Inter-institutional training cooperation on the use of tablets in interpreting

Cooperación interinstitucional en el ámbito de la formación sobre el uso de tabletas en interpretación

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Abstract: The rising popularity of mobile devices, specifically tablet computers, among interpreters and the trend towards digitisation and paperless workflows in international organisations create opportunities for introducing tablets into the interpreter workflow. This paper presents a webinar organised jointly by the European Commission and European Parliament for members of a network of language and conference services in international organisations. The article describes the context, preparation and organisation of that webinar as an example for inter-institutional cooperation in online interpreter training against the backdrop of stagnating or decreasing resources and it also provides some insights from an evaluation form sent to participants after the webinar.

Keywords: interpreting, mobile devices, tablets, webinar, training, inter-institutional cooperation.

Resumen: La creciente popularidad de los dispositivos móviles, especialmente las tabletas, entre los intérpretes, así como la tendencia hacia la digitalización y los flujos de trabajo sin papel en las organizaciones internacionales, crean oportunidades para introducir tabletas en el flujo de trabajo del intérprete. Este documento presenta un seminario web organizado conjuntamente por la Comisión Europea y el Parlamento

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Europeo dirigido a los miembros de una red de servicios de idiomas y conferencias en organizaciones internacionales. El estudio de caso describe el contexto, la preparación, la organización y la evaluación de dicho seminario como ejemplo de la cooperación interinstitucional en la formación en línea de intérpretes en un contexto de estancamiento o disminución de recursos.

Palabras clave: interpretación, dispositivos móviles, tabletas, seminario web, formación, cooperación inter-institucional

1. INTRODUCTION

Tablets have become very popular since 2010, when Apple first introduced the iPad. Since then, Apple and Samsung especially have shipped hundreds of millions of devices. Even if some years later sales numbers have started to decline (Dredge 2015), tablets are still popular among interpreters, and for several reasons. Apart from the fact that interpreters are a mobile workforce without individual offices, tablets have come a long way. Unlike the earlier, much clunkier «Tablet PCs» from the 1990s, modern devices are lightweight and slim, have a long-lasting battery, are silent because of their lack of mechanical keyboard and fan, and their operating systems—adopting a different approach from traditional desktop and laptop computers—allow for more focused work by usually only showing one application at a time. Finally, developers have been keenly publishing high-quality software (apps), e.g. streamlined word processors or spreadsheet applications and tools with relevance for interpreting, such as glossary management, annotation or note-taking apps. The authors' experience shows that even interpreters who had eschewed traditional laptops are willing to try out tablets because of the benefits that come with fast boot-up time, simplified software and the direct manipulation of content without having to resort to a keyboard or mouse.

Mobile devices have also been making inroads in the workplace. In a trend labelled «Bring your own device» (BYOD), more and more employees bring smartphones and/or tablets to work because they have grown accustomed to using them for many things. Employers have started to accommodate that by providing network access or by rolling out mobile device management strategies integrating BYOD devices into corporate IT infrastructure. There are additional factors at play that favour the spread of IT solutions and mobile devices in particular. As more (and more complex) work needs to be done quicker with stagnant or even decreasing resources, the pressure for more streamlining, more efficiency and more collaboration goes up. The move away from paper is also motivated by ecological and economic considerations.

2. PAPERLESS INITIATIVES IN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

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These days, corporations and organisations, especially multilingual entities such as the EU and the UN, many operating in several geographical locations, rely more and more heavily on electronic document workflows.

2.1. *The European Parliament*

In its «Resource Efficiency Measures Strategy» (European Parliament 2014), the EU legislators first outlined how they want to become a «Paperless Parliament». A working group of the Parliament Bureau and the Budgets Committee was tasked with drawing up proposals to prepare for the 2014 EU budget cycle. The strategy encouraged the move towards «paperless working practices in committee meetings» and an «increase [in] the use of the IT tools while at the same time reducing the budget for printing meeting documents as well as saving natural resources». Again, this shift is motivated by both ecological and economic considerations, as paper documents are to be collected after meetings for «potential re-use», and «[t]he reduced number of printed pages also leads to a reduction in posts […].»

There is certainly a big potential for reducing the use of paper in the EP: in the years before the Strategy was published, the Printing Service had handed out a total of 91 million pages, about one third of which are used for committee meetings. Rather unsurprisingly, the Parliament's Environment Committee (ENVI) has been playing a pivotal role and was the first committee to stop providing paper documents in meetings altogether: «As of 1 July 2015, the ENVI Committee decided to fully implement the paperless project for meetings. Therefore, there will be no more paper documents available in the meeting room. All the documents will be available through the "Meeting documents" tab under "Useful documents" on this webpage» (European Parliament 2017).

The EP's paperless strategy is facilitated by the availability of wireless internet access throughout the premises. And in an update of the paperless strategy published in 2016 (European Parliament 2016, 85), the Parliament also focuses more on mobile devices: «The documents will be available not only on desktop computers but also and especially on mobile devices such as laptops, tablets and smartphones.» Tablets are provided to certain categories of EP staff, including interpreters, who do not have individual offices and consequently do not have easy access to desktop computers anyway.

In addition, several software applications—eCommittee, eMeeting and eParliament—have been developed in-house. First, as the name implies, «eCommittee is a dedicated work space for Members, Assistants, committee secretariats, political group staff, EP staff and others who need to follow the work of committees.» (ibid.)

As is the case in other EU bodies, such as the Committee of the Regions[1] or the European Economic and Social Committee[2], the web site provides meeting documents through an online calendar. Secondly, and on top of eCommittee, eMeeting enables users to annotate and share committee documents. Thirdly, eParliament, which is under development at the time of writing, is conceived as a workflow tool to support both the political work and the administration of the EU chamber. This central document repository makes it possible to publish content in different formats according to what is required.

EP interpreters obtain meeting preparation documents on MINA (Meeting Information and Notes Application), a secure website on the Parliament's intranet.

2.2. *The European Commission*

While the EU's executive branch does not seem to have a paperless strategy comparable to the Parliament, the Commission nevertheless places considerable emphasis on electronic workflows in its policies, for example in customs («complete the shift to a paperless and fully electronic and interoperable customs environment» (European Commission 2016)). In addition, the comprehensive «Digital Single Market» package (European Commission 2015) sets out to improve digital skills in the EU population and push ahead the digitalisation in private companies and public administrations. Apart from using its website to communicate and inform, the Commission employs many internet-based systems, such as ARES for document management[3] or CIRCABC[4] for organising and distributing meeting documents in collaborative spaces.

Commission interpreters obtain their preparation documents on SCICnet, the interpreting service's secure internal website. For a more detailed overview of the work of interpreters in EU institutions, consult Duflou 2016.

2.3. *The United Nations*

Based on resolution A/RES/55/285 (United Nations General Assembly 2001) adopted already in 2001, the United Nations have been striving to rationalise and modernise their work. However, instead of choosing the ubiquitous «paperless» moniker, they have adopted the term «papersmart», because it is not solely focused on getting

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1. cf. http://cor.europa.eu/en/search-center/Pages/search-events.aspx?k=ALL()%20 (eventdate%3E=2017-01-23)
2. cf. http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities
3. http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/edoc_management/it_tools_en.htm#ares
4. https://circabc.europa.eu/faces/jsp/extension/wai/navigation/container.jsp

rid of all paper. The Papersmart initiative[5] is comprised of an online portal, a print-on-demand service for meeting participants, an e-publishing service to bring meeting documents to mobile devices, and the distribution of media (specifically, flash drives). Important additional factors are accessibility (making information available to persons with disabilities) and knowledge management. An information leaflet for participants (United Nations 2017) states similar motives for going «papersmart» as can be found within the EU, i.e. more efficient workflows, financial savings and a reduced ecological footprint. The Papersmart portal is run by the Integrated Sustainable PaperSmart Services Secretariat[6].

3. EARLY IN-HOUSE TABLET TRAINING INITIATIVES

Faced with an increasingly paperless environment and an increasing interest in the use of tablets among interpreters, the interpreting services of the European Parliament and the European Commission started providing in-house training around 2012. Regardless of whether interpreters use corporate or private devices, proper training and the sharing of information, experience and best practice is important for them to be able to integrate mobile devices seamlessly into their work.

Based on the enthusiasm of individuals like the authors of this paper, training initiatives begun at the grassroots level, with tablet «early adopters» starting to share their knowledge with peers. That ad-hoc training then slowly gained the support of the management and evolved into formal training organised by the institutions. To the authors' knowledge, this kind of hands-on training (or something similar) is not offered by other departments within the institutions. So not only did the early enthusiasts fill a niche and respond to a need, they also helped raise awareness for the use of mobile devices within their respective departments or even the wider institutional context.

4. THE IAMLADP WEBINAR

In times of budgetary restraints and limited staff, more cooperation between institutions makes sense. IAMLADP (International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications) is a cooperation body of the departments for translation, interpreting and conference management in international organisations such as EU bodies, international tribunals or members of the UN family.

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5.   http://papersmart.unmeetings.org/en/about/
6.   For the purpose of this article, it was not possible to gain an overview of how interpreters in the various UN bodies and agencies obtain their meeting documents for preparation.

IAMLADP has put in place «Joint Training Ventures», projects to explore synergies for training member institutions' staff.

One of the first steps towards the webinar described here was a presentation to the chief interpreters of international organisations at the annual IAMLADP meeting in Brussels in June 2014. Given by one of the authors of this paper at European Parliament premises, the talk covered the use of technology in the field of interpreting in general (including earlier interpreter support tools like electronic dictionaries and traditional laptops), the use of tablets in interpreter training, for language learning and note-taking, the concept of BYOD and some aspects of mobile device deployment and the necessary infrastructure in corporate environments.

Due to growing interest, the IAMLADP e-Learning Task Force developed the idea of a jointly organised webinar on the use of tablets in the interpreting booth. The European Parliament, specifically the e-Learning unit of the Directorate-General for Interpretation and Conferences, was put in charge of the project coordination. The course content and the delivery via video-conference were to be assured by a cooperation of the two interpreting services of the Parliament and the Commission.

The trainers for the webinar were chosen from the group of enthusiasts who had been giving in-person trainings at both institutions before. In addition to the trainers, the inter-institutional project team consisted of representatives from the two respective units in charge of interpreter training, conference technicians from the EP side and EP secretarial staff to facilitate the group's work. The involvement of trainers and technicians from the beginning was key to ensure a smooth delivery of the webinar against the backdrop of technical hurdles that will be described later.

4.1. *Webinar preparation*

The project group first met in April 2015 to discuss the organisation and content of the webinar. Earlier in-house courses served as the basis for this webinar, but the project group decided to leave out institution-specific content and to focus instead on the key topics, due to time constraints and the practical limitations of delivering a training session online. No basic training on how to use tablets in general was to be provided. The following topic structure was chosen: (1) introduction with practical tips and tricks, (2) document management strategies, (3) using an application for document management and annotation, (4) using an application to store and organise meeting notes and general background information, (5) using an application to build and manage glossaries, (6) Miscellaneous, including interesting software or accessories, subject to available time. The course material was provided to participants in electronic form.

The webinar was announced to IAMLADP members at the network's annual meeting in June 2015. Preparations were very thorough since this was a pilot project and follow-up webinars were a distinct possibility in case of success. Prospective participants were to receive a questionnaire beforehand, asking them about any previous experience

with tablets (or laptop and desktop computers) and with individual apps, particularly in relation to the topics covered. One question also asked for the average time spent in the booth per week—the target group for the webinar was defined to consist of active interpreters at international organisations (who have at least some experience as tablet users). The maximum number of participants was set at 12, with at least one participant per institution to ensure a good coverage of IAMLADP members. To minimise the risk of technical problems, a document with questions and answers on the technical requirements for the webinar was prepared by the project team and sent out to participating organisations. To test both the technical setup and the cooperation of trainers from two different organisations, two «dry runs» were scheduled in June 2015 at the Parliament and the Commission respectively. Those dry runs were open to participation by interested interpreters from both sides, providing them with additional training opportunities in the process.

4.2. *Webinar delivery*

On the afternoon of 22 October 2015, the actual webinar took place on European Parliament premises with 13 participants from several continents. Participants connected to the platform and the webinar went through without major problems, in large part due to the fact that three trainers were present. While one trainer presented each section of the webinar, the two other ones would follow along to be able to help, if need be, and monitored the built-in chat, where participants could ask questions and provide real-time feedback when something was unclear or went too fast. The two inactive trainers were able to reply to those questions, solve them directly in the chat or ask the active colleague to go slower or repeat a certain bit. The chat interactivity was helpful but being able to also get visual feedback from the participants (i.e. through a video connection) might have proven even more useful for the trainers.

Some technical limitations were known in advance, so containment measures could be taken. The license owned by the European Parliament for the videoconferencing platform used for the webinar did not allow for screen sharing functionality, where a computer or tablet is connected to the webinar to be able to show what happens on that device. The trainers' tablets had to be connected using a hardware video interface with low resolution. This led to visibility issues for some participants who were not able to see the tablet screen clearly. To compensate for this problem, some trainers used the built-in zoom functionality to enlarge the part of the screen that was being explained.

5. EVALUATION

An evaluation form was sent out to the participants after the webinar. The form included the following questions:

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1. Relevance to your work *(Very relevant - Relevant - Slightly relevant - Not relevant at all)*
2. Content of the webinar *(Very good - Good - Average - Disappointing)*
3. Length of the webinar *(Just right - Acceptable - Too long - Too short)*
4. Presentational and teaching ability of trainers *(Very good - Good - Average - Disappointing)*
5. Expertise of trainers *(Very good - Good - Average - Disappointing)*
6. Documentation *(Very good - Good - Average - Insufficient)*
7. Invitation and administrative organization *(Very good - Good - Average - Disappointing)*
8. Your assessment of the concept of a IAMLADP webinar *(Very useful - Useful - Somewhat useful - No value)*
9. Overall assessment *(Very good - Good - Average - Disappointing)*
10. Would you recommend this webinar to others? *(Yes - No)*
11. Your assessment about running a course with trainers from other Institutions *(Very useful - Useful - Somewhat useful - No value)*
12. Your experience of the webinar format *(Easy to use, appropriate for the content —Appropriate for the content but challenging to use—Challenging to use and inappropriate for the content - Inappropriate for the content but easy to use)*
13. Could you please suggest how we could make changes for any future webinar? *(free text answer)*
14. Any other comments *(free text answer)*

The feedback given by the participants was largely very positive and encouraging across all evaluation criteria. They welcomed the initiative and found the content useful overall, some asking for a repeat or follow-up session. Very few mentioned a lack of interaction or found it difficult to follow, but this was to be expected as webinars are less interactive by nature. Under «Any other comments», participants made some suggestions for future webinars (only one app per webinar to make it easier to digest, add a summary of points covered to the course material).

The project team also closed the project on a positive note. The objectives —organisation of a webinar for IAMLADP member institutions, dissemination of knowledge, sharing of best practices and fostering inter-institutional cooperation— were met and future webinars were considered possible and desirable.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Overall, the webinar itself and the cooperation between Parliament and Commission have proven successful.

Improvements could include breaking up the content into a series of shorter, more focused webinars so that participants can follow along more easily and to allow for more detailed explanation and perhaps repetition. Interactivity could be increased by building in breaks for feedback or by adding video input from participants.

The feedback methodology should be improved. The phrasing of questions and the scales used did not always correspond to statistical standards. The main reason for that is that the evaluation was done for internal purposes to find out what worked and what didn't and not with a view to a scientific publication at a later stage. In the future, the project team might want to bring in expertise to help improve on this front.

Also, while earlier in-house training sessions were fairly easy to organise from a technical point of view, moving the session online proved more challenging. IT systems in international organisations are often purchased using long and complicated procedures, which makes it difficult to keep up with technological progress. In order to avoid the resulting technical issues, one may wish to explore consumer-oriented solutions for interactive video-conferencing with screen-sharing. Many of those solutions can be used free of charge, and participants are likely to be familiar with them. Rigid procedures and security precautions, however, usually prohibit simply using off-the-shelf products. Also, there are known quality issues with many of them. All involved must show flexibility and creativity to solve the problems that arise.

Further research is warranted, inter alia, into how working paperless changes interpreter preparation in terms of efficiency and effectiveness for the better or for the worse. Konnikova (2014) collates some insights on digital devices potentially decreasing information retention, and it opens up interesting paths for additional research.

On a general note, tablets and applications are now mature tools that interpreters can integrate into their workflow to get the benefits described in this article. Mastering technology will also enable interpreters to shape the future development of their profession instead of feeling overwhelmed by it. There seems to be a convergence between the move towards electronic documentation, which is likely to gain more traction, and interpreters in international organisations adopting mobile devices and tablets in particular. Working paperless, however, is only one part of technology literacy. Other developments like remote interpreting or even machine interpreting supported by artificial intelligence come to mind. It is now up to the institutions to provide interpreters with the necessary training to be able to master new technologies. In the face of budgetary restraint, pooling resources is the right way to go to share knowledge and best practices. Web-based training can help save on travel costs and reduce the ecological footprint, and it lets peers benefit from in-house expertise elsewhere. The authors would like to encourage international organisations to cooperate more often and more closely when it comes to interpreter training, with the added benefit of increasing the sense of belonging of individuals to the wider community of practice.

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