

‘Resilience is the strength you need most’



Resilience, reflection, flexibility and knowing your way around the news are core to thriving in invision interpreting. **Sandy Deo** provides a close-up of a domain she loves

This article provides an insight into my experience of invision interpreting, a domain I was terrified of, but now love. Firstly, here’s a bit of background on me and how I became a sign language interpreter.

Raised in Wolverhampton by a deaf single parent, I have been lucky to have grown up with deaf people and to have been accepted in the deaf community from childhood. Rupert Street Deaf Club in Wolverhampton was a second home and it’s down to them that we ever got to go on day trips. Blackpool and trips to Wales were as much a part of my childhood as having my mom’s deaf friends visit the house every week with their children. I genuinely feel so grateful for these experiences, as it honestly shaped who I am as a person.

As the eldest girl of a Punjabi family, I shouldered most of the household responsibility, as well as the interpreting responsibility for Mom and looking after my siblings. I embraced my role as caregiver and was instinctively maternal with all the children I looked after. I have no doubt that if we had had a father around, this probably wouldn’t have fallen to me, but I supported

my mom to look after the first baby and, from then on, it became the norm. Fortunately, I was born into a family that is huge; on my mom’s side alone, I have seven aunts, an uncle and 30 cousins, which meant we were always kept busy.

Growing up was challenging in some respects. It was difficult to balance the ‘interpreting’ with the feeling of just wanting to be a child and going to play yet knowing that, without me, my mom wouldn’t have access to most of the conversation going on around her. Looking back, I realise there was always an unintentional power imbalance in many situations. I don’t think any parent should ever experience this, or have to be reliant on their children, but that was the way things were back then.

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Conversations and career change

It sounds ridiculous, but it never occurred to me that interpreting was a career choice until I went along to my brother’s graduation in 2012 at the University of Wolverhampton. I had honestly never even thought it was something I could or should do, until a conversation with the professor/historian John Hay that day. He seemed genuinely surprised that I hadn’t considered studying to become an interpreter.

My brother also felt that I would make a good interpreter and should consider studying – it felt a little foreign and I had not been in education for over 10 years, so to say I was afraid of writing an academic essay is an understatement. I had instead worked for Hays Recruitment, working my way up to becoming a regional compliance manager, so I already had a career. I had serious self-doubt but was encouraged by my brother, colleagues and my best friend, who read my entry essay with relish – she has always been one of my biggest supporters and without her I don’t think I would ever have contacted Sandra Pratt at the University of Wolverhampton! Many stressful long nights, exams, assignments, library all-nighters, a few Sign Language Society Balls and more than a few tears later, I graduated with a First and haven’t really looked back!

There are always people in your corner who push and challenge you. I am grateful to my lecturers, without whom I would not have got through my degree; they underestimate how much of what they do matters to us! I absolutely encourage anyone who is unsure about becoming an interpreter to consider studying at the University of Wolverhampton.

Starting blocks

I always say that I have been very fortunate, and that I am blessed enough to have been given opportunities. It took me a while to leave my

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other job and start my interpreting career and I didn’t know where to start! Aside from agencies, getting a job at Frank Barnes School for the Deaf in London was the greatest start to my interpreting career that I could have asked for. It gave me such a rich variety of experiences and fantastic language models in the amazing deaf staff working there and I flourished. Having other friends who put me forward to work on my first ever film shoot gave me the starting blocks to build up my experience in media interpreting, which I absolutely love and hope to continue doing.

Moving to London seemed like the obvious thing to do, I had always said it was on my bucket list, and I got fed up with the weekly commute I had done for a year! From there, I have been lucky enough to get some great working opportunities.

Invision entry

Invision interpreting is the medium of interpreting directly to camera, in a way that you complement the programme/content. While the audience is never far from an interpreter’s mind, striking the balance of sufficient variation of vocabulary, appropriate register and deciding how far along the BSL/SSE continuum to work is a skill that takes a long time to master. While 18 months’ experience is significant in this domain, I am still working on my relevant skills.

Due to the ever-changing technological climate we live in, people are increasingly aware of invision interpreting as it is available via so many channels, be it live TV, recorded TV or

social media platforms, thanks to the increasing desire across organisations to make content accessible. Platforms like BBC iPlayer didn't exist 10 years ago, and now there is a whole 'Signed' catalogue of programmes. More services should follow suit.

There seems to be a lot more willingness, particularly at the moment, to finally understand what people actually want and need, rather than providing a one-size-fits-all service. Requests from the deaf community appear to be increasingly considered. There is a long way to go, but the fact that the conversation is even on the table is fantastic.

Like a lot of children, I had always watched programmes such as See Hear, and I saw invision as something I wanted to do, even if it was just once and I was terrible – either that or be a kids' TV presenter! I always wanted to try it and thought it would be one of the biggest professional challenges I could face. On some level, it has also always bothered me that deaf people have to rely on often incorrect subtitles to grasp the news and current affairs, and I've lost count of the times I have had to re-explain a news item because it just didn't make sense in written English. For this reason, I always wanted to help provide a service that meant BSL users get the news in their first language and, as such, have some semblance of equitable access compared to their hearing peers.

My interpreting career so far has spanned six years (I'm still not quite sure how that has happened) and, after much procrastination, I qualified in 2019. Although I wanted to do invision next, I wasn't sure how to get into the field or who to speak to and I was enjoying my time working with the first deaf actors to be cast in great roles at the RSC.

Many of the opportunities I have been fortunate enough to gain have often come out of great working relationships with colleagues and

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peers, and my introduction to invision has been no exception. While working with the legendary Rob Skinner for the first time at the RSC, all I could think about was how many times at university our lecturers had sung his praises – I was more than intimidated! Working together was great and it was Rob who asked me whether I would be interested in joining the Red Bee news team and recommended me. Red Bee provides access to live and pre-recorded content for big broadcasters such as the BBC and Channel 4. It has been 18 months since I started there and the team continues to grow.

Invision interpreting was intimidating at first; I desperately wanted to get it right, but I was also aware of being the only Indian – something I'm used to, but at the same time, I didn't want to be a tokenistic addition. I was encouraged when other ethnic minority interpreters started coming in for their assessments, as it no longer felt like I was the only one. It was even better when deaf presenters of ethnic minority backgrounds joined the team, as it felt more representative of the community we all inhabit, although there is still not enough visibility.

Finding your feet

There is an inherent fear of invision interpreting in the interpreting profession, and there needn't be. While it is an intense, pressured environment, once you get to grips with the programme formats and become comfortable in front of a camera, you are just doing what you do every day. The level of exposure is terrifying initially and the attention and interest you receive

is unnerving at times, but again once you become comfortable, you use your resilience and remember all your interpreting training which will stand you in good stead.

Aside from learning on the job, there isn't any formal training which I think would be great, if developed, as it would help to pave the way for aspiring invision interpreters. I may try and put something together!

Initially, when I joined Red Bee Media's invision team, I was given pre-recorded programmes to start building up the correct skillset in order to attempt the news. I started with children's CBeebies programmes, which I absolutely loved (I'm a big kid at heart) and then, as I built up my stamina and ability, I was able to take on lengthier programmes.

Four months on, I started to interpret the news, PMQs on Wednesdays and occasionally Covid briefings/statements as required. I absolutely love interpreting documentaries and programmes like Panorama and Question Time, as I find a lot of their content fascinating, as well as architectural programmes such as Grand Designs. Working in the TV invision industry has meant I've become much more aware of the breadth of programmes out there.

'The landscape is changing'

The news team has predominantly comprised male interpreters for some time, and it has been nice to see more women join the team. We would benefit from more diversity though.

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Although recruitment is ongoing and the doors are open, more people from diverse backgrounds need to be willing to face the fear of the challenge that is invision. The support is there if you come forward. While it may have taken some time, we are now starting to see appropriate interpreters interpret appropriate jobs. While I don't believe that the colour of your skin automatically means you are appropriate for a job, I am happy that it is starting to be considered along with other factors such as experience and skillset.

I have completed invision work for Asian-themed theatre projects, educational programmes and other clients, all of which is very telling. The landscape is changing. The very fact that there are more and more deaf actors in mainstream theatre and TV programmes and a deaf contestant on *Strictly* is testament to this change and perhaps also proves that broadcasters and industry giants are finally starting to realise that providing access for access' sake doesn't work and isn't a great model to work to. Conversations are slowly but surely being directed to deaf people in the relevant industries. It's about time.

Resilience and reflection

It may sound like a cliché, but I would honestly say resilience is the strength you need the most in this field. You must also be willing and able to reflect upon your skills, what you have produced that day and really assess whether it was good enough. As a profession, we are already too critical of ourselves, but for invision, I believe it is necessary – it's the only way you will become better at what you do. The level of exposure you experience and responsibility you have as a news interpreter makes reflection vital. We are providing a service and as such it should be of the highest quality. Watching myself back and asking deaf friends and family for feedback

is incredibly important, but it's vital to only ask people who will be honest! Switching the sound off, I find watching myself with just the BSL on-screen helps as a tool of reflection, and this is often the best way to check whether you have made any sense!

Playing around with the language you can use really helps, so watching my colleagues interpret the news is something I do quite a lot to see how others interpret certain stories or what strategies they use. As new additions to the team, we also discuss any areas of concern or possible strategies, which is so useful as we're all learning at the same time.

Newshounding

I have a confession to make – before I started doing invision, I rarely watched the news! I found it far too depressing and would much rather spend my time listening to some music or binge-watching something! That said, I have rediscovered an interest in the news, and it definitely helps me to be a better interpreter. Watching the news serves as prep and gives you a greater understanding of stories appearing while interpreting, which in turn of course means you have a developed schema to tap into, decreasing the amount of processing you are having to do in the moment.

You need to be flexible in this domain as there will often be sudden changes to the filming schedule or a sudden news story which is not something you were expecting, so you really need to have mastered the ability to mask any internal struggles. A willingness to upskill yourself is important, as well as learning new vocabulary which will mean you are overall a better interpreter.

If you are someone who is thrown by unexpected changes, or prefers to be consistently prepared for every job, this domain may be a struggle.

Spice of life

I thrive on variety and new challenges. I honestly believe it's how you become a better interpreter. With this in mind, I work in media, theatre, TV, higher education, panel events, public events, VRS, as well as TV/film shoots (something I want to increase) and performance interpreting at festivals and concerts. Invision work currently accounts for 10-15% of my working schedule, which hopefully will increase. I strive to maintain a balance between invision and other types of work to ensure I am not pigeonholed but also that my skillset does not plateau. There are other things I am still hoping to do and other skills I hope to develop throughout my career – ambition is healthy!

High moments

One of the first times I did invision at the Houses of Parliament, I had envisioned a glamorous studio and, when I arrived to meet my co-worker, it transpired our studio room was in the basement and that it was tiny. I was so nervous and had no idea what to expect, so kept running to the toilet and felt very sweaty!

Once we started to get sized up for camera, it suddenly felt very real and a tad scary. My co-worker and I decided we should plan ahead how we would swap over as there was no technician and the camera was static, meaning that we would each have the responsibility of stepping in and out of frame as eloquently as possible. The first few times, I ended up walking into the camera, which meant viewers

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unfortunately got a close up of my face getting bigger and bigger. Deciding we should instead step to the side, coming back into frame was an issue, ending up with us both crawling on the floor as seamlessly as we could and sliding into the resting chair propped up against the wall to avoid the top of our heads coming into shot. Needless to say, it became harder to suppress our laughter as the reality of the fact that we were literally crawling on the floor sank in, and then having to be the consummate professional in front of the camera! We have since moved studio rooms, and I have not had to crawl on the floor ever since – yet!

During one of my very first weekend shifts at Red Bee, there wasn't anyone else in the studio, which would have been fine, except my temporary access pass had expired and I couldn't get into the studio! Cue lots of 6:30am calls and messages to the team begging if anyone knew a way I could get in, as I was due to do the news in half an hour. To say I was stressed is an understatement. I didn't really know anyone at that time and now I was disturbing them at such an ungodly hour. I was so mortified. Luckily for me, the team were very gracious and came to my rescue, meaning that I could get in and get my job done. After that, I was swiftly given a permanent pass, which was triple-checked to ensure this never happened again.

Facebook feedback

As in any domain, there are great benefits in what we do; the recognition of hard work is really nice and the support from colleagues and the deaf community is really heart-warming, particularly when it's from friends and colleagues who remember when you first started and are genuinely happy for you. Of course, it's not always plain sailing – I still get compared to my brother who is also an interpreter and that can

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become tiresome. While I understand people may only know him and then associate me with him to contextualise who I am, some seem to find it difficult to separate us as individuals.

For me, comparisons can be difficult. Being compared to very seasoned invision interpreters can be brutal, particularly when you've just started. I think it's a natural human behaviour, but it's probably one we need to eradicate unless we are providing constructive criticism for the betterment of others.

I also receive very random messages on Facebook, most of which are nice, but the funniest one I have had is when someone I had never met messaged me on Facebook to tell me that although they appreciated my work that day on the news and enjoyed it as usual, they weren't a fan of my hairstyle and enquired as to what had happened to it!

I find that working in this domain increases confidence, particularly when it comes to being recorded as part of your other interpreting jobs, as you're so used to a high level of visibility and exposure that you learn to become comfortable.

Invision is a great domain to work in, not least because it forces you to be better than you were before, as you're conscious of being scrutinised and aware of the position of responsibility it places you in. It's safe to say that I am enjoying my interpreting journey and I hope that more doors are opened, which is hopefully encouraging to aspiring sign language interpreters and the next generation. Greater and realistic representation is inspiring and I, for one, hope to see more of it.

