hesitate to ask questions, including asking for proof of certification. (See appendix for a list of factors that may be important to consider when evaluating an interpreter's qualifications.)

One final caveat: while the cost of interpreting services is always a large factor in the hiring process, it should not be the primary factor. If you try to economize by hiring a less expensive, but unqualified, interpreter, information may be communicated incorrectly or not at all. This may lead to procedures being followed incorrectly, morale problems in the workplace, and eventually having to repeat meetings or instructions with another qualified interpreter's assistance. These are costly alternatives to hiring a qualified interpreter the first time around.

Appendix:

Factors which may affect an interpreter's qualification for an assignment:

- topic (vocabulary specific to the industry, the company, or the department)
- environment (large or small group? indoors or outdoors? office or factory? sitting/standing/walking around? is there competing noise present?)
- emotional content (is there a lot of conflict present? is it overt or covert?)
- working relationships (formal or informal? In general, the more informal, the harder it is for an outsider to step in and interpret.)
- needs of the deaf consumer(s) (language preferences, familiarity with subject matter, special needs [deaf-blind, early language deprivation, foreign born])